

**The Story of the Australian Youth Forum— the political and social realities  
behind online technological solutions in youth political communication**

Prashanth Pillay

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[Monash University]

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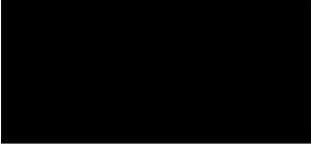
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## **Declaration of Originality**

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the difficulties in using online media as a tool to solve youth political engagement problems. It argues that online media has complicated the relationship between the government and young Australians, highlighting the practical difficulties of operationalising effective political communication practices. *The Australian Youth Forum* (AYF), Australia's main online government project to raise low youth public engagement levels, is used as a case study. Originally intended as a solution to low youth participation levels, the AYF soon became part of a broader problem concerning the management of youth political communication platforms, reviving historically familiar government struggles against citizen efforts to decentralise youth political communication projects. Through a textual analysis of interview transcripts with government officials, youth postings and policy documents, it is asserted that there are key differences between idealised visions of media influence and technological outcomes in reality. Drawing on key ideas surrounding the mediatization of political communication, it is explained that the introduction of online media brings forth bureaucratic hurdles, policy challenges and conflicting expectations over how to use technology purposefully. The AYF exemplifies the overall difficulty in assessing what it means when governments look to technology for solutions. It also shows how online initiatives may not necessarily work as anticipated. Online media and associated government regulations are appropriated in culturally specific ways that gradually inform and modify media technology's initial purpose. These dialectical forces of media influence have significant implications for how the success and failure of such initiatives are assessed.

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## **Chapter 1: Thesis Introduction and Outline**

This project examines the difficulties faced by governments and youth in using online media as a platform for political communication and as a solution to youth political engagement problems. It argues that the introduction of online media technology has made the already volatile relationship between youth and the government more difficult, but at the same time, also unravelled the problems and conflicting perceptions that exist over how media technology should be used and what it should be used for. This thesis examines the grounded experiences of youth and public officials in working with and under specific expectations, demands and constraints when online technology is introduced as a tool to reinvigorate youth political engagement as a broader agent for positive change. Attempts by governments and youth to manage technologically related social and political change are important because they complicate perceptions of the identity of problem areas in online political communication and how policy visions for digital media come into practice. These actions challenge assumptions of the real-world meaning of online political participation and the management of communication. In a nutshell, this study acknowledges that the failure of and dissatisfaction with government-run youth political communication projects is not surprising given that people relate to the reality of political communication and understand its challenges in different ways and contexts.

In pursuing the above objective, this thesis examines the case of the *Australian Youth Forum* (AYF), Australia's first government-based online youth political communication forum for youth—a project that, it will be argued, epitomises the challenge of determining what success and failure actually mean in such online initiatives. Publically labelled as a failure due to low participation rates, it is argued that the AYF actually tells a broader story about why online political communication projects, no matter how well intentioned and meticulously planned, may not necessarily work as anticipated.

The AYF was launched in 2008 by the Rudd government as part of the *Kevin07* election campaign promise to make political deliberation more accessible to young people. Despite widespread expectations that online media should do something for youth political communication, it continues to remain unclear what this would be. There was a public expectation that the AYF would bring about a decisive moment of change in youth political communication (AYF, 2010, para.2), but the actual nature of this transformation and its consequent implications for youth participation remain uncertain. This thesis argues that the AYF provides an intriguing insight into how youth and public officials grappled with this sense of uncertainty and the inevitable pressure to confront, categorise and define reality in ways that made sense to them. The purpose of this study is to foreground an often forgotten aspect of ‘the political’, at least in the context of the AYF, in how people’s encounters with online media may open up politically charged ways of organising and interacting with laws and conventions that oversee the operation of online political communication projects. This provokes broader questions about what problems media technology is intended to solve and whether we are looking in the right places and spaces to understand the merits of such projects for youth political engagement.

Chapters 1 to 4 set the conceptual and methodological background for the research and chapters 5, 6 and 7 are independent empirical chapters that present specific findings concerning how public officials, youth participants and policymakers respectively negotiated the significance of online technology amid prevailing social challenges and government expectations. The concluding chapter presents the broader implications of these findings for online political communication research. A brief breakdown of each chapter is provided in the following paragraphs.

Chapter 2 examines how technology-oriented solutions are managed in government to achieve particular political and social narratives of change. The case study of the AYF is introduced and explained as an instance where technological change is deliberately framed in reference to how it will solve the problem of low youth participation rates. It is argued that the AYF serves as a pertinent case study for understanding how technological change is, to varying extents, strategically managed to fulfil broader government agendas to address specific problems in political communication. The chapter also surveys key literature in the field of online political

communication, asserting that the social and political influence of online media on political communication is difficult to locate or generalise as it is cultivated through specific ongoing negotiations with authority and power that introduce different problems and solutions. As a way of concluding the chapter, it is suggested that it is more constructive to ask how online media, through negotiation, fit within people's broader cultural and social perceptions of political communication reality than to focus on the direct effects of technology on political communication.

In an effort to understand online media influence as part of a broader cultural history of political communication practices and perceptions, Chapter 3 argues that past government struggles against citizen efforts to decentralise youth political communication projects in Australia have played a key role in determining how people negotiated and managed technological change with the introduction of the AYF. Highlighting key events in Australian youth political communication history, it is stated that online media influence is not only driven by contemporary events and practices surrounding the introduction of online technology, as discussed before, but is also shaped by specific historical developments in political communication culture. Historical tensions around decentralisation in youth political communication continue to dominate contemporary narratives, problems and experiences surrounding online engagement in Australia.

Chapter 4 provides a summary of all the data collected on the AYF, and details the method employed in this thesis. It establishes a method for uncovering how people orientate themselves to technological change and the ideas they use to do that by using Simon Lindgren's (2012) work on connected concept analysis (CCA). CCA is a method based on grounded theory that generates particular 'categories' or interpretations of social reality that are indicated by the data collected within a given research phenomenon. This chapter explains in detail how these categories are formed and how they connect to the main research objectives.

Chapter 5 provides an empirical insight into how public officials in the AYF attempted to manage technological change. Through an analysis of empirical data gleaned from interviews with political officials on the organising committee and official documents on the AYF, it examines the bureaucratic challenges and

adjustments faced by AYF public officials when online technology was introduced for the first time as a central platform for youth political communication. In exploring the above, Andrew Chadwick's (2007) work on organisational hybridity—the ability for online political organisations to switch between actions of interest groups, traditional political parties and social movements, is utilised. It is explained that the AYF does not seem to have the same degree of organisational hybridity that Chadwick sees as typical of online organisations. It makes the argument that the introduction of online media in government projects may not necessarily lead to organisation-wide changes or transformations in how they operate. Its actual influence on political communication may be more subtle and isolated, involving specific people faced with particular challenging circumstances that are not necessarily encountered organisation wide.

Chapter 6 focuses on the different ways in which youth participants used the AYF to manage specific political and social challenges. Presenting findings from an analysis of 721 online youth web postings submitted to the AYF, it is asserted that young people assembled divergent understandings of what media-related social change entailed. These ideas of change are explained in relation to the concept of 'cultural thickening', the core process through which Andreas Hepp argues that typical patterns of thought and articulations of social reality are learnt and concretised through people's practices with media and the negotiated relationships they form with regulations and authority (Hepp, 2013, p.73). This chapter primarily argues that the original core government intention of connecting with young people and solving the problem of low youth participation rates was 'thickened' (Hepp, 2013) in different ways within the context of the local realities faced by young people, leading to the expression of multiple political communication problems and solutions.

The final empirical chapter (Chapter 7) explores the plight of policymakers faced with the challenge of managing the diverse social relationships formed by young people with online media. Specifically, it looks at the challenges faced by online policymakers in addressing the varying ways young people relate to online media and the consequences this may have for how government addresses young people's public interests. Using Peter Lunt and Sonia Livingstone's (2012) concept of the 'implied audience'—the assumed interests of audiences mobilised in policy

discourses—this chapter argues that recent government efforts to standardise online policy for all government departments has drastically constrained the potential for Australian policymakers to represent and address youth interests. The implied audience is framed as consumers of communication services rather than active participants in deliberation on public policy.

Collectively, empirical chapters 5, 6 and 7 tell a story of how the social experiences of youth and public officials are moulded by the introduction of online media in distinct ways, adding to the overall confusion of what constitutes success and failure in youth political communication and what its challenges and problems actually are. The concluding chapter draws together the main arguments in the thesis, explores their implications for political communication research and toys with potential ideas that might be developed for future projects.

## **Chapter 2: The Pressure to Define Technological Change—the Politics of the Social and the Temptation for a Quick Fix**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This introductory chapter establishes that the use of online media to solve political communication problems can bring with it a distinct pressure for government officials to clarify how change should happen. It is argued that although this pursuit of technology-oriented solutions may be framed as a natural and perfectly legitimate part of how government-run online political communication platforms operate, there is actually *nothing* natural about this process. Ministerial representatives actively manage how technological change is represented based on their own expectations and ambitions. They are embroiled in the struggle of maintaining a stable narrative of change, one that features online media as the central solution to political communication problems. It is argued that the constant play with possible arrangements of what could and should form the reality of online participation in Australia, based on the expectations and ambitions of public officials and youth, forms the basis of the AYF's existence as a social and political organisation. Broadly, this chapter aims to show how the AYF presents an opportunity to explore the wider connection between changes in media technology on the one hand and social change in political communication on the other, with the intention of showing how media-related change is to a certain extent managed through negotiation.

The chapter begins by highlighting that the management of technological change is supported by the interconnected practices, decisions, attitudes and perceptions of citizens and government employees. Following this, the AYF is introduced to explain how the introduction of online media has built a sense of hope in technology to produce answers to political communication problems. This strategic dependence on technology for answers is connected to Morozov's (2013) work on internet-centrism, which refers to the tendency for governments to define political and

social change in technological terms as opposed to the prevailing social and political context in which that change is to occur (Morozov, 2013, p.128). The next part of the chapter locates Morozov's critique of internet-centrism within a broader spectrum of current political communication literature on the negotiated nature of media influence through compromise and confrontation with authority and regulation. It is then argued that these complex negotiations with power and the difficulty of pinpointing the contribution of online media to political communication is indicative of the process of mediatisation. Finally, the concept of mediatisation (Hepp, 2013) is acknowledged as a way of empirically capturing how governments and young people are required to orient themselves to online media whilst managing its accompanying constraints on understandings and practices of political communication.

## **2.2 The Politics of the Social and what it means for Digital Political Communication**

The question of what online media does for political communication has so far received no clear answer (Couldry, 2012). In recent times, there has been an interesting tendency for media scholars to literally define online media as a 'bunch of things' (Couldry, 2012, p.16; Geiselhart, 2010, p.37) as a way of appreciating the diverse processes and practices that underline different dimensions of online political communication, from how people engage with government websites to regulatory restrictions within governmental departments that influence how such websites are managed. This deceptively simple scholarly observation matters because it illustrates that the influence of online media on political communication is in part co-articulated through the practices of politicians, government employees and citizens with an interconnecting stake in moulding the reality of online communication. The challenge of managing technological change concerns how youth and public officials work with and under specific expectations, demands and constraints when online media is introduced as a tool for youth political communication as much as it concerns the technology itself and its interactive features. To understand socially mediated political communication, it would seem logical to look beyond the technological features and the democratising claims made in relation to them. Focus needs to be directed towards what youth and government officials are doing in relation to online media—actions

that may not necessarily have media as their aim or object.

Jim Macnamara (2011), a key figure in the field of qualitative research on online citizen participation in Australia, contends that Australian government initiatives generally tend to foreground media technology and its associated technical features as a major contribution to political communication. Macnamara (2011) believes that this approach has ultimately obscured further analysis on what youth and government officials are actually doing in relation to media and how their experiences are informative in outlining important contributions to the field of political communication. He argues that there is an absence of a proper qualitative empirical framework in place in the policy frameworks of Australian public organisations that could analyse what bearing postings on online media have on how online political communication is experienced by citizens.

Macnamara (2011) suggests that a shift of focus onto the social implications of media use and implementation by educating public officials and staff through guidelines on how to thematically analyse online data, such as user submissions, in order to understand citizen interests in communication matters is necessary. The main weakness of Australian communication policy, according to Macnamara, lies in its lack of focus on how media users themselves understand their role and responsibility within online communication platforms and the significance of new media in defining what political communication means for them. Though there seems to be a keenness by public officials to implement online media as a primary tool to solve specific political communication problems, a proper set of guidelines in current online policy explaining how youth media interests are to be registered and evaluated in government is required (Macnamara, 2011).

The approach taken in this thesis is in part inspired by Macnamara's (2011) appeal for a more empirically based inquiry into how online media is experienced and made relevant to specific problems and realities through the practices of public officials, youth and policymakers. It aims to discover the cultural world ('bunch of things') that exists behind a digital communication set-up, beyond its technical potential in facilitating direct conversations between citizens and the government. It asks how participants make sense of their role and purpose when faced with

technological change and the prospect of a new media-driven solution to youth political communication problems. More broadly it looks at how online media, with their organised mechanisms, protocols and infrastructures, channel communication for the individual in specific ways that may lead to very particular ways of experiencing and understanding the reality of online political communication and its problems. Although these questions are not new in the discipline of media studies, they produce different answers and outcomes when applied to specific political communication projects; the experiences of youth and public officials from working with and under specific expectations and demands in online political communication cannot be assumed to be standard across all online political communication initiatives.

In the simplest of explanations, this thesis is concerned with the organisation of social actions both of public officials and youth within the AYF and what this means for the field of political communication, including notions of what aspects of political communication are problematic, what political participation is and what government management of online communication involves. As such, this project relates to two interconnecting areas of media scholarship: (1) a focus on the organisation of people's practices with and around online media and (2) the implications of these observations for how we understand the interrelation between the change of media communication on the one hand and the change of culture and society, including its problems and struggles, on the other. In the following section, I argue that although the AYF was presented to the public and media as a novel digital solution to existing youth political communication problems, there were underlying concerns among public officials, select opinion leaders and youth representatives over what young people would come to expect and want from Australia's first ever youth online political communication portal. There was a belief that by focusing on the anticipated changes brought about by online media to youth political communication, more young people would relate to the AYF as an authentic youth-inspired solution to revitalise youth engagement rather than as a government-regulated service. This begs further questions about how people involved in online political communication projects like the AYF manage technological change in an effort to seek direct answers to prevailing political communication problems.

### **2.3 The Launch of the AYF and the Search for Authenticity—the Underlying Story behind Australia’s (Constructed) Technological Solution to Youth Political Communication Problems**

This section posits that the launch of the AYF highlights (1) how the introduction of online media has built a sense of hope in technology’s ability to produce authentic change and answers to political communication problems and (2) how these proposed visions of change prioritised an attention to what the internet means or stands for over what is actually achievable given government policy and bureaucratic regulations. There was an effort to represent the AYF as a decentralised youth-driven portal free from the binds of bureaucracy and regulation. It is subsequently argued that this tendency to frame social and political change as a purely online media phenomenon connects with the work of Evgeny Morozov (2013) on internet-centrism. Morozov (2013) explains internet-centrism as a set of assumptions on which governments rely to answer questions about political change by reframing it in terms of new media technology rather than the overall social and political context in which that change is to occur (Morozov, 2013, p.5). It also sheds light on the idea that technological change is an actively managed and strategic process between government officials and young people rather than something that simply or inevitably happens.

A series of key events occurred before and after the launch of the AYF that clearly explain how technological change was managed by government officials specifically with the intention to frame online media as the answer to low youth political participation rates. These key events are chronologically detailed in Figure 1 and subsequently elaborated upon.

Oct 2007	Jan 2008	Oct 2008	June 2009	Oct 2009	Dec 2010
Labor announcement of plans to launch an online youth platform under the <i>Kevin07</i> campaign	Launch of the Australian Office for Youth by the Labor government	Launch of the <i>Australian Youth Forum</i>	Launch of the Web 2.0 Taskforce	Launch of the <i>National Conversation Project</i>	Launch of the <i>National Strategy for Young Australians</i>

**Figure 1: Timeline of Key Events Surrounding the Launch of the AYF**

The idea of establishing an online political communication platform in Australia gained traction during the 2007 election campaign when Labor leader Kevin Rudd, under the *Kevin07* campaign, first announced his intention to set up an internet portal for young people to communicate with the government as part of his promise to ‘revamp the way politicians and youth communicate’ (Megalogenis, 2007a, p.1) so that open dialogue could be fostered without the traditional constraints of bureaucratic red tape. Two days after the announcement was officially made on News.com.au, it was reported that his proposed plans were an integral factor in winning his party a staggering primary vote lead of 750,000 among young voters aged 18–26 (Megalogenis, 2007b) out of a total of just over one million youth votes. Kevin Rudd’s victory in the 2007 elections was publically attributed, partially at least, to his ambitious plans for revamping youth political communication through online media—a first in the history of government youth political communication efforts (Ellis, 2009). The AYF was subsequently launched on 2 October 2008 by the newly instated Labor government, as part of its electoral promise to revolutionise youth political communication in Australia. Youth were identified as the central demographic under focus in Australia’s maiden attempt to use online media in political communication (Ellis, 2009).

The Australian government funded the development of the AYF by allocating a sum of AU\$80,000 from its annual 2008 youth budget. The money was spent on the

website's design, programming and maintenance (AYF, 2008a; AYF, 2008b). At the time of this study the website was supervised, operated and funded by the Australian Office for Youth. This office was launched in early 2008 and it resided within the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.<sup>1</sup> Its main institutional role involved coordinating with the Australian government in creating youth policies, programmes and services for young Australians. The Australian Office for Youth was the main institutional interface connecting political officials working in the AYF with the Minister for Youth and their ministerial committee. Minister Kate Ellis ran the Australian Office for Youth until 2010, when a cabinet reshuffle made way for the incoming Minister for Youth, Peter Garrett. At the time this study was conducted, Peter Garrett<sup>2</sup> headed the AYF together with 10 steering committee members aged 18–26 and employed by the Australian Office for Youth. These members were representatives of various independent youth organisations and they were responsible for the day-to-day operations of the AYF, including updating its main website.

In June 2009, in light of the low readership rates and activity levels on the portal, the government employed the services of a specially put together Australian Web 2.0 Taskforce to assess the reasons behind its underwhelming reception. The taskforce comprised political officials, technical specialists and academics all of whom were previously involved in the planning and evaluation of e-government initiatives. Its main administrative hub resided within the Department of Finance and Deregulation. Its findings, published in the form of a report, identified the AYF as an important guiding framework for the government to plan future online public consultation projects catering to other areas of government (Web 2.0 Taskforce, 2009). The AYF was believed to provide important learning points for the organisation of future digital communication projects in Australia (Web 2.0 Taskforce, 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations was disbanded in 2013 with the election of the Abbott government. The Department of Education and Training and the Department of Employment was formed in its place. Issues relating to youth political participation were subsequently placed under the responsibility of a newly formed youth office under the Department of Human Affairs.

<sup>2</sup> After the 2013 general elections, Christopher Pyne from the Liberal Party was elected as Minister for Education and the AYF was transferred under his care within the Department of Education.

However, taskforce members were particularly concerned over the AYF's public status as a 'youth political communication wing of the government' (Web 2.0 Taskforce, 2009, para.2), with suggestions that such a categorisation could in some ways weaken in the eyes of young Australians its claim to serve as an 'interactive online set-up run by youth' (Web 2.0 Taskforce, 2009, para.1). There was a predominant feeling that the AYF's public image as an official cog within the larger structured environment of the government body, albeit the case, was in some ways 'not in sync' (Web 2.0 Taskforce, 2009, para.4) with the de-centred form of interactivity typically associated with the networked environment of the internet. It was believed that the AYF's public status as a political communication instrument of the government could make it seem somehow less identifiable and less authentic to young Australians as an online media-based project. Perhaps the most compelling argument made by the taskforce in support of the above point was in relation to how online media called for a 'more updated way of seeing and organizing the reality of (online) youth participation' (Web 2.0 Taskforce 2009, para.4). Seen in this context, online media was regarded as holding certain key underlying values concerning how online youth participatory culture should be experienced and structured. The AYF's legitimisation as an official government set-up 'did not represent how online political communication should feel' (Web 2.0 Taskforce, 2009, para.5).

The taskforce suggested the government launch an investigation into how online participatory culture could be best represented as a decentralised youth-driven portal rather than a government service or an official gateway that young people can use to speak to politicians (Web 2.0 Taskforce, 2009). It was argued by the taskforce that the AYF should build a more dominant presence as an organisation 'outside the normal official mechanisms for political socialization' (Web 2.0 Taskforce, 2009, para.6). An official suggestion was made to the government to seek feedback from major youth organisations around the country on potential improvements to the AYF that would align it more closely to the principles of digital interactivity and the interests and preferences of young people. A taskforce report, produced by the committee at the conclusion of the enquiry, argued that online participation needed to register a different sort of participatory reality:

The institutional sentiments behind the development of the AYF are noble enough but we feel that something is missing. How can the AYF provide an authentic online experience that justifies young people's emotional and physical investment in new media environments? We need to clearly capture the vast power that new media technology provides for young people. Unfortunately we do not have the answer. (Web 2.0 Taskforce 2009, para.6)

These words succeed in framing the situation of youth online participation as one about finding what an 'authentic online experience' actually means. On the surface, the AYF was an attempt by the government to forge a more interactive relationship with young people using online media but these actions were also believed by the taskforce to represent a search for a distinct reality behind online participation. This is interesting because government actions in one register, in the form of providing a digital communication portal for young people, had been 'rekeyed' in another, as a committed government search for how the reality of online participation should be categorised and what technology-related political and social change should be about. Underlining this search was a firm belief that online media had to effect some sort of noticeable social and political change.

If the AYF was to live up to its billing as a technological solution to Australia's youth political communication problems, it was believed that its impact should be defined in clear and identifiable terms. The government's pursuit of a coherent narrative of technology-related social change began with a survey of opinions in the youth public sector on what changes online media technology should bring to youth political communication. This public survey was officially named the *National Conversation Project* (NCP). The main point of the NCP was to identify youth-inspired visions of what the AYF website should be expected to provide for young people. Heeding the advice of the previously assembled taskforce, government officials were intent on ensuring that the driving force behind defining technological change came from young people rather than as top-down ambitions executed by political bureaucracy (Web 2.0 Taskforce, 2009, para.8).

The NCP was launched in October 2009. It was a two-month programme aimed at inviting youth representatives and organisations from various states working for

different youth causes to provide their input on what online participation should be about in a series of roundtable meetings held at the Australian Parliament House in Canberra. Among the invited participants was the Oaktree Foundation, a youth organisation concerned with reducing youth poverty in Australian inner city suburbs that had previously been publically acknowledged by the government for its effective use of online technology in fundraising activities. Although most of the proposals sent to the government were not publically available at the time of writing, the findings of the NCP were revealed in an online government document entitled the *National Strategy for Young Australians* (the ‘National Strategy’) in December 2010. The purpose of this strategy was to collate and discuss key points of what youth representatives in Australia defined as a ‘constructive and purposeful online public space’ (National Strategy, 2010, para.1). The central finding revealed by the strategy was that young people often feel trivialised in an online public space such as the AYF because these online set-ups often work on the assumption that young people are in a sense ‘incomplete citizens’ (National Strategy, 2010, para.2) with the implication that they do not possess an inclination towards public matters. It was believed that rather than attempting to bring young people into the political communication process, governments should present a public space on their terms and conditions based on their everyday lives (National Strategy, 2010). It was preferred that media technology be used more creatively by letting young people decide what public communication should be about.

Despite the findings from the NCP, a clear understanding was still lacking of how the reality surrounding participatory culture should be defined with the resources available. There was also an absence of any official explanation about the way in which the government planned to incorporate the feedback received from young people into youth political communication policy formulation. A week after the findings of the NCP were made publically available in the form of the National Strategy document, the government released a new mission statement for the AYF: ‘using online technology to bring politicians and policymakers into the homes of young people for exciting virtual discussions’ (AYF, 2010, para.4). Accompanying this statement was a slogan that read ‘towards a revolutionary, participatory and decentralised democracy in youth political communication’ (AYF, 2010, para.5). There was a strong government focus on the perceived effects of online media

technology on youth political communication.

The Australian government's keenness in placing technology and its associated ideas of decentralisation and interactivity at the heart of its attempts to revive youth political engagement connects with Morozov's (2013) assertion that the internet has pressured governments into dealing with social and political problems with ready-made technological solutions. Morozov's scholarly expertise lies in questioning totalising claims and narratives about the democratic potential of the internet and its effect on how political problems, mainly relating to online governance and participation, are framed and perceived. He asserts that as the internet takes on a greater role in political communication, there exists an inevitable pressure for governments to forget the context through which technologies operate in reality and begin with what the internet allows. Morozov refers to this idealisation of new media as 'internet-centrism', a belief that social and political problems are best understood and addressed in terms and categories relating to the internet and its associated values. In other words, there is a firm conviction that new media will bring a unique and possibly revolutionary change to how people relate to social and political reality (Morozov, 2013). However, internet-centrists are not necessarily confident that new media technology will always bring positive change though they all agree that the capabilities of new media should be used as the main template through which democratic promotion and participation is understood (Morozov, 2013).

Drawing on Morozov's (2013) work, it can be argued that there is a prevailing sense of internet-centrism in the Australian government's persistent efforts to identify and categorise political and social change in terms of the interactive and decentralised values that are typically associated with new media technology. A clear indication of this was the significant decision to frame the AYF as an online project outside centralised government infrastructure, as an independent online youth-driven project, even though in reality the AYF was very much subjected to government regulations and decision-making processes. As stated previously, there was an acknowledgement among government officials that an authentic online political communication experience was one that mirrored the ideas attached to the potential of online media but also remained impervious to the effects of regulation and power. This technology-focused approach towards reinvigorating youth participation ultimately overshadowed

questions about the technology-oriented changes and solutions that were realistically possible within the context of current government policy and youth preferences. As Morozov (2013) rather blatantly puts it, '[the internet] has mangled how governments think about the past, the present, and the future of technology regulation' (Morozov, 2013, p.61). Although online regulation and policy will always play a major role in shaping participatory experiences, the extent of its impact may not necessarily be at the forefront of public discussions about online media and technological change (Morozov, 2013).

Morozov (2013) also contends that the underlying pressure faced by public officials to represent the reality of public participation as an independent new media technology phenomenon has now become a natural and perfectly legitimate part of how government-run online political communication platforms operate. However, the irony for Morozov (2013) is that there is actually *nothing* natural about this process. Public officials actively manage how technological change is represented based on their own expectations and ambitions. They are embroiled in the struggle of maintaining a stable narrative of change—one that features new media as the central solution to political communication problems. In the case of the AYF, assembling the Web 2.0 taskforce and launching the NCP symbolised strategic efforts in building a stable narrative around technology-driven change. The search for an authentic new online-driven solution was in many ways about *constructing* authenticity rather than finding the social impulse and need to assemble a coherent and stable technological solution that would resonate with young people.

In addition to Morozov's (2013) argument about the constructed nature of technological solutions to political communication problems, contemporary political communication literature suggests that it is difficult to think about a single coherent technological solution due to the diverse and fragmented understandings people have of online political communication, including its role, purpose and objectives. It will be argued in the following section that recent political communication scholarship has been critical of conceiving of media as precise political communication solutions not because of any perceived government incompetence but rather due to the way media influence works on social reality; through complex and competitive negotiations with regulations and various power structures leading to very different opinions of what

online political communication should be about or what works and what does not. Scholars argue that technological solutions, if and when they arise, are typically based on a particular set of prevailing circumstances and challenges and often these anticipated ideas of technological change are momentary and subject to change over time through developments in media technology and people's practices with media.

## **2.4 Accounts of Social Change in the Field of Digital Political Communication—a Process of Negotiation through Compromise and Confrontation**

This section argues that contemporary political communication scholarship in the field of online political communication arrives at a simple but effective conclusion: it is difficult to think about online projects as coherent answers to political communication problems because technological solutions are by their very nature outcomes of constant negotiation with prevailing structures of authority and regulation bringing forth momentary resolutions. Their argument is that the constant play with possible assemblages of what could and should form the reality of online political communication produces outcomes that are negotiated through confrontation and compromise with laws, regulations and, more broadly, power structures. This leads to diverse and sometimes manufactured understandings of what online political communication should be about.

The field of online political communication, in recent times, has been dominated by a sense of cautious optimism about the actual changes digital technologies bring to political communication (Bennett, 2010; Chadwick, 2011a; Macnamara, 2011; Stanyer, 2010). This sentiment is driven by a realist sense that although digital technology may promote democratic ideals, the reality of practices surrounding its use is subject to various regulatory processes of power. From the broadest of perspectives, contemporary scholarly work on digital political communication has tended to revolve around the following three areas developed from a reading of key literature in the field:

- (1) With the introduction of online media in political communication, how do we frame and categorise the work and role of ordinary citizens, presumably

people without any initial store of political authority, within such online projects? More specifically, how can we account for the wider political significance of their online contributions as part of understanding how online media does (or doesn't) work for them?

- (2) What do (or don't) governments consider when deciding to use online media as solutions to specific political communication problems?
- (3) What motivations and values drive citizens to engage with online political communication platforms?

These questions are not intended to serve as an exhaustive summary of existing work in political communication research. They instead provide a guide for highlighting specific areas in political communication scholarship that have received consistent attention; areas where scholars have been particularly interested in understanding how the presence of digital media has influenced the social reality surrounding online political engagement in specific ways. The first question concerns the reality behind the framing of the 'ordinary citizen', people without any initial store of political authority, in light of the digital developments in political communication. It asks how the new interactive features provided by online media and the expanded opportunities to exert one's 'voice', seen through the predominance of political bloggers and key political commentators on online media, provide a complicated picture in terms of how the online work of citizens should be labelled (Chadwick, 2011a; Tilly, 2007) and its political consequences understood. In particular, scholars have been critical of claims that aggrandise media technologies in solving the problem of low participation rates because the online contributions of ordinary citizens are still subject to particular government infrastructures and protocols that determine what gets heard and validated in policy.

The second question looks at the realities faced by public officials when implementing online media projects, including the challenges and barriers faced when committing to using a digital platform (Macnamara, 2010a; 2010b). Macnamara argues that the problems faced by public officials in online political communication initiatives go beyond immediate issues such as raising public engagement levels: they concern broader reflective questions about why and how online media should be used in the first place. Finally, attention is turned to the reality of what drives citizens to

use online media as a platform for political communication (Bennett, 2007) in the first place; more specifically it looks at specific categorisations of values and principles of political communication that people accommodate (or reject) as part of a broader process of negotiation when using digital media.

Each of the three questions will be discussed in relation to key authors that have in some way or another contributed towards addressing how specific social realities are experienced and understood in relation to particular aspects of digital political communication. These authors have either mapped their own categorisations of the reality behind particular dimensions of technological change in political communication, or questioned the rationale for and empirical accuracy behind existing accounts of online political communication. Collectively, these three areas paint a bigger picture of how people's negotiations with socially embedded processes of control and power complicate attempts to frame online media technology as coherent solutions to specific political communication problems. The area concerning the framing of online work and activities of citizens (Question 1) will be dealt with first.

#### **2.4.1 Area 1: How do we Categorise the Work and Role of Ordinary Citizens (Presumably People without any Initial Store of Political Authority or Public Recognition) within Online Projects?**

The integration of digital technology within political communication has opened up an array of opportunities for individuals outside fixed party or media organisations to participate in political discussion. Public access to online policy resources and the ability to directly participate in ongoing policy deliberation has motivated certain governments to categorise the ordinary citizen, people without any initial store of political authority, as a key participant in policy decision making and deliberation (Chadwick, 2011a, 2012; Couldry, 2012) within the political process. Government representations of the changing roles of ordinary citizens online, in terms of their ability to intervene within various political processes, and the increasing political significance of their work, have been a key feature of technological change (Bimber, 2012; Couldry, 2012). Government institutions, in advertising various internet-based political communication programmes, see it as necessary to publically emphasise how

the interactive features of online participation will provide ordinary citizens with the authority and power to enact identifiable political change and thus solve the problem of youth disengagement from political participation.

For example in Australia, the *Government 2.0 Action Plan*, launched in 2010, was an official commitment by the Labor government in Victoria to use online media in ways that facilitate direct engagement between individual citizens and public officials over policy formulation issues. The broader objective of the plan was to increase the accountability and transparency of government processes by allowing citizens to directly speak to specific key officials through online media without the need to deal with various intermediary agents. It was hoped that citizens would collaborate with public officials in influencing policy change while recognising their role as ‘key authors of policies that affect them’ (Government 2.0 Action Plan, 2010). The *Government 2.0 Action Plan* was ultimately an attempt by the Victorian government to represent the central roles that citizens have within the process of policy formulation and how this is being facilitated through online media.

Political communication scholars, however, while recognising the value of such claims in raising citizen optimism, interest and a sense of ownership over government projects, have examined the difficulty and complexity involved in labelling or categorising the online work of citizens on government websites. There has been a general sentiment that any attempt to categorise or account for how individual citizens contribute to the political process and what sustainable influence their online actions may have on policy formulation depends on embedded processes of control and power. It has been argued that there remains an embedded form of control and regulation in networked environments—one not necessarily to do with the actions of governments alone—that determines which online contributions, groups and users ultimately receive government attention and validation (Chadwick, 2011a; Wright, 2011).

Chadwick (2012) provides a compelling case for exploring the complexity around framing the online work and role of citizens in relation to how recognition and visibility of both individuals and groups on the internet is controlled and managed. Chadwick’s contribution to political communication literature is reflective of the

growing sense of cautious optimism that exists among scholars when tackling issues relating to the democratising effects of online media. He argues that not all citizens that participate in online media projects manage to sustain an identifiable impact on policy issues or feel that they have made a visible difference—in fact many do not.<sup>3</sup> This, he argues, is not because of a lack of ingenuity in how governments use online media but because the networked environment, by its inherent structure, is more effective in recognising and legitimising the importance of people and narratives that have somehow already achieved a certain level of prior public recognition and visibility, whether it is through a viral political video or the number of re-tweets achieved by a person's Twitter message.

These powers of legitimisation, and instances where particular online users or narratives are framed as being politically significant, may be dependent on (1) the pick-up of particular citizen postings on search engines or news feeds sites, which are then discussed by other people, (2) one's strategic coordination with other established online social communities or activist groups, or (3) via votes or recommendations by other online users. As such, not all citizens or citizen-driven communities are guaranteed a visible online presence, as it is largely conditional on prevailing circumstances. In fact, certain online citizen-driven organisations have consciously adopted particular strategies in how they use digital media to ensure that their political visibility is maintained and presence registered by the government.

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC), an Australian non-government youth affairs body undertaking activities relating to advocacy and policy development, is a sterling example of how the prevailing online bias towards already popular and highly visible public contributions, driven by embedded processes of control and power online, is accommodated in an organisation's operational architecture. Its website thrives on an online membership system to maintain public visibility. The membership system encourages young people to sign up to the AYAC by registering to work on any of their community projects. These community projects revolve around particular youth issues and they often require members to post narratives through social media about their personal experiences concerning the issue

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<sup>3</sup> This observation is based on empirical research Chadwick conducted on a series of e-government projects in the UK.

in question. Youth submissions that achieve a certain number of views, ‘likes’ and re-tweets are then collated by the AYAC and sent to the government for consideration in policy formulation. The AYAC places a strong emphasis on pursuing youth issues that already have a considerable public following. The organisation has officially announced its preference to undertake networked action rather than serve as a platform for consolidating individual voices because they believe that it is ‘difficult for ordinary voices and groups online to receive the publicity required for recognition by government bodies’ (AYAC, 2012, para.3). There is a preference for combining their resources and using topics that already resonate with the public and hence have a better chance of being picked up by ministers. Social media is used to canvas for topics that have become key features of public debate and consciousness before they are included in proposals sent to the government.

The above example corroborates Chadwick’s assertion that control and power on the internet is expressed and understood through the currency of public visibility; certain narratives and users prove to be more popular, and hence more ‘relevant’, than others, over time. This leads to the question of what we, as scholars, should make of the online work of citizens ‘in the shadows’—those who do not sustain a sufficiently visible online impact to be publically noticed and legitimised as key contributors to public debate but have nonetheless engaged significantly with online media by investing time and effort. These citizens are engaged participants whose contributions somehow fail to achieve enough traction or power of influence to become a highly visible part of public debate and consciousness. As a result their submissions are simply left unacknowledged by fellow citizens and public officials and omitted from policymaking considerations. Citizens that remain at the periphery of public visibility and acknowledgement have been part of considerable scholarly reflection and are important to empirical research in online youth political communication because their experiences and narratives serve as important critiques of accounts that fetishise online media as *the* answer to youth engagement problems where every voice receives an equal opportunity to be heard and implemented. The hard truth is that network openness, the fact that everyone can participate online, does not necessarily translate into effective engagement or democracy as the political and social influence of most citizens’ contributions fail to reach beyond the immediate context in which they are posted (Chadwick, 2012).

Morozov (2013) argues that the process of achieving public visibility online through one's contributions on a government or public website is not always self-generated and self-sustaining. He states that the publicity of particular citizen contributions can often be attributed to the work of outsourced public relations (PR) corporations that publicise particular posts by re-posting them in social media outlets and in popular blogs with the intention of fulfilling the vested interests of the government or organisation in question. These selected postings have been deliberately signposted because they are, as Morozov (2013) asserts, predicted to raise the credibility of particular ideas, policies or politicians such that they become part of mainstream consciousness. This strategic manipulation of power and control on the internet, through the currency of public visibility, is part of common practice for large news aggregate websites like Gawker and the Huffington Post that employ specific PR specialists to make certain user comments and stories go 'viral'. Morozov (2013) states that the majority of postings on public websites do not as a result gain the necessary visibility to really influence policy.

Natalie Fenton (2012), a prominent author in the field of online news journalism and a frequent commentator on democratic theory, has similarly argued that although online media creates multiple opportunities for young people to enter into public and policy deliberations, only a few, selected contributions (if any) are taken into consideration. Fenton explains that political communication platforms, in the context of Western democratic societies, tend to be governed by specific frameworks that regulate the visibility (Fenton, 2012, p.142) of online public contributions. These frameworks may sometimes consist of protocols, criteria or even algorithms that determine the type of postings that are most politically and economically viable to promote, leaving the majority of the remaining online contributions largely impotent without the necessary visibility to have an impact (Fenton, 2012). Fenton argues that it seems unlikely that new technologies will drastically change how power is exerted and articulated online because online networks, and their associated protocols, criteria and algorithms, are after all regulated and programmed by institutions with established political architectures that predate the internet. Fenton reaches the important conclusion that online political communication initiatives are not first and foremost about raising political engagement; their primary function is expressive, to

show that governments care about what every citizen has to say. In doing so, such initiatives—rather contradictorily—reaffirm rather than regenerate the political structures, decisions and attitudes that have always been part of how governments operate (Fenton, 2012).

The challenge for scholars lies in providing an account of the social and political significance of citizens whose submissions remain outside the reaches of public visibility and acknowledgement. Chadwick (2011a) argues that this involves asking empirical questions about what narratives that are outside the centre of public attention, such as citizen submissions that do not make the ‘final cut’ in terms of public popularity, say about how online media is valued as a platform for political communication. Understanding the positioning and framing of the work and role of ordinary citizens in light of digital political communication is an ongoing empirical exercise that needs to move beyond the impulse to establish single-category distinctions. It requires us to look past the internet’s inevitable social consequence of framing particular issues as truth and important pieces of reality.

#### **2.4.2 Area 2: Categorising the Realities Faced by Public Officials when Implementing Online Media Projects**

Considerable scholarly work has also been devoted to examining the realities faced by public officials when implementing online media projects, including specific challenges and barriers. The decision by governments to ‘go digital’ may seem like an inevitable progression in the digital media age but the implementation of such projects involves a consideration of the types of online media technologies and forms of consultation that are most appropriate and the objectives that should be put in place. Macnamara (2010a) has devoted much of his research to discovering the trends, behaviours and practices of Australian public officials in the implementation of digital media projects. The strength of Macnamara’s (2010a) research revolves around its ability to develop open categories of reality, which he labels ‘themes’, about how public officials in real-world online political communication projects actually understand the value and significance of their practices and what affect this has on the overall effectiveness of online communication. These categories are not fixed observations of the state of institutional practices around new media; rather they are

dynamic and open to change over time through particular strategic interventions and unexpected social occurrences—a point clearly acknowledged in Macnamara’s (2010a) work.

This section will feature a recent study conducted by Macnamara (2010a) on the planning and conduct of a series of online public consultation trials launched by the Australian federal government in 2008 as part of an attempt to revitalise democracy and reinvigorate citizen interest in politics. The public consultation trials were administered by the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO) via three online consultation sites: a blog run by the Department of Broadband, Communications and Digital Economy (DBCDE); the National Human Rights Online Consultation Forum established by the Attorney-General’s Department; and an online forum on childhood hosted by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The study involved a series of interviews with key public officials involved in the planning of the above projects and an accompanying qualitative analysis of the respective websites.

Macnamara’s findings were interesting because they reflected the general uncertainty that public officials faced in defining what online political communication should be about and what it should achieve—a similar picture to how the AYF was publicly received (see first section). These uncertainties were not due to the incompetency of public officials but were part of a wider process of *making sense* of how the presence of new media requires certain core administrative revisions to facilitate online communication. One of the central findings in the research revolved around the notion of ‘planning’ (Macnamara, 2010a, p.232). It was stated that the decision by public officials regarding what type of new media technology to use was one that emerged through an uninformed and sometimes instinctual commitment to particular technologies that were popular during that period in time rather than through careful deliberative planning involving ministers and public officials. It was asserted that ministers and public officials needed to be more sensitive to the possible social consequences of using particular technologies; for example, keeping track of what sorts of citizen practices tend to be privileged around particular media technologies. This involves conducting consultations with information technology staff, senior policy officers and PR staff in deciding how particular objectives can be

met through the right type of technological platform.

Another key finding in Macnamara's (2010a) research was the tendency for online discussions on the trial sites to revolve around particular controversial issues that, at the time, are at the centre of public attention. As an example, Macnamara draws on how the trial consultation blog of the DBCDE attracted harsh criticism from various digital media interest groups over the department's online announcement of a proposed internet filter. The ensuing discussion on the blog emerged as a 'blame-game' rather than having any constructive value. The issue of internet filters received an unprecedented amount of social media coverage far outweighing any other local discussion topic at the time. Macnamara argues that this ultimately resulted in much of the online conversation being 'off topic' and preventing these trial websites from achieving their actual objectives. In many ways, this point relates to previous arguments in this chapter about how the internet, through its networked structure, prioritises particular narratives rather than others as being publically important. The framing effects of the internet, in its categorisation of what is important, also pose serious challenges for government officials in redirecting public focus on issues that are relevant to the purpose of the online project in question. This ultimately involves the government setting its own categories of what matters as a way of resisting media's privileged framing of reality.

Macnamara's work shows how the presence of new media as a platform for political communication raises key challenges for public officials, first in developing particular principles for how and why certain media technologies should be used in public consultation and second in managing the unexpected social consequences that can arise through the networked environment of the internet. These categorisations of the reality behind the operation of online political communication projects foreground the social consequences that new media have in organising the practices and values adopted by public officials.

### **2.4.3 Area 3: Categorising Citizen Preferences that Drive Online Youth Participation**

With the introduction of digital media in political communication, the field of

civic education has devoted much of its efforts to keeping pace with the changing political identifications and practices that young citizens are believed to adopt (Bennett, 2007). Part of this exercise involves establishing core sets of categories that explain why citizens participate (or do not) in online political communication projects. There is clear pedagogical value in this process of categorisation because these formulated categories are meant to inform school curriculum proposals, policy, and education programmes on how youth interest in political engagement can be reinvigorated. The work of assembling categories, or more specifically, coming up with sets of principles that explain the different social motivations that young people have for participating in or disengaging from online political communication projects, was a task that was first adopted by Lance Bennett (2007), a professor at the Department of Political Science at the University of Washington and the Director of the Centre of Communication and Civic Engagement. His main premise is that people's values about politics are organised and acted out differently in response to online media technologies.

Bennett's (2007) work revolves around building categories based on citizenship styles; how young people express their membership or investment in particular sets of values about political action and political information through their practices around online media. He believes that technological change also marks a 'generation in change' (Bennett, 2007, p.1). Along with online media, young people's political values and ideas of what counts as politically relevant are being gradually reconfigured in interesting ways that need proper categorisation to be understood. Ultimately, Bennett categorised people's engagement with politics into two citizenship models: the dutiful citizen (DC) and actualising citizen (AC) models.

The DC model involves people that still believe in the obligation to participate in government-centred activities where voting is seen as the core democratic act. There is a tendency for these citizens to value mass media as a key information source and join civil society organisations as a way of making sense of politics and their role within the larger process of political communication. In contrast, the AC model features citizens that have a diminished sense of government obligation and a higher sense of individual purpose. These citizens are less likely to vote and react more positively to personally defined acts such as consumerism, community volunteering

or transnational activism. There is also a greater motivation for such citizens to use the internet to establish peer relations and social ties to facilitate collective networked action in support of specific public causes.

For Bennett (2007), the differences between these categories explain why many education programmes and attempts by government to design digital portals fail to attract AC citizens: simply because they were based on DC images of citizenship. He argues that governments are often more comfortable with using online media to provide one-way information to young people, and over-manage and limit the opportunities for more interactive and expressive participation that young people find in other media experiences. Bennett acknowledges that in an ideal situation, public officials and educators must find a way to bridge these categories; to appreciate the importance of having less managed partnerships with young people, dealing with issues on their terms while emphasising the importance of voting and being informed of certain basic political facts. The task of connecting both models of citizenship, concedes Bennett, represents a daunting project for civic educationalists but it is nevertheless an essential aspect of formulating civic policy that is sensitive to the social requirements and concerns of youth citizens.

Although Bennett's understanding of the different categories of citizenship style stems from a concern to understand the changing political practices and preferences of young people in the new media age it also illuminates something extremely important about media. Both categories, in their differences, foreground the varying ways through which media appear to young people as frames of political reality, or more specifically, how media frame and validate what is political and what matters in political communication. For example, in the context of AC forms of citizenship, it is argued that the internet facilitates an understanding of political communication that is decentralised and based on loose affinities among various interest groups. In the DC model, the reality of political communication seems to be based on a purely informational relationship to mainstream media where citizens engage with media for the purpose of making informed voting decisions. As such, the AC and DC categories also seem to represent specific conventions of practices and understandings of political and social reality that are attached to *media forms*. Implicit in Bennett's work is an explanation of the organisational *effects* of media on the social world; the

categories of values and understandings of reality that people build from using particular media forms.

Bennett's AC and DC model of citizenship was recently applied by Ariadne Vromen in her analysis of online youth political participation in Australia. Vromen (2012a) is a leading scholar in Australian youth political participation, social movements and community organisations at the University of Sydney. Her 2010 study was based on a coded analysis of 100 Australian youth-oriented political participation websites, including the AYPF, across the government and non-government sector. The objective of the study was to determine the kind of citizenship orientations present in online youth political communication discourse in Australia. Vromen (2012a) discovered that policymakers and officials of government-run and funded websites ideally preferred to cultivate citizenship based on the DC model that revolved around the broadcast of one-way authoritative information from site producers, news sites and public officials. She also established that almost all government websites under the analysis stressed the importance of identifying with national policy goals rather than individual youth-based everyday issues.

Vromen's study seems to suggest that Australian policymakers and public officials generally relate to the mediated reality of online political communication, including what is political and what matters in political communication, through a top-down and dutiful approach. This means that youth in government-led youth participation programmes can 'have a say' but only under the fixed terms and context set by the government. Online media appear to young people and governments differently as frames of political reality in how media frames and validates what is political and what matters in political communication, making it even harder for policymakers to allow AC and DC elements of citizenship to co-exist in government projects.

The above survey of digital political communication literature suggests that media outcomes are heavily dependent on various episodes of ongoing negotiation with authority and power that involve some level of confrontation and compromise. The idea of a coherent technological solution to a specific political communication problem then seems less likely to surface because the significance of online media,

including its objectives and aims, are in part channelled by people's strategic actions and decisions to accommodate or reject various aspects of power and regulation. With respect to the question concerning the representation of the online work and role of ordinary citizens in political communication projects, it was established that there exist online users whose contributions online do not receive any validation because they lack proper public visibility—a key currency through which power and regulation is expressed on the internet and an architecture that has been in place in government from pre-internet times.

Following that, I explored distinct circumstances that affect how public officials understand online political communication. It was argued that public officials themselves sometimes struggle to assert their own influence in terms of what issues are politically relevant during instances when particular controversial topics of discussion take centre stage and threaten to dismantle the objectives of political communication projects due to their intensified visibility and public presence. In addition to this, it was argued that government decisions to choose particular new media technologies over others can have major social and political repercussions in terms of how citizen voices are heard and what government objectives are met; as Macnamara (2013) has suggested, which technology should be used is a coordinated and negotiated decision best deliberated between ministers, public officials and IT personnel. The decision to go online is not only driven by the authoritative power of particular individuals in government but is one that revolves around the actions of both citizens and various government staff members in the bureaucracy. Finally, I looked at categories of young people's political preferences and their place in civic education. I suggested that these political preferences are greatly influenced by the power of media forms that set some of the conditions for participation.

All the above three discussion areas underline the negotiated nature of online media's organisational influence on people's diverse orientations to political communication reality. In doing so, they capture people's strategic negotiations with regulation and power, through conflict and integration, in their attempts to affirm what could and should form the reality of online political communication. These complex negotiations with social reality make it difficult to explain media's distinct contribution to political communication as online technology is deeply integrated in

different ways within the everyday decisions and practices undertaken by people in the field of political communication (Hepp, 2013, p.4). In the following section, I will suggest that the concept of mediatisation reflects a changed social context where media use is obligatory, creating more challenges in how it is appropriated in diverse social and cultural contexts.

## **2.5 The Difficulty of Outlining Media's Distinct Contribution to Political Communication and Mediatisation as a Cultural Response**

The active and ongoing negotiations undertaken by citizens and governments to manage technological change make it harder for us to envision exactly how online media solve political communication challenges. This difficulty is significant because online technological solutions to political communication problems are by their very nature formulated and implemented based on neatly defined expectations of how online media should work. These expectations, as stated in the previous section, do not necessarily materialise in reality as people have distinct ideas of what the reality of political communication should be about through their strategic negotiations with regulations and power structures that regulate online media projects. This section argues that mediatisation is a concept that encapsulates why changing political communication practices create as many problems as they solve. This is fundamentally because these practices reflect a changed social context where media use is obligatory, rather than needs-driven. Online media is viewed by governments as a necessary aspect of political interaction whether or not its presence is really warranted to solve specific political problems (Couldry, 2012). As a result, online media technology is appropriated in diverse cultural and social contexts, where different problems are identified and solutions sought. This poses obvious practical challenges in coming to a consensus of what online political communication should achieve and how to operationalise effective practices. Mediatisation is a response to the challenge of defining the decentralised effects of media in a media saturated political communication environment (Couldry, 2012; Hepp, 2013).

The concept of mediatisation has a highly complicated history as it has been used in reference to different understandings of media influence. Recent scholarly

interpretations of mediatisation have tended to class it as a sensitising concept (Couldry, 2012; Hepp, 2013). This means that mediatisation is conceptualised as a research-guiding concept that directs us to particular instances where media is seen to both shape and be shaped by people's practices in specific ways leading to specific social outcomes (Hepp, 2013). It is an empirical study of how media, culture and society are mutually implicated in processes of change. In the context of political communication, citizens and politicians are embroiled in a changing environment of practices, strategies and attitudes that may limit as much as it enables political interaction.

Though media infrastructure offers particular capabilities and potentials for interaction, people's localised practices are responsible for influencing how media work (Stromback & Esser, 2014). The above point is a key reason why the term 'mediatisation' is preferred over 'mediation' (Couldry, 2012) in contemporary scholarly work on political communication. The reason behind this preference in terminology stems from a growing international acknowledgement that the term 'mediation' better explains acts of transmitting and communicating through different media (Couldry, 2012; Stromback & Esser, 2014). 'Mediation' has been employed to explain the general characteristics of communication, be it through digital media, television or the newspaper, and the different interrelationships that are forged between participants (Hepp, 2013). 'Mediatisation' on the other hand is now used to explain the relationship between *historical* changes in media communication and social changes (Hepp, 2013). The emphasis of mediatisation is on *tracing the relationship between long-lasting broadly based cultural changes* and the media. There is an assumption that media transformation is an ongoing unfinished process that is consistently acted and negotiated upon through people's actions in response to various changing circumstances and/or challenges in reality (Hepp, 2013). Media complicate political interaction between governments and citizens because it cultivates different expectations of what it should do, making it harder to seek resolutions to political communication problems and even identify what these problems are about in the first place. The concept of mediatisation allows us to grapple with the ambiguity and contradictions surrounding the deeply embedded significance of media in political communication (Couldry, 2013).

While governments are now expected to use online media to connect with young people to stay current and appeal to their interests, this undertaking comes at the inevitable cost of further complicating their relationship with young people. The introduction of online media bring forth new practical problems in terms of understanding and managing the varying interests and objectives that are derived from the different ways young people and government officials appropriate media technology (Hepp, 2013). The next chapter argues that the history of youth political communication in Australia had set certain empirical pre-conditions for how youth and government officials managed technological change with the introduction of the AYF.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has established that media-related change is to a certain extent managed through negotiation. The launch of online media projects to solve political communication problems can bring with it a distinct momentum and pressure for government officials and representatives to anticipate and define what change(s) it would bring to how youth and politicians communicate. It has been argued that although this pursuit for technology-oriented solutions may be framed as a natural and perfectly legitimate part of how government-run online political communication platforms operate, there is *nothing* actually natural about this process. Ministerial representatives actively manage how technological change is represented based on their own expectations and ambitions. They are embroiled in the challenge of maintaining a stable narrative of change, one that reinforces online media as the central solution to political communication problems.

The AYF embodied a series of debates about the purpose and role of media technology in youth political communication whilst highlighting that practices and understandings of political communication are constrained and enabled in different ways according to people's negotiations with power and authority. While online media is an increasingly standardised aspect of how governments reach out to youth, its introduction is accompanied by a rich empirical backdrop of different and

sometimes competing ideas on what online political communication should be about, what it should achieve and which practices matter. This backdrop complicates any simple understanding of online media as fixed solutions to political communication problems.

The next chapter argues that, in the case of Australia, constant government struggles against citizen efforts to decentralise past youth political communication projects have played a key role in determining how people negotiated and managed technological change with the introduction of the AYPF.

# **Chapter 3: An Exploration of Past Government Struggles against the Decentralisation of Youth Political Communication in Australia and its Contemporary Resonance**

## **3.1 Introduction**

It was previously argued that the AYF is emblematic of how technological change is managed in specific ways, foregrounding changing understandings and practices of youth political communication. This chapter argues that Australia's youth political communication history is dominated by distinct waves of government struggles against citizen efforts to decentralise youth political communication projects. It is argued that although the introduction of media technology in youth political communication was originally intended as a solution to low youth participation levels, it soon became part of a broader problem concerning the management of youth political communication platforms, rekindling a long-standing and historically familiar political confrontation between young people and the government over the centralisation of youth politics. Using John Urry's (2000) work on 'social mobility', the inevitable human social impulse to seek a new sense of social order when past frameworks of meaning become unstable, it is argued that despite government efforts to maintain narratives of progress and change with each new youth project, there continues to exist an inherent resistance to decentralisation. The chapter concludes with the idea that historical practices and events inform contemporary understandings of media as problem-solving technologies in specific ways.

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first explores the development of key government youth political communication initiatives in Australia, highlighting various episodes of government struggle with citizen attempts to decentralise youth political communication. It is explained that these historical events had a role to play in contextualising the introduction of the AYF as a continuation of what has been a

traditionally polarised political battle for and against centralised government authority. It is argued that these tensions continued to escalate to the point of being publically played out on live television during a 2010 *Q&A* discussion, hosted by the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) network, between youth participants and the prime minister. The discussion was originally meant to address public questions and feedback on current youth political communication initiatives, including the AYPF, but instead revived historically familiar debates about centralisation and decentralisation in Australian youth political communication. The broadcast also reinforced the idea that the mediatisation of political communication is susceptible to specific historical tensions and pressures and capable of raising new questions about what problems technology is intended to solve in the first place. Political officials were keen to discuss youth issues through the prism of a centrally managed and regulated political communication set-up—much to the frustration of young people who believed such an approach to be a stifling and counterintuitive way of addressing their unique everyday concerns.

The concluding section argues that Australian government attempts to categorise youth political communication initiatives since the early 1990s have been strongly premised on the idea of ‘mobility’ (Urry, 2007), where each new political initiative was represented as a departure from past shortcomings and the beginning of a ‘new’ era or revolution in youth political communication. It is stated that this sense of mobility (1) connects with the idea of the changing social relations between government officials and young people and (2) serves as a broader social strategy for seeking a sense of stability in an environment that continues to resist any fixed explanation about how media technology should be used to communicate with young people. This concept of mobility, however, is counterintuitive. Whereas each new youth project was heralded as a new phase in political communication, past struggles against decentralisation continued to exist. It is argued that the mediatisation of political communication develops in the interface between present media developments and practices and past political practices and traditions. It would be impossible to appreciate and make sense of contemporary technological solutions without acknowledging particular events in political communication history, media related or otherwise.

### **3.2 A Recent History of Youth Political Communication Initiatives in Australia**

The history of youth political communication in Australia can be analysed in three broad chronological periods, each defined by the specific political approaches undertaken by elected government officials at the time to manage youth political communication, and how young people subsequently responded to those efforts. (Irving et al., 1995; Sawer, 2002). The first period is a vast 20-year period from 1970–90, a time characterised by a culture of active youth protest against centralised government authority (Irving et al., 1995; Sawer, 2002). It will be argued that the idea for change in youth political communication was in part motivated by the growing realisation among government officials that young people will remain disenchanted with established authority until they are included in youth policy consultation and governance strategies. The start of the second period, 1990–99, was marked by an encouraging turn towards a sense of government openness to decentralisation, a move first officially proposed by the Keating government in 1992 (Irving et al., 1995; Sawer, 2002). This idea was only followed through in practice in 1997 during John Howard’s tenure as prime minister, which saw the establishment of government-funded representative youth-driven bodies that endeavoured to tackle everyday issues that affected Australia’s youth. However, this government strategy under the Howard administration did not last. The end of the second period, towards the second half of 1999, saw the dissolution of representative youth-driven bodies as government officials increasingly found youth input to be disruptive to their own policy agendas. The final period from 1999 to the present day represents a reprioritisation of centralised authority in youth political communication as part of the mainstream political agenda (Bessant & Webber, 2001; Sawer, 2002; Sorenson, 2006; Counihan, 2009; Q&A, 2010). It will be argued that the launch of the AYF in 2008 did not necessarily instigate a move away from the notion of centralised rule despite government efforts to indicate otherwise. Rather, the government continued to hold onto the viewpoint that a central government body must ultimately oversee youth participation, policy and deliberation to ensure efficient government.

Table 1 summarises these three periods, providing information on key events, presiding governments that were *influential* in each period, and their respective political agendas and approaches to structuring youth political communication. Key political approaches to political communication are italicised in bold in the table. Each period is elaborated in further detail in subsequent sections.

### **3.3 Period 1—Youth Protest Culture and Youth Resentment towards Established Authority (1970–90)**

Since the early 1970s, young Australians have never been at the forefront of formal political discussion (Sawer, 2002, p.39). An Australian study conducted by Saha et al. (2009) reported a sustained global decline in youth electoral turnout since the 1970s. The foundations of youth political involvement in Australia stemmed from persistent critical questioning of established authority (Sawer, 2002; Seigel & Rockwood, 1993). Young people were more inclined to engage in mass community protests and less motivated to vote, due to a growing sense of disillusionment with institutional authority<sup>4</sup> and the sincerity of government efforts to further youth interests (Beresford & Philips, 1997; Sawer, 2002). This section will argue that the perceived problems in Australian youth political communication from the 1970s to 1990s revolved around a series of disagreements between young people and government officials over how political communication should be managed—problems that were inherently tied to a difference in opinion over how to define and regulate the social reality of youth political communication. These problems were not easily definable because they were deeply rooted within the conflicting social and cultural perceptions of young people and the government over what youth political communication should achieve and how it should operate, with each subscribing to their own understanding of what the reality of youth political communication should look like.

The key issue that first positioned young people against government authority and politicised previously politically apathetic young Australians took shape in 1971

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<sup>4</sup> This was partly due to youth protests against Western involvement in the Vietnam War that lasted until 1975.

under the presiding Liberal government led by the prime minister of the time, William McMahon, who rejected initial public pleas to withdraw young troops from the ongoing Vietnam War (Beresford & Philips, 1997; Sawer, 2002). The reluctance displayed by the McMahon government to cease Australian involvement in the Vietnam War in 1971 was widely interpreted by young people as a blatant sign of government apathy towards and neglect for the lives and concerns of young people (Beresford & Philips, 1997). As a result, the dynamics of youth political participation during this period were largely defined through strong opposition to authority (Irving et al., 1995; Seigel & Rockwood, 1993)—a stance that would remain a staple feature of Australian politics in years to come. However, these sentiments over the government's perceived lack of care for young people were not restricted to matters of foreign policy as they soon became the default framework through which young people rationalised most government-driven youth policies and initiatives in the 1970s (Irving et al., 1995; Seigel & Rockwood, 1993), as will be explained next.

**Table 1: Summary of Key Historical Periods in Australian Youth Political Communication**

Period	Key event(s)	Presiding influential government(s)	Main political approaches to structuring youth political communication
Period 1 (1970–90)	<p>Strong youth protest culture against Australia’s foreign policy in sending young troops to the Vietnam War.</p> <p>Industrial disputes over work opportunities across Australia.</p>	William McMahon (Liberal)	Government took a keen interest in closely managing the lives of young people (including employment opportunities) in accordance with specific centralised regulations. There was a <b>highly controlled and strained relationship</b> between youth and the government.
Period 2 (1990–99)	<p>The launch under the Keating government in 1992 of the <i>Youth Summit</i>—a meeting between national leaders and youth community leaders to discuss possible youth consultation processes.</p> <p>The launch of the AYPAC in 1997 by the Howard government.</p> <p>The abolishment of the AYPAC in 1999, also under the Howard government.</p>	Paul Keating (Labor) John Howard (Liberal)	<p>Early encouraging signs to develop a <b>consultative model of youth political communication</b> during the Keating government. These plans were carried forward by John Howard who eventually launched the Australian Youth Policy and Coalition (AYPAC) in 1997.</p> <p>These consultative approaches were soon abolished after the Howard government found it difficult to manage oppositional youth views on its policies. The AYPAC was dissolved in 1999 in favour of a <b>more centralised face-to-face platform</b>.</p>
Period 3 (1999–present)	<p>The launch of the <i>National Youth Roundtable</i> (NYR) by the Howard government in 1999.</p> <p>The launch of the AYF in October 2008 by the Rudd government.</p>	John Howard (Liberal) Kevin Rudd (Labor)	<p>A reprioritisation of centralised government authority over political communication since the launch of the NYR.</p> <p>The launch of the AYF under the Rudd government was officially branded as a move back to interactive and decentralised communication in theory, but in practice, political communication was still <b>highly centralised</b>.</p>

Since assuming power in March 1971, public officials under the McMahon government looked towards regulating youth rather than consulting with them, a stance that was based on the belief that young people were at the highest risk of turning to violence, criminal behaviours, substance abuse and suicide (Brown, 1974, p.142). There were two aspects to this hard-line stance. First, McMahon introduced the *Public Order (Protection of Persons and Property) Act* 1971, which was a piece of legislation that criminalised youth protest activity in public spaces that was deemed to be destructive to public property or dangerous to other members of the public (Brown, 1974, p.143). The legislation made it illegal for young people to ignore police requests to disassemble organised protests (Brown, 1974, p.144). This legislation was interpreted by youth as a direct and gross infringement of their freedom of political expression (Brown, 1974, p.144). The second aspect of the McMahon government's regulation of youth was a blanket ruling that made it impossible for young people to choose their own industrial profession to ensure that people remained employed in specific trade areas where industrial demand for employment was high (Irving et al., 1995, p.272). There were no official consultative mechanisms in place to evaluate how young people would adapt to these designated professions given their skills<sup>5</sup> (Irving et al., 1995, p.272).

The McMahon government's regulatory stranglehold over youth industrial employment ultimately led to the emergence of industrial disputes over government-funded youth work opportunities in the first half of 1972, involving young workers who wanted the freedom to choose their trade (Irving et al., 1995, p.274). These industrial disputes were specifically targeted towards Malcolm Fraser, the federal Minister for Education and Science for most of 1972 under McMahon's tenure as prime minister, who was widely seen as the public face of youth industrial regulation. State governments under McMahon's rule had the power to transfer young people to different trades at their discretion (Irving et al., 1995). Young workers also demanded an end to centralised wage control in favour of variable salary rates according to work experience and skill levels (Irving et al., 1995). The largest organised strikes took place in Lysaghts and Lloyds in Newcastle and at the Evans Deakin shipyard in Brisbane (Irving et al., 1995). These places have a special significance in the history

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<sup>5</sup> A dedicated ministerial portfolio for youth affairs was only established in 1978 under the Fraser government.

of youth politics as they became synonymous with the ‘master–servant’ analogy in Australian youth politics, a provocative description cultivated by young people in the late 1970s to early 1980s to describe their subjugation under centralised government regulations and the lack of freedom for individual political expression under presiding government infrastructure (Irving et al., 1995; Sawer, 2002).

Centralised regulation of young people’s work choices and constraints over their methods of political expression under the McMahon government had ultimately, as discussed above, led to the continuation of youth strikes and demonstrations in various forms until the early 1990s. Their stubborn resistance finally paid off when there was a gradual realisation under the tenures of former prime ministers Paul Keating and John Howard that the relationship between officials and young people could perhaps be better managed through a dedicated representative youth-driven body that brought youth interests and issues to parliament for discussion (Beresford & Philips, 1997; Bessant & Emslie, 1995; Saha et al., 2009). In tandem with this new strategy, politicians began, on a much broader scale than before, to support the growth of youth representative bodies and youth consultation processes run by young people. The growing sense of deep-seated youth resentment against government authority under McMahon’s rule had made the problem with Australian youth political communication and its potential solution very clear to subsequent governments, at least for the imminent future; young Australians were being denied the ability to manage their own lives and they wanted to have a direct stake in influencing youth policy decisions rather than being represented indirectly through centralised government-driven legislation (Irving et al., 1995; Sawer, 2002). The events from 1970 to 1990 as discussed above showed that from very early on, youth political communication problems were fundamentally based on differing visions held by young people and public officials over what political communication should achieve and how it should be managed.

### **3.4 Period 2—Early Engagement with Youth Consultation Processes in Government and a Return to Centralisation (1990–99)**

This section argues that although the Keating and Howard government's solution to youth political communication problems—proposing and establishing a youth representative body to address public youth concerns—worked in the short term by diluting some youth resentment against government authority, it ultimately brought about a new set of problems for government officials that struggled to cope with youth opinions that opposed their agendas and rules. The underlying point here is that the intended government solution, to establish a representative body for youth eventually became the source of further problems for politicians in managing dissenting viewpoints from young people (Melville, 2003). The history of Australian youth political communication is characterised by problems that affected *both* young people and public officials and the proposed solutions to these problems rarely appeased both parties (Melville, 2003).

The election of the Keating government in 1992 marked Australia's first official foray into consultative youth politics through the launch of the *Youth Summit*—a meeting of federal and national leaders and youth community leaders to discuss the future of youth political communication in Australia (Irving et al., 1995, p.22). The summit was principally organised by the Queensland premier of the time, Wayne Goss, under the supervision of Prime Minister Paul Keating. It promised to put in place a youth political communication infrastructure that was less centralised and targeted towards facilitating ongoing consultation with young people and various members of youth community organisations (Irving et al., 1995; Melville, 2003; Sawyer, 2002). Specific plans were also publicly released at the *Youth Summit*, in a separate document titled *Youth Policy: A Statement of Principles and Objectives*, to decentralise youth policy formulation and cater to the diverse social challenges and circumstances faced by young people (Bessant & Webber, 2001). The document detailed plans to link policy with young people's everyday lives. To achieve this, key consideration was given to attaching policymakers to specific youth organisations so that they could attain a better grasp of specific issues that affect young people (Bessant & Webber, 2001) from a more involved on-the-ground perspective. These

youth-specific organisations were officially termed ‘peak bodies’ and have since become part of Australian political lexicon.

Peak bodies, in the context of Australian politics, are widely regarded as associations that function as consultative agents for the government in relating feedback on a broad range of governmental policies. They are classed as representative bodies that provide advocacy, representation, coordination, information, research and policy development on behalf of various government organisations within a given sector. They are consulted in the process of policy development, and give evidence to parliamentary inquiries and at the committee stage of relevant legislation (Irving et al., 1995, p.326). In Australia, peak bodies fall into two main categories: ‘outward-looking’ or ‘inward-looking’ (Melville, 2003). Outward-looking organisations are focused on policy development, advocacy and representation to government and the wider community, consultation, lobbying, community education and networking with allied interest groups. Inward-looking peak organisations are concerned with industry development, which includes providing member support, information dissemination within particular industries, coordination, infrastructure development and networking between members. Youth peak organisations generally fall into the former category where advocating for youth social reform and welfare are key elements of their social and political purpose (Bessant & Emslie, 1995; Melville, 2003).

The material effect of the proposals raised at the *Youth Summit* was only evident years later with the launch of the Australian Youth Policy and Action Coalition (AYPAC) under the Howard government in 1997, a year after the Liberal party’s victory in the 1996 federal elections. The AYPAC was the largest peak body in Australia and it was directly affiliated with and funded by the government (Melville, 2003). The AYPAC was structured to represent over 350 youth organisations and networks that were in direct contact with the social conditions and challenges faced by over one million young Australians (Irving et al., p.328). It generated commentary and criticism on youth employment, education, health and homelessness (Sawer, 2002). These peak bodies remained under the operational jurisdiction of the government. There was an attempt to bridge the gap separating policymakers and policy takers by funding organisations to represent those affected by changes in

government policy (Irving et al., 1995). The rationale behind this was to strengthen weak voices—sections of the community that would otherwise be unheard in public debate and policy development, such as young people (Sawer, 2002).

The government's decision to launch the AYPAC was heralded by Australian youth and policy theorists as the first institutional attempt at decentralising youth political communication in Australia (Bessant & Webber, 2001; Irving et al., 1995). There were three aspects to this decentralisation process: (1) its framing of political communication around everyday youth issues rather than centralised bureaucracy-driven agendas, (2) its decentralised administrative infrastructure that employed state-specific AYPAC offices in most states to address local concerns, and finally (3) its representation of all young people as active members of the AYPAC with direct access to AYPAC staff (Bessant & Webber, 2001; Irving et al., 1995). The significance of each of these three areas is elaborated upon below.

The Howard government's decision to define political communication around everyday youth issues rather than around the adult-oriented interests of political officials is widely considered by youth policy scholars to be the core driving force behind the decentralisation of political communication in the 1990s (Bessant & Webber, 2001). The reason behind this sense of scholarly optimism was the fact that the majority of public youth policies in the early 1990s, before the AYPAC, were directed towards regulating youth behaviour and lifestyle choices rather than listening to youths' everyday concerns (Bessant & Webber, 2001). This bleak assessment of past policies was primarily based on the range of education retention policies designed by the government from 1990 that aimed to keep young people in school until Year 12 regardless of their social situation. There were widespread scholarly concerns that these policies were largely insensitive to why certain youths have difficulty staying in school (Bessant & Webber, 2001). In this regard, the AYPAC was a well-timed institutional effort to 'correct' the narrow scope of past youth policies. It was widely perceived by Australian youth researchers to be the first genuine nationwide opportunity for young people to directly engage in formulating new policy agendas through active lobbying within the policymaking community, or more formally by providing testimony or written submissions to official inquiries, and/or by regular contact with public servants, ministers and others involved in the

consultative processes.

The AYPAC also maintained its influence in various states through decentralised branch offices located in all Australian states, each equipped with their own resources and flexibility in addressing state-specific youth issues that were most concerning to young people (Sawer, 2002). However, all state branch offices were expected by the central government to hold monthly public consultation sessions with local youth known as ‘policy forums’. The main themes discussed in these state-level policy forums were then compiled into position papers, programme initiative proposals and discussion papers that were sent directly to the federal government (Irving et al., 1995; Sawer, 2002). This decentralised set-up allowed the AYPAC to adapt to social and political circumstances that prevailed in different states while maintaining an overarching objective to communicate all deliberative outcomes to the federal government.

The decentralised structure of the AYPAC was also evident in the ease with which individual young people could become members (Irving et al., 1995). Any young person in Australia could apply to be a member of the AYPAC by filling out a simple form (Irving et al., 1995). Youth policy scholars have argued that the free-for-all membership system employed by the AYPAC had a key effect in framing young people as important individual members of society who had a firm grasp of their local political, social and economic circumstances and inequalities (Bessant & Webber, 2001). This particular way of framing youth was clearly conveyed in AYPAC’s official newsletter *Round the Peaks* that was published in 1996. It stated that young people were all ‘equal participants in society who have an opportunity to voice their local concerns to “real people” in the AYPAC (as opposed to a centralised faceless governmental bureaucracy) who can relate to those concerns’ (Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies (ACYS), 1996, para.2). Young people will be able to speak with fellow members of the youth community that are in touch with youth concerns and challenges.

Although the AYPAC began as part of the Howard government’s broader plan to promote consultative politics to the youth sector in 1997, clear tensions emerged between youth representatives in AYPAC and government officials just six months

into its operation. Its long-term fate, along with that of other youth peak organisations in general, was uncertain and bleak as these organisations were constantly in danger of facing dissolution if their feedback on youth public opinion was found to put the credibility of the ruling government under question (Melville, 2003). A study by Rose Melville, an Australian sociologist and researcher on youth peak organisations with University of Wollongong, found that more than 50 per cent of youth peak organisations had lost significant amounts of funding and another 20 per cent had totally lost funding during the second half of 1997 under the Howard government. Melville's (2003) study also concluded, through a survey of 142 peak organisation in Australia, that youth peak organisations were most susceptible to government defunding specifically when their political activity and opinions were in opposition to government agendas and objectives. In addition to Melville (2003), research interviews with youth officials in the AYPAC and other youth peak organisations suggested that governments increasingly wanted a more hands-on role in regulating discussion topics and moderating the scope of discussions (Irving et al., 1995, p.327). Youth officials that were interviewed were also increasingly disillusioned with the concept of peak bodies as they felt that this was in effect an indirect form of surveillance, as governments could now appease young people with consultative platforms but also take an active interest in shaping the outcomes of policy forums, a move that was justified on the basis that these organisations were using government funding to stay in operation in the first place (Irving et al., 1995, p.328).

It was only in the latter part of 1997 that these initial suspicions amongst youth officials were finally confirmed when the Howard government officially announced the broader plan of incorporating peak organisations into a 'purchaser/provider' model (Bessant & Webber, 2001). This required peak bodies to have an internal PR department housed under central government administration that would render specific government-supervised services to young people and deliver tangible outcomes on particular youth concerns that were often short term in nature and related to government objectives rather than being community-identified priorities (Bessant & Webber, 2001; Sawyer, 2002). This proposal was vehemently opposed by all active peak organisations, leading to the government either cutting their funding or dissolving them completely (Bessant & Webber, 2001; Sawyer, 2002), an approach that kick-started a long-standing government struggle against youth-driven

decentralised political communication initiatives and ideas (Bessant & Webber, 2001; Sawer, 2002).

An early example of the Howard government's strong oppositional stance against decentralisation was the dissolution of 'National Shelter' in 1997. National Shelter was an Australian peak organisation dedicated to seeking temporary housing for homeless youth. The peak body was de-funded because the Liberal government believed that its strong opinions on public housing for youth added an unnecessary layer of complexity to existing government plans to tackle youth homelessness (Melville, 2003). The dismantling of National Shelter coincided with the government's decision to eliminate the issuing of grants to peak bodies for conducting projects and research on youth affairs. In place of government grants, the Liberal government promoted the concept of 'tendering', which referred to government subsidies and financial rewards that were tied to specific government-planned youth projects, tasks and outcomes rather than independent organisation-based projects. In other words, future youth peak organisations would only receive funding if they agreed to embark on a government-planned project for young people. This move effectively stripped any semblance of decentralised financial and functional autonomy from youth peak organisations in Australia (Melville, 2003; Sawer, 2002). The government also put in place a competitive tendering process that applied to all affiliate community organisations, which meant that youth peak organisations had to compete with other private organisations—youth related or otherwise—for funding (Melville, 2003).

With these stringent centralised financial restrictions in place, it was only a matter of time before the AYPAC suffered a similar fate to National Shelter as part of the government's heightened plans to clamp down on decentralised youth political initiatives and activities. The AYPAC was dissolved in 1999 after its opinions were deemed to be highly critical of government policy and in opposition to the government's agenda for addressing youth poverty and unemployment (Bessant & Webber, 2001; Sawer, 2002). It was at the time the latest casualty of the Howard government's clamp-down on peak advocacy organisations. The main factor that led to AYPAC's dissolution was its criticism of the *Common Youth Allowance Program* (Melville, 2003). The programme was launched in June 1997 and aimed to provide

students with financial assistance for housing while excluding unemployed youth that were not part of the local education system (Melville, 2003). The AYPAC argued extensively for a more inclusive youth financial assistance programme but was eventually informed by the government that it would not be receiving further funding to operate as a peak body (Melville, 2003). Although the AYPAC began its existence in Australian youth politics as a much-welcomed solution to the lack of youth political representation, it soon became the source of a problem for government officials who struggled to cope with its oppositional viewpoints.

David Kemp, the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs under the Howard government, claimed that young people were seeking broader representation and access to government than could be provided by a single decentralised youth peak body such as the AYPAC (Bessant & Webber, 2001; Sawyer, 2002). According to Kemp, a single lobby group could not represent young people as effectively as broader and formal representational processes (Bessant & Webber, 2001; Sawyer, 2002). There was also a growing governmental concern that youth peak bodies such as the AYPAC were more interested in disagreeing with institutional policies and legislation than providing constructive feedback, thus slowing down government responses to youth concerns (Irving et al., 1995). The main argument made by the government was that peak bodies were ultimately unaccountable because technically they occupy a 'grey area' in public administration sitting between government bodies and citizen communities (Melville, 2003). It was believed that the government would be in a better position to cater to youth interests if its youth political communication wing was fully managed by government officials whose aims and ambitions remain in synch with the goals set at the ministerial level (Bessant & Webber, 2001; Melville, 2003; Sawyer, 2002). There was an institutional preference for a fixed body that would aggregate views across the youth sector and provide government with fast, coordinated responses to policy proposals.

Bridgeland Sorenson, a prominent Australian youth policy commentator and political consultant with Edith Cowan University, labelled the dissolution of the AYPAC as one of the most drastic institutional moves to centralise youth public opinion in modern day Australia. Sorenson (2006) states that the institutional decision to dissolve the AYPAC, first, defined the landscape of Australian youth politics by an

overarching conflict between the ideas and policies of politicians and youth representatives and, second, removed any credible opportunity for youth to launch a purposeful connection with political institutions on issues that specifically concerned them in an everyday context (Sorenson, 2006). It was a move that was largely regarded by the media and public as counter to the advancement of youth political communication in Australia (Bessant & Webber, 2001; Melville, 2003). Senator Andrew Bartlett, a member of the Australian Senate representing Queensland, clearly reflected common public sentiment when he mentioned that closing the AYPAC was a case of ‘shooting the messenger’ (Bartlett, 2003, para.4), where the government was intent on denying an active public sounding board on major issues such as unemployment and education (Bartlett, 2003). For Bartlett, the dismantling of the AYPAC was a pre-emptive institutional move to curb public disenchantment with the presiding government. He had this to say about the issue:

At the time of the de-funding of AYPAC, we said it was a classic case of shooting the messenger. AYPAC was generating commentary and criticism about youth unemployment, education, health, homelessness etc. and a lot of the news wasn't good. There had been a peak national youth body in this country for 20 years. (Bartlett, 2003, para.4)

Bartlett's comments were mirrored at a global level with an official press release from the United Nations Youth Australia (UNYA), a subsidiary organisation under the United Nations that speaks up for youth participation rights. The UNYA stated that the Australian government's act of dissolving the AYPAC created a local environment where the relationship between youth and the government was largely detached (UNYA, 2012) and one where youth politics seemed to be characterised by a battle between centralised and decentralised political motivations and ideas (UNYA, 2012). In addition, it asserted that youth should be directly involved in the actual process of political communication, interacting and consulting with ministers in person on a regular basis (UNYA, 2012). It was stated that having a government organisation that acts on behalf of youth interests would gloss over the unique cultural and social circumstances faced by various youth communities in favour of *ad hoc* policy solutions that were designed to impose a sense of manufactured consensus (UNYA, 2012). It was believed that youth subjectivity would be lost within a centralised and structured government-driven political communication process

(UNYA, 2012).

Political communication after the AYPAC seemed to be defined in terms of addressing youth concerns through a regulated environment with fixed organisational structures to deal with youth policy issues (Bessant & Webber, 2001; Sawyer, 2002). The period 1990–99 in Australian youth politics is an important one because it showed how youth-tailored solutions in youth political communication, such as the Howard government's introduction of the AYPAC, can potentially prove to be a problem for government officials in the long run, reinforcing the idea that it is difficult to understand youth political communication within the context of a single problem and solution as different challenges and fixes consistently arise.

### **3.5 Period 3—a Reprioritisation of Centralisation as a Key Part of Youth Political Governance (1999–present)**

This section argues for the existence of distinct political strategies that underlined how and why specific government solutions were introduced and implemented at specific periods in time. It showcases how the Howard government's reprioritisation of centralised political communication in 1999 was an attempt to regain political control over youth voices and how the subsequent proposal of the Rudd government in 2008 to digitise youth political communication was motivated more by a desire to regain political credibility and trust from a disillusioned youth public than to end centralised control over youth political communication. This section highlights that although government-driven political communication solutions and initiatives are introduced for young people, they are also created in the interest of politicians who see them as opportunities to regain political control and/or realign their public image in relation to young people. In other words, government solutions and initiatives may not necessarily always result in changes for young people; these solutions can also cater to the challenges faced by politicians themselves.

The move towards a centralised political communication platform was initiated through the launch of the *National Youth Roundtable* (NYR) by the Howard government in 1999 to replace the AYPAC. The roundtable was fully funded by the

Liberal government and operated by the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs at the time, David Kemp. This project consisted of a series of bi-monthly meetings between senior political officials and nominated community leaders at Parliament House. These community leaders, aged 15–24, were selected through a nomination scheme run by their respective local communities that included school teachers and peers, and other grassroots organisations. Community leaders were required to submit a proposal after each meeting indicating the major policy concerns of youth they represented in their community.

The NYR was described by the government as a ‘vehicle for facilitating participation’ (Bessant & Webber, 2001) and it was introduced as a landmark and game-changing development in youth political communication at the state and federal levels (Bessant & Webber, 2001; Sawer, 2002; Sorenson, 2006). In subsequent press speeches just after the launch of the roundtable, John Howard reiterated that the launch of the roundtable coincided with a new era in youth political communication—an era where young people no longer had fixed party loyalties and political values but embraced an ever-changing spectrum of lifestyle choices (Sawer, 2002). It was believed by the government that the roundtable would instil some sense of stability in an uncertain political environment, providing young people with an awareness of key issues that they should be concerned about as citizens (Bessant & Webber, 2001). The roundtable operated along the lines of a centralised and systematic structure concerning (1) which youth topics deserve public discussion and (2) how such topics should be deliberated publically (Bessant & Webber, 2001).

Despite government commitment explaining how exactly the roundtable would support young people, its status as a centralised government platform emerged as a contentious point for youth and the wider public (Sawer, 2002). The notion of a centralised youth political communication set-up received particularly harsh condemnation from state and community media around the country (Bessant & Webber, 2001). The most notable of the criticisms of centralised governance came from a reported incident in 2001 at a roundtable meet on national radio.

In 2001, the NYR courted national controversy after it was revealed on the Triple J radio station that a member of the opposition Labor party, Kate Lundy, was

denied access to a roundtable meet (Australian Politics, 2001; Sorenson, 2006) due to her membership of the opposition Labor party. The *Sydney Morning Herald* had subsequently labelled the roundtable undemocratic and an institution that restricted youth to only speaking with political officials from the Liberal party. In response, John Howard organised a public interview with Triple J stating that opposition members that want to speak to youth roundtable participants can set up a separate formal consultation with young people in a committee room in Parliament House (Australian Politics, 2001). The *Sydney Morning Herald* ran a subsequent story condemning political officials who ran the roundtable as ‘image-Nazis’ (Australian Politics, 2001, para.23)—people who cared more about their status and public image as a ruling national party than about democracy (Australian Politics, 2001, para.23). The article generated public suspicion of the government’s actual intentions behind running the roundtable and prompted youth researchers to take an active interest in understanding its operational protocols and effectiveness in connecting with youth (Bessant & Webber, 2001; Sorenson, 2006).

Youth scholars primarily perceived the NYR as a retrograde step in Australian youth political communication after the AYPAC (Bessant & Webber, 2001; Sawer, 2002). The concentration of decision-making powers to a single ruling party begged further questions about the terms and conditions upon which individual youth concerns were heard and addressed (Melville, 2003). In 2006, Sorenson released a public report through Edith Cowan University on the challenges faced by the roundtable in hearing youth voices under a centralised government set-up.<sup>6</sup> Her research involved a series of interviews with current roundtable participants, which revealed that several ministerial officials from government were not present at these meetings and acting advisors were often asked to stand in. The centralised structure of the roundtable, according to Sorenson (2006), did not have the necessary resources to address the diverse nature of youth concerns and topics that were presented at these meetings. Below are direct quotes from youth participants in the roundtable included in the study:

...you go there with high expectations about spending time with ministers etc., but in reality you get all of eight seconds with ministers that aren’t even connected with

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<sup>6</sup> This report was also part of her Masters thesis at Edith Cowan University.

your topic area ... what's the point? No-one takes it seriously and you find yourself crashing back to reality. (Sorenson, 2006, p.23)

...the person who was responsible for the area my project was involved in was the Minister of Youth but I didn't meet with him. I met with Minister for Transport ... it wasn't his area or youth portfolio or anything to do with the Youth Allowance. (Sorenson, 2006, p.23)

These quotes are featured here because they reinforce the idea that the appointed government bureaucrats within the roundtable had little or no professional affiliation with the specific issues brought up by young participants. This raises pressing questions about the politics inherent in managing adult-initiated youth participatory processes and in whose interest the forum is actually operating. Sorenson's (2006) research provides a rationale for asking whether the centralised participatory or consultative devices used in Australian youth political communication provide experiences that encourage cynicism and distrust on the part of young people about participatory processes.

Further to the above, Sorenson's (2006) study revealed that youth participants in the roundtable were institutionally framed as citizens that needed structured directional guidance in their interactions with government ministers and members of the mainstream media. First, all participants had to undergo 'etiquette briefings' that focused on (1) methods of addressing invited ministers at the roundtable and (2) specific politically sensitive questions that were out of bounds for discussion (Sorenson, 2006). Second, a set of media protocols were put in place by the government on what youth participants could and could not say when interviewed by mainstream media about their experiences in the roundtable (Sorenson, 2006). These protocols clearly demarcate how and on what terms the participants are to speak to the media and hence play a part in shaping the public perception of the roundtable. They defined the scope of what participants could or could not say to mainstream media on subjects relating to representation, control of information and confidentiality (Sorenson, 2006, p.96). Government protocols were a significant part of the roundtable process and they were responsible for setting the agenda for what was to be discussed at these meetings.

Sorenson's (2006) study had a major influence in the eventual dismantling of the roundtable. It was dissolved in 2007 before the national elections were held. The Liberal party cited Sorenson's study as evidence that Australian youth were not convinced of the roundtable's capacity to communicate effectively with youth (Sorenson, 2006). Howard agreed that an alternative youth political communication platform was necessary to reinvigorate youth interest in politics (Sorenson, 2007). The early demise of the NYR was yet another example of prevailing tensions between young people and the government over how youth political communication should be regulated. The centralising tendency in how governments want to manage youth politics remained evident even when the AYF was eventually introduced as a new and technologically advanced way of connecting with young people after the disappointments of the roundtable. It is argued in the following paragraphs that although the AYF was introduced as a way of raising youth engagement levels, it ultimately became part of a broader problem, rekindling a long-standing political confrontation between young people and the government over the organisation and management of youth political communication platforms.

This pressure for 'change' and the subsequent void that was left after the roundtable was dissolved was ultimately capitalised upon by the incoming prime minister Kevin Rudd who, under the *Kevin07* election campaign, targeted youth political communication as an area that required special attention. It was a move that eventually saw the formation of the AYF, an effort that was emblematic of the wider institutional desire to once again redefine political communication. The notion that the AYF represented a new frontier in youth political communication—primarily the fact that it involved digital media—allowed the government, for the time being, to publicly initiate a 'break' from a rather bleak youth political communication history. However, the introduction of media technology was from the very start perceived by mainstream media as part of a broader government agenda to distract the public from its intention to centralise youth political communication (Counihan, 2009). Media technology was thus perceived to be part of a broader historical problem concerning the politics behind the management of youth political communication—government practices of centralised control and regulation were viewed as a problem that would never really go away. This viewpoint was further supported by the fact that engagement numbers for the AYF were plummeting within three months of its

launch. It was officially reported by the Ministry of Youth in January 2009 that the AYF received around 500 unique visits a month compared to its initial projection of 4000 (Counihan, 2009), a statistic that has since been used by the media to show the magnitude of its failure.

Low readership rates during the first two years of the AYF's operation had prompted youth community activists and media columnists to draw a direct link between the AYF's unpopularity and a lack of government know-how in using technology as a decentralised platform to capture diverse youth voices and interests (Counihan, 2009; Vromen, 2012a). It became a common assumption that politicians simply did not possess the skills and foresight required to adapt to decentralised forms of interactivity and looser regulation infrastructures—characteristics that were deemed key aspects of online communication (Counihan, 2009; Vromen, 2012a). This view was most succinctly encapsulated in a particular story on the AYF published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* in October 2009 that received considerable public and media attention. The article in question was written by Bella Counihan (2009), a youth journalist with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and was entitled 'Blogging a dead horse'. In it, Counihan claimed that the launch of the AYF in 2008, as a new digital platform for young people, succeeded, at least in the beginning, in cultivating public hope that youth participation in Australia would be 'reinvented' (Counihan, 2009, para.3), after the centralised measures and tendencies present in past efforts. But in reality, Counihan asserts, the AYF did not focus on changing the actual political circumstances surrounding youth political communication and held on to the presumption that online media technology would somehow automatically reinvigorate youth interest in political participation:

The AYF promotes technology for technology's sake. Young people love technology—we get it. We like Facebook and MySpace and Twitter, but not every message put in an IT box and wrapped up in a technology bow means we will buy it. (Counihan, 2009, para.5)

Counihan (2009) suggests that new media technology is widely seen from an institutional perspective as a 'one-size-fits-all' solution to youth participation problems in Australia—a strategy that has not paid dividends in transforming youth political communication. Counihan (2009) goes on to conclude that the AYF was a

crude form of political advertising targeted at winning over a politically dispassionate generation of youth through technology. Her claims prompted the Minister for Youth at the time, Kate Ellis, to publish a short response through the same newspaper stating that public cynicism about the AYF was understandable considering that Australian politicians have traditionally struggled to connect with young people. She stated that the AYF had become part of a historical deep-seated suspicion over any government efforts to connect with young people. The following quotes from her article in response to Counihan illustrate this point:

Let's just be honest from the outset—the engagement of young people hasn't traditionally been a great strength of our political system. Governments have either not cared or not known how to talk to young people. Given this fact, it's hardly surprising that when polities do attempt it we're confronted with a high degree of cynicism (Ellis, 2009, para.2).

We belief [sic] that online projects should be under a centralised set of rules and run by selected government representatives. It is a matter of choosing the most efficient way forward to get more people involved. Let's give it some time. (Ellis, 2009, para.5)

The centralising tendencies of government political practice became the default explanation for low levels of youth activity on the AYF (Vromen, 2012a). Although the government acknowledged this history of political centralisation in the youth sector, they were adamant that such an approach would eventually prove to be a success (Vromen, 2012a). This sense of governmental resilience and advocacy for centralised rule and subsequent public criticisms over such an approach became a staple feature of media discussions on the AYF (Vromen, 2012a). A NewsBank and LexisNexis search conducted with the words 'AYF' and 'centralised' and 'decentralised' revealed that there were 167 mainstream Australian media reports in total on the AYF in the first six months of its existence on the subject of political centralisation in youth political communication. There was a general mainstream media consensus that because the AYF was a purely government-run and funded initiative, it would not have the necessary breadth and flexibility to address various youth social issues that could be best captured through decentralised efforts run by young people themselves.

It would be fair to argue that although the AYF first started as a simple technological solution to raise youth participation rates, it had increasingly become part of a broader problem; young people simply could not relate to initiatives that were squarely operated and run by government. In a move to regain youth credibility and trust, the government made the decision to hold a live television discussion with youth representatives on their concerns over the future direction of Australian youth political communication. This was through the ABC channel on which Kevin Rudd made an appearance on the *Q&A* programme. It is argued in the subsequent pages that the programme only served to further expose the inherent differences in opinion between young people and governments over how youth political communication projects should be managed. The broadcast effectively showcases historically familiar debates about centralisation and decentralisation in Australian youth political communication. It provides insight into how the mediatisation of youth political communication is susceptible to specific historical tensions and pressures, and sheds new light on what technology is intended to solve, the wider problem areas and/or political debates of which it is also part, and what success and failure actually mean.

On 2 May, 2010, Kevin Rudd was invited to the first episode of *Q&A*. The session was hosted by veteran journalist Tony Jones and was attended by over 120 young Australians aged between 16 and 25. The purpose of the discussion was to provide young Australians with an opportunity to direct a series of questions to Kevin Rudd on concerns they had over the current and future state of youth political communication (Q&A, 2010). The programme was televised live on ABC and television audiences were given an opportunity to comment on proceedings through Twitter.

The session started with a series of questions directed at the prime minister on the topic of unfulfilled promises made during the *Kevin 07* campaign as part of its promise to use digital technology to address youth interests. The majority of questions were concerned with why his reform-based election campaign (*Kevin07*), one that garnered a substantial amount of youth support, had failed to capture youth concerns and effect appropriate proposals for change. The reported lack of change specifically extended to areas of (1) laptop accessibility in the public school system, (2) the legal age for drinking and (3) healthcare reforms for young people needing long-term

medical assistance (Q&A, 2010).

The *Q&A* session with Kevin Rudd was interesting because it demonstrated an apparent disagreement between the youth attendants and Kevin Rudd over how the governance of youth political communication platforms should be organised, evoking past debates on the decentralisation and centralisation of youth initiatives. The discussion followed a predictable trend where young people expressed their frustrations at the lack of transformations and unfulfilled promises under the Labor government while Kevin Rudd, in reply to these statements, maintained that the consideration of promises and the implementation of change through online political communication platforms had to first go through centralised government protocols and procedures, which meant that visible results of communication initiatives would take time to appear. The following extract from the transcript of the *Q&A* conversation between an Australian student Matthew Liang and the prime minister illustrates the above point:

LAING: Prime minister, last week the newspapers ran a series of stories detailing a long list of promises that the ALP [Australian Labor Party] made the last election, which remain unfulfilled ... For example, I have yet to see any improvements in laptop accessibility in my school. No change. Given the amount of young people who got behind the Kevin '07 Campaign, on the basis of its reform and change agenda (with digital technology), is it any wonder why idealistic youth become cynical adults when it comes to politics? ... There was the assumption, correct me if I am wrong, that digital political communication mediums will allow us to directly voice our issues and the government to better capture these appeals. What has happened?

RUDD: I think you'll find the vast bulk of those have either been implemented or are being implemented ... Can I say, on so many of the big things that we undertook to do, including an education revolution ... and other proposals suggested through our online platforms, it's rolling out there through the proper channels under proper guidance and procedures ... and we're not through it yet [sic].

LAING: Wait, so when you say we can directly contact politicians online what you're actually saying is that what [sic] we can contact the organisation first and wait in line with everyone else like how it is in a technical support helpline? Then what's the point of having online communication in the first place prime minister? Seems to me that going online is no different from writing a letter or making a phone call. Why can't youth political mediums be run by youth?

JONES (HOST): Very briefly, Matthew wasn't alone on this. We've got a lot of questions about unfulfilled or broken promises. Where are the changes promised?

RUDD: On the question of keeping up with our promised changes, it's always tough. You know what it's like out there. There's always a celebration of the things that go wrong, as opposed to the things that go right. That's kind of news. That's

politics. That's reality. That's what we deal with. Have we been the perfect communicators of a message [sic] of what this change is? Of course not, including myself. ... The bottom line is that we are a government organisation and whatever is submitted to us will have to go through proper channels of consideration before they are addressed. (Q&A, 2010, para.11)

There was an implicit assumption in Kevin Rudd's responses that all forms of communication, digital or otherwise, would inevitably be subject to centralised processes of assessment and implementation, a point that was constantly picked up on by dissatisfied youth that felt that online political communication should offer a sense of immediacy in terms of responding to youth problems. The ensuing debate over the centralised management of online political communication projects eventually moved on to the question of what online media was actually supposed to achieve in the first place. The discussion reproduced below exemplifies how young people critically reflected upon the problem-solving role of media technology. There were polarising views on how the AYF actually set out to raise youth engagement. The youth speakers at *Q&A* saw the introduction of the AYF as a solution targeted towards reducing the presence of centralised management and control over youth political communication, an impression that was flatly denied by the government:

NATE REYNOLDS: Mr Rudd, I was under the assumption that the AYF and associated online avenues were there so that we could jump on them anytime and directly relate issues/experiences we are facing but more importantly remove the bureaucratic red tape that plagues traditional processes of political interaction. I thought the internet was supposed to solve the problem of government control over what we can or cannot say and what gets addressed. But it doesn't seem to have worked that way.

RUDD: Can I just say that the AYF was there to raise interest in political communication and get young people like your good selves on-board. Governments have to work in a certain way. It is how we get the stuff you ask for done. It is not viable to leave everything up to representatives as our history in this sector would suggest ... there needs to be a standard system in place. I don't think the AYF was ever there to change that. I don't know why you are shaking your head but from where I am standing it makes complete sense to have the central core of government intact in initiatives like these.

MARCUS WHITE: Tony, if I may? Mr Rudd thanks for being honest but at the same time I feel confused. Why not just stick with traditional ways of communicating with young people? Why go online if it's going to be run and operated by politicians in closed doors? Doesn't matter what you use.

RUDD: I wouldn't put it that way. We are transparent and open with how we manage all projects. Young people like the internet and it gives them an added avenue to reach us. We want to reach everyone and the AYF is that first step forward. I never said we were re-writing how we work as a national and political

institution. (Q&A, 2010, para.13)

This discussion suggests a critical questioning of what the problem-solving role of media technology should really be. The assumption that the AYF would eventually lead to the decentralisation of youth politics and hence solve the problem of centralised bureaucratic control over what gets discussed and addressed was met with opposition from the government, which perceived its introduction to be less disruptive to current political arrangements. Although online media was first publically introduced as a straightforward solution to raising youth political participation, it has gradually become part of a broader political problem, one that has been around for more than a decade—the centralisation of youth politics amid opposing youth public sentiment against established authority. Pertinent questions were raised in the *Q&A* programme over the scope and extent of media technology's problem-solving role in reality: was online media meant to solve the historical problem of centralised political control or was it simply, as Kevin Rudd put it, another platform for communication?

The above questions reinforce the idea that there is no single instrumental logic determining what problems online media should solve and how they should solve them. The idea that online media would solve a single problem with a specific solution was one that was problematised from the start, as media technology itself became part of a broader unresolved historical problem. It can be stated that youth political communication in Australia is informed and contextualised by the continuous tension between young people and the government over how online projects should be regulated and managed.

In the next section it is argued that all youth political communication projects in Australia have at one time or another been defined by governments as something new, transformative and different from the projects they succeed, but despite this well-intentioned desire to move forward, the core problem of centralised government control over youth politics persists. Using Urry's (2000) concept of 'social mobility', it is argued that past problems of centralised political practice remained a constant feature despite changing youth political projects, technologies, ambitions, expectations and infrastructure over the years. This part of the chapter argues that changes in understandings and practices of political communication develop in the

interface between the present and the past. Past political practices and attitudes inform contemporary approaches and practices with media.

### **3.6 Connections between the Past and Present—the Significance of Social Mobility**

This section of the chapter argues that changes in understandings and practices of political communication are informed through specific relationships between past and present events, practices and attitudes in youth political communication, which may not necessarily relate to media technology. As a way of explaining this relationship between past political practices and current perceptions of media technological change, Urry's (2000) concept of social mobility is used to explain the counterintuitive nature of change in political communication. Despite the revised infrastructure, expectations and objectives publicised with each new project, there are certain patterned consistencies in political communication practice and how people understand media technology as solutions. It is difficult to strictly isolate online youth political communication to a specific phase of history or timeframe because some of the defining moments, decisions and practices that determine how current media projects work may be found in past events and political practices. The problem-solving role of online media, more specifically what online media is supposed to solve and how it should go about doing it, is not only related to the importance of media technology *per se*. It is also formed through interconnecting practices located in both the past and present within the field of youth political communication.

Throughout the history of Australian youth political communication, there has been a general social impulse to move on from past failings or the supposedly constraining circumstances of previous political communication initiatives. This desire to move on after each failure was closely connected by public officials to the need for change in how the youth political communication sector was run. It asserts that this government interest in moving forward reflects a much broader social strategy of seeking a semblance of stability and meaningful order in an environment that continues to resist any fixed categorisation of what political communication should be about and how media should be implemented and used as problem-solving

technologies.

The desire of governments to move forward from past political communication efforts connects with Urry's work on 'social mobility' (2000, p.2). Social mobility is a term Urry uses to explain broadly how social life and the organisation of the social world are consistently changing through time and history. More specifically, he discusses social mobility in reference to how people, with their respective access to symbolic resources, have the ability to re-create the past in ways that are presumably meaningful under new social terms and conditions for the present. Urry (2000) describes social mobility as an inevitable human social impulse to seek a new sense of social order and stability when previous stable frameworks of meaning are somehow no longer relevant or are threatening to collapse for whatever reason.

Urry's (2000) work revolves around exploring traces of 'mobility' in how the social world is organised and framed. His main motivation in pursuing the concept of 'social mobility' stems from his interest in questioning what, if any, complex social patterns lie behind seemingly ordered aspects of social life (Urry, 2005). The main approach of Urry's work involves reflecting on how seemingly self-organising, stable and meaningful representations in politics and history—for example, the meaning of political communication—come to fruition in the first place and how they change over time. Urry (2005) believes that the concept of social mobility captures how media and government organisations in particular strategically move through different ways of categorising social reality in a quest to seek social order and stability when previous categorisations of reality do not hold. He argues that social mobility is particularly pertinent in the digital era where there is a constant focus on newness; in the field of political communication, Urry (2005) argues that the introduction of online media technology has become synonymous with the start of a new modern phase, one that is distinctly different from past expectations and infrastructure.

From the historical account presented so far, it could be argued that 'social mobility' in the context of Australian youth political communication revolves around changing government and youth identities. The notion of *identity* discussed here revolves around the question of what it means to be a government official and participant in youth political communication. In the years before the AYPAC, the

government assumed the role of being key regulators of youth behaviour and young people themselves were framed as members of the public that needed consistent attention and supervision. This was carried out through a series of school retention policies aimed at keeping young people in school and out of trouble. Little focus was on how youth could also contribute to the political communication process as thinking and deliberative citizens. The AYPAC successfully re-wrote the identities of both government officials and youth. The government assumed a more decentralised and less attached role in regulating youth behaviour and lifestyle choices through policy as the AYPAC was given the responsibility to convey youth challenges and issues to the government from a grassroots level. The subsequent roundtable initiative instated public officials as key representatives of youth interests, removing the need for the ‘middle man’, peak agencies like the AYPAC. Youth concerns were conveyed to government at roundtable sessions by youth representatives carefully handpicked by government officials based on their previous experiences with youth affairs at state or federal level. The launch of the AYF after the roundtable interestingly brought about less clearly definable identities. Although the government used digital media to provide a more interactive environment for young people to interact and communicate in, there seemed to be a lingering sense of uncertainty and doubt, possibly stronger than before, over how this technological change should be perceived and what it should bring, apart from serving as a break from past unsuccessful political communication attempts.

However, the sense of mobility captured in the field of Australian youth politics is also counterintuitive; despite the new ambitions, technology and expectations publicised with each of these new projects, past tensions between government officials and young people remained over the centralisation of youth political communication. It was a problem that never really went away. To recap, with the AYPAC, governments increasingly wanted a more hands-on role in regulating discussion topics and moderating the scope of discussions, whereas with the NYR, specific policy directives and protocols were established to control and centralise youth participant discussion with politicians and the media, and finally in the AYF, the government took a clear oppositional stance against youth pressure to decentralise how the online forum worked and achieved its goals. The long-standing opposition that past and current Australian governments felt towards decentralisation provoked

critical public questioning of the motivations behind online government youth political communication initiatives.

It could be argued that contemporary changes in expectations, understandings and practices of political communication develop between the interface of past practices and ideas and present understandings of media technology in youth political communication (Urry, 2005). As such, it would be highly challenging to understand how media technologies work as specific solutions to specific problems or what their consequences are in political communication precisely because media influence is articulated through a constant negotiation with historical practices and current circumstances, actions and attitudes. Urry labels the uncertain and unpredictable social consequences of media technology the ‘complexity turn’ (2005, p.3). The ‘complexity turn’ refers to how various social groups, through their engagement with technology, develop collective ways of categorising social reality in ways that are not solely based on observations in the present. There is an absence of any linear and reducible logic of how people should work with media and what they will receive from it. It could be argued—based on the introductory explorations of the AYF in Chapter 2 and the discussion of its history in this chapter—that the AYF in many ways embodies what Urry (2005) describes as the ‘complexity turn’ with regard to digital technology. The struggle to define and convey technology-related political and social change coupled with the efforts of government officials to impose a centralised political communication environment makes the AYF an intriguing development in the history of youth political communication that testifies to the complex social consequences of modern media in the social world.

The overall point is that prevailing historical tensions around decentralisation in youth political communication remain a key part of contemporary narratives and experiences surrounding online engagement in Australia, including how media technology is understood as a solution. The mediatisation of youth political communication in Australia did not solely revolve around the introduction of digital media technology but it is a process that is deeply rooted in the political history surrounding local government efforts with respect to communicating with young people.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has explained that particular historical political practices may have an influence on contemporary youth political communication initiatives and the motivations behind technology-motivated solutions. It described how Australia's youth political communication history is dominated by distinct episodes of government struggle against citizen efforts to decentralise youth political communication projects. It is argued that although the introduction of media technology in youth political communication was originally intended as a solution to low youth participation levels, it soon became part of a broader problem concerning the management of youth political communication platforms, rekindling a long-standing and historically familiar political confrontation between young people and the government over the centralisation of youth politics. Using Urry's (2000) work on 'social mobility', it is argued that despite government efforts to maintain narratives of progress and change with each new youth project, there continues to exist an inherent resistance to decentralisation. The chapter concluded with the idea that historical practices and events inform and constrain contemporary understandings of media, as problem-solving technologies, in specific ways.

The next chapter explains the method employed for this study. It explains how Lindgren's (2012) work on CCA provides an incisive way of exploring how public officials and youth participants understand online media amid prevailing pressures, challenges and struggles in youth political communication, some of which have already been explored in this chapter.

# **Chapter 4: Method: Connected Concept Analysis and the Uncovering of Socially Grounded ‘Categories’ to Explain Instances of Mediatised Reality**

## **4.1 Introduction**

As argued in the opening chapters, this thesis has set out to examine how public officials and youth participants negotiate the significance of media technology amid prevailing social challenges and government expectations. This chapter details a method for uncovering and explaining how people orientate themselves to technological change and the ideas they use to do that by using Lindgren’s (2012) work on Connected Concept Analysis (CCA). CCA is a method based on grounded theory that generates particular ‘categories’ or interpretations of social reality that are indicated by the data collected on a given research phenomenon. The task that this thesis faces is to uncover and explain latent social categories that may be present in the large number of documents that have been collected in the context of the AYF. These various documents are collected from different key informants within the AYF, and through in-depth interpretation they collectively explain the reality behind online youth political communication in Australia.

The first part of the chapter identifies the data collected for the study and explains how they are organised for this research and their broader significance to the research’s objectives. The second part of the chapter describes CCA and how it is applied in analysing the data. It argues that CCA recognises the varying prominence of different categories by quantitatively identifying how frequently they appear in a particular corpus of text that is being analysed. The identification of these categories involves examining the wider context of each word and then grouping together words that have a similar context. To assess whether words are used in similar contexts, a specific set of criteria provided by Van Dijk (2008) is employed when determining the similarity of meaning between different contexts. This strategy of incorporating Van Dijk’s (2008) work in CCA has been successfully employed by Lindgren’s

(2012) own research on online political communication on Swedish movie piracy, which will be elaborated upon later. It is asserted that this overall process of generating concepts or categories from data is derived from the established principles and logic of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). CCA is a contemporary application of grounded theory to online political communication research.

## 4.2 Collecting and Organising Data

A thorough scan of the AYF website was conducted to identify the types of documents that were publically available. The authors of these documents and their targeted audience were recorded to determine the wider significance of each document. The main section of the AYF, at the time this research was conducted, consists of an interactive discussion board containing posts submitted by youth. There are sub-sections on the main website that have their own respective micro-functions, as follows:

- (1) a section describing what the AYF represents for young Australians
- (2) a resources section housing government-authored documents on the AYF (see Table 2) for youth to understand the administrative and public service goals of the AYF
- (3) a multimedia section hosting videos produced by the government on the AYF with the option of downloading full transcripts. These videos provide brief interviews with public officials on their role in the AYF and the positives of working in government with young Australians. All videos are directly addressed to Australian youth.

All documents were downloaded and saved as text files labelled accordingly, to facilitate the textual analysis process as will be detailed in the subsequent section. For the purposes of organising the data so that different informants and their objectives could be identified, each document was individually read and its author, target audience and general purpose highlighted. The documents were classified accordingly into the following broad classifications, with authors denoted in bold:

- (1) topical web postings written by **youth participants** to the government
- (2) documents produced by **AYF steering committee members** (a) on the

objectives of the AYF and its moderation policy for web postings, (b) containing general government responses to youth concerns and (c) containing information on AYF-related strategies, events and campaigns. These documents were all addressed to youth

- (3) media reports covering the AYF and associated events or issues by various **mainstream and independent media organisations**.
- (4) policy documents pertaining to nationwide government use of digital media for political communication produced by the **AGIMO**.

Table 2 provides a list of all the documents collected. They are classified according to who produced them. Information on the general purpose and perceived public significance of each document is also provided where available. As this research is primarily concerned with unravelling how people negotiated their understandings of technological change amid government and public expectations when it was *first* introduced in youth political communication, the web postings and institutional documents were specifically collected from the day the AYF was officially launched to when the first-batch of AYF steering committee members left their assigned positions to allow the instatement of a new committee. This ensured that the institutional documents produced by the steering committee members had direct relevance to what was being posted by youth participants at the time. This method of time-based sampling closely follows the proposed sampling strategy of discourse analyst Van Dijk (2008), who argues that in a world of numerous online texts, the sampling of online documents such as web postings must be sensitive to the *context* of the research topic in focus. For example, if one is looking at the social consequences behind the *introduction* of online media then the documents analysed must fit within a timeframe relevant to when the technological platform is first launched. Van Dijk (2008) compellingly argues that ‘time’ is a central variable that defines the context of a research topic as it means that the researcher, if required, may need to analyse people, things, documents and events present during that period that may enrich, or in some cases even change, the context of the research topic in question.

**Table 2: Breakdown of Institutional Documents Pertaining to the AYF**

Document	Purpose	Date obtained from AYF
<i>National Conversation Project</i> (NCP) summary	An online summary on the main page of the AYF website that contains an overview of how the NCP, an in-house initiative by the government to promote awareness about the AYF portal, came about.	10 August 2010
NCP summary discussion paper	A more detailed treatment of the objectives and goals of the NCP and an introduction to the seven core priority areas it emphasises.	10 August 2010
<i>National Strategy for Young Australians</i> (Full Version)	The post-event discussion paper on the NCP, how specific ideas will be incorporated in youth policy and what the long-term institutional ambitions are for Australian youth.	13 August 2010
The AYF discussion paper	Paper discussing the consultation model of the AYF and the main focus areas it hopes to address.	10 August 2010
<i>National Youth Strategy</i> launch speech	Then Minister for Youth, Kate Ellis, speaking to youth at the launch of the National Strategy.	10 August 2010
Government interpretation of online youth responses on body image	The government published their interpretation of the responses posted about youth body image in the online AYF website.	10 August 2010
The AYF frequently asked questions	A list of frequently asked questions about the AYF generated by the government.	10 August 2010
‘Host your own forum’ initiative	The government has set up an ‘online kit’ for young people to host their own forums within localised communities.	10 August 2010
The moderation process	How youth submissions are moderated and published.	10 August 2010
Kate Ellis’s speech at the launch of the AYF	Then Minister for Youth, Kate Ellis, speaking to youth at the launch of the AYF.	18 August 2010

#### **4.2.1 Youth Web Postings on the AYF Forum**

The main medium of communication for youth participants on the AYF website is their web postings. As indicated in Chapter 2, there is no available information surrounding a poster's identity as posters are able to post without entering personal details on the website. The postings provide access to knowledge pertaining to posters' (1) online ties with AYF committee members and fellow youth posters, (2) intentions and goals for using media technology, and finally, (3) shared social knowledge and beliefs. This information is important because it collectively underlines the grounded experiences of young people in working with and under specific expectations, demands and constraints when the forum was first introduced as a tool in youth political communication. Ultimately, the postings allow the researcher to draw certain considered conclusions about how online media were used and understood as a problem-solving technology for youth political communication problems.

Each posting was extracted from the main site and saved in a separate independent file categorised according to topic. This archiving was done in case the main AYF website was removed or became inaccessible for one reason or another. Listed in Table 3 are all the postings collected during the period from when the AYF was first launched in 2008 to when the first batch of AYF steering committee members left their appointments in 2010. In an effort to protect the anonymity of all participants, pseudonyms were used to reference each youth poster in the analysis.

**Table 3: Breakdown of Youth Web Postings on the AYF from 2008-2010**

Topic	No. submitted responses	URL (public access)
Binge drinking	90	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=15">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=15</a>
Global recession and access to government services	9	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=17&amp;OrderType=2">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=17&amp;OrderType=2</a>
<i>The National Strategy for Young Australians</i>	73	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=21&amp;OrderType=1&amp;PageMove=2">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=21&amp;OrderType=1&amp;PageMove=2</a>
Climate change	34	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=28&amp;OrderType=2">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=28&amp;OrderType=2</a>
Enrolling to vote	4	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=32&amp;OrderType=1">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=32&amp;OrderType=1</a>
Young people in the media	37	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=29&amp;OrderType=1&amp;PageMove=3">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=29&amp;OrderType=1&amp;PageMove=3</a>
Disability care and support	4	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=33&amp;OrderType=2">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=33&amp;OrderType=2</a>
Contributing to our democracy	50	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=13">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=13</a>
The concept of volunteering	28	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=27">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=27</a>
Body image	59	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=3">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=3</a>
Human rights	45	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=8">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=8</a>
Violence and safety	68	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=12">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=12</a>
The next big question	42	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=20">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=20</a>
Gambling—what do you think?	30	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=19">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=19</a>
Global poverty	27	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=14">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=14</a>
Bullying	54	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=4">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=4</a>
<i>The Indigenous Education Plan</i>	18	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=26">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=26</a>
Australian educational curriculum	8	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=31">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=31</a>
International aid	34	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=30">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=30</a>
Apprenticeships and trades training	7	<a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=25">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/Ideas/DiscussionForum.aspx?TopicID=25</a>

#### **4.2.2 Institutional Documents Pertaining to the AYF**

This section will first list the entire set of government documents that were obtained by either downloading from the website or contacting the AYF directly for access. Second, it will argue that although these documents shed light on the public aims of the institution and its standard operational procedures, they are typically removed from the context of what it means to actually work within such an organisation amid prevailing expectations and challenges faced in an everyday context (Chadwick, 2011a). Using Chadwick's (2011a) research work on online political communication organisations, it is argued that more specific first-hand accounts of what it is like to work within such organisations should supplement the information provided by institutional documents. These first-hand accounts, Chadwick (2011a) argues, provide a clearer picture of the different internal variables within an organisation that affect how its employees understand and apply media technology as a solution to political communication problems.

A thorough initial reading of the government documents suggests that these resources were aimed at (1) setting out the institutional objectives of the organisation as a political communication platform, (2) providing an insight into how web postings are analysed, sorted and ultimately communicated to the government and (3) summarising the government's stance on particular youth issues that have been discussed previously on the forum. These objectives, when collectively viewed, reveal the government's official understanding of how online media should be applied as a solution to youth political communication, including the official protocols and objectives for communicating with young people.

Chadwick (2011a) argues that although government documents are important in establishing the official objectives and motivations behind the introduction of online media, they generally fail to capture the attitudes, shared meanings, resources, interactions and decisions of insider actors, which matter a great deal in determining how government officials actually perceive the significance of technological change in political communication within an everyday context (Chadwick, 2011a). In other words, Chadwick (2011a) asserts that public documents should be read and analysed in conjunction with 'insider accounts' of working within online government projects.

Chadwick's (2011a) recent research on 'TechCounty', a pseudonymous United States online local government project, provides an appropriate precedent for understanding why the study of public institutional documents should be analysed within the context of more specific first-hand accounts of what it is like to work within such organisations.

The purpose of the 'TechCounty' study was to establish how insider staff experiences of using online media technology add context and meaning to instances when government-driven online media projects fail to achieve publicised objectives of solving particular political communication problems. These accounts reveal challenges, constraints and motivations behind internal government attitudes and decisions that are not necessarily captured in official government documents alone. Chadwick (2011a) argues that the widely perceived failure of 'TechCounty' as an online citizen engagement platform was due to the fragile and uncertain adoption of digital media by its public service employees, an insight that could not be gleaned from solely studying public institutional documents. The research was conducted through a two-fold approach: a document analysis was conducted based on all available documents on the TechCounty website and this was accompanied by a semi-structured interview with 12 executive members from the administrative, legal, political and technological branches of the organisation. One of the key findings from the interviews concerned the lack of organisational stability within TechCounty: communication problems between staff members from upper and lower levels of management and between IT and non-IT personnel made it challenging for policies and new ideas to be implemented without continuous back-and-forth exchanges. Chadwick's (2011a) central point is an important one: internal institutional variables such as attitudes, shared meanings, resources, interactions and decisions play a powerful role in determining the outcomes of online engagement in government settings *alongside* public documents.

In the case of the AYF, it is exclusively run by the AYF steering committee, which consists of 10 elected youth members. In a similar vein to Chadwick's (2011a) approach, face-to-face interviews with all 10 members were scheduled to understand how public officials working in the AYF understood the significance and challenges of using digital media in youth political communication. The accounts provided by

public officials of their strategic attempts to make sense of technological change when confronted with new technology will provide a rich context for understanding how government-based online political communication projects operate ‘from the inside’, or what Chadwick terms ‘thinking inside the box’, amid public narratives and expectations of their official ambitions and goals as stated in the institutional documents. Interviews were semi-structured in order to encourage research participants to discuss their experiences working in the AYF on their own terms, which was also the primary reason behind Chadwick’s decision to use the semi-structured format. The following opener was used in all interviews as a starting point:

Tell me how you came to be involved in the AYF, and what were the highlights, turning points and challenges of working on a digital initiative like this one.

This invitation was meant to be non-directive (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007); it is open-ended rather than requiring the interviewee to provide a very specific piece of information. This approach meant that interviewees could draw upon their personal experiences of working within the AYF and emphasise particular events or issues that seemed to have pressing significance in defining their engagement experience with media. It is hoped that through an analysis of their narrative accounts, specific grounded categories would emerge as a way of conceptualising the experience of working in the AYF under specific institutional expectations and pressures. Supporting questions were also asked in certain situations to allow interviewees to expand on the issues surrounding the AYF that they thought were relevant.

Access to committee members was achieved via email. Their email addresses were obtained from the head committee member. Each member was provided with a summary of the research project and informed that their participation would be immensely valuable. All 10 emails were positively received with one member preferring to have the interview conducted through email. The email interview was conducted in a similar way to the offline interviews with the same opening invitation mentioned previously. Supporting questions were then sent back so that the respondent could elaborate on areas that needed clarification. All members agreed to the interview on the basis of confidentiality. In an effort to protect the anonymity of all participants, pseudonyms were used to reference each member in the analysis and

particular care was taken to ensure that as much relevant information as possible is provided without revealing the identities of affiliated organisations and subjects. All interviews, with the exception of the email interview, were recorded with a digital recorder and then loaded on to flash drive for future reference and safekeeping.

Interview transcription was conducted in accordance with the standards and guidelines established by Hammersley (2012), who states first that transcribing should reflect what is actually being said as much as possible to ensure a clear representation of reality and second, that a separate set of accompanying field notes should be kept to record the tone of what is said by interview participants. These field notes should contain audio cues, such as laughter, disappointment and/or frustration, to contextualise how participants convey certain ideas and the significance of these ideas to their overall conversation. Table 4 lists the interviews conducted with the pseudonyms used to protect the anonymity of members and their respective roles within the AYF.

**Table 4: Breakdown of Interview Participants**

Pseudonym	Official job title/role
Member 1	Head Organiser—makes sure all members are keeping to their tasks and sets internal goals and objectives for the rest of the team to follow.
Member 2	Treasurer—keeps track of budgeting and petty cash funds within the AYF.
Member 3	Publicity Manager—deals with all matters pertaining to how the AYF is advertised online and at Outreach programmes across the country.
Member 4	Ordinary Member with no specialised tasks or roles
Member 5	Ordinary Member with no specialised tasks or roles
Member 6	Ordinary Member with no specialised tasks or roles
Member 7	Ordinary Member with no specialised tasks or roles
Member 8	Ordinary Member with no specialised tasks or roles
Member 9	Ordinary Member with no specialised tasks or roles
Member 10	Ordinary Member with no specialised tasks or roles

### 4.2.3 Institutional Video Material Pertaining to the AYF

Table 5 provides a list of government-generated videos obtained for the research. These videos consist mostly of official ministerial addresses to young people about the AYF and related internally hosted events. This material, like the institutional documents, defines the official aims and objectives of the AYF as a youth-driven online political communication organisation. To facilitate the textual analysis process, full transcripts of all the videos were obtained from the AYF through email correspondence with the steering committee members.

**Table 5: Breakdown of Institutional Video Material Pertaining to the AYF**

Document	Purpose	Access
NCP launch on YouTube by Kevin Rudd and Kate Ellis	Official launch video address on YouTube.	Full transcript obtained—personal correspondence with AYF
Kate Ellis individual address to youth for NCP launch	Official launch video address on YouTube by Kate Ellis.	Full transcript obtained—personal correspondence with AYF
Kevin Rudd’s YouTube speech on the AYF and NCP	Kevin Rudd’s address to Australian youth on the importance of voicing opinions on the AYF board.	Full transcript obtained—personal correspondence with AYF
Vox Pops on what youth thought about the AYF	Youths were asked for their opinions of the AYF at the launch of the official youThink event, which is the offline equivalent of the online forums.	Full transcript obtained—personal correspondence with AYF
AYF launch video	The official launch video of the AYF featuring opening addresses from Kevin Rudd and Kate Ellis.	Transcript A: <a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/flash/transcripts/ayfLaunch_transcript.htm">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/flash/transcripts/ayfLaunch_transcript.htm</a>  Transcript B: <a href="http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/flash/transcripts/introtoAYF_transcript.htm">http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/flash/transcripts/introtoAYF_transcript.htm</a>

#### 4.2.4 Media Reports/Opinion Pieces Covering the AYF that were Published on the AYF website

These documents (see Table 6) were specifically representative of instances where the AYF and/or the government appeared in mainstream media to reaffirm the contributions of the initiative and to field public questions about its progress. As mentioned in previous chapters, these documents are significant to the research because they collectively establish that young people and the government generally disagreed about how online initiatives should be run, especially with regard to the issue of decentralisation. This information sets the context for (1) understanding how public bureaucrats working in the AYF formed negotiated understandings of its significance amid public expectations and critical feedback and (2) making sense of how young people orientate themselves to technological change and its associated ambitions to solve specific youth political communication problems in the face of the government’s wanting to centralise online initiatives.

**Table 6: Breakdown of Media Reports Covering the AYF on the AYF Website**

Document	Purpose	Access
Full video and transcript of Kevin Rudd’s appearance on ABC’s <i>Q&amp;A</i> .	The <i>Q&amp;A</i> programme was part of the initial groundwork set in place for the launch of the AYF and NCP.	Full transcript with editor’s notes: obtained from the ABC—July 2010.
An article from The <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> entitled ‘Young people need to be seen—and heard—by governments’.	Kate Ellis responds to a local journalist’s (Bella Counihan) criticisms over the sincerity and effectiveness of the government’s efforts in making the AYF a successful political communication project.	<a href="http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/young-people-need-to-be-seen--and-heard--by-governments-20091103-httk.html">http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/young-people-need-to-be-seen--and-heard--by-governments-20091103-httk.html</a>

#### 4.2.5 Media Reports/Opinion Pieces Reporting on the AYF in Mainstream Media

These documents (see Table 7) were representative of the presiding mainstream news frame throughout the period in which the AYF is being analysed, from its

launch in 2008 to when the first batch of steering committee members left office. They addressed a combination of matters relating to youth issues, policy regulations and in-house administrative matters within the steering committee. The reports collectively put in place an infrastructure for public social commentary on the AYF. These documents are significant to this research because they allow us to question if specific government actions and decisions in the AYF were motivated by the presiding news frame. This allows for an exploration of the possibility that mainstream media reports had some form of influence over how government officials defined and articulated the scope of the AYF as a technological solution to youth political communication problems.

To gain access to these media reports, a NewsBank search was conducted to identify all Australian media reports on the AYF during the one-year period in which the AYF is being analysed. NewsBank provides access to the complete full-text content of all local, regional and national newspapers. The search was conducted using the terms ‘AYF’ and ‘Australian Youth Forum’ as a way of capturing articles that were both about the AYF and make reference to the AYF. The results are presented in Table 7, together with a description of the objective of each article and the website address from which it was accessed.

#### **4.2.6 Policy Documents Pertaining to Online Political Communication**

There are two central policy documents that set out government protocols and regulations for the government’s future vision for online political communication. These documents provide an insight into the social and political consequence(s) that the introduction of media technology had on policymaking decisions, strategies and objectives. Table 8 provides a brief explanation of both documents and their significance. The documents are integral to understanding the wider influence of online media in the field of policymaking initiatives and proposals, and the implications at stake for citizen interests.

**Table 7: Breakdown of Media Reports Covering the AYF in Mainstream Media**

News source	Article title and objective	Access
<i>The Age</i>	‘Blogging a dead horse’ Bella Counihan deems the NCP a failure from the get-go and criticises the lack of vigour in institutional efforts to communicate with youth.	<a href="http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/politics/blogging-a-dead-horse-20091030-hodl.html">http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/politics/blogging-a-dead-horse-20091030-hodl.html</a>
Crikey	‘Kate Ellis and the youth roundtable that wasn’t’ Andrew Crook speaks about Kate Ellis’s ‘mysterious’ absence at a youth discussion on the <i>National Strategy for Young Australians</i> . The roundtable group was addressed by a representative instead of the minister.	<a href="http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/10/23/kate-ellis-and-the-youth-roundtable-that-wasnt/">http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/10/23/kate-ellis-and-the-youth-roundtable-that-wasnt/</a>
ABC News	‘Media negative on teens: youth forum’ ABC highlights AYF findings: that young people felt that the media were portraying sensationalised narratives about themselves and were not fairly represented.	<a href="http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/04/07/2210264.htm">http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/04/07/2210264.htm</a>
<i>Herald Sun</i>	‘Rudd with more Qs than As’ Andrew Bolt lambasts Rudd’s performance on <i>Q&amp;A</i> , claiming that the promises expressed during the <i>Kevin07</i> campaign remain unfulfilled.	<a href="http://blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/andrewbolt/index.php/heraldsun/comments/rudd_with_more_qs_than_as">http://blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/andrewbolt/index.php/heraldsun/comments/rudd_with_more_qs_than_as</a>
<i>The Punch</i>	‘At the end of the day, the kids caned Kevin on Q&A’ David Penberthy claims the <i>Q&amp;A</i> had revealed the ‘real Kevin Rudd’ who he claims fumbled handling most questions directed at him, despite the well-intentioned act of appearing before a live youth audience for	<a href="http://www.thepunch.com.au/articles/at-the-end-of-the-day-the-kids-caned-kevin-on-qa/">http://www.thepunch.com.au/articles/at-the-end-of-the-day-the-kids-caned-kevin-on-qa/</a>

News source	Article title and objective	Access
	discussion.	
<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	‘How teens took Rudd to the cleaners in question time’ Erik Jansen mirrors much of the common media sentiment: that Rudd’s performance on <i>Q&amp;A</i> revealed more on the major fragilities of the government than it shed light on any issues about youth.	<a href="http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/how-teens-took-rudd-to-the-cleaners-in-question-time-20100209-npjb.html">http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/how-teens-took-rudd-to-the-cleaners-in-question-time-20100209-npjb.html</a>
<i>The Australian</i>	‘Tetchy PM fails to satisfy young audience’ Another critical review of Rudd’s handling of youth questions during the <i>Q&amp;A</i> programme and the continued disenchantment of young people with the Australian government’s ability to provide for them.	<a href="http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/opinion/tetchy-pm-fails-to-satisfy-young-audience/story-e6frg6zo-1225828494797">http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/opinion/tetchy-pm-fails-to-satisfy-young-audience/story-e6frg6zo-1225828494797</a>
<i>The National Times</i>	‘Trust savvy gen Y to smell a rat’ National Times columnist Miranda Devine justifies youth cynicism over the Rudd government due to the government’s indecisive and defensive responses to youth accusations about government ineptitude at the <i>Q&amp;A</i> .	<a href="http://www.watoday.com.au/opinion/politics/trust-savvy-gen-y-to-smell-a-rat-20100210-ns82.html">http://www.watoday.com.au/opinion/politics/trust-savvy-gen-y-to-smell-a-rat-20100210-ns82.html</a>
Crikey	‘Q&A: the ABC’s soapbox’ Bernard Keane reviews proceedings at the <i>Q&amp;A</i> and singles out a particular youth participant, Angela Samuels, whose question to Rudd about the lack of laptops in schools had left him stumped for an answer.	<a href="http://www.crikey.com.au/2010/02/16/partisan-teen-becomes-conservative-idol-and-other-qa-mysteries/">http://www.crikey.com.au/2010/02/16/partisan-teen-becomes-conservative-idol-and-other-qa-mysteries/</a>

**Table 8: Breakdown of Policy Documents Pertaining to Online Political Communication**

Document	Purpose	Access
<i>Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for Reform of Australian Government Administration</i>	The document contains proposed strategies for streamlining government policy and services under a central portal so that audiences have to interact with only one main interface to communicate with the government. The strategy was enforced with a simple mission statement—‘to simplify Australian government communication policy and services for citizens’ (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), 2010, para.3).	<a href="http://www.dPMC.gov.au/publications/aga_reform/aga_reform_blueprint/#blueprint">http://www.dPMC.gov.au/publications/aga_reform/aga_reform_blueprint/#blueprint</a>
<i>The Australian Public Service Information and Communications Technology Strategy</i>	This document represents Australia’s latest online policy initiative to consolidate and put into action previous ideas that were established within the <i>Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for Reform of Australian Government Administration Strategy</i> document. It suggests that current policy emphasis is oriented towards effective <i>service delivery</i> with an acknowledgement of open engagement.	<a href="http://www.finance.gov.au/e-government/strategy-and-governance/ict_strategy_2012_2015/index.html">http://www.finance.gov.au/e-government/strategy-and-governance/ict_strategy_2012_2015/index.html</a>

### 4.3 Analysis of Data—Background and Method

This section will provide a detailed explanation of how the data were analysed. As explained in the introduction, the task undertaken in this thesis is to uncover and explain latent social categories that may be present within the large number of documents collected in the context of the AYF. These ‘categories’ represent interpretations of social reality and interactions that are indicated by the data collected

within a given research phenomenon. In the context of this study, the objective is to unearth categories that specifically explain how public officials, youth participants and policymakers orientate themselves to, and make sense of, technological change and the ideas, practices and attitudes that are employed in this process. This section will start by explaining the significance of ‘categories’ as a concept and then detail how Lindgren’s (2012) method of CCA was used to identify these categories within the documents collected.

The concept of categories is well established in ‘grounded theory’, a research methodology first conceived by American sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1965). Grounded theory is dedicated to generating and discovering concepts and theories from data that are systematically obtained from social research (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). It is a way of working with data (both qualitative and quantitative) in order to generate concepts and ideas about the phenomena being studied. Categories are not simply abstract labels for particular real-world phenomena—they serve as sensitising concepts that represent and emulate how people think about certain events or phenomena in the everyday world. Quite literally these grounded categories should be robust enough that people not related to this research project can piece together each of these categories and ‘work out’ what the social world being studied is all about. That means grasping who are its main actors, what are their roles and purposes and what social experiences are cultivated through their engagement with the AYF and its protocols and expectations of media-related change.

As a way of identifying socially grounded categories within the text of the collected documents in this research, Lindgren’s (2012) work on CCA, known simply as ‘concordance analysis’ in his early work, was employed. Lindgren’s main research expertise lies in digital culture with a focus on how new media audiences make sense of new media-related social and political change through their engagement experiences. He places particular focus on developing methodological tools for capturing how audiences arrive at relatively stable conceptions of what mediated realities mean for them. CCA is particularly relevant to online political communication research and this study because it works on the assumption that people’s engagement with media technology provides *different* all-encompassing narratives about its social purpose and importance—referred to by Lindgren (2012) as

‘truths’<sup>7</sup> For Lindgren (2012), categories reflect various social truths that different people fervently believe to be part of reality and their practices and perceptions are guided by these truths. In other words, as Lindgren explicitly notes (2012), there is always a broader story behind targeted technological solutions in political communication. These initiatives are sites where different individual perceptions and practices are applied to specific aspects of technology in specific ways that lead to very particular realisations of media technology’s significance.

CCA is a discourse-oriented research strategy based on grounded theory and its main thrust is to unravel particular understandings of social reality, or what Lindgren (2012) has referred to as truths, in a particular slice of digital culture. These categories are made up of individual words and/or phrases in various texts that only come to light through an analysis of the collected data. The underlying assumption is that certain social experiences with online media may be inevitably more ‘popular’ or visible than others within the space of a particular digital culture (Lindgren 2012). Online engagement experiences do not necessarily begin from uniform social situations or circumstances. Some audiences exert more power, either through a given opportunity or through choice, to decide how they want to engage with new media, whereas others may simply be less critically minded in deciding how they want to use it and follow certain established cultural patterns or social protocols of usage (Couldry, 2011; Jenkins, 2006; Lindgren, 2012). The bottom line is that people think about, work with and relate to digital media in a variety of ways that sometimes give way to specific cultural trends of media use, some of which are more predominant than others within the social world under analysis.

CCA recognises the varying prominence of different grounded categories by quantitatively identifying how frequently they appear in a particular corpus of text that is being analysed. The identification of these categories involves examining the wider context of each word and then grouping together words that are used in a *similar* context based on a specific set of criteria explained later in the chapter. Each category is given a unique name and described based on the common context of

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<sup>7</sup> Lindgren’s (2012) notion of ‘truths’ is similar to Hepp’s (2013) idea of the ‘panorama’, which refers to how media is deeply integrated into people’s overall understanding of social reality, forming a particular viewpoint on the world or field in question.

words it represents. Throughout the process of explaining categories, the researcher keeps in mind that the central research objective is concerned with identifying people's social relationships to new media, which in this case involves finding out the social experiences and perceptions of media-related political and social change that are cultivated through people's engagement with new media and its established protocols.

The above method of discourse analysis (CCA) was used successfully by Lindgren (2011) in his analysis of the significance of Twitter for participants in WikiLeaks, as a central portal for media audiences to coordinate social movements online where information from various government and non-government sources is remixed, re-appropriated, shared and recirculated. The main goal of the research was to understand the social consequence of Twitter by identifying how media audiences categorise their engagement with Twitter to fulfil their respective interests in participating in WikiLeaks. Lindgren's aim was to determine how social media makes a difference to the way media audiences make sense of social reality, by observing the principles and values that digital technology use is predicated upon.

A step-by-step explanation of the methods involved in CCA follows.

The first step involves saving all the documents in an accessible text file format. For webpages, PDF files and word documents, this involves copying the text with the help of a text editor and transferring it to a text file. All the text files were organised according to who produced them and were added to appropriate folders. In the case of the web postings, all 721 posts were organised in sub-folders according to the AYF topic that they were written in response to. The analysis of each social group was tackled separately.

The second step involves 'atomising' (Lindgren, 2012, p.5) the discourse, or, in simpler speak, inputting the text files under analysis into concordance software to determine the frequency with which each word appears within the text under analysis. Lindgren argues that 'atomisation is a strictly quantitative and objective operation that can be made in just one way, and entails creating a complete inventory of all semiotic units (words) used in the mass of text under analysis' (Lindgren, 2012, p.5). The

concordance software used was Lexical Tutor, a common choice among scholars in the field of discourse analysis. The software is useful because it provides a frequency breakdown of every word in the text together with the wider context in which the word is contained, which can be viewed in full through a simple click of the mouse.

The third step represents the first qualitative measure, and aims to filter out words that are irrelevant to the analysis and that will clutter up the top of the word frequency list. In text analysis terms, this corresponds to applying a list of stop words, abbreviations and symbols to be removed from the analysis. In the case of this research, word connectors such as ‘is’, ‘are’ and ‘the’ were removed for greater clarity. As a guide to identifying typical stop words in a text, a list provided by discourse analysts Wilbur and Sirotkin (1992) was used, as employed by Lindgren (2011) in his research work on Twitter use in WikiLeaks. For Wilbur and Strokin (1992), stop words are non-content words that bear no knowledge. The primary list of most common stop words in qualitative analysis that they have come up with is provided in Table 9. Wilbur and Sirotkin (1992) produced this list based on their analysis of 6,134 sets of qualitative empirical data from media and IT research projects.

**Table 9: List of Stop Words**

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Stop words list by Wilbur and Sirotkin (1992)
if, but, and, the, a, of, to, was, in, it, an, by, far, from, is, whether, are, that

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The key fourth step is *conceptualisation* (Lindgren, 2012). This is of a markedly qualitative character and the aim in the case of the current research is to generate categories or concepts that explain how people conceptualise what media-related social and political change should be about while faced with the pressure and expectation of conforming to particular ways of thinking about new media. It is an iterative process in which the researcher works through the word frequency list from top to bottom: each word on the list is put in an automated text search to determine the other places in the text where the word appears. Each context in which the word appears is studied in terms of how it connects, if it does, with the main research objective. *A category may be made up of one word or several words but every word*

*within a category must have been used in a similar context to convey a similar meaning.* For example the words ‘help’ and ‘aid’ could quite possibly convey similar meanings if the context of their usage is similar. Lindgren (2012) is careful to note that each category is made up of words that are used in a *similar* rather than an *identical* context. This distinction is made to acknowledge that individual words need not be used in an identical context to carry the same meaning (Lindgren, 2012).

To determine the similarity of meaning between different contexts, Van Dijk’s criteria for studying how discourse meanings vary with context is utilised. Each criterion represents a single variable that affects how context conveys meaning within a discursive text. The criteria are presented below.

#### **4.3.1 Perspective**

Perspective refers to the way in which events may be described relative to the location of speakers or recipients (Van Dijk, 2007, p.180). For example, media accounts of a particular youth political communication platform may be signalled as being ‘with’ the government or ‘with’ the youth public and thus give rise to different ways of evaluating the contributions of the platform to public participation.

#### **4.3.2 Agency**

Agency refers to the underlying beliefs and social attitudes of people that organise and control how particular documents are structured and produced in the social world. For example, one would expect public officials working in the AYF to have particular agency in regulating how aspects of the AYF are run, such as the selection of discussion topics and the moderation of posts when producing an official report on the operational procedures of the AYF. Agency is the dominance that is exercised within a discourse by an individual or a particular social group through their commitment to regulate the production of particular forms of meaning. In other words, the concept of agency for Van Dijk (2007) refers to dominant themes, meanings, principles, values and concepts that are formulated and applied by people in positions or circumstances of authority as a way of controlling what specific documents mean to their target audience. Agency is thus also an exertion of power

through discourse.

#### **4.3.3 Time**

The notion of time refers to when a particular document was produced. A document produced at a particular time may make particular reference to specific events or circumstances during that period that have special significance for what is being communicated.

#### **4.3.4 Modality**

Modality refers to the manner or tone in which a discourse is conveyed, such as necessity, probability, possibility, obligation and permission. For example, hypothetically speaking, if a media report states that ‘It is probable that the AYF will receive public criticism’ and another that states that ‘The AYF has received public criticism’, we can assume that the word ‘criticism’ is used in a vaguely different context. The second statement conveys a fact whereas the first is a postulation of what might happen in the future. Both statements communicate different impressions and meanings about criticism surrounding the AYF to the reader.

#### **4.3.5 Levels and Completeness of Description: Granularity**

This aspect of contextual meaning concerns the variations in the level of description of a particular event within a particular narrative. That is, one individual or social group may describe a particular event in detail whereas another may describe the same event with less specificity. Van Dijk (2007) asserts that generally within a discourse, as soon as aspects of an event or issue become more important for the participants, the description becomes more specific and more complete.

#### 4.3.6 Topics

The topic or central issue with which a document engages is one of the main variables that affect contextual meaning. For example, in institutional texts that relate to communication policy, it is institutional business topics that are usually attended to and given priority.

The above variables do not function exclusively but work together to establish meaning in context. For a category to be formulated words must be used in a similar context according to Van Dijk's (2007) criteria and their contexts must be studied closely to determine how they inform the objective of the research. The researcher will repeat the above four steps of analysis until the point of 'saturation' (Lindgren, 2011, p.6) is reached—that is, when repeated new words no longer lead to any significant revisions of the categories formed.

In order to test the validity of findings and to ensure that the findings from the entire research accurately reflect what this research set out to capture, the categories derived for each social group were read closely to see if they coherently answered Van Dijk's questions about developing contextual knowledge. Lindgren (2013) utilised this method in his research on news and blog discourse on illegal file sharing in Sweden. He explicitly refers to this sort of validity checking as 'close-reading', where findings are analysed to determine whether they provide coherent answers to a set of pre-structured questions on context (Lindgren, 2013, p.3).

The following questions, based on Van Dijk's set of questions on context, were posed and then answered in reference to the findings to identify any remaining gaps in our knowledge:

- (1) Do the categories explain the nature of the relationship between involved participants of the social group under focus and other relevant members of the case study being analysed?
- (2) Do the categories account for the predominance of shared social knowledge and beliefs within the social group being studied?
- (3) From reading the categories and their relevant explanations, are the intentions and goals of members of the social group in question clear?

#### **4.4 Cluster Analysis of Web Postings**

The final part of this chapter will explain how a two-step cluster analysis was conducted to explore the key combinations of socially grounded categories that exist within individual postings online. Cluster analysis was first introduced by the social scientists Glaser and Strauss in 1967 as part of their work on grounded theory and subsequently refined and applied to public policy and communication studies by Ian Dey in 1999. Glaser and Strauss's (1967) original idea of cluster analysis involved studying the frequency with which categories 'co-occur' within a text. If a particular combination of categories co-occurs on a regular basis within a text then it could be argued, according to Glaser and Strauss (1967), that this regular co-occurrence provides sufficient empirical grounds for inferring a meaningful relationship between those categories.

Dey (1999) has since streamlined cluster analysis in an attempt to apply it with greater simplicity and efficiency to the field of public policy and communication studies. He states that the relationships between grounded categories developed from qualitative analysis can be analysed either by noting their similarities through observable patterns such as the frequency with which they appear together within a text or through inference based on the researcher's prior basic knowledge of the subject(s) being analysed. Dey notes that the latter approach to cluster analysis may carry the risk of the researcher imposing their own potentially biased opinions on how specific categories are related. The cluster analysis conducted in this chapter makes use of Dey's first approach, which looks at the popular combinations of categories within the entire text of web postings.

Using Dey's (1999) approach to cluster analysis as a framework, a two-step cluster analysis was conducted using SPSS (Version 19.0) to find out the different combinations of categories with the number of times each of these combinations appeared in the web posts. A two-step cluster analysis looks at the interrelationship between individual categories as they occur in the data and compiles the most common combination of these categories as they appear. It is a scalable cluster

analysis algorithm designed to handle moderate to large data sets. The first step, known as ‘pre-clustering’, involves treating each of the 721 postings on the AYF as a separate *case* in SPSS. Each category is treated as a *variable*. For each case or posting, the number ‘1’ is assigned to denote if a particular variable is present in a post and ‘0’ if a particular variable is absent. To determine if a category is absent or present in a post, each web posting is read individually with the intention of identifying keywords that are associated with each category produced from the discourse analysis. An example of pre-clustering is provided in Table 10, where each case represents a single web posting and each variable represents a category derived from the discourse analysis. For example, Case 1 contains Category B and Category C.

**Table 10: Example of Pre-Clustering**

Case	Variables			
	Category A	Category B	Category C	Category D
1	0	1	1	0
2	1	0	0	1
3	1	0	0	1

Once the binary values (1 and 0) have been added for all the 721 cases, the second step of the cluster method involves entering all the category variables in a two-step cluster analysis form. Using SPSS allows access to the cluster distribution table that shows the most common to the least common cluster combinations computed with an internally programmed SPSS formula. For example, if the data in Table 10 were to be entered in SPSS, the most common clustering would have been identified as the pairing of categories A and D, with the least common pairing being categories B and C. Cluster analysis allows an examination of how specific social variables and perceptions of mediatised social reality are ordered and condensed within youth actions of posting online.

## **4.5 The Broader Implications of Connected Concept Analysis for Media Research—Identifying Practices and Then Working Backwards to Unravel What They Mean**

As a way of summing up CCA's overall influence in media research, Lindgren (2012) argues that media texts, at their very core, embody certain claims about what people *do* in relation to media (Couldry, 2004; Lindgren, 2012), a perspective adopted from Couldry's (2004) work on media practice. Media practice, for Couldry, refers to what people do with and around media, beyond particular definite moments of media production or consumption. Taking into consideration that media are deeply embedded within everyday social life, Couldry (2004) insists that the most constructive way of understanding media influence is to ask quite simply what people are doing, across various social circumstances and settings, in relation to media. There is a deliberate emphasis on de-centring media as an object of study and refocusing one's attention on the wider spectrum of practices that emerge in and around media.

Lindgren (2012) argues that CCA involves *working backwards* by firstly acknowledging that there are *several different* media practices or possibilities for action within any online culture or organisation and that these practices are articulated within specific texts that, when analysed, reveal specific categories of meaning that underlie people's understanding of media's significance in social reality. These practices, for example, could refer to the strategies undertaken by policymakers in addressing youth political communication interests explained in particular online policy documents or the everyday actions undertaken by public bureaucrats in managing internal bureaucratic protocols documented in government documents (Lindgren, 2012). Technological change is then no longer restricted solely to the texts that are produced or consumed through specific media platforms; rather, it is a question of how media are valued within texts and narratives produced in different social settings and/or inspired by different social relationships, circumstances and challenges.

Lindgren (2012) argues that the categories uncovered by CCA from the analysis of various documents and texts signify specific mental perceptions of social reality, or

what Lindgren refers to as ‘truths’ as discussed previously, upon which different media practices are based and acted out. In other words, grounded categories contribute to the reproduction of practices through the capacities they enact and the contexts for action they provide (Lindgren, 2012). These practices are actions undertaken by people in relation to media that are somehow considered meaningful to an individual’s understanding of a particular cultural reality. Media users may indulge in a common practice like posting on a forum, but the cultural and social significance of this practice for each individual may be different. Both Lindgren (2012) and Couldry (2004; 2010a) stress that individuals make sense of their practices through a subscription to particular mental perceptions of social reality explicitly referred to in CCA as ‘categories’. Media practices are actions that traverse these categories. People are generally drawn towards rationalising their practices as meaningful in an effort to maintain, not always successfully, a sense of ontological security in the world—the certainty that by conducting specific actions, particular interests and objectives can be met, thus ensuring a temporary form of social stability.

This research is dedicated to breaking down an empirical story about a failed online initiative by firstly acknowledging that this set-up consists of different people responsible for different practices and secondly by exploring the different motivations, perceptions, feelings and values that are attached to these practices and what they say about how people orientate themselves to technological change and make sense of its broader purpose. In fulfilling this task, the next chapter begins by first exploring the practices of the government officials who run the AYF, identified through an analysis of institutional documents and interviews with steering committee members. CCA is then used as a way of cutting through to the perceptions, values and beliefs upon which these practices are based.

## **4.6 Conclusion**

This chapter showcased the available data for this research and explained its significance to the research. It then explained how the data were analysed using Lindgren's (2012) concept of CCA. The concept of CCA facilitates a working through of specific empirical cases via a methodical analysis of grounded categories that explain the role and purpose of various media practices located in relation to and around media.

Applying the methods discussed here, subsequent chapters will present the findings from the research. Collectively, the remaining chapters tell the story of how technological change was understood by youth participants, AYF steering committee members, and national policymakers and the bearing this has on their perceptions of online media as problem-solving agents in youth political communication.

## **Chapter 5: Thinking inside the Box—the Bureaucratic Challenges and Adjustments faced by AYF Public Officials with the Introduction of Online Media**

### **5.1 Introduction and Chapter Framework**

This chapter empirically examines how public officials within the AYF attempted to manage and define technological change. It examines the bureaucratic challenges and adjustments faced by AYF public officials when online media were introduced for the first time as a central platform for youth political communication. In explaining the above, Chadwick's (2007) work on organisational hybridity—the ability for online political organisations to switch between practices that are typical of interest groups, traditional political parties and social movements—is utilised. It is explained that the AYF does not seem to have the degree of organisational hybridity that Chadwick sees as typical of online organisations. It is argued that the AYF has steadfastly remained a structured bureaucracy. Despite constraints on organisation-wide change through online media, it is asserted, using Nick Wilson's (2010) concept of social creativity, that media-related social change was experienced through the way staff members worked together to negotiate specific regulations and laws to achieve their own ambitions. In other words, online media's potential for producing change was most evident through basic and isolated forms of social cooperation rather than through government-wide expertise in using and applying media technology. This chapter makes the broader point that media influence may not always work in highly visible and orchestrated ways or lead to systematic transformations in how entire online political communication organisations operate; on the contrary, its influence may be evident in more subtle yet significant ways, bringing to the fore different localised problems with how staff members negotiate technological change.

This chapter reinforces the idea that media influence operates within government organisations in non-uniform and uneven ways bringing to the fore different and sometimes conflicting visions of how online media should work in youth political communication. Although online political communication projects may be

equipped with the technical resources to accommodate and shift between new organisational goals and ideas their operation may be constrained by fundamental differences in opinion over what online political communication actually means, what problems it should solve and how it should be organised—adding confusion over how to define success in such projects. It is argued that the use of online media and the management of technological change can be subjected to an internal form of centralised bureaucratic regulation that prioritises certain ambitions over others as being more important to youth political communication, thus stifling any opportunity for quick organisation-wide switches between different objectives and values.

The findings from an analysis of interviews with key public officials running the AYF will be presented first in this chapter. The main objective behind the interviews was drawn from Chadwick's (2011a) interview sessions in his TechCounty study (see Chapter 4) where he set out to find out how insider staff experiences in using online media technology add context and meaning to instances when government-driven online media projects fail to achieve publicised goals of solving particular political communication problems. Chadwick (2011a) makes the important point that sometimes the dominant social and political influences of online political organisations are driven by the everyday practices and perceptions of the staff who run them, rather than the technology itself. This means that there is much at stake for researchers in prioritising the motivations and decision-making processes staff experience and work through internally within the organisation, a method Chadwick (2011a) refers to as 'thinking inside the box' (Chadwick, 2011a, p.1). Similarly, the interviews in this chapter showcase the range of attitudes, shared meanings and decisions that operate behind the scenes in the AYF when online media were first introduced to solve the problem of low youth participation rates. The emphasis here is on capturing on-the-ground knowledge about how staff understood online media and how they oriented themselves to technological change—information that was not necessarily published in external official documents or resources. A series of 10 semi-structured interviews was conducted with executive steering committee members of the AYF, opening with the following leading invitation: 'Tell me how you came to be involved in the AYF, and what were the highlights, turning points and challenges of working on a digital initiative like this one'.

As denoted in the official job scope description on the website, the steering committee under the AYF is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the AYF, selecting topics for discussion in the AYF, monitoring visitor demographics, organising offline forum meets to complement the discussion on the website and providing a chain of feedback to the Minister for Youth and the Youth Office on the content of each topical discussion. Steering committee members are nominated by their peers and selected annually through an in-house election scheme by the Youth Office and on the basis of their prior involvement in youth community activities either in the private or government sector.

The second part of the chapter presents an analysis of all institutional documents relating to the operation of the AYF. This section was inspired by the work of Paul Benyon-Davis and Steve Martin (2011) on e-government initiatives and the tendency for governments in the United Kingdom (UK), current and past, to adopt a flexible set of changing agendas in an effort to experiment with different ways of defining modernity in the age of digital media communication. Davis and Martin argue that the framing of e-government initiatives through institutional documents and other official channels plays an important role in setting up the public image, objectives and character of the project to the public. Both authors are accomplished researchers in the field of information systems and work as consultants for the development and implementation of e-government initiatives in the UK. Benyon-Davis and Martin (2011) also assert that government documents are important indicators of the agenda-setting function of online political initiatives in terms of how specific ideas and concepts about political communication are prioritised in certain contexts to meet specific strategic interests. The institutional documents analysed in this chapter include government proposals concerning the aims and objectives of the AYF, annual reports on the efficacy of the AYF in communicating with youth, transcripts of ministerial speeches pertaining to the AYF provided by the Youth Office and reports on the AYF written in conjunction with affiliate government-funded youth organisations.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> A full breakdown of documents analysed is available in Chapter 4.

The third and final part of the chapter asks if changing government objectives for and definitions of what online youth political communication was supposed to achieve were in part influenced by mainstream media coverage of the AYF. This discussion is based on Stromback and Esser's (2014) argument that online political communication initiatives do not act in isolation from mainstream media, which they state is an important element in studying the mediatisation of online political communication. They place particular emphasis on exploring how the agenda-setting behaviour and decisions of public officials within online organisations are influenced or moulded by mainstream media coverage of the organisation in question (Stromback & Esser, 2014). Stromback and Esser's argument is motivated by Stromback's (2011) earlier study of how staff attitudes and behaviour in an online Swedish political communication organisation were influenced by mainstream media coverage. Through semi-structured interviews with its staff members, the study revealed that higher management executives in the online organisation were generally more favourably inclined towards staff members who tailored their goals and objectives to encourage positive media coverage from mainstream journalists, even if these aims deviated significantly from the problem that online media was originally intended to solve (Stromback & Esser, 2014). In the context of this study, this chapter traces the changing emphasis assigned by the government to the idea of youth politics and youth political engagement across a fixed span of time from the launch of the AYF in 2008 (2008–10).<sup>9</sup> It then assessed mainstream media coverage of the AYF during the same period with a view to exploring the possibility that the government could have framed the AYF in careful response to the type of national media coverage received by the government and the AYF.

The triangulation of interviews, government document analysis and mainstream media analysis was employed as a way of understanding how public officials managed and defined technological change. The combination of these methods was similarly used by Chadwick (2013) as part of his fieldwork in exploring how various online political communication organisations perceived digital media technology as instruments for disseminating public information and/or as spaces for public debate.

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<sup>9</sup> This timeframe was selected (see Chapter 4) because the institutional documents that have been published and obtained for this analysis fall within that period. At the time of writing, no new documents have been institutionally published since 2010. Secondly, the steering committee members I interviewed were in office for that two-year period.

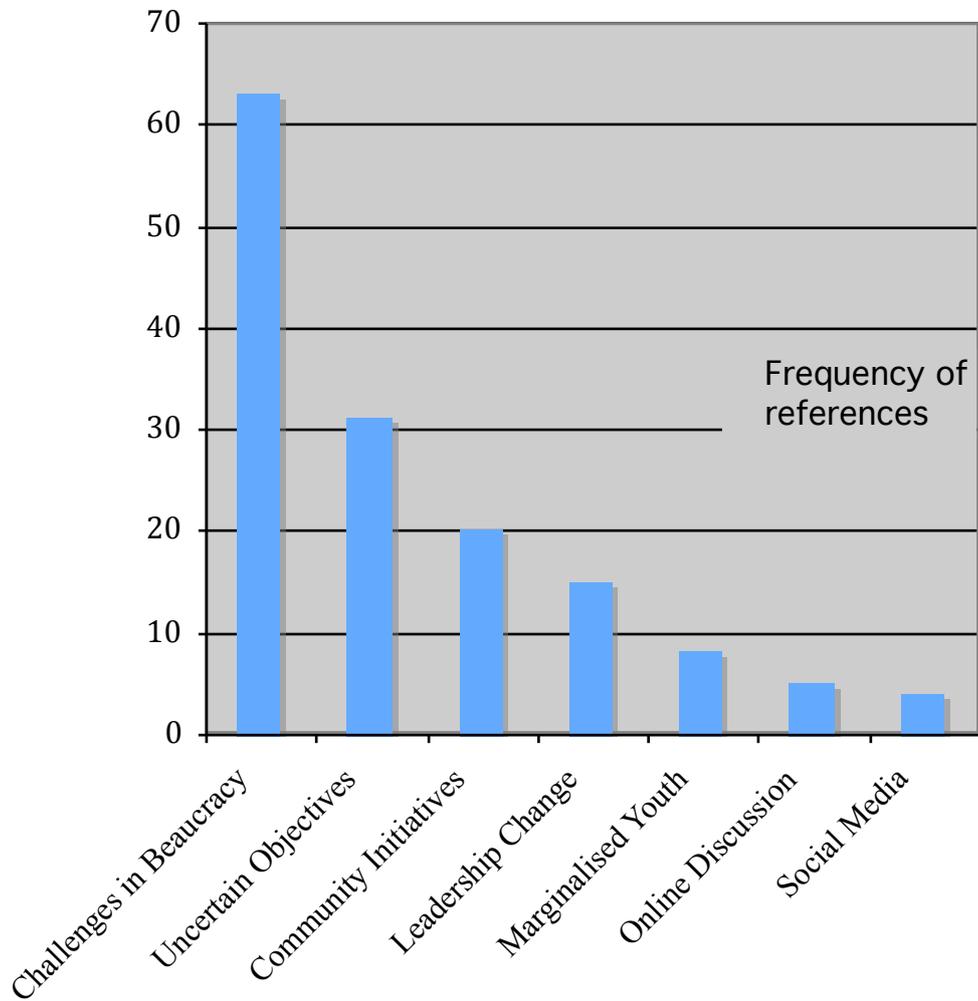
Although Chadwick's (2013) broader aim was to understand how old and new media work together in the mediatisation of political communication in Britain, his methodological approach to capturing people's general orientation to technology stemmed from a combination of (1) interviews with key staff members of online organisations, (2) an analysis of key official documents produced by these organisations and (3) a study of ongoing mainstream media reports on these organisations and their resulting influence on organisational behaviours. This chapter attempts to undertake a similar mixed-method approach to highlight the wider consequences of technological change in government.

## **5.2 Part A: Findings from Interview Sessions**

The interviews were conducted and coded according to the protocols and procedures outlined in Chapter 4. Specifically, transcripts from all 10 interviews were combined within a single text file. The text file was then run through Lexical Tutor, a concordance analysis programme that breaks down the frequency of all words in the text corpus. Themes were formed based on pairing words that were used in similar contexts. As stated in Chapter 4, a set of criteria produced by Van Dijk (2007) was used to determine whether words were used in the same context in a way that justifies their inclusion in a specific theme. Specific labels were used to identify each theme based on its meaning and significance. The concordance words that make up each theme are presented in the tables below, together with an explanation of each theme. The context of each word is also explained fully in these tables.

The distributional frequency of themes was also calculated. The purpose of this was to understand what concerns dominated members' experiences of working in the AYF. In other words, the aim was to discover how most people defined their experiences in working with the AYF—what issue was particularly significant for them? This allows the drawing of certain broad conclusions about areas in the youth political communication process that may deserve more detailed empirical exploration in future research projects. In a similar vein, Chadwick (2011a), in his empirical work on what institutional variables determine the success or failure of online government organisations, suggests that for institutional research to be valuable to the formulation

of policy, dominant themes relating to the issue being researched must be highlighted so that future research can be conducted in these areas.



**Figure 2: Number of Times Each Theme was Referenced**

### 5.2.1 Challenges in Bureaucracy Theme

The frequency distribution in Figure 2 identifies that the topic brought up the most (N = 63) pertained to the challenges and constraints committee members faced from working within the institutional structure. The main point argued here is that it was difficult for the AYF to switch between different political aims and practices to achieve various goals because there were fixed bureaucratic laws and steps in place that governed each administrative process in the AYF, meaning that the organisation operated on a fixed set of structured protocols, leaving little room for flexibility. Most members agreed that the exchange of ideas within the committee and across various levels of government usually underwent extensive vetting and moderation before being officially endorsed. There was also the problem of logistics, as ministerial advisors and fellow committee members were located in various states around Australia so internal staff meetings were infrequent. In addition to this, decisions on policy suggestion outcomes often took time before being approved. One member described the problems involved in organising regular meetings among members of the team and with government officials. The quotes featured below are arranged in descending strength of representation in the ‘Challenges in Bureaucracy’ theme based on the number of different concordance words they include according to the laws of concordance analysis. The quote with the strongest representation of the theme has greatest variety of concordance words (Lindgren, 2012). An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of ‘Challenges in Bureaucracy’ is also provided in Tables 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15.

Because we live in different parts of Australia ... it wasn't simple to just have a meeting next week. It cost a lot of money to fly someone from say Perth or 11 of them altogether and the government couldn't pay for that. No meetings with ministers or minister advisors are communicated online for reasons that I am not really aware of. But yeah ... these were some of the institutional and logistical constraints involved. Take one of our members for example. She lives in Fitzroy Crossing and she doesn't have time to communicate through email because she has two kids. We tried telephone conferences but then there were limited availabilities technical wise and not all government officials favoured the idea or had the time to engage in that. (Member 5, 12 October 2010)

**Table 11: Concordance Words that make up the Challenges in Bureaucracy**

**Theme (1)**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion).
Meetings/Groups	Used to refer to official scheduled staff meetings in the AYF.
Logistical	Used to refer to the practical requirements (e.g. funding and availability) of getting people from their home state to attend meetings interstate.
Constraints/Limited	Used to refer to the <i>practical</i> barriers faced in getting staff together in one location for meetings. These constraints include the lack of funding to fly staff to the location of official meetings, the lack of time to attend meetings and government rules that prohibit online meetings with ministers, which meant that face-to-face meetings were the only option.
Communicate	Used to refer to the difficulties faced by staff in engaging in email correspondences with other staff due to the lack of time/availability.

The quote below emphasises the particular regulations that govern how online government organisations operate, which, as argued, ultimately slows down progress. It states that when proposed government plans are finally implemented after adhering to all bureaucratic procedures, these changes may not necessarily be in synch with current perceptions, attitudes and practices of young people.

The nature of the government infrastructure was that because they have to do things a certain way, according to certain steps, protocols and rules and they moved very slowly like a big labouring machine. Government work takes time and things have changed since. If (the colour) black was cool then, it isn't cool now (for young people). (Member 7, 9 June 2010)

**Table 12: Concordance Words that make up the Challenges in Bureaucracy**

**Theme (2)**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Slowly/Machine	Specifically refers to the nature of government organisation operations that lead to delays in achieving particular outcomes.
Nature/Protocols/Rules /Infrastructure/Steps	Used to refer to laws and bureaucratic regulations and practices that characterise the organisation's everyday operational processes.

The bureaucratic laws and regulations in place meant that internal proposals submitted by committee members took time to be validated and approved by ministerial officials. There was a predominant concern that most submitted ideas would lose their originality and appeal by the time they were implemented and acknowledged by the government. There was a perceived sense that government processes take time and media-related change is not immediate. The hierarchical nature of the deliberation process, where committee suggestions run through various systemic processes before being considered by the minister, and the strict protocol put in place to communicate with ministers, is clearly evident in the digital political communication environment of the AYF.

Chadwick (2007) provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding how online political communication organisations like the AYF operate, which he labels 'organisational repertoires of action' (Chadwick 2007, p.289). Organisational repertoires refer to the accepted boundaries, strategies and regulations that either provide opportunities for action or restrict action. These rules ensure that members of an organisation act collectively in the way they make decisions, appeal to the public and reach broader goals. Repertoires, as Chadwick (2007) points out, play a role in sustaining collective identity—they are not tools adapted at will but shape what it *means* to be a working participant in a political organisation.

Chadwick's (2007, p.300) central argument is that increasingly in digital political communication, we are seeing political organisations adopt a hybrid of various repertoires, or what he terms 'organisational hybridity'—a term that captures

the difference the internet is making to processes of political mobilisation. Chadwick states that there is a growing trend for online political communication websites to adopt a range of repertoires of practices typically associated with interest groups, social movements and traditional political parties. For example, the ability to get citizens to talk to each other about a particular topic online on a government website means that a political organisation often has to shift between the repertoires of an official government outfit, that may include following fixed protocols, and repertoires that are non-hierarchical and more open to allowing horizontal communication among citizens and less structured ‘conversations’ between political members and citizens. Online political organisations, according to Chadwick (2007), ‘now simultaneously exhibit quite diverse ways of organising and mobilising, mashing together and combining narrowly channelled actions with looser ones’ (Chadwick, 2007, p.286). He argues that the internet has enabled a convergence of previously distinct organisational repertoires, namely that of interest groups, social movements and traditional party politics, where the influence of online media is pervasive and organisation wide as online political communication platforms seamlessly switch between different organisational infrastructures, objectives and goals in response to what the prevailing situation calls for.

In the case of the AYF, however, that sense of flexible mobility between repertoires that Chadwick (2007) regards as typical of online political communication efforts seems less present, as it is more centred on a single fixed repertoire. The empirical data gathered from interviews with committee members revealed a governmental preference for a more officially driven and institutional approach to communication. Although Chadwick (2007) associates this controlled and centralised form of political communication with the communicative ethos of the pre-internet era, the AYF seems to reinforce, at least from the perspective of its committee members, a more regulated and structurally organised political communication environment. Youth committee members found their experience and work with the AYF to be strongly dominated by the challenge of working with bureaucracy within a hierarchical and regulated culture, so much so that certain steering committee members described their job as less to do with addressing youth issues and more oriented towards tackling the structural limitations of governmental bureaucracy, a point addressed next.

The committee members who were interviewed separated matters of the bureaucracy from the political. They found that working with the AYF had much less to do with the actual political process or addressing any form of youth political issue than learning how governmental bureaucracy works and the processes behind it. For most of the members, working with the AYF felt less oriented to youth politics than first envisaged relative to their previous work with independent youth organisations outside the government because of the challenge involved in negotiating various institutional channels before actual change could be implemented. This sense of negotiation with institutional structure often felt like a foreign experience or as one member quite cleverly put it, ‘it felt like a foreign closeness ... because you can closely relate to youth political affairs but the bit that felt foreign was the part where we have to dance around institutional regulations’ (Member 8, 9 June 2011). Matters pertaining to bureaucracy specifically involved interacting with various levels of authority and developing an appreciation of the channels through which committee suggestions must go before being validated by the government. The following quote saliently reflects the above point, directly addressing the divide between ‘the political’ and ‘the bureaucracy’:

I learnt not so much about the political process ... well ... erm ... in fact we rarely dealt with anything ‘political’... but [rather] how an office and government department works with the minister and minister advisors and how there is that divide. Everything has to go through a proper channel and everything takes time before implementation is even considered. I haven’t learnt much about the political process *per se*. I divide the political from the bureaucracy because that’s how we had to work. It’s the bureaucracy that I have been learning about. I think working with youth and youth issues is challenging but working with governments is even more challenging because you have to come in from the outside. (Member 1, 7 October 2010)

**Table 13: Concordance Words that make up the Challenges in Bureaucracy**

**Theme (3)**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Political	Used to refer to youth issues and affairs that revolve around the interests of young Australians. Word was used specifically in contrast to matters regarding bureaucracy and its processes.
Process/Bureaucracy/ Channel	Used to refer to bureaucratic laws and regulations but only in contrast to politically driven work involving youth affairs, issues and interests.
Challenging	Refers to the difficulty of working and negotiating with bureaucratic laws.
Divide	This was used exclusively to refer to the difference between youth-driven political work and work that involves negotiating and understanding bureaucratic political processes.

Despite the challenges faced by committee members in managing bureaucratic expectations and protocols, it became evident through the interviews that they often introduced initiatives to compensate for the lack of meetings and other institutional constraints by entrepreneurially working out possible plans for action. These initiatives often involved the informal composition of ‘mini strategic plans’ that addressed issues such as mid-term goals and objectives that the AYF should be focused on achieving. These strategic plans were circulated within the committee and not released through official channels. There was a consistent effort on the part of youth committee members to negotiate institutional barriers to establish a type of informal infrastructure to support their ambitions or aims for what the AYF should achieve. The following quote recounts one such example of an attempt by a member to write a strategic work plan that specified a task list for the committee; it contains the third greatest variety of concordance words for this theme:

I did almost like a mini strategic plan. I wouldn't go as far as to say it was a strategic plan (laughs) but I did outline goals and how to reach them. And this has provided more guidance from my unbiased opinion especially when we were unable to conduct regular meetings with the advisors. Working on those goals has been difficult and ultimately the face-to-face meetings were still the most useful ... but the strategic plan provided some guidance. This plan was internal among us members. Once again, I felt I wasn't engaged in youth political work, it was about solving logistical problems and bypassing institutional restraints. For example, I suggested that each member must speak to 10 organisations in a year as a goal and ultimately raise awareness and tell people about the website and engage in

discussion. (Member 5, 12 October 2010)

**Table 14: Concordance Words that make up the Challenges in Bureaucracy**

**Theme (4)**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Strategic/Guidance	Refers to a plan or blueprint for finding ways to get around bureaucratic regulations/protocols.
Restraints	Used specifically to refer to government rules that prevent particular ideas or proposals from being implemented.

Member 5 found that his involvement with the AYF consisted less of dealing with youth concerns and issues than it was an exercise ‘about solving logistical problems and bypassing institutional restraints’ (Member 5, 12 October 2010). This involved thinking about ways to strategically work around government barriers to achieve a particular goal or ambition by investing time and effort in individually conceived projects, such as the task list set up by this member.

The entrepreneurial initiatives undertaken by certain members to get around government rules and regulations and achieve specific objectives reflect what Wilson (2010) refers to as ‘social creativity’ (Wilson, 2010, p.2). Wilson has devoted much of his research to understanding the evolving nature of creative expression in the digital media environment. In particular, he states that the digital media environment warrants a new way of defining creativity and the reclassification of what creative industries are; further, that although the introduction of online political communication projects is often based and assessed upon ideas of newness and government expertise in using and implementing technology, technologies do not always produce innovation (Wilson, 2010). He argues that creativity in the digital media age is instead evident in how people socially interact with their peers and with other figures of authority to negotiate specific outcomes in reality (Wilson, 2010).

Wilson’s (2010) broader point is that the influence of online media within political organisations may not always be uniformly distributed, but rather, it is articulated through basic relationships that its members forge with others in the

everyday operation of online political communication projects. Member 5's initiative to construct a mini strategic plan as both a solution to and compensation for the lack of face-to-face meetings with other members to discuss their goals and objectives is a clear instance of Wilson's (2010) notion of social creativity. This involved active collaboration through the forging of productive relationships with other steering committee members to come up with a proper plan for meeting organisational expectations and ambitions in an effort to negotiate existing constraints.

Wilson (2010) also argues that social creativity demands a sense of experimentalism, to search for possibilities of overcoming barriers even without the guarantee of successful outcomes. This instinct for experimentalism was most pronounced in interviews with Member 6 who revealed how he had set up, programmed and organised an independent social media portal, accessible to other AYF members, that focused on areas of youth politics that were pending approval or acknowledgement from the AYF. His primary concern was the slow progress of policy discussion in the AYF. His independent set-up was primarily a labour of love but also motivated by the fact that government takes time to act on pressing issues and he felt that something needed to be done to push the process along:

I became involved in this because I didn't feel anything was being done and I wasn't connected to what was done so far. I believe there was a lack of intellectual debate on policy that takes place amongst youth political organisations ... I know that there is the opportunity in the AYF to bring up any issue you want. But I am not sure how much that happens with all the institutional regulations in place. I think there must be a balance between youth issues and the bigger picture in terms of actual policy formulation. My media set-up has tried to fill that other void; of youth voices in non-youth issues. The key difference is that my simple set-up is not run by the government and hence ideas get exchanged faster. The AYF is closely tied to the government ... I think the AYF has a lot of resources pumped into it and I am not sure how effective [sic] those resources are used. (Member 6, 7 October 2010)

**Table 15: Concordance Words that make up the Challenges in Bureaucracy**

**Theme (5)**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Regulations	Used to refer to laws and protocols in place that slow down the process of how youth ideas are received and assessed by government. This word was used specifically in the context of assessing and implementing youth submissions.
Void	Used to refer to specific areas in youth political communication where official government initiatives have not been addressed/tackled.

It is perhaps interesting to note that Member 6 utilised social media as a tool to adapt to the structural conditions within the AYF. Although the AYF did not possess the level of organisational hybridity typically expected of online organisations (Chadwick, 2007), there were individual efforts to contribute towards hybridising the existing institutional cultural repertoire in place at the AYF. These attempts to widen the existing repertoire of practices within the AYF could be understood as instances of social creativity (Wilson, 2010). Wilson argues that many instances of social creativity require a leap of faith for individuals to get involved with independent projects that are premised on the possibility of positive, but unknown, outcomes, rather than those where the metrics of success have been carefully laid out up front.

Wilson (2010) argues that the pre-internet vision of creativity as either a quasi-commodity or the preserve of the so-called ‘creative class’ of talent and institutional expertise is no longer applicable. Further, he asserts that the role of the ‘expert’ is increasingly problematic in a world where socially distributed expertise and knowledge production—such as peer-to-peer knowledge sharing as facilitated by the internet—is widespread. More specifically, Wilson believes that creativity should be defined less in terms of institutional expertise or talent and more in terms of social cooperation (Wilson, 2010), which forms the crux of what *social creativity* is.

The concept of social creativity, as stated previously, urges us to focus on the collective and relational nature of creative practice, where the cooperative production of knowledge through collaboration and dialogue helps us in negotiating institutional

barriers, laws and regulations. It involves moving out of one's assigned boundaries and the capacity for action that one is assigned and expected to work with, by forming collaborative partnerships with other people to question if there is a better way through which certain objectives can be achieved. In the context of the AYF, instances of social creativity also underline the fact that online media's potential for producing change is *most evident* through isolated forms of social cooperation in negotiating specific bureaucratic regulations and problems rather than through government-wide expertise with and flexibility in using and applying media technology.

### **5.2.2 Uncertain Objectives Theme—the Gap between Digital Interactivity and its Practical Application in Researching Youth Participatory Culture and Politics**

Figure 2 identifies 'Uncertain Objectives' as the next most referenced topic in the interviews conducted. This sense of uncertainty has to be put in the context of the findings. The uncertainty expressed here did not stem from not knowing what the objectives of the AYF were; rather it was a higher-order ambiguity over how to use the data and information from these participatory cultures in an informed and purposeful way to realise government objectives. It is argued here that this sense of prevailing uncertainty over how to use data and information from the AYF in a purposeful way proved to be a significant obstacle to the AYF switching between different repertoires of action to achieve different objectives, or producing what Chadwick (2007) refers to as organisational hybridity. In addition to this, it is argued that it became difficult to conceive of the AYF as a technological solution to low youth participation rates because its actual overall contribution to political communication and policymaking was itself a mystery to staff members.

It was clear, on a superficial level, that the AYF was a website that provided a space for youth to voice their opinions on issues concerning them. However, for most members who were embedded agents within the institutional process and also young citizens themselves, that 'space' did not extend towards sustaining or determining how responses gathered from youth political participation could be harnessed to provide specific inroads into the development of actual policy. The predominant

question was: what could governmental institutions like the AYF take from online posts, apart from the issues raised in their manifest content? For example, should we be looking at the possible thought processes that a young person goes through when they make a posting online? What assumptions do young people make about youth and political culture when posting online? How are these assumptions identified in postings? What do online postings say about what young people think about other young people?

This point is illustrated by the following excerpts from interviews with members who expressed their problems in pinning down what the AYF actually does for youth political participation apart from sending those voices to the government. The quotes are arranged in descending order of strength of representation of the ‘Uncertain Objectives’ theme based on the number of different concordance words they have according to the laws of concordance analysis (Lindgren, 2012). An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of ‘Challenges in Bureaucracy’ is also provided in Tables 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20. The quote below draws a distinction between working in an organisation and understanding its broader contribution to policy:

I am still not sure as to what the AYF is meant to achieve. From my level of closeness I find that feeling rather odd. What exactly is the AYF used for? I do not think it's a transparency issue. I do not think anything is hidden. I feel everyone working is willing to contribute. But they are kind of unsure as to what to do with it. What do we do with all these posts apart from sending it to the government? And this is weird considering that these reservations are felt by officials working in the AYF, like me. (Member 4, 14 October 2010)

**Table 16: Concordance Words that make up the Uncertain Objectives Theme (1)**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Unsure/Reservations	Refers to a sense of general ambiguity over how the posts submitted to the AYF would actually inform policy and the broader field of political communication.
Sending	Refers explicitly to the act of submitting collected posts to the government.
Achieve	Used in reference to the contribution of the AYF to broader goals such as policymaking and future political communication strategies.
Posts	Refers explicitly to the submitted posts on the AYF as data.

The above excerpt makes a central differentiation between the process of *sending* youth voices to the government and *using* youth voices—information collected from web posts—to understand wider cultural trends about youth social tendencies and habits in a way that informs policy formulation. There were members who admitted consciously distancing themselves from the AYF website because it failed to make sense to them in terms of how the website could bridge that gap between getting youth voices to the government and using those voices for potential policy implementation. The website in itself, as a technical medium, channels young people towards a particular participatory culture and specific ideas of interaction but it does not necessarily show institutions how the data generated should be used. The following quotes contain the second and third greatest variety of concordance words for this theme:

This may seem strange but I have not looked at the AYF website for a long time. When it was first launched I looked at it frequently. I think it seems like quite a powerful website but I am unsure how what we see on it gets used and how the stuff that's posted can be used to make actual change. There are definitely some serious reservations if we know what this is about. (Member 1, 7 October 2010)

**Table 17: Concordance Words that make up the Uncertain Objectives Theme (2)**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Change	Word used in the same context as ‘Achieve’ to refer to the contribution of the AYF to broader goals such as policymaking and future political communication strategies.

The quote below shows how a member’s uncertainty over the AYF’s objectives lead him to have an unfulfilling experience working in the AYF:

From my experience the AYF working experience was not fulfilling. A fulfilling experience means something that you can be passionate about and feel good about and know that whatever input you are getting from youth can be used purposefully and you know exactly how to do just that. Having an interactive website doesn’t solve the whole problem. (Member 2, 12 October 2010)

**Table 18: Concordance Words that make up the Uncertain Objectives Theme (3)**

Concordance Word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Input	Word used in the exact same context as ‘Posts’ to refer to the submitted posts on the AYF as data.
Fulfilling	Refers to a feeling of satisfaction from knowing that the AYF has met its potential and purpose of recognising its core contribution (whatever this may be) to policy and political communication.
Purposefully	Word used in the exact same context as ‘Achieve’ and ‘Change’ to refer to the contribution of the AYF to broader goals such as policymaking and future political communication strategies.

The quote below explains the importance of understanding how youth postings inform policy decisions on a broader scale, thus validating the central objective of the AYF:

I think a major challenge in digital political communication is finding a way to turn youth responses into actual indicators to guide policy formulation. A method must be established. And that is something I am personally working on. There is no concrete way to do it. I mean ... what is the AYF’s main objective then if we can’t translate everyday speak into political speak? (Member 5, 12 October 2010)

**Table 19: Concordance Words that make up the Uncertain Objectives Theme (4)**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Indicators/Guide	Refers to how data in posts can be meaningfully used to develop ideas and strategies in the development of policy.
Objective	Word used in the exact same context as ‘Purposefully’, ‘Achieve’ and ‘Change’ to refer to the contribution of the AYF to broader goals such as policymaking and future political communication strategies.

In the interview sessions with AYF members, it became clear that there was an epistemological gap between understanding digital interactivity and its practical application in researching youth participatory culture and politics. The above quotes highlight three dimensions through which this ‘epistemological gap’ was expressed; the technical, affective and methodological. Member 1 comments on how the visual interface of the website looked technically ‘*powerful*’ but it did not have enough information or visual cues to show how the material posted on it translates to actual change. There was a gap between the *technical* interactive features afforded by the website and how it can actually be applied to benefit society. Member 2 addresses the *affective* dimension of the epistemological gap about *feeling good* when one knows how to use the input received from interactive communication with youth in a way that is purposeful. A sense of emotional fulfilment is gained when there is knowledge about how youth-submitted postings on the forum could benefit the public. Member 5 argues the need for a clear method that shows exactly how youth responses on the website (*everyday speak*) can be used in policy formulation. There is a belief here that a structured plan detailing how empirical responses can be transformed into actual policy will be a step in the right direction for the AYF to achieve its objectives.

It is important to explore possible explanations for why this gap between digital interactivity and its practical application developed in the first place. Bennett (2007), as previously stated, has devoted considerable research towards understanding how civic engagement can be purposefully fostered through media technology. Bennett believes that political organisations and institutions need to be educated on the rationale behind online media interactivity and digital communication—in other

words, institutions need to know what to look out for in citizen online postings, for example, and formulate a clear method for feeding these ideas into actual policy formulation.

Bennett (2007) conceptualises the birth of the '*actualizing citizen*', who favours loose-networked activism to address issues that are of personal relevance, such as environmental problems or animal-friendly consumerism. He argues that attempts by the government to design digital portals often conceive of citizens under the old model where voting, bureaucracy and mass broadcast of information are the main ingredients for political communication. In the case of the AYF, there is a clear consensus among committee members that online media communication produces different sorts of citizen responses and information from traditional forms of political communication, which, according to Bennett (2007), is the first step towards realising the political value of the internet in reaching out to young people.

Bennett (2007) suggests that one way in which institutions like the AYF can better understand how young citizens use the internet to communicate politically is to delve into the wider youth community of non-government organisations (NGO) and other foundations that design and operate similar online youth engagement communities. Sharing similar experiences of working within an online youth political communication platform can be a productive experience to identify areas of overall participatory culture that need greater governmental attention.

Interestingly, committee members in the AYF have been active in the area of forging ties with other online communities. Figure 2 shows that the topic of member involvement with affiliate online youth community organisations was the third most referenced issue (N = 20). The aim of community involvement, for most members, revolved around the culture of 'problem sharing' and seeking community-based solutions to 'big questions' on youth participatory culture. The following quote is the strongest representation of the 'Community Initiatives' theme as it contains the greatest variety of concordance words for that theme:

AYF has done well in partnering with local community groups ... it was one of the biggest things. When you partner with other organisations ... then you get more people involved, going through the same sort of problems. (Member 9, 12 October 2010)

**Table 20: Concordance Words that make up the Uncertain Objectives Theme (5)**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Community	Refers to affiliate youth organisations in Australia that cater to youth affairs either in a political or social context.
Partner	Used to signify cooperation between different organisations.
Problems	Used specifically to signify how different youth organisations engage with common youth problems.

It has been argued in this section that there was a general lack of clarity in the AYF over how submitted postings could inform broader policy goals and objectives, hence validating a larger purpose and contribution. There was a general difficulty in pinpointing what exactly the AYF does for Australian youth political communication—a gnawing issue that, in some cases, led staff members to distance themselves from the online platform. It became difficult for the AYF to operate and mobilise as a unit or shift between different objectives due to the overarching cloud of this prevailing uncertainty over how to use collected data and information from the AYF in a purposeful way. Although the AYF may have set out to specifically raise youth political participation rates, staff members were still deliberating on its wider contribution to political communication and policymaking. It is difficult to conceive of media technology as a targeted solution when the bigger picture surrounding its role in policy and political communication remains hazy. There were, however, some encouraging signs as certain staff members believed that collaborating with other youth organisations would provide community-based solutions to common youth problems, not just low youth participation rates.

### **5.2.3 Leadership Change Theme—Coping with Transition**

The AYF underwent a change in leadership midway through its operation in 2010. Kate Ellis had vacated the youth minister post and assumed a ministerial role in the Department of Early Childhood. Peter Garrett was the newly installed Minister for Youth and he assumed responsibility for heading the AYF. This change of leadership affected the overall working experience of steering committee members in the AYF. Certain members saw the change of leadership as a disruption to the everyday operation of the AYF where previous government protocols and expectations no longer applied. Many saw Ellis as an important figurehead in the AYF and a vital part of building professional camaraderie. The absence of such leadership meant that there was a further divide between steering committee members and members of Peter Garrett's own ministerial team. This chasm in relations inevitably made it difficult for the AYF to function as a cohesive and adaptive online unit in the face of different political and social challenges, or in Chadwick's (2007) terms, to exhibit any form of organisational hybridity. The theme was referenced significantly (N = 15 times) during the interview sessions. An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of 'Leadership Change' is also provided in Tables 21, 22 and 23. The following quote has the greatest variety of concordance words for the 'Leadership Change' theme, highlighting the leadership change as a source of uncertainty over the future ambitions of the AYF:

Things have changed because of the transition. Ellis was keen on face-to-face meetings ... we felt like we were getting somewhere and we were important to the whole set-up. Minister Garrett had other large portfolios and was not really keen on face-to-face meetings. I am now not sure if there are future plans to enhance the AYF. And I have known now that the minister has settled in and has got more time but I am really not sure what they are going to do next. (Member 1, 7 October 2010)

**Table 21: Concordance Words that make up the Leadership Change Theme (1)**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Transition	Refers to the process of adapting to and making sense of how the change of leadership affected the day-to-day operation of the AYF.
Portfolio	Refers to Minister Garrett’s ministerial responsibilities outside his work with the AYF.
Garrett	The incoming youth minister.
Future	Used to signify future AYF plans, goals and objectives and the direction it is heading towards as Australia’s main youth political communication set-up.

For the majority of committee members, the AYF was a government project that was the brainchild of former minister Kate Ellis. She was, as one member put it, ‘the face’ (Member 1, 7 October 2010) of the AYF as her presence and involvement in AYF meetings and her campaigning for an efficient digital youth communication platform resonated strongly with those who choose to join the committee. A scan of the website revealed 14 photographs of Kate Ellis on the main and sub-pages, with one image each of former prime ministers, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. There were, at the time of writing, no photographs of the youth minister, Garrett. Whether this was simply a coincidental trend or indicative of something more symbolic, the interview transcripts seem to reinforce the idea that Kate Ellis was the central political persona through which members identified themselves as being part of a wider institutional community.

In addition to Kate Ellis’s symbolic presence and identity, there was also the guarantee under her tenure that the voices of AYF members would be heard and registered in these face-to-face meetings. This was not the case when Peter Garrett took over, partly due to a difference in management styles but also due to the absence of any explicit infrastructure in place to listen to voices from the *lower tier* of government. Under Kate Ellis, as Member 1 mentioned, there was the feeling that youth officials in the AYF were achieving something and ‘getting somewhere’ (Member 1, 7 October 2010). As Couldry (2010b) notes in his work on digital culture and voice, the process of listening is important because it validates the value of voice

by reinforcing the notion that ‘what you say’ matters. A quote from Couldry (2010b, p.18) nicely sums up this point: ‘whatever transformations social, political and economic structures undergo, none will be acceptable unless they are based on valuing an individual’s ability to give an account of themselves’. The valuing of voice plays an important role in recognising the professional role and capacity of AYF members to act with purpose and effect (Couldry, 2010b).

The departure of Kate Ellis understandably raised a certain amount of instability and apprehension over what the future held for the AYF and its committee members. The quote featured below reflects this issue and has the second most variety of concordance words for this theme:

With the changes (change of youth minister) ... we had four meetings a year and with every meeting we were introduced to new staff (Minister Garrett’s own ministerial advisors) and they didn’t know and we didn’t know what we were doing. Nobody was settled. It was just mass confusion. I don’t blame the staff. Minister Ellis was taken out of the AYF portfolio and Minister Garrett was put on it. It was really Kate’s baby, she owned it. And then when Minister Garrett came in, he had to get his head around it. (Member 4, 14 October 2010)

**Table 22: Concordance Words that make up the Leadership Change Theme (2)**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Owned	Used to signify Ellis’ affiliation and strong connection with the AYF project—her dedicated ownership of its objectives, goals and responsibilities.
Confusion	Refers to the sense of unease and general ambiguity over what to expect once the leadership change was in effect.

It was clear from the interviews with members that the period of transition at the helm posed problems for most members in terms of knowing what was actually expected of them. It was the general consensus that Kate Ellis had a stronger symbolic relationship with the AYF project than Minister Garrett. The different management styles of the ministers had also added an extra challenge for committee members to overcome. Direct and easy accessibility to ministers and ministerial was for the majority of members the primary driving constituent of what working *with* the

government was about.

As a closing point to this section, it is important to note that discussion on social media technology and the actual interactive features of the AYF website received comparatively little attention in the interviews (N = 5 and N = 4, respectively). On the rare occasion that the website portal or social media were discussed specifically, it often tended to be in relation to promoting the AYF through Facebook and getting more people to know about its existence. There was no talk about how social media and the website portal could be potentially used to connect young citizens directly to the government or about encouraging horizontal communication among young citizens. This was primarily because of the potential difficulty in moderating inappropriate comments about the government on social media websites and the vast array of government restrictions already put in place regarding what could or could not be discussed by young citizens online. The following quote represents the greatest variety of concordance words for the Social Media theme:

We use Facebook and it was something that took a really long time. And the limitations the government put in place on what could not be mentioned made it difficult to monitor what people posted ... and also not everything said in Facebook can be moderated due to the technology it uses. And that (moderation process) is managed by me and the committee. We don't have many likes or friends. It's more like a portal and gateway to the website, to get people to know we exist. We don't do Twitter because we thought we won the Facebook battle (to manage it amid all the governmental regulations) and let's be happy with that. But we also didn't think Twitter is relevant. Twitter is a constant live-feed. We would have to update it always. AYF moves on a slow pace so it's not interesting enough. The feed on Twitter keeps changing and the current structure doesn't really keep up. (Member 6, 7 October 2010)

**Table 23: Concordance Words that make up the Interactive Features Theme**

Concordance Word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Facebook/Likes/Friends	Refers to the Facebook social media platform. This word was referenced only when members spoke about the technical features of AYF and their application to youth political communication.
Moderation	Refers to the need for presiding over/checking what members of the public post on the AYF Facebook page; something that could be done on Facebook but not Twitter.
Twitter	Referenced in the interviews only when comparing it to Facebook and the difficulty of updating Twitter regularly especially when the AYF, as a government bureaucratic organisation, operated at a much slower pace not necessarily warranting regular live updates.

This chapter to this point has discussed how the primary concern of committee members with regard to the AYF was the challenge they faced in getting their ideas and suggestions heard and implemented at the top tier of government. It was evident that the introduction of online media with the AYF had brought with it a layer of bureaucratic challenges, considerations and protocols. This was in part due to the hierarchically structured nature of governmental bureaucracy and regulatory processes through which every proposal had to go before implementation. This also meant that members were often uncertain about how online posts were actually integrated in policy formulation. This uncertainty was expressed in the interview sessions as a form of ambiguity over what the AYF was really about. For them, the AYF should be more than a simple medium of transmission conveying ideas from citizen to government. The AYF should have a formal approach to examining the nature and structure of youth responses and their wider narratives of youth culture. It was not a lack of transparency that led to most members' uncertainty over how online posts were processed but rather the lack of any government plan for dealing with online media interactivity. Further, the highly regulated and hierarchical nature of the bureaucracy ultimately shaped how and what type of social media was used in the AYF. Facebook was preferred over Twitter because the slow and structured progress of the AYF could not 'keep up' with Twitter. Social media use could, it was believed, within the current regulated environment, be more appropriately used as a tool for political promotion

rather than political deliberation.

The fundamental broader point that can be taken from the findings so far is that the management of technological change can be subject to an internal form of centralised bureaucratic regulation that prioritises certain goals over others as important to youth political communication, thus stifling any opportunity for the quick organisation-wide switches between different objectives and values that Chadwick (2007) refers to as organisational hybridity. In addition to the bureaucratic burden hanging over the use of online media, general uncertainty over the broader role and purpose of media technology and disruptive changes in political leadership all meant that it would be a tall order for online political communication organisations to swiftly shift between different goals, ambitions and practices or even maintain a centralised focus on a single problem and solution. This is because media influence operates within government organisations in non-uniform ways, bringing to the fore different and sometimes conflicting visions of how online media should work in youth political communication.

## **5.3 Part B: Findings from Institutional Document Analysis**

### **5.3.1 The Top Tier of Government**

During the content analysis and coding phase with the government documents, one particular point became clear: the government employed a range of varying themes to characterise the AYF at different periods in time. Each document released typically had a different featured dominant theme regarding what the AYF was about and its role in youth society. The key question then would be: what was the rationale behind the different representations of the AYF? Was this part of a specially conceived political branding strategy or did it simply boil down to a sense of institutional indecisiveness? These questions relate to those identified in the work of Paul Benyon-Davis and Steve Martin on e-government initiatives.

Davis and Martin's (2012) recent research focused on the UK government's long-running project, the *Local Government Modernization Agenda* (LGMA). The LGMA is an ambitious programme that began in 1997 with the aim to establish

independent e-government systems for all local councils in the UK, so that citizens can consult with ministers and perform other government-related transactions online. Davis and Martin noticed that the official documents released by the government on the project often cited different aspects and ambitions relating to what the LGMA was about. They realised that these different strategies stemmed from both a sense of institutional indecisiveness over how to advance the project and also a clear organisation-wide consciousness of how the media was framing the LGMA in mainstream news reports (Davis & Martin, 2012). They argued that mainstream media reports co-determine the thematic agenda of online organisations (Davis & Martin, 2012). Davis and Martin conclude that there is a tendency for governments to adopt a flexible set of changing agendas in an effort to experiment with different ways of defining modernity to address dominant media narratives (Davis & Martin, 2012).

This section attempts to raise a few talking points on the probable reasons behind these varying official themes used to characterise the AYP. It does this by highlighting specific landmark moments in the mediated youth political scene during the period when particular themes of youth political communication became popular within government. This is done through a simple media analysis of reports published in the timeframe during each theme was publicised by the government.

To identify emerging themes, I studied what the context of each word under analysis actually communicates to the reader. Words that are used in the same context are grouped together. A set of criteria published by Van Dijk (2008) was used to group similar contexts into themes. Each theme was generated from sets of words that are used in the same context. The criteria consisted of the following categories: (1) agency—from whose perspective was the document presented, (2) the period in which the document was published, (3) modality—the tone and style of language (e.g. formal, informal, brief), (4) level of detail of what was actually said and (5) the topic.

Below are the results of the concordance analysis. The concordance words are the words that have been grouped together because they are used in the same context to feature a particular theme. Tables 24, 25, 26, 27, 28 and 29 each explain the concordance words that make up themes, A, B, C, D, E and F respectively.

### 5.3.2 Theme A: AYF as a Platform Dealing with Everyday Youth Issues (Everyday Issues)

**Table 24: Concordance Words that make up Theme A in the Institutional Document Analysis**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Everyday	Refers to the government's dedication to addressing everyday issues/affairs that young people face not necessarily about formal politics or political representation.
Challenges/Problems/Issues	Refers to everyday struggles encountered by young people.
Personal/Stories	Relates to the AYF's openness in addressing emotional and social issues that are personal to young people that may be the result of particular circumstances unique to the individual.

Theme A frames the AYF as an accessible platform dealing with everyday challenges and concerns faced by ordinary young Australians. The 'everyday' is discussed with minimal political vocabulary, as it contains no specific reference to policy or any jargon related to conventional politics. There is also the sense that youth can, apart from commenting on the assigned topical issues on the website, include any personal problems or stories they wish to share.

### 5.3.3 Theme B: AYF as a Consultative Mechanism for Formal Policy Formulation (Policy Formulation)

**Table 25: Concordance Words that make up Theme B in the Institutional Document Analysis**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Consultation	Refers to a prioritisation for citizen deliberation on policy issues when framing the AYF.
Policy/Framework/Formulation	Used when discussing how the AYF will serve as a platform for policy deliberation between public officials and young people.
Politics	Refers to the AYF being used to address issues raised in parliament and in representative political settings as opposed to everyday youth issues that are not necessarily addressed officially.

Theme B frames the AYF as a political space for the government to understand how youth policy could be further refined through the issues raised on the website. This process involves seeking advice and gaining an informative insight into how young people relate to existing policy frameworks and then asking them for guidance about how these policies can be further enhanced to meet their needs.

### 5.3.4 Theme C: AYF as a Youth-driven Programme ‘Run by Youth for Youth’ (Youth-driven Programme)

**Table 26: Concordance Words that make up Theme C in the Institutional Document Analysis**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Young/Committee	These words place emphasis on the fact that the AYF is a project operated by young people.
Energy/Vibrant	Refers to the perceived dynamism that young people bring to online political communication projects.
Knowledgeable	Refers to the idea that young people know what other young people are going through in their everyday lives and the challenges that they face in specific contexts such as in school, university, with friends or in family settings.

Theme C conceptualises the AYF as a project specifically operated by young people for other young people. There is particular emphasis on the youth steering committee and its members including a clear description of their respective roles and job scopes in facilitating youth political communication. These excerpts would often be accompanied by a profile of a random committee member featuring various nuggets of information that situate them as a young Australian. Information would include age, the place in which they grew up, hobbies, favourite food and so on.

### 5.3.5 Theme D: AYF as an Interactive New Media Portal

**Table 27: Concordance Words that make up Theme D in the Institutional Document Analysis**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Interactivity/Online/Form	Used to refer to the technical features available through online political communication including the level of interactivity available and the ease with which youth can submit postings (e.g. through a simple form).
New Media/Internet/Portal/Website	Used to refer to the AYF as a space for community engagement and deliberation. Emphasis is placed on the spatial aspect of communication, where young people have a dedicated place in which to engage in discussion with peers and political officials.
Facebook/Social Media	Refers to social media integration (mainly Facebook) with the AYF website, specifically in how updates on the AYF can also be found on the AYF Facebook page.

Theme D provides an insight into the AYF as a new media hub with a series of interactive opportunities for youth to communicate with the government. There is strong emphasis on the progressive, modern outlook of digital interactivity and the ability of youth to now log on and jump into discussion with the government. The digital experience also included ways in which young people could use Facebook to check for updates within the AYF that are now highly accessible to youth.

### 5.3.6 Theme E: AYF as a Community-based Organisation (Youth Sector)

**Table 28: Concordance Words that make up Theme E in the Institutional Document Analysis**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Sector/Independent, Community/Organisations	Used to emphasise the AYF's affiliation with other youth organisations in both the public and government sector in an effort to develop mutual learning of youth issues and strategies to address them.
Parents/Teachers	Refers to how educational and family institutions are vital aspects of the wider youth sector. The AYF is represented as having close ties with parents and teachers to develop a well-rounded understanding of Australian youth.

The AYF is framed here as an organisation that has strong ties with local grassroots community associations, such as YouThink and LeftRight. The 'youth sector' was defined as collective space for parents, grassroots organisations, youth charitable organisations and other social and public aid groups. Communities were strongly encouraged to voice their views on behalf of young people on what they felt had to be done in terms of guiding young people towards leading fulfilling and responsible lives.

### 5.3.7 Theme F: AYF as a Conversational Exchange between the Youth Minister and Young People (Conversation)

**Table 29: Concordance Words that make up Theme F in the Institutional Document Analysis**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Conversation/Speak/Voice/Informal Relaxed	Refers to the informal conversational nature of interaction that the AYF website promotes and encourages, moving away from more formal and serious political debate and discussions often associated with parliamentary meetings.
Accessible/Immediate	Refers to the ease and immediacy of connecting with members of the government. Comparisons are made to how this is similar to having a face-to-face conversation with someone.

Political communication in this context was framed as ‘having a conversation’ with the minister. Theme F was mostly predominant in video uploads that usually featured the youth minister seated on a couch with a cup of coffee in hand talking to a youth committee member, where they discuss a range of general youth issues and how the AYF was an opportunity for youth to directly engage with the minister in an informal setting without any hierarchical boundaries. The symbolic message here was that the minister and youth citizen were on a level playing field.

### 5.3.8 Time-based Graphical Representation of Themes

Figure 3 indicates the frequency with which the themes above appeared within the specific two-year timeframe within which these documents were first published. The *y*-axis shows the number of times a particular theme was referenced. The *x*-axis details the period in which the institutional documents were collected, from May 2008 to November 2010. A different line, as shown in the legend, indicates each theme. In an effort to understand how these trends came about, an analysis of the public youth political environment was necessary. A NewsBank and LexisNexis database search

was conducted with the terms ‘youth’, ‘Australian Youth Forum’ and ‘youth issues’.<sup>10</sup> The search returned an array of media reports from both online and mass media that were organised according to date. Each of these articles was then read so that its main topic could be identified. Articles that had no relation to the AYF or youth were removed from consideration.

No of References

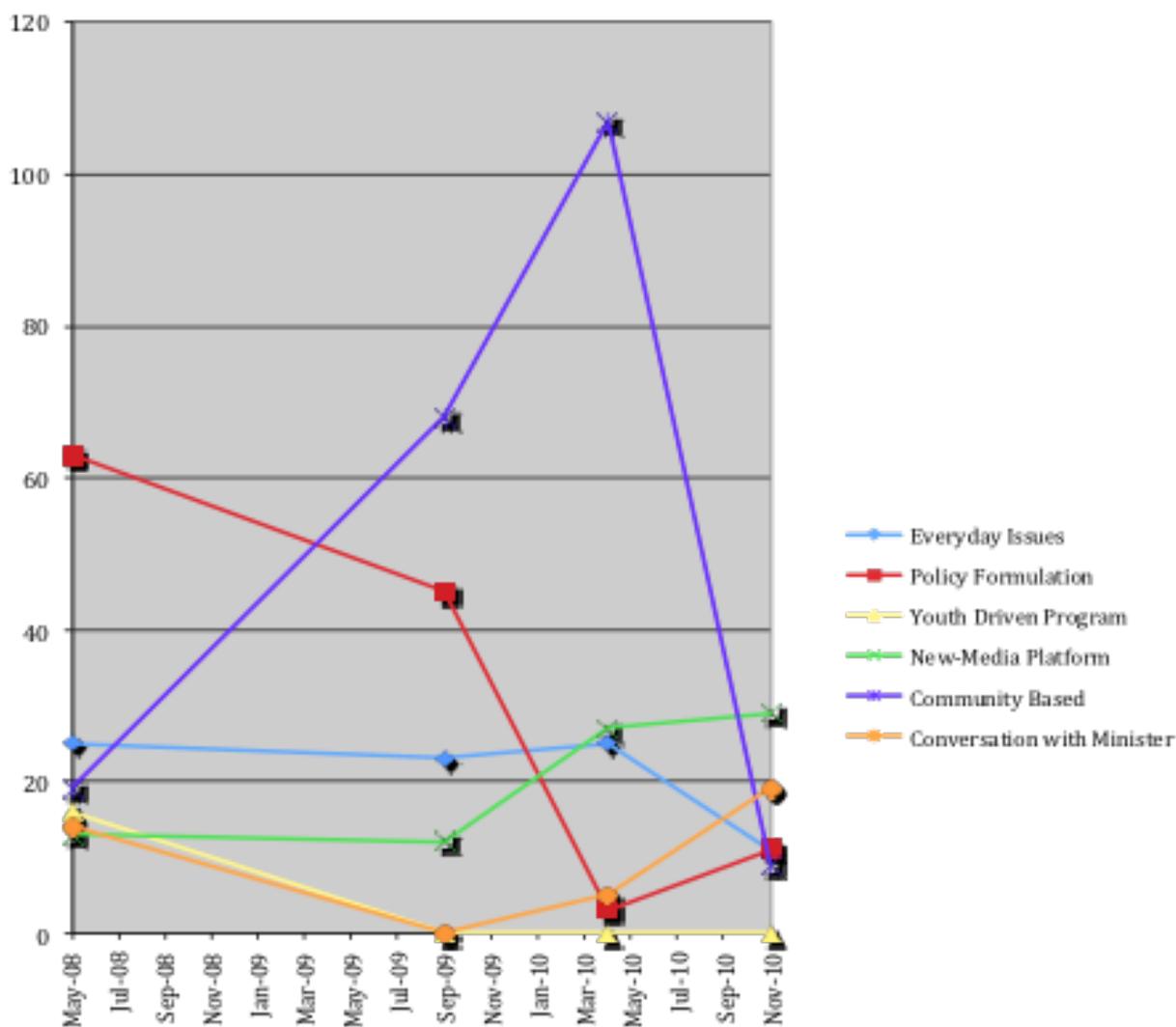


Figure 3: Time-based Representation of Themes

<sup>10</sup> Chapter 4 goes into greater detail on how this search was conducted and the exact nature of the parameters.

These data were then compared qualitatively with the trends depicted in Figure 3. The purpose here was not to look for a causal link explaining a particular trend, but rather to open up new perspectives and consider the wider mediated social context within which digital political communication was framed. The underlying question was: Is there a plausible relationship between how the government promoted the AYF and how it was reported in mainstream media? This part of the enquiry was based on Stromback and Esser's (2014) argument that online political communication initiatives do not act in isolation from mainstream media, which they state is an important element in studying the mediatisation of online political communication. They place particular emphasis on exploring how the agenda-setting behaviour and decisions of public officials within online organisations are influenced or moulded by mainstream media coverage of the organisation in question (Stromback & Esser, 2014).

The AYF was publicly launched in October 2008 although the government had published proposal documents in the months before as a build-up to launch day. It was initially branded as 'a look at everyday challenges faced by young Australians' (AYF, 2010) and it highlighted its intention to move away from the conventional parliamentary discussion towards a more issue-based approach. The focus of the AYF back in 2008 was on discovering what everyday issues and challenges young Australians felt affected them the most and why. It was expected that youth concerns and feedback would organically feed into the policy formulation process.

Up until October 2008, there seems to have been a relatively steady but marginal increase in the framing of the AYF as an issue-based platform focused on the everyday lives of youth (see 'Everyday Issues' in Figure 3). Accompanying this increase was a gradual decrease in discussion about policy formulation. This was expected, since the government was, after all, keen on promoting the AYF as an alternative political communication set-up that focused less on policy issues and more on everyday events. This also involved a gradual disassociation of the AYF from traditional political concepts and jargon related to parliamentary discussions and voting rights and procedures. In her speech at the Nexus Multicultural Arts Centre, Lion Arts Centre in Adelaide, an event that was broadcast live on national ABC news television and published on the ABC website, the youth minister at the time, Kate

Ellis, stressed the following:

The reality is that we need to hear what young people today have to say about their experiences and circumstances—because we recognize that they face unique everyday challenges and issues quite unlike those faced by generations before them ... A recent study of young people and democracy by the Whitlam Institute pointed to a generational shift away from the traditional, institutional forms of political participation like voting, membership of political parties and unions. (Ellis, 2008, para.1)

There was also a keen institutional emphasis on the youth sector community: parents, youth social organisations and public charitable associations were all seen as key stakeholders in giving young Australians a voice.

From September 2009, the number of references made to the AYF as part of a conversational exercise between the youth minister and youth began to increase (see ‘Conversation with Minister’ in Figure 3), coinciding with the media-focused launch of the NCP in October 2009. Youth minister Kate Ellis was at the forefront of this mini-campaign, visiting several schools in Sydney, Adelaide and Melbourne on a promotional tour for the AYF. The NCP also showcased the potency of Ellis as a key public figurehead in furthering the aims of Australian youth political communication. Mainstream media coverage of the event was highly encouraged and permitted. There was a strong government emphasis placed on reaching out to the ‘average Australian teenager’ (Ellis, 2009, para.5). The campaign also involved the participation of a strong contingent of youth community-based services like Headspace and Oaktree, explaining why youth community-based discussion was on a sharp rise. The topic of policy implementation, as shown in Figure 3, continued its nosedive as most government discussion focused on matters relating to everyday politics.

Another possible reason for the AYF being predominantly framed as an intimate conversational platform between citizen and minister during October 2009 is a strategic public re-branding exercise for the AYF in response to the less than favourable media coverage it received in terms of its ability to connect with young people.

October 2009 was the month in which *The Age* reporter Bella Counihan launched a scathing attack on the AYF in her article ‘Blogging a dead horse’. Counihan argued that the AYF was only a tokenistic participatory platform received with a distinct sense of apathy by young Australians. Counihan brought it to the public’s attention that much of the AYF’s efforts in engaging youth participation were futile. She based this observation on the 13 subscribers that the AYF YouTube channel garnered throughout its existence and the fact that online discussion was minimal, with most topics receiving few responses. The article had a strong effect on the Australian public: it attracted over 200 comments, most of which were sharp criticisms of the AYF due to its low engagement rate. The article was also referred to on Channel 7 and ABC programmes, which prompted Kate Ellis to publically respond to Counihan that her take on the AYF was pessimistic and failed to acknowledge the minority of youth that were participating actively. Ellis provided a full-length article in conjunction with her official response detailing the interactive features of the AYF and future plans to improve its online interactive structure.

Although the Labor government struggled to retain public credibility for the AYF in the face of much media and public criticism, the AYF continued its drive to present the project as a rare opportunity for youth to converse directly with the government outside parliament. This strategic decision to promote the conversational and non-regulated aspect of online political communication between public officials and young people could in some ways be seen as a ‘damage control’ measure to mitigate further public criticisms of the AYF.

Examination of data in Figure 3 from May 2010 onwards suggests that the AYF was heading in the direction of landmark strategic change. The topic of policy implementation was on the rise and more discussion was being generated on the actual interactive potential of the AYF as an online media platform. However, there was a strong decline in institutional attention to the concept of ‘everyday politics’, the original framework through which the AYF was first launched back in 2008. It seems that the government was seeking to align the AYF more closely to the conventional political domain—a move that is rather uncharacteristic because the AYF was originally branded as an ‘alternative’ platform for youth political participation. Discussion of community involvement in the youth sector also subsequently plunged.

These radical changes in branding and direction could have also been the result of a change in management with Minister Garrett assuming the post as the head of the AYF in 2010. Nevertheless, this trend signifies a bold shift from past strategic efforts.

It is clear from this analysis and discussion that mainstream media reports on the AYF had at least some influence over the branding measures and strategies adopted by government officials. The AYF in certain instances was *dependent* on mainstream media to promote awareness of the AYF as witnessed by the NCP, an institutional event tailor-made for media coverage as much as it was for young people to meet and greet members of the AYF.

On the other hand, it could also be argued that mainstream media framing of online political communication projects seems to exert particular pressure on public officials to adopt changing objectives and ideas in an effort to win favourable, or prevent non-favourable, media coverage. This was perhaps most explicit in the government's fervent push to frame the AYF as a conversational and accessible platform for young people to touch base with government officials in October 2009, a move that was at least partly intended to balance out mainstream media criticisms of the effectiveness of the AYF in connecting with young Australians.

This media analysis on the shifting representations of youth interests and organisational ambitions within the AYF raises the possibility that government practices in the framing of the AYF were calculated actions that worked upon particular ways of thinking about the implications of mainstream media narratives for the AYF's public reputation. However, it is equally important to note that despite the various discursive strategies used to frame the AYF (see Figure 3) from 2008 to 2010, the operational protocols and framework behind the actual AYF website remained untouched and unchanged. It would be fair then to state that the changing tactics of framing the organisational goals of the AYF *did not really follow through* in terms of changes in actual practices. In other words, mainstream media representations of the AYF may have affected how politicians framed online political communication, but there is no evidence that these narratives actually influenced government practices. This point further reinforces the idea that the actions taken by the government to align the AYF with varying goals and ambitions seemed to be primarily motivated by a

concern for addressing and managing the AYF's public image.

Stromback and Esser (2014) argue that in studying the mediatisation of online political communication, one has to be open to the basic question of whether particular government practices and behaviours would have taken place in the absence of mainstream media. In the case of the AYF, there is strong evidence to suggest that public officials were in *some capacity* influenced by mainstream media framing of the AYF, and without the mainstream media focus they might have acted differently. Nevertheless, the influence of online media in government organisations like the AYF may not be articulated only through internal factors such as bureaucratic protocols and practices—there are moments where online media set-ups achieve meaning and purpose by responding to mainstream media representations in an effort to address and shape public opinion. Although media technology provides opportunities for quick mobilisation in different political or social circumstances, there are times when these intended movements are constrained by an obligation to operate in ways that counter particular mainstream media-driven criticisms. The mediatisation of online political communication is also affected by how mainstream media shape government professional practices and attitudes in online political communication.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

This chapter empirically examined how public officials within the AYF attempted to manage and define technological change. It has argued that media influence operates within government organisations in non-uniform ways, bringing to the fore different and sometimes conflicting visions of how online media should work in youth political communication. The ability of online political organisations to switch between practices typical of interest groups, traditional political parties and social movements may not be forthcoming as media influence does not always operate in such visible and orchestrated ways throughout an organisation. There are several reasons for this. First, the management of technological change can be subjected to an internal form of centralised bureaucratic regulation that prioritises certain ambitions over others as important to youth political communication, thus stifling any opportunity for quick organisation-wide switches between different

values. Second, a general lack of clarity around the broader purpose and aims of online political communication projects in terms of their contribution to actual policy makes it difficult for staff members to work together as a team seeking specific goals. Third, the political figurehead plays a key role in fostering support and motivation within online political communication organisations, gelling together concrete aims and instilling a sense of organisational readiness to respond to particular political or social circumstances and challenges. Unfortunately for the AYPF, a change in leadership meant that most staff members had to adapt to the new ministerial head in charge, forcing them to re-orientate themselves to the significance behind technological change. Finally, it was argued that professional practice and attitudes in online political organisations may be influenced by the mainstream media's framing of organisational performance and perceived contributions to the wider public. The mediatisation of online political communication is a process that spans both online and offline media platforms.

The discussion in this chapter has made the broader point that media influence may not always work in highly visible and orchestrated ways or lead to systematic transformations and switches in how entire online organisations operate; on the contrary, its influence may be evident in more subtle yet significant ways, bringing to the fore different localised challenges with how individual staff members negotiate technological change. The next chapter focuses attention on how youth posters manage technological change and how their practices in turn inform mediatisation and our understanding of media influence in specific ways.

## **Chapter 6: Different Strokes for Different Folks—Youth Understandings and Social Experiences of Participation in Government-run Forums**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter argues that the uncertainty behind media-related change and what successful political communication means was in part driven by the different ways youth participants, through their perceptions and actions, used the AYF to manage specific political and social challenges relevant to their lives. On the basis of an empirical analysis of 721 online youth web postings submitted to the AYF,<sup>11</sup> it is argued that young people had divergent understandings of what media-related social change entailed. These perceptions of change are explained in relation to the concept of ‘cultural thickening’ (Hepp, 2013), the core process through which Hepp argues that media moulds people’s experiences. Cultural thickening refers to how people develop ideas and expectations about social reality through media practices within the context of presiding state regulations (Hepp, 2013). The contention in this chapter is that the original core government intention of connecting with young people and solving the problem of low youth participation rates was interpreted in different ways, leading to different definitions of what the problems in youth political communication were.

The primary point here is that people’s engagement experiences with media are not driven by a unitary logic but rather are often defined by particular dominant patterns of thought and action that develop through their appropriation of media technology to address culturally specific problems. With this in mind, it is asserted that anticipating what youth want from an online political communication forum and grasping how it will inform engagement will always be a difficult task. Although online government political communication platforms are centralised projects equipped with common objectives and protocols, the meaning and significance of

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<sup>11</sup> All 721 postings were made during the period when the pioneer batch of youth steering committee members (those interviewed in Chapter 5) held appointment.

participating in these initiatives may be articulated in very specific cultural terms and conditions leading to a series of different conclusions about the purpose of online communication. As an extension to this, this chapter further reinforces the idea that the use and implementation of online media does not revolve around finding a central solution to a particular problem; it is more than likely that there will be several different problems that call for several different solutions.

The line of enquiry adopted by this chapter and thesis lies in uncovering the relationship between changes in media technology and wider patterns of cultural and social changes in how the reality of communication is perceived. The topic of online participation has emerged as a compelling and significant area of study in media and political communication research. Empirically, studying youth participation allows us to critically question whether methods of assessing and understanding online participation by the government, media and public are actually in step with the ‘on-the-ground’ social experiences faced by young people that engage with these technologies. In fact the compatibility between government understandings of online participation and young people’s conceptions of what it means to engage online has been a key issue of discussion in Australian youth research and one that has been regarded as consistently problematic. In 2010, Australian youth political communication and welfare policy researchers Ariadne Vromen and Philippa Collin embarked on an empirical project to determine what Australian politicians and policymakers in the youth sector actually thought about online youth political participation initiatives. Their study, which involved focus group interviews with 63 public officials in government, concluded that Australian government decision makers in the youth sector generally felt that young people would benefit from more issue-focused and everyday lifestyle-inspired political discussion settings rather than highly regulated, formal and top-down political communication projects.

However, Vromen and Collin (2010) reported that although public officials widely acknowledged that the main drivers of youth online participation tend to revolve around a variety of different everyday social issues, they argued that it would be impractical and difficult for government youth organisations to serve these varying youth interests with sufficient depth and flair given that all online government projects are linked in some capacity to offline bureaucratic frameworks that adhere to

strict protocols and expectations. Vromen and Collin (2010) state that as a result, youth participants are caught between working under these stipulated government practices and seeking ways to connect participation to their own interests and everyday experiences.

The above argument was actually echoed by youth participants themselves in an earlier study by Vromen in 2008. The study involved focus group interviews with 13 young people involved in an Australian NGO, the Inspire Foundation. The Inspire Foundation is a national non-profit organisation that organises online programmes for young people to discuss key social issues. Vromen's interviewees revealed that online participation in government initiatives was a 'scary' (Vromen, 2008, p.535) exercise in comparison to NGOs because there were specific formal objectives, expectations and demands to meet before a submission would be considered legitimately political and hence suitable for government consideration. They felt that young people could not define politics and citizenship identities under their own terms and conditions and even when such opportunities were presented, there was an underlying pressure to meet certain institutional criteria about what engaging online means. For example, one respondent spoke about how young posters were discouraged by certain online government websites from discussing the hard facts of any issue unless they could cite government-based evidence.

There seems to be a pre-existing tension and a disjunction in Australia between government methods of assessing online participation and 'on-the-ground' mediated experiences faced by young people that engage with these online media platforms. Further to this, scholars, the government and young people themselves have readily acknowledged that there is simply no single and coherent participatory culture. As iterated in Chapter 2, the experience of participation itself is inevitably moulded by online media technology and its associated supporting infrastructure of government practices, strategies and expectations in ways that are not necessarily predictable. In the next section, Hepp's (2013) work on 'cultural thickening' is explained in greater detail as an analytical framework to empirically capture the distinct patterned meanings, perceptions and practices that are attributed to the experience of participating online in a government-run media forum.

## 6.2 ‘Cultural Thickening’—the Concretisation of Meanings and Perceptions in Mediatised Reality

The main conceptual framework behind this chapter stems from Hepp’s (2013) work on understanding and researching participatory cultures in the digital age. Hepp (2013) argues that online participatory cultures are cultures that are cultivated through media’s inevitable ‘moulding’ of social reality and social experiences. Central to this moulding process are the guiding technological influences, social impulses, and government expectations of what media-related social change should be about. However, the moulding influence of media on the social experience of participation is not uniformly distributed. Hepp argues that through this moulding process emerges a thickening of particular meanings of social reality and experiences (2013, p.71) giving rise to dominant articulations of culture and identity. The idea of ‘cultural thickening’ draws attention to typical patterns of thought and articulations of social reality and experiences that are *learnt* through people’s practices with media and the negotiated relationships they form with new media technology, policy regulations, government authority and fellow participants (Hepp, 2013). Hepp’s point is that although it is difficult to define online participatory cultures in a ‘clear-cut either/or exclusivity’ (2013, p.74) because there is no single distinct logic behind media-related social change, we are able to identify instances where particular meanings and experiences of social reality appear to be *concretised* as part of social form.

Hepp’s (2013) idea of cultural thickening is inspired by Swedish anthropologist Orvar Lofgren’s (2001) work on understanding how Swedish national radio contributes towards a more defined understanding of Swedish culture and identity. Lofgren’s (2001) central concern was with the question of how people have come to feel at home in the nation through the educative role of broadcast radio in contributing towards a ‘cultural thickening’ of the idea of the nation–state through the themes, visions and imaginaries brought up on air. This thickening process for Lofgren is a process of ‘learning to belong’ (2001, p.3) to a specific culture or community and one that may be initiated by media, not only through direct engagement, but through a negotiation with related government laws, social expectations and personal circumstances. Through this learning process, typical styles of thought, discourse and

practices with repeated articulation eventually become key fixtures of participatory culture. Hepp (2013), in a similar vein to Lofgren (2001), is interested in how specific patterns of perceiving, experiencing and articulating reality are learnt and made tangible through one's engagement with media. He also expands on Lofgren's (2001) notion of thickening by exploring how these patterned perceptions of social reality ultimately lead to the formation of distinct mediatised identities that outline an individual's purpose and role in engaging with media.

For Hepp (2013), mediatised identities are temporary, patterned ways of perceiving social reality through media engagement at a particular given time to manage particular social circumstances and problems. Individuals who use media do not necessarily settle on a particular identity but instead shift through a 'menu of possible identities' (Hepp, 2013, p.125) depending on presiding social challenges and situations. These identities are simply expressions of the different organised ways in which specific practices and perceptions of reality have become thickened as part of what it means to communicate through media at a given point in time.

The research findings compiled in the following pages are devoted to outlining these identities by uncovering typical articulations of social reality and experiences from young people's interactions with the AYF under presiding government expectations, social pressures and policy regulations that determine what online participation should be about. This involves understanding how the practices of youth participants and the media products of their engagement produce particular learnt patterned meanings of social reality—'a multilayered strata of diverse cultural thickenings' (Hepp, 2013, p.74)—where media remain a central part of their overall experience.

The study of online participatory culture in the AYF is not a celebration of youth agency or a commentary on what youth are doing with online media. Rather, it highlights the non-uniform social experiences of participating in the AYF, experiences that are cultivated through a negotiation with online media technology and its associated impulses, government aims, pressures and strategies. These experiences and articulations of social reality are learnt and expressed through the media practice of posting online.

### **6.3 Framework for Presenting Findings—Explaining the Contribution of Each Research Component**

The findings will be divided into two parts. The first will be concerned with explaining the meaning and significance of central themes that have emerged from an analysis of 721 web postings on 18 different youth-centred topics.<sup>12</sup> Each theme represents particular patterned articulations of social reality and experiences associated with participating in the AYF or what, as noted previously, Hepp has described as ‘cultural thickenings’ (Hepp, 2013). The themes introduced in this chapter are also differentiated through the way they communicate specific mediated identities; these identities are not fixed and they refer to an ongoing process of youth *identification* with particular social experiences and articulations of social reality that determine their role and purpose in engaging with online media.

The second part of the chapter acknowledges that there is no reason to assume that individual youth posters in the AYF only experienced and articulated the reality of online engagement in fixed and isolated ways shaped by a single theme. Various combinations of themes may come into play in an individual’s engagement with media. Using the concept of cluster analysis based on a framework first introduced to political and media communication by social science researcher Ian Dey (1999), this section seeks to understand the rationale behind popular groupings of themes as they appear in individual web postings.

### **6.4 A Character Study of Youth Poster Types—Exploring Different Cultural Thickenings**

The themes explained in this section are patterned responses to the ‘common media problem’ of working under ambiguous government visions of how online political communication should be facilitated through the AYF platform. More specifically, these themes represent distinct social experiences and the associated

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<sup>12</sup> Coding procedures and protocols are stated in Chapter 4 and will be reiterated in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

identities that are cultivated from the process of negotiating with the dominant practices, strategies, expectations and goals underpinning the AYF's daily operation.

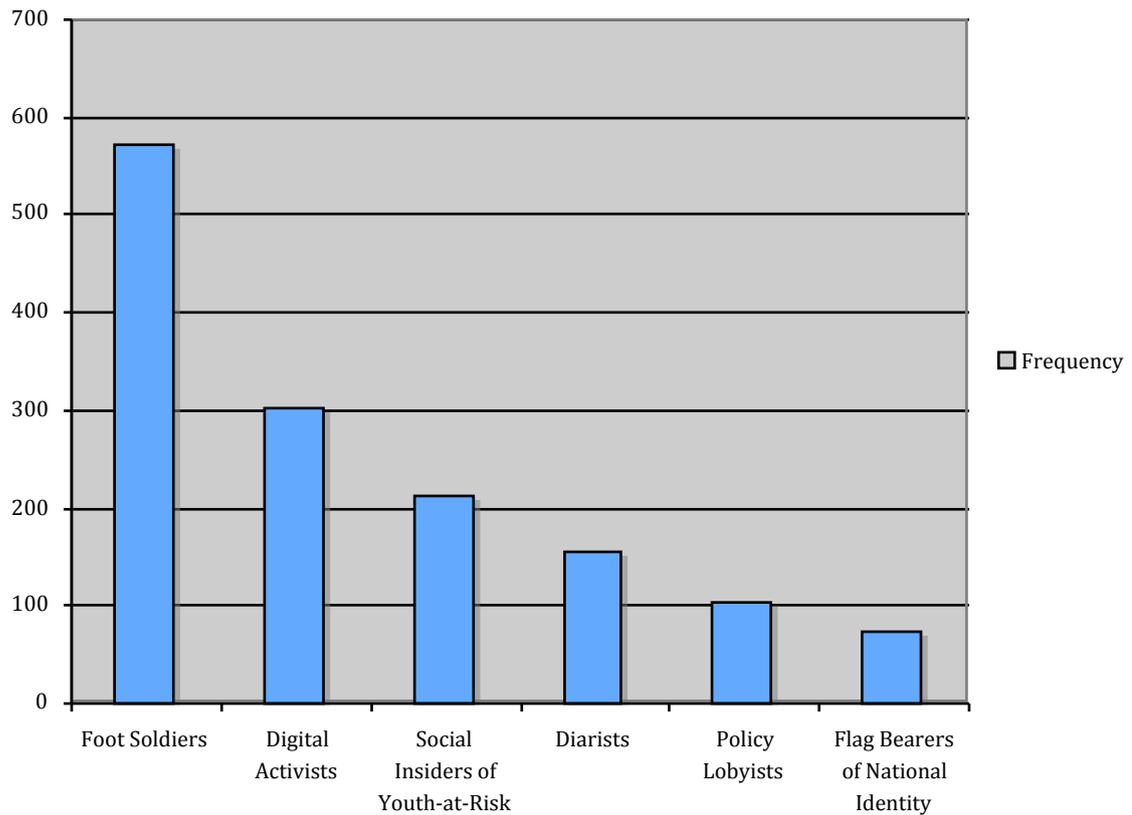
A series of six thematic headings were formed during the course of the coding process. Their significance can be summarised as follows:

- (1) The Spirited Foot Soldiers—Appeals for institutional guidance and leadership in how to construct online voices in ways that are relevant to government practices and processes.
- (2) The Social Informants of Youth-at-Risk—Eyewitness accounts of youth-at-risk behaviour in public spaces.
- (3) The Flag Bearers of National Identity—A close identification with what being 'Australian' meant.
- (4) The Policy Lobbyists—A view of policy as the main solution to particular social problems.
- (5) The Diarists—Youth who used the AYF to archive personal experiences, thoughts and opinions.
- (6) The Emotional Digital Activists—Young posters that used digital technology to encourage public action in support of particular public causes. These public issues were personalised through an appeal to emotion.

Further explanation is necessary here for how these themes were developed. Before the actual coding process was conducted, all the posts were extracted by computer from their original web format and saved in independent text files within separate folders, each labelled with the relevant topic title that these posts were in response to. This step was important because it preserved the context of each post and it prevented a generalisation of all the postings as part of a single media text of youth responses to the government. Each text file was then run through concordance software that provided a breakdown of the number of times each word appears within a particular text. Following Lindgren's (2007) principles of concordance analysis, words that were repeated more than two times were taken into consideration for analysis. These words were then studied in their context of usage. Words that were used in similar contexts across all the 721 posts were grouped together to form a single 'theme' using Van Dijk's (2010) set of criteria for identifying similarities in contexts of various texts. Variables such as the tone of language, degree of clarity,

subject topic and the presuppositions consciously and unconsciously brought by posters to particular issues were taken into account.

To gain a sense of how significant each theme was within the scope of youth web discussion sampled for this research, a frequency distribution was constructed to illustrate how many times each theme was referenced in the text of the 721 web postings (Figure 4). This was done in response to social science online methods researcher Anthony Onuwuegbuzie's (2003) observation that in determining the number of times a theme arises within the research text in question, the researcher is able to grasp how strongly a particular theme actually influences the collective voice of web posters. He refers to this as the 'truth space' (Onuwuegbuzie, 2003, p.108)—an understanding of how closely a particular theme is representative of the overall discussion within a specific space. This allows the researcher to limit their discussion of themes to ones that have a significant influence in structuring online discussion and provide validity to claims and arguments derived from the research.



**Figure 4: Frequency of Themes in the Analysis of Youth Web Postings**

#### **6.4.1 The Spirited Foot Soldiers—An Appeal for Guidance in the Construction of Voice**

The ‘Foot Soldiers’ are posters that specifically look to the government for guidance and supervision over how their voices should be constructed; for example, focusing on the issues their posts should relate to and how their posts should be framed within current debates on youth. Digital technology was used as a tool to seek government support for clarifying how online posts should be structured in a way that best contributes to policy decision making and governance. Participating in the forum for these young people was mainly about understanding how the government can constructively influence their online submissions so that it fulfils a broader political purpose. This proactive and positive outlook to government intervention differed significantly from the government’s stance of minimal interference when it came to regulating online submissions. Using Chadwick (2012) and Wright’s (2009) work on

online governance, it is argued that the non-interventionist stance of the government in regulating online participation was really a precautionary step taken by officials to reduce the risk of being publicly accused of stifling free speech and over-managing the forum. It is asserted that this sense of caution may have contributed towards the thickening of online participation as an exercise in seeking governmental guidance. This theme underlines the point that particular government media-oriented solutions—for example, adopting a policy of non-intervention—can sometimes ironically be the source of the problem for young people when using online media. It is difficult to predict what young people want from media engagement, making the success or failure of these projects hard to determine or anticipate.

As shown in Figure 4, there were 572 references to this theme in the entire web post text corpus, by far the most referenced theme in the analysis. These posters believe that youth voices need governmental guidance to be legitimised as being constructive and purposeful for government practice and policymaking. One could even regard these posters as cautious pragmatists—though they seem to acknowledge the interactivity and accessibility of the internet as a convenient tool for political communication, there is a predominant belief that these features would only be meaningful if the government provides a sense of direction as to how their voices should be formulated online to fulfil governmental objectives. There was a belief among young people that government officials should step up as leaders in guiding the online discussion of specific issues in terms of emphasising how each issue relates to the process of governance, in terms of possible actions that could be undertaken with regard to specific youth problems, and how their suggestions will be put into practice within the formal governance framework.

For the majority of youth, institutional guidance was most commonly understood as an opportunity for the government to represent themselves as agenda setters in flagging particular issues that they believe are worthy of public discussion to facilitate governance. The government was seen as responsible for cueing the youth public as to when their voice and participation is necessary and to what specific issues these efforts should be directed. The quote below from a web post in response to the topic *Contributing to Democracy* exemplifies the above point and is presented here because it contains the greatest variety of concordance words, as explained in Table

30, for the theme of ‘Foot Soldiers’, and is thus the strongest representation of the theme (Lindgren, 2011):

Sorry, I have nothing to say about this topic but something bugs me about how this forum operates. I believe our government needs to be proactive and send a message to tell young Australians, ‘look, here is an issue that needs discussion because we need to know your opinion on this for doing this [for governing]’ ... what’s the point giving us a flash interactive forum and topic and saying go talk about this issue. We need proper guidance and leadership. If for example budget allocation for youth initiatives is a hot topic in parliament then it is the responsibility for the government to let us know what the proposed options are for action and how our ideas could be tailored and presented meaningfully. It simply boils down to taking initiative to lead the discussion. (Participant#1, 2009, para.2)

**Table 30: Concordance Words that make up the Foot Soldiers Theme**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Proactive/Initiative	Used in reference to government leadership in leading online discussion.
Guidance/Leadership	Used in reference to government support and its importance in marshalling specific discussions towards relevance and clarity.
Proper	Used in reference to the need for a clear governance framework through which online posts are check for relevance and purposefulness to policy.
Responsibility	Used to indicate that the government is obligated to guide online discussions in ways that are relevant to matters of policy and governance.
Governing	Used to signify the important relationship between the content of online posts and its relevance to informing official governing practices.

The above poster argues that the government should assume the role of agenda setter, bringing to the fore particular issues and explaining to young people why they matter and how their views on the subject will help with certain institutional dilemmas or challenges. She asserts that the medium in itself (*‘flash interactive forum’*) will not automatically provide young people with the knowledge on why a particular social issue is important and how young people can contribute to informing the political practice of government. There is the suggestion that the government must assume the role of a leader that channels youth discussion into areas of government that need it most.

Some posters advocated for the establishment of specific government standards and guidelines for how youth submissions should be structured in public debate. The quote below, from a submission that was originally posted as a response to the topic of *School Bullying*, expresses this particular viewpoint and is the second strongest representation of the ‘Foot Soldiers’ theme based on the number of different concordance words it contained:

We need some structure and predictability here ... a standardised way of how we can assemble our responses ... the AYF is all good and great but giving us a place to express our opinions and then walking away isn't doing anything. At the moment it's like here's a topic, discuss. That leadership presence is lacking. If you are going to moderate the forums for negative comments and swear words or even take up some of the ideas discussed in policy making then at least add your 2-cents on how we structure our responses to particular topics in ways that are useful to everyone involved. The key point here is not simply about listening and nodding heads to what young people are saying, it is about you people needing to influence the structure and format of our responses in positive ways ... for example what sort of tone should our contributions take (official or non-official) and do we need to reference particular policies or current initiatives—some people have no idea about this—and if so do we put that in first or towards the end? There should be guidelines to these things. (Participant#2, 2010, para.6)

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of ‘Foot Soldiers Theme’ is provided in Table 31.

**Table 31: Concordance Words that make up the Foot Soldiers Theme (2)**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Structure/Format	Used to express the need for a formal guide in how online postings should be constructed/written in response to particular topics.
Predictability	Used to refer to the need for a clear formatting guide for how posts should be constructed.

The above post calls for a more structured and predictable communicative environment, one that provides clear guidelines as to how young people can approach the discussion of particular topics in ways that are in synch with government goals and objectives. It broadly implies that governments should take an active interest in how postings are formatted online and how they contribute to the ensuing discussion. The key issue here lies in how the government can manage and guide youth voices in terms of style, structure and content rather than simply ‘listening’ and taking the voices into consideration. The next quote, which is the third strongest representation of the ‘Foot Soldiers’ theme, expressed uncertainty at the level of formality required in youth responses to the government. It was part of a posting in response to the topic of *Climate Change*:

You have to understand that for a lot of us, talking to the government online is not something we do every day like logging on to Facebook. I don’t feel comfortable contributing when I am not aware of how I should speak online on a serious issue like climate and environmental change to people from government. Do you want a detailed analysis of what I think of the climate situation or a one-liner informal Facebook status update kinda [sic] reply? Any directions on this or anything goes? (Participant#3, 2010, para.3)

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of ‘Foot Soldiers Theme’ is provided in Table 32.

**Table 32: Concordance Words that make up the Foot Soldiers Theme (3)**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Detailed	Used in reference to the specificities of how a post should be structured in response to a particular topic.
Informal/Facebook/Status	Used in reference to the absence of any official guidelines to how posts should be structured.
Speak	Used as part of a broader question about how posts should be structured in response to a particular topic.

The above post makes a key distinction between the potentially different social expectations of communication in popular social media sites like Facebook and official government-run forums like the AYF. There is a distinct sentiment that communicating with the government online requires a particular style of social interaction but there remains a sense of uncertainty as to what these social protocols are. The poster expresses specific concern about his lack of familiarity with the perceived ‘ins and outs’ and norms of online political communication.

There were posters that also believed that an online environment without proper posting guidelines would attract responses that are vague and devoid of proper elaboration or purpose. There was a concern that an absence of government guidance and rules on posting will inculcate social norms that are not favourable for constructive political discussion. This viewpoint was the fourth most popular idea under the ‘Foot Soldiers’ theme. Below is the quote that contained the fourth highest variety of concordance words. For this poster, the introduction of proper posting guidelines was seen as important in ensuring well-thought-out responses from young people:

Our view on the school curriculum is [a] broad subject to just throw it up for discussion without some sort of guidance. Personally I dislike Essential English (literature). I think it’s useless ... but the guy next to me might have valid reasons to like it. So what you’re going to get is a whole lot of people saying ‘I like this’ and ‘I hate this’ and so on which is pretty much what typical online social media stuff is about for most people of our generation—a whole list of superficial proclamations without substance. This will not work. We need a standardised way to put together arguments in ways that are useful and this guidance should come from the government. Maybe each post has to address a fixed number of issues

adequately and have a word limit before it is allowed publication by the website admins? (Participant#4, 2010, p.2)

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the ‘Foot Soldiers Theme’ is provided in Table 33.

**Table 33: Concordance Words that make up the Foot Soldiers Theme (4)**

Concordance word	How concordance word relates to the theme (criterion for inclusion)
Superficial	Used in reference to youth responses that lack proper structure and purposeful content when proper leadership and guidance is not received.
Standardised	Used to express the need for a formal guide in how online postings should be constructed/written in response to particular topics.
Publication	Used to suggest the need for a governance infrastructure to moderate posts.

The post above conveys how the internalised assumptions and norms typically associated with online media such as the tendency for people to write short declarations about liking or disliking something tend to detract from purposeful and constructive online political communication. Online media for this poster puts in motion certain ways of doing things online, involving a specific range of media practices, that may not always be conducive to political communication. The government is expected to strategically intervene in setting particular protocols and guidelines to establish some sort of logic or system for determining ‘what goes where’ in the construction of mediated political discourse. In a similar vein to most posts under the ‘Foot Soldiers’ theme, there is a clear emphasis on critically engaging with the ‘media logic’ behind online media—the internalised social imperatives, pressures and rules that influence how and why people participate online.

Youth appeals for government leadership and guidance were essentially an appeal for a common social template, containing guidelines, protocols and stylistic reference points, for communicating with political officials. Young people looked to the government to clarify and develop shared understandings and expectations about what constitutes publicly valued online political information and communication. This

was expressed in two central ways: (1) posters who felt that the government should assume the role of agenda setters promoting particular issues and explaining to young people why they matter in government practice, setting a precedent on what youth politics should be about, and, (2) posters who believed that the government should be more active in imposing particular standards of style, structure and content of postings rather than simply ‘listening’.

Youth participants were in fact struggling to identify a clear ‘media logic’ of specific principles and values behind the AYF’s operation as a public consultation forum. They were faced with the challenge of identifying exactly what the ‘norms’ and social expectations of online political communication should be about in the first place—a problem that they believed required government intervention and guidance. This request for guidance and leadership is important for two main reasons.

First, it draws attention to the relationship between online media formats, protocols and regulations and their consequent influence on public and government expectations of what politics and political communication should really be about. The Foot Soldiers theme conveys the challenge faced by youth participants in *forging a sense of familiarity* with the format and protocols behind online political communication that remained unclear to them. It could be argued that online political communication brought about a renewed sensitivity to the existence of a core ‘media logic’ that mapped out media’s organising effects on political discussion. Youth communication experiences with the government were very much dominated by efforts to establish some common ground in terms of how online political communication should take place.

Secondly, youth requests for government guidance and supervision raise questions about online governance, more specifically about when, how and to what extent institutional authority and guidance should be enacted in the everyday online environment of government consultation forums. Scholars in the field of online political communication, most notably Chadwick (2013), have recently argued that government officials of public consultation forums have become increasingly cautious over actively facilitating and leading online discussions or coming up with specific criteria for how online discussion should take place, to avoid being publically accused

of over-managing and controlling discussion in online spaces that are specifically branded as interactive and citizen driven (Chadwick, 2013). There is an ongoing, legitimate concern among government officials that measures and actions taken to guide online discussion may be publicly construed as stifling to the development of democratic public discussion. Such allegations, it is feared, can have a detrimental effect on PR and mar the credibility of the online initiative in question (Chadwick, 2013).

Both Chadwick (2012) and Macnamara (2011) have previously asserted that the distinction between government practices that over-manage or constrain and practices that lead or facilitate online discussion generally remains unclear as all forms of government intervention in open discussion forums are inevitably open to varying degrees of public and media interpretation and scrutiny. Public officials have continued to impose specific censorial measures to remove explicitly offensive content but have remained fairly conservative in terms of leading public discussion in a specific direction to avoid controversy (Chadwick, 2013; Macnamara, 2010b). Chadwick (2013) contends that the limited involvement of governments in active online discussions serves as a wider example of how the process of online governance seems, in certain circumstances, to be shaped by a dominant ‘media logic’: a set of ideas and rules about how to avoid being seen as controllers of public debate and discussion.

Scott Wright (2009), an expert voice in the online governance of government-run youth and mainstream political communication forums, has similarly asserted that matters relating to government moderation of online forums have become ‘prickly issues’ (Wright, 2009, p.553) for governmental agencies because public officials are wary of being accused of stifling online public debate, an accusation that can seriously weaken the legitimacy of the online initiative in question. Wright argues that as a result, government forums that encourage people to have their say often end up under-led with a lack of proper focus due to the absence of any guidelines for facilitating the ensuing discussion. These assertions were supported by Wright’s analysis of the online *Downing Street* forum postings where he noticed an evident lack of government guidance and facilitation of discussion as website administrators openly expressed their concern about the damage that any claims of censorship might

cause the government.<sup>13</sup> Wright's work suggests that government fears of over-managing open discussion forums remain a distinct *possibility* as part of a broader logic in online political communication environments. This logic explains how internet technology and the social and political expectations of citizen empowerment that come with its implementation can sometimes constrain practices of online governance.

Wright's findings were recently reinforced by Janelle Ward (2012), who conducted a similarly structured empirical study on the adoption of Web 2.0 by 21 private and governmental online youth organisations in the UK. Ward has been a key voice in scholarly conversations about how UK-based civic and political organisations use new communication technologies to inform and mobilise young citizens from culturally diverse backgrounds. Her study aimed to understand how youth political organisations view young people and their online submissions and what implications, if any, these perceptions have for broader government understandings of citizenship. A content analysis of the websites together with interviews with the public officials responsible for them revealed that most government officials, as opposed to officials working in private youth organisations, preferred an 'inform then involve' (Ward, 2013, p.150) approach. This involved providing young people with objective and value-free representation of important topics and then leaving it up to them to figure out how those topics are relevant in their everyday lives. Ward argued that officials running government websites deliberately avoided a more involved and hands-on approach to guiding discussion as they did not want to attract public accusations of over-moderating, which would discredit their efforts to connect with youth. They also believed that young people should develop their own opinions of how a topic is relevant to their lives; the role of the government was defined in terms of providing information and facilitating rather than influencing discussion.

In the context of the AYF, it can be strongly concluded that online political communication and the subsequent perceived lack of government guidance has prompted youth participants to seek clear directions from the government concerning how online media technology should channel and shape political and social change.

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<sup>13</sup> Wright conducted a content analysis of the website in question, although the exact breakdown of methods and the nature of this analysis were not provided in the published article.

Based on recent scholarly research, the perceived lack of leadership may be explained by the potential challenges and complex considerations public officials themselves generally face in deciding how and to what extent they should lead, influence and facilitate online youth discussions without appearing to over-manage and censor.

The non-interventionist stance adopted by the Australian government in managing the AYF played a role in contributing to the overall *thickening* of online participation as an exercise in seeking governmental guidance and support. Youth participants understood the AYF platform as an opportunity to seek government guidance on issues relating to (1) what youth politics should be about in the sense of what issues are important to the process of governance and (2) the format and structure of online political discussion that concern how social interaction between public servants and youth participants should be ordered and organised. The government solution of not intervening in the construction of online posts, to provide young people with the freedom to communicate, proved in the end to be part of the problem for youth when using online media.

This theme underlines the point that particular government media-oriented solutions, such as adopting a policy of non-intervention in managing online postings, although well intentioned, can sometimes ironically be the source of problems for young people when using online media. It is difficult to anticipate what young people relate to when using online media, making the success and failure of these projects hard to determine from the outset.

#### **6.4.2 The Emotional Digital Activists—Using Digital Media to Personalise Particular National and Global Causes through Emotion**

The ‘Emotional Digital Activists’ group was represented 302 times in the analysis (Figure 4), making it the second most common character profile that was identified. This theme underlines the broader point about how digital technology is used by youth to encourage social and political action through the personalisation of specific public causes, through the online *expression and performance of individual emotions* such as anger, regret, sadness or disgust. The underlying point of this theme is to showcase how specific public issues can attract a range of diverse emotional

discourses, each providing a unique understanding of the problem and/or potential solution, thus complicating any attempt to evaluate the overall success or failure of online political communication projects.

Digital technology was used in very specific ways to assume ownership over a particular issue through an appeal to emotion. This in turn contributed towards a specific thickening, in relation to the meanings, perceptions and practices behind the use of the online forum, as a tool for activism through a foregrounding of emotions to promote and aim for particular political and social outcomes. To conceptualise this thickened understanding of online media activism through emotion, Kuntsman's (2012) concept of 'affective fabrics' in digital cultures (Kuntsman, 2012) is utilised. Affective fabrics specifically refer to a lived and deeply felt set of emotions that connect with a specific set of values and ways of thinking about society. The idea is a contemporary take on Raymond Williams's (1978) classic work on 'structures of feeling' (Williams, 1978), which refers to the general organisation of specific emotions in a given social period or set of social circumstances; it describes how common thoughts and emotions shape subjective experiences and understandings of reality in particular ways that are not necessarily identifiable or obvious at first.

The 'Emotional Digital Activists' were primarily concerned with using digital media to personalise particular global and national issues by expressing emotion. They also called for greater support from fellow youth posters. However, appeals for greater youth support did not extend to explicit networking with other individuals and remained a purely autonomous affair. This conclusion was based on the observation that none of the 721 web posts analysed in this chapter referenced any other post or served as a reply to another post.

The digital activists engaged with issues across two broad subject areas: (1) the social implications of youth body image representations on national television (190 references in the 302 times this theme appeared) and (2) whether the government has done enough to address the problem of climate change in Australia (44 references in the 302 times this theme appeared). For purposes of clarity, findings from each area will be presented separately.

Posters who wrote about youth body image representations on national television were diverse in their emotions and opinions towards the issue and fell within two camps. Ninety-nine of the 190 references to youth body image representations on national television expressed *frustration and disgust* at how television shows depict youth body image and how these depictions have damaging implications for youth self-confidence. However, the remaining 91 references saw televised images of young people's bodies as a *celebration* of youth vitality and enthusiasm. The forum was used as a platform to directly express polarised emotions on youth body image representations on local television. Below are quotes from both camps, and they are featured here because they are the strongest representation of the 'Emotional Digital Activists' theme based on the number of different concordance words detected in both text corpuses:

I cringe with disgust basically ... I see Home and Away as a show where young people are sexualised for the sake of popular entertainment. How many of us girls put on makeup with our stick thin bodies and frolic on the beach with very little in the hope for male attention? It is heartbreaking if our fellow Australian girls end up believing that the real world is all about looking thin and shapely and end up with low self-esteem. Please join me in creating a movement against the misrepresentation of youth bodies on national television. It is degusting [sic] and nauseating. If I contacted the Home and Away producers to pressure them into changing their idea of [sic] young woman [sic], I will not receive a reply because it is not easy to get our voices up the ladder to the top and people in management don't like public whining ... this website however needs to showcase our anger with these unfair idealistic representations of young women. This is our only shot to kickstart a movement to show how we feel; this is a direct line to make this public and stand up!!! (Participant#5, 2010, para.17)

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of 'Emotional Digital Activists' is provided in Table 34.

**Table 34: Concordance Words that make up the Emotional Digital Activists**

<b>Theme</b>	
Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Disgust/Nauseating	Expression of emotional displeasure directed towards a specific societal or political problem in an effort to justify why a resolution should be sought.
Heartbreaking	Expression of sadness directed towards a specific societal or political problem in an effort to justify why a resolution should be sought.
Movement	In reference to an organised protest or campaign advocating a specific public cause.
Anger	Expression of frustration directed towards a specific societal or political problem in an effort to justify why a resolution should be sought.
Misrepresentation	Reference to any perceived distortion in the representation of youth bodies on national television.

The following quote expresses the viewpoint that television's representation of youth should be regarded as a celebration of youth vibrancy and enthusiasm:

Seriously what's wrong with celebrating being young? It is a time of vitality and youthful spiritedness. So what if local television shows feature girls and men with toned bodies? Everyone loves eye-candy. Young people should stop being so prude. Be happy that you are young and be inspired to be healthy. The only war is the war against your own conservativeness (for those who fault tv shows for showing examples of youthful beauty). I want to use this online space to mobilise fellow young Australians to join me in making a campaign that defines youthful living as a joyous celebration of all things positive rather than a hell hole of unrealistic media representations and expectations. I applaud local television for filling my teenage years with full of possibilities in terms of what I can be and providing me with the motivation to feel good and healthy about myself. Think glass half full not half empty. Let's spread some optimism folks. (Participant#6, 2010, para.17)

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of ‘Emotional Digital Activists’ is provided in Table 35.

**Table 35: Concordance Words that make up the Emotional Digital Activists**

**Theme (2)**

Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Celebrating/Optimism	Expression of positivity directed towards a specific societal or political problem in an effort to justify a way forward.
Campaign/Mobilise	In reference to initiating an organised effort in advocating for a specific public cause.
Joyous/Happy	Reference to a positive emotion in response to a particular societal or political problem to justify a way forward.

The above quotes illustrate distinct ways through which online technology is used to personalise a public issue through the expression of particular emotions with the ultimate goal of garnering public support for achieving a desired political and social outcome. In the first post, the AYF forum is used as a space to showcase the poster’s frustration with representations of youth body image ideals. The expression of frustration and disgust are in a way structured by the technological possibilities of being able to freely express one’s emotions publicly as well as the hope that these emotions will be felt by others and channelled into a proper movement for action. In addition to this, the poster also works on the assumption that the AYF online space is a more appropriate and acceptable channel to express one’s displeasure against the practices of media organisations as opposed to lodging a complaint to the show’s producers directly because ‘people in management don’t like public whining’ (Participant#5, 2010, para.17). Through this assumption, the forum to a certain extent is seen as a non-judgemental space for emotionalising and hence personalising specific social and political problems.

The second post addresses the same issue of youth body image representations on local television but instead of adopting a position of resistance the poster appeals for young people to see these representations as a celebration of youth. The same issue has attracted two different sets of emotional responses calling for different political and social outcomes.

These polarised emotional responses were also identified in the third and fourth strongest representations of the ‘Emotional Digital Activists’ theme based on the variety of concordance words within these texts. These postings were submitted in response to the issue of climate change and whether the government has done enough to address the issue, with the particular quote below expressing disappointment at the lack of government efforts in mitigating climate change:

My blood is boiling at the complete governmental apathy to climate change. Running a government website on climate change is not addressing the problem, it is paying lip service. With continued low levels of rainfall and drastic fluctuations in overall environmental temperatures, something needs to be done and done fast or future generations will suffering [sic]. I am ashamed and angry that with Australia’s supposed intellectual sophistication in politics, not one politician has his head screwed on right. Environmental politics here is disgusting and we need to collectively voice it to the government one post at a time. I’ve written over 50 letters to ministers and I got squat. It’s time to get this public. (Participant#7, 2010, para.17)

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of ‘Emotional Digital Activists’ is given in Table 36.

**Table 36: Concordance Words that make up the Emotional Digital Activists**

**Theme (3)**

Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Ashamed	Expression of emotional displeasure directed towards a specific societal or political problem in an effort to justify why a resolution should be sought.

The quote below calls for more confidence in the government's approach to handling the issue of climate change:

When youth homelessness is at an all-time high and unemployment rates soaring, it is only logical for governments to focus on the present rather than stipulate and hypothesise on how our climate is changing. Climate change is important but I think we should show some confidence and support in Rudd and his team. They know what is important and we need to be calm and trust them to do their job. I think it takes loads of courage to prioritise policy with limited resources. So I call for my fellow friends to stand behind our leaders as we elected them for a reason. Let us rally some genuine support for the men in suits. (Participant#8, 2010, para.17)

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of 'Emotional Digital Activists' is given in Table 37.

**Table 37: Concordance Words that make up the Emotional Digital Activists**

**Theme (4)**

Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Calm	An appeal for composure in relation to a specific public cause.
Confidence	The belief in the capacity of government members to act in the best interests of its citizens.
Courage	The mettle required by government members to make critical decisions.

The first post reflects a heated response to the lack of government activity in addressing climate change. The AYF is conceptualised as a space to publicise private feelings of frustration in relation to a problem, a tactic that is viewed by the poster as a better approach to raising awareness on the issue and possibly getting a response from the government. The second post in response to climate change assumes a

completely different stance as it calls for greater trust in and support for the government decision not to prioritise climate change as a key issue. It attempts to rally public support for the government's passive stance on climate change. The postings under the 'Emotional Digital Activists' theme point towards a certain complexity in how different sets of emotions aimed at very different political and social aspirations exist side-by-side, resisting any single simplified logic of how young people use online media as a tool for activism. The same public issue can provoke polarised emotions. Further to this, the forum serves as a key digital space for young people to politicise their private emotions for a larger public cause.

Kuntsman's (2012) idea of 'affective fabrics' provides a key context to conceptualise the political and social significance of emotions in online forums. In each of the quotes above, the meaning and purpose behind the online forum is realised and learnt through the expression of a deeply felt set of personal emotions in connection to specific ways of thinking about society and enacting political and social change—the central core of Kuntsman's notion of 'affective fabrics'. Kuntsman has argued that online forum postings can be 'affectively charged' (Kuntsman, 2012, p.5), and studying them provides us with the opportunity to explore emotions as the site of contact between the individual and the social world. However, the emotionality of these postings, as Kuntsman argues (2012), lies in their capacity to explicitly name different emotions as the naming of an emotion can create communities of feeling: groups of people who feel a similar way in response to a particular issue. The online forum for Kuntsman (2012) serves as a space that anchors these emotions in relation to specific public issues. In all the posts analysed for this theme, there was a common impulse among posters to explicitly name their emotional state in an effort to first personalise the public issue at hand and second rally common public support for action towards a solution.

In a similar vein to Williams's (1977) work on 'structures of feeling' as a way to explain commonly felt social experiences during specific historical moments of upheaval and challenge, Kuntsman's (2012) concept of 'affective fabrics' explores how specific public issues in our world can produce distinct patterned emotions that are expressed and legitimised online as key social and political forces. Kuntsman (2012) points out that in every online setting, there can be several different 'affective

fabrics’—sets of feelings—that are expressed simultaneously in relation to a particular public issue but remain distinct in their social and political aims. This was definitely the case with the AYF as posters expressed different emotions regarding the same issue.

Kuntsman (2012) also emphasises that the idea of affective fabrics is not only about the representation of emotion in online media but also captures the movement of emotion through digital environments—specifically through the sharing of emotionally charged online narratives and digital multimedia between different people and websites and the broader political consequences these mobilities have in online and offline spaces outside of where they originated. However, the AYF seemed to purely function as a space for showcasing these emotions and their perceived political and social importance, as opposed to enabling actual movement—networking and interaction between different groups of people who share similar sentiments. This is because, as mentioned earlier, youth posters on the AYF did not explicitly reply to or reference the postings of their peers. Expressing emotions online in support of a specific issue was very much a self-driven and individualised effort aimed at furthering and supporting a particular public cause.

The ‘Emotional Digital Activists’ theme underlines the broader idea that emotions have an important role to play in determining how online media is used as a political and social tool to further particular goals. The mediatisation of youth engagement led people towards personalising specific public issues through discourses of emotion. Young people, however, felt differently about each topic, leading to different conclusions about what the underlying problem area was in the first place. For example, the government’s reluctance to act on climate change issues was perceived as an inexcusable form of apathy by some, but as a sign of clever prioritising of what is important by others. The question of whether online media are successfully making a difference to youth engagement is one that remains difficult to answer because there were different conceptions of what the problems are and how to solve them. Based on this, it is difficult to establish a centralised barometer for assessing the success or failure of online political communication projects because there is no consensus concerning what problems these initiatives are actually supposed to be solving.

### **6.4.3 The Social Insiders of Youth-at-Risk—Using Online Media to tell ‘Truths’ about Youth, Risky Practices and Consequences**

The ‘Social Insiders of Youth-at-Risk’ is a label used to describe posters who are particularly interested in discussing real-world instances of public behaviour that was believed to have strayed from the norm of what is socially acceptable. There were 212 references to this theme. These posters are heavily invested in providing online accounts of real-world instances of youth risky behaviour, such as binge drinking and school bullying. However, their main motivation for posting these observations was to relate a form of cultural competence—an insider understanding of the reality behind why young people behave the way they do—knowledge that may be lost on government officials who do not live within these cultures. They were also motivated to express reservations over whether government-initiated youth-at-risk narratives and representations actually capture what really goes on in everyday youth culture. The underlying point conveyed by this theme is that when online media are used to address culturally specific problems characterised by specific sets of values and behaviours within a particular place and time, it becomes almost impossible to understand the significance of youth online engagement outside these cultural contexts. It is difficult to define what problems online political communication should solve or what successful online political communication means in instances where the significance of online media and the problems young people hope online media would address are understood in very specific cultural terms and through very particular everyday experiences.

Although the term ‘youth-at-risk’ was not explicitly defined in any of the posts analysed, there was a general understanding that the concept of ‘risky youth’ or those who transgressed or operated on the margins of particular laws were difficult to define and assess through government knowledge practices such as the official procedures, research and policy measures that go into identifying what constitutes risky youth behaviours. Below is an extract in response to the topic of *Contributing to Democracy*. This quote was selected because it has the highest number of concordance words for this theme, making it the strongest representation:

People often have quite a few drinks around the main High Street pub at the corner of the crossing informally known as the water-hole thanks to all the boozed up youth but ... it adds a bit of flavour to an otherwise mundane life of government rules and straight-laced authorities telling you what's wrong with young people ... I mean go to the High Street Pub and then you'll know what I mean. Finger wagging is annoying. What is the fun in thinking all about consequences before drinking? It saps the energy out of the activity. You guys just don't get it. Binge drinking programmes and help groups all point to the importance of thinking about consequences first. They will never capture the pointless and simple reasons of why we drink in the first place. For me, I drink because I want to get away from thinking about consequences. (Participant#9, 2009, para.2)

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of the 'Social Insiders of Youth-at-Risk' is provided in Table 38.

The above post exemplifies a case where the validity of youth-at-risk narratives in representing and regulating everyday youth behaviours is critically examined. It is argued that the nature, meaning and consequences of various youth behaviours, dispositions and practices that young people engage in are different to the knowledge and narratives produced by government about the cultural drivers of what is risky and harmful to young people. There is also the suggestion that government policy and strategies aimed at addressing youth risky behaviour tend to construct risky practices in ways that suggest that young people ought to have developed a risk-aware, prudent and responsible outlook and consider future consequences of their actions. The poster asserts that this approach is not in synch with why young people drink in the first place—to liberate themselves from standards, rules and expectations. The AYF served as a space for these posters to account for the vague, non-specific, slippery, emotional and ephemeral realities and cultural motivators of youth risky behaviour that may not necessarily be fully addressed in government policy narratives.

**Table 38: Concordance Words that make up the Social Insiders of Youth-at-Risk**

<b>Theme</b>	
Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Rules	In reference to explicitly referring to government regulations that are meant to govern youth behaviour.
Authorities	In reference to law enforcers including government officials and the police.
Wrong	In reference to the government's perceived faults of young people.
Programmes	In reference to rehabilitation initiatives that are organised by the government for youth.
Straight-laced	Refers to the rigidity of government regulation when it comes to governing youth.
Consequences	Refers to government emphasis/significance placed on the need for young people to think about the implications of their behaviour before acting.

The second strongest representative quote under this theme that came up during the concordance analysis shared a similar sentiment to the previous extract by arguing that there is more to youth risky behaviour than what is suggested through government youth programmes and policy. The AYF was once again used to reveal the 'deeper and messier cultural and social meaning' behind youth risky behaviours and practices:

I have friends who occasionally dabble with drugs but they are still really nice people. The thing is, doing drugs is for the most part never only about substance abuse or addiction, it is the parties, music, road trips, dancing, the social companionship that come with identifying as a young person. I am not saying doing drugs is right but it certainly is not as simplistic or neat as what government authorities have been saying in their booklets and rehabilitation schemes about youth gullibility and addiction problems. The drug problem amongst young people is real but it cannot be generalised within a blanket category of youth deviance. (Participant#10, 2009, para.2)

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of the 'Social Insiders of Youth-at-Risk' is provided in Table 39.

**Table 39: Concordance Words that make up the Social Insiders of Youth-at-Risk Theme (2)**

Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Addiction	In reference to how the government represents youth drug addiction in their policy and rehabilitation schemes.
Abuse	In reference to how the government represents youth drug abuse in their policy and rehabilitation schemes.
Schemes/ Rehabilitation	In reference to initiatives that are organised by the government for youth that are believed to be indulging in risky behaviour.

The above quote asserts that risk and danger, what these might mean, the possibilities they provoke and the limits they transgress are not always generalisable. This is because these practices are situated in very particular configurations of social experiences that contribute to the construction of *youth identity*, a process that cannot be entirely captured in standardised and rule-bound knowledge practices of government regulation and policy. In this sense, online media play a pivotal role in conveying, to the government in this case, the more abstract and less obvious facets of how risky youth behaviour contributes towards young people’s sense of identification with their place in society.

The ‘Social Insiders of Youth-at-Risk’ represent a group of posters who used online media to explain certain ‘hidden truths’ of youth risky behaviour, aspects of social reality that are not always addressed in structured government discourses on youth and risk. These ‘truths’ refer to the complex social significance that risky behaviour and practices have for young people living in the everyday world both as an outlet to escape the constraints of authority and as part of identity construction. The AYF forum was used by young people to foreground the vague, imprecise and indistinct social and cultural significance of youth and risky behaviour through their own personal encounters and observations. These accounts are special in their own right because they represent aspects of youth everyday culture that remain outside the scope of institutionalisation and government classification. The AYF forum allowed the ‘Social Insiders of Youth-at-Risk’ to speak about their experiences with youth risky behaviour from a level of intimacy not afforded to them through other official channels of government communication. The broader implication is that questions of

what problems online government forums are supposed to address are difficult to answer because the challenges and problems defined by young people are often embedded within particular cultural understandings of reality and very specific social experiences.

### **6.5 Cluster Analysis—how do Less Frequently Referenced Themes Influence Youth Discussion Online and what is Their Relationship with Dominant Themes?**

Although the frequency analysis yielded a relatively small number of references for the ‘Diarists’, ‘Public Policy Lobbyists’ and ‘Flag Bearers of National Identity’, these themes were important in terms of how they sometimes supported and paired up with more frequently referenced themes in the web postings. This section explains how a cluster analysis of all the themes—which involves identifying the popular combinations of themes as they appear in web posts—provides a greater insight into the interconnected relationship between different thickened social realities. The themes in this chapter have thus far been analysed separately to capture the unique social experiences faced by young people in negotiating with a dominant yet ambiguous set of government practices and media-related protocols. However, experiences, practices and articulations of social reality through media engagement are often complex and resist any clear-cut ‘either/or’ exclusivity in the real world (Hepp, 2013). This means that there is the real possibility of themes overlapping in the web postings analysed.

Hepp (2013) clearly emphasises that the process of cultural thickening—the typical styles of thought, discourse and practices that are learnt as part of a broader process of learning to belong—do not occur in isolation. Various different cultural thickenings often come into play together in the formation of an individual’s experience with media. The basic point here is that media experiences and cultures are ‘fuzzy’ by nature (Hepp, 2013, p.73): although they may have defining characteristics they lack clearly differentiated boundaries. In other words, there is a sense of artificiality in assuming that social experiences with media are ‘walled off’ from each other or happen in isolation. This section of the chapter acknowledges that there is no

reason to assume that individual youth posters in the AYF only experienced the reality of online engagement in fixed and isolated ways. An individual’s engagement with media may consist of different combinations of themes. The concept of cluster analysis allows us to understand the relationship, if it exists, between various themes.

Using Dey’s (1999) approach to cluster analysis as a framework, a two-step cluster analysis was conducted using SPSS to identify the different combinations of themes and the number of times each of these combinations appeared in the web posts. A two-step cluster analysis looks at the interrelationship between individual themes as they occur in the data and compiles the most common combinations of these themes as they appear. This method was used by Kaye and Johnson (2011) in their research on online discussions where they explored how people who were active participants in political debate judged different types of blogs as credible. They discovered that people who found blogs to be highly credible sources of alternative information—that is, information that was not available in mainstream media—also found blogs specifically on the war in Iraq to be particularly legitimate and valuable for their information needs. The themes, ‘blogs credible as alternative sources of information’ and ‘blogs credible because they addressed war’ were the most common pairings in their analysis. In a similar vein, a cluster analysis on the data set for the current research produced some interesting combinations.

**Table 40: Cluster Analysis Findings**

Cluster 1 (29.1%)	Cluster 2 (27.7%)
Foot Soldiers = ‘Yes’	Foot Soldiers = ‘No’
Social Informants = ‘No’	Social Informants = ‘Yes’
Flag Bearers of National Identity = ‘No’	Flag Bearers of National Identity = ‘Yes’
Policy Lobbyists = ‘No’	Policy Lobbyists = ‘Yes’
Diarists = ‘Yes’	Diarists = ‘Yes’
Emotional Digital Activists = ‘No’	Emotional Digital Activists = ‘Yes’

The two most common clusters of themes are shown in Table 40. In Cluster 1, it is apparent that in some cases (29.1% of all postings) posters who were ‘Foot Soldiers’ were also active ‘Diarists’. ‘Diarists’ was a theme developed during data coding to specifically classify posters who used the AYF forum as a space to archive

and express personal life experiences in relation to particular topics. The ‘Diarists’ did not feature much independently in the postings as shown previously by the frequency analysis (N =155). However, there was a clear appeal for ‘Foot Soldiers’ to sometimes become ‘Diarists’ themselves in recording and expressing personal details of their lives. A reading of all the postings that featured both ‘Foot Soldiers’ and ‘Diarists’ themes revealed that posters often alternated between the two identities in a single post. The following post was selected to represent this cluster because it contains the greatest variety of concordance words from both the ‘Foot Soldiers’ and ‘Diarists’ themes out of all the other posts in the cluster:

My issue is to do with the lack of government support in showing us how to talk about financial difficulties. I’m 17 and I live at home with my mother and 2 brothers. My mother is currently on the carers’ pension as one of my brothers is severely Autistic and requires full time care, and as such she cannot work. I am currently a university student, I work casual hours and assist my mother with caring duties, as she is single and can’t care for two young kids alone. This is my story. Where do we go from here to make stuff we say here useful to you for governing? Also is it necessary for us to put actual figures of our budget in here so you know the seriousness of our situation? What’s the format? Any guidance is appreciated. (Participant#11, 2010, para.9)

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of ‘Diarists’ is given in Table 41.

**Table 41: Words that make up the Diarists Component in Postings that Contain the Diarists and Foot Soldiers Themes**

Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Issue/Difficulties	Used in reference to a personal problem or circumstance that is debilitating in some way.
Care	Used exclusively to refer to how the poster or a member of their family requires full-time healthcare.
Duties	Used to refer to particular important family commitments that have become a priority due to a personal family problem.
Story	Used in reference to a narrative or anecdote from an individual’s life experience.

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of the ‘Foot Soldiers’ is given in Table 42.

**Table 42: Words that make up the Foot Soldiers Component in Postings that Contain the Diarists and Foot Soldiers Themes**

Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Useful	An appeal for guidance on how to make postings purposeful for governance and policy.

For the above poster, the personal narrative underlines their appeal for greater government support in showing how young people can communicate their experiences in ways that are relevant to institutional practice. In other words, the personal narrative, one’s subjective experience of a particular issue, is meant to serve as a framework for the government to come up with a more structured plan for telling young people how they should construct their voices to best inform policy formulation and governance. One could even say that these narrative accounts were used to address the challenge faced by young people in translating ‘everyday speak’ into ‘political speak’, contributions that have the influence to shape public policy. A contextual reading of all posts featuring the ‘Diarists’ theme showed that all the personal narratives told online were specifically concerned with *individual* experiences and memories rather than memories from shared or community-based events, circumstances or experiences in which other posters or public groups might have an investment. There was a clear emphasis on the representation of the unique self in these narratives. The following extract represents the second strongest representation of Cluster 1 based on the number of different concordance words that were present under both themes. The post details the brief experiences of a former drug addict in confronting social stigma:

Speaking as a former addict, I can personally say that social stigma is one of the reasons we refuse help. Despite all the measures put in place to reduce this, when I walk into a room of normal people who know my history, I can feel the overall unease and some people blatantly step back! Don’t get me wrong, they’re nice people but it has become difficult for people to behave normally around an ex addict. Maybe we could have a section on here for ex-addicts to talk with normal people. This section could possibly have 3 parts—one section as a profile and background of the person, another for our personal experiences and the final one for government input on how we can communicate those experiences effectively for the benefit of planning government initiatives etc. (Participant#12, 2010, para.10)

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of ‘Diarists’ is provided in Table 43.

**Table 43: Words that make up the Diarists Component in Postings that Contain the Diarists and Foot Soldiers Themes (2)**

Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Experiences/Personally	Used in reference to a narrative or anecdote from an individual’s life experience.
Stigma	Used to refer to a personal feeling of being publicly discriminated against.

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of the ‘Foot Soldiers’ is provided in Table 44.

**Table 44: Words that make up the Foot Soldiers Component in Postings that Contain the Diarists and Foot Soldiers Themes (2)**

Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Section	Used to refer to the format/structure of online posts.
Planning/Initiatives	Used as part of a broader question on how online posts can influence formal government programmes in purposeful ways.

The above post conveys the challenging experiences of assimilating into society as a former drug addict, and the poster subsequently draws on that experience to propose a dedicated section for ex-addicts to speak with non-addicts. Particular attention is paid to how the proposed online section should be structured and what kind of government guidance is required. The anecdote of the poster’s experience with social stigma served as an important driving force behind their proposal for a new section on the AYF and their request for government guidance in ensuring that the section in question is useful for the process of governance.

Overall, Cluster 1 showed how young people drew on their personal experiences to justify and legitimise their request for greater guidance in how media-related

political and social change should take root. There was a belief among posters within this cluster that everyday life experiences provide important markers for how online political discussion should be structured and formatted and made more relatable. For this to be possible, youth posters strategically alternated between being ‘Diarists’ and ‘Foot Soldiers’ in an effort to advocate for a clearer and more defined logic to how the AYF should work as a youth political communication platform.

Cluster 2 represents posters that were extremely versatile in adopting all character profiles, with the exception of ‘Foot Soldiers’. This group of posters was represented in 27.7% of all postings, the second most common combination of themes. They did not seem to require institutional guidance on how to construct their voices online. Posts that fell into this category gave considerable significance to the importance of public policy in shaping the lives of young people. There was a clear emphasis on effective policy formulation to manage the lives of young people among other factors that were not traditionally related to formal politics. Together with an interest in policy, these posters also placed an importance on upholding and preserving their national identity as young Australians. The post below, a response to the topic on *Human Rights*, was chosen to represent a post from Cluster 2 because it was the strongest example of how multiple themes combined in a single post: it featured the highest number of concordance words of each theme thus proving that each of the five themes was strongly represented:

I was attending a youth workshop and was personally appalled at how many people thought that the non-legalization of gay marriage was not a big deal. Shocking experience in a country like ours! Well, it is a BIG deal. Imagine not being able to love freely and start a family freely. These are basic human rights. I’ve seen gay communities especially in the city and I don’t get how these people are risky youth or a danger to society values. They just want to be human. There are multiple considerations to be made when considering changes in the Human Rights Acts and Policies and these include Gay rights and Same Sex couplings ... C’mon let the world know that Australians are world changers. (Participant#13, 2009, para.5)

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of the ‘Diarists’ is provided in Table 45.

**Table 45: Words that make up the Diarists Component in Postings that contain all but the Foot Soldiers Theme**

Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Attending	Used as a precursor to reveal a personal narrative experience.

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of the Flag Bearers of National Identity is provided in Table 46.

**Table 46: Words that make up the Flag Bearers of National Identity Component in Postings that contain all but the Foot Soldiers Theme**

Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Australian	Used in reference to the Australian identity/what it means to be Australian.

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of the ‘Social Insiders of Youth-at-Risk’ is provided in Table 47.

**Table 47: Words that make up the Social Insiders of Youth-at-Risk Component in Postings that contain all but the Foot Soldiers Theme**

Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Risky/Danger	Used to refer to socially perceived conceptions of youth behaviour deemed to transgress regulations/laws.
Values	Used in reference to what societal norms and principles are with regard to a specific youth lifestyle/attitude/behaviour.

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of the Policy Lobbyists is provided in Table 48.

**Table 48: Words that make up the Policy Lobbyists Component in Postings that contain all but the Foot Soldiers Theme**

Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Policy/Acts	Used in reference to a specific policy/referendum/act in Australia.

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to the theme of the ‘Emotional Digital Activists’ is provided in Table 49.

**Table 49: Words that make up the Emotional Digital Activists Component in Postings that contain all but the Foot Soldiers Theme**

Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Shocking/Appalled	Expression of displeasure directed towards a specific societal or political problem in an effort to justify why a resolution should be sought.
Rights	Used in reference to a particular public movement/cause.

The above post illustrates an intricate interweaving of different themes ranging from personal narrative accounts to policy lobbying to providing social insider knowledge of risky youth. The poster uses the AYF as a platform to address, albeit fleetingly, different dimensions of a particular social issue. The AYF, as an online forum, allows young people to address issues from a variety of angles; for example, as an emotional activist to promote the issue of gay rights, as a policy lobbyist to get human rights issues addressed and as a culturally competent young person who has inside knowledge about the lifestyles of young gay people in Australia. However, the post does not appeal for institutional support in how to discuss a particular issue, like the ‘Foot Soldiers’; there is a certain level of confidence, independence and familiarity with the AYF as a tool for communicating with the government—a clear exception in the overall findings. There was minimal consideration of how a post should be formatted.

Cluster 2 showed that youth experiences with the AYF did not always originate from a questioning of its practices, norms and rules in structuring communication, as

was the case with the ‘Foot Soldiers’. Rather, certain young people seemed to work upon an assumed and unspoken logic when discussing issues relating to government policy, risky youth behaviour, social activism and national identity with the government. In these cases, questions of communicative form—what issues should be discussed in the AYF and how they should be formatted—were left unaddressed. Although there were no universally agreed practices and norms about how online discussions should occur among these posters, there was an implicit understanding and belief concerning how online political communication should work. It is this sense of assured confidence in knowing the structure and inner workings of online political communication that differentiated Cluster 2 from the rest of the findings.

The two clusters above attest to the fact that youth online participatory experiences are made up of an assemblage of cultural thickenings—different learnt ways of using online media to manage social reality. Online participatory cultures, as Hepp (2013) argues, consist of various cultural thickenings that provide the online engagement experience with meaning and significance. An individual may use an online government forum to address a variety of problems, each requiring different solutions and outcomes. As a result, it is difficult to easily conceptualise how online political communication projects should work and what they should achieve.

## **6.6 Concluding Remarks—the Varying Interpretations of Online Media’s Purpose and Aims**

Youth experiences of participating in the AYF, as the findings showed, were not solely a story about young people using online media to get their voices heard by politicians. There was an underlying motive to assemble, mobilise and identify particular possibilities for social and political media-related change while negotiating dominant government protocols and regulations surrounding the operation of the AYF. Each theme discussed in this chapter featured a particular vision of how and why online media matter to young people in the context of specific social, cultural and political realities ranging from issues relating to online governance to eyewitness accounts of youth risky behaviour in public spaces. Underlying this observation is the understanding that the moulding influence of online media on social and public life is made up of different patterns of thought and articulations of social reality and experiences that are learnt and concretised through people’s practices with media and the negotiated relationships they form with policy regulations, government authority, expectations and specific cultural circumstances (Hepp, 2013). The original core government intention of directly connecting with young people was ‘thickened’ (Hepp, 2013) in different ways within the context of the local realities and challenges young people faced. Youth used online media to manage multiple problems that demanded a diverse range of solutions and aspired towards different political and social outcomes.

Anticipating what youth want from an online political communication forum will always prove to be a difficult task. Although online government political communication platforms are centralised projects equipped with common objectives and protocols, the meaning and significance of participating in these initiatives may be articulated through very specific cultural terms leading to a series of different conclusions about the purpose of online communication. The question of whether governments are in synch with the online practices of young people is one that is potentially difficult to answer in the affirmative as online media’s moulding influence on young people’s engagement experience draws on varying ideas of what works and what does not.

The following chapter examines how youth policymakers in the youth political communication sector in Australia face the challenge of, not only catering to this diverse mix of youth interpretations of media-related social change, but also conforming to government-wide standardised online policy strategies that impose restrictions and guidelines that determine what online policy should be about and how online public projects should be run.

# **Chapter 7: The Tricky Business of Managing Policy and Public Interest—an Exploration of Youth Policy Formulation in the Digital Age**

## **7.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter, the analysis of web postings showed that youth engagement with the AYF had a lot to do with mapping out different problems and potential solutions in relation to political communication. The conflicting interests and indeterminacies concerning how online media should serve as a problem-solving technology for political communication were shown through youth practices. Building on this complexity, this chapter examines the challenges faced by governments in regulating, through policy, the diverse mediated social relationships young people form with online media. Specifically, it looks at the challenges faced by online policymakers in addressing the varying ways young people relate to online media and the consequences this may have for how the government addresses young people's public interests. Using Lunt and Livingstone's (2012) concept of the 'implied audience'—the assumed interests of audiences mobilised in policy discourses—this chapter argues that recent government efforts to standardise online policy for all government departments has drastically constrained the potential for policymakers to represent and address youth interests, providing an implied audience that is framed as consumers of communication services rather than active contributors to deliberation on public policy.

This foray into policy is important because the capacity for governments to act in the interest of youth and their ability to deliver on specific ambitions for technological change, are ultimately regulated through policy. The emphasis placed by policy discourses on political communication and its framing of citizen interests have an important practical influence on how governments implement online technological solutions in reality. With this in mind, an empirical study of online policy and its relevance to political communication practice is crucial towards

painting a real-world picture of the constraints government officials face when implementing particular youth projects like the AYF. While there is an expectation for governments to use technology to engage youth, the manner and extent to which technology can be used to foster youth discussion is very much dependent on the priorities foregrounded in national policy discourses.

This chapter begins by chronologically mapping out landmark events in Australian online media policy leading to the eventual establishment in 2012 of the *Australian Public Service Information and Communications Technology Strategy*. The strategy represents the formalisation of nationwide policy expectations and standards with regard to online political communication in Australia. Through a concordance analysis of key relevant policy documents it is argued that online policymakers, in their quest to conform to the nationwide streamlining of online policy standards, have been compelled to promote a simplistic representation of the role of media audiences and political communication, choosing only to address issues of efficiency in the delivery of communication services to the public. In fairness, however, this philosophy does not entirely underlie what online policymaking is about in Australia. As the historical discussion of online policy in Australia and the subsequent empirical analysis will show, online policymakers were, in the early stages of Australian online policy development, intent on prioritising various ways of actively collaborating with citizens on how online policy should be formulated. However, this deliberative approach was cast aside after apparent struggles to remain sensitive to the different ways audiences related to online media while working under a centralised online policy system.

This chapter is sympathetic to the two-fold challenge faced by online policymakers in firstly, managing the uncertainty and diversity of how audiences relate to online media and, secondly, responding to the wider pressures of mediatisation, most recently evidenced by the decision for all government departments to operate under a centralised and fixed set of online policy regulations. Although the introduction of media technology to youth political communication inevitably creates new policy concerns for how citizen participation should be managed, national changes in government-wide online policy practices play a key role in determining the boundaries within which youth policymakers are allowed to act—

in the process shaping the consequences of mediatisation for youth online policymaking.

## **7.2 Online Policy in Australia and the Changing Conception of Audiences**

This section will provide an insight into the history of online policy formulation in Australia as a means of explaining how the representation of ‘audiences’, and conceptions of what their public interests are, remain at the heart of national policy debates and decisions. The framing of audiences in policy narratives is important because it carries certain implications about how governments understand their public role in online political communication and more broadly what online political communication means to them. As will be stated later in this section, these were issues that were continually contested and reconfigured through the development of various online communication policy strategies over the years in Australia.

There is also a key scholarly precedent for this line of questioning. The issue of audience representation in communication policy narratives has recently been a central discussion topic in media scholarship through Lunt and Livingstone’s (2012) recent work on media regulation policies in the UK, where an analysis was conducted of the regulatory practices of OfCom—the central governing body on British information policy. Livingstone and Lunt (2012) are prominent media and audience researchers who have collectively contributed towards much scholarly discussion over the years on the changing regimes of media regulation in the UK and its effect on the representation of audiences. Their latest research on OfCom reveals that there remains a persistent reluctance among policymakers to clearly define audience public interests, concerns, social roles and rights in policy narratives as these cultural- and citizen-motivated issues remain complex to define and analyse given limited governmental resources. In other words, audiences get represented in policy in ways that facilitate regulatory processes.<sup>14</sup> Lunt and Livingstone (2012) have articulated the inevitable framing of media audiences in policy discourse as the ‘implied audience’

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<sup>14</sup> In Lunt and Livingstone’s (2012) research into OfCom, they discovered that consumer interests, the provision of services—economic imperatives to the public, received greater attention than citizen interests.

(Lunt & Livingstone, 2012), a term derived from their research on British communication policy.

The ‘implied audience’ is used to refer to the assumed roles, objectives and interests of audiences that get mobilised in policy discourses about how people ordinarily relate to media and communications (Lunt & Livingstone, 2012). It represents a vital component of efforts to reduce state regulation and increase industry self-regulation through the promotion of standardised codes of conduct, protocols and technical solutions for the user. Lunt and Livingstone (2012) have argued that there remains little discussion in government, media and policy scholarship about the actual costs for citizens who are made to undergo this policy regime shift in terms of whether their interests and goals are acknowledged and what the wider social consequences might be. The ‘implied audience’ has key implications for how citizen rights, vulnerabilities, ambitions and future intentions are addressed and/or accommodated in policy regulation.

It will be argued that the representation of audiences in each of Australia’s policy developments had key implications for how public interest was understood by the government. This section also demonstrates the complexity of the background and legacy inherited by the current online policy framework (the *Australian Public Service Information and Communications Technology Strategy*). The administrative set-up surrounding the formulation and implementation of Australian online policy will first be addressed to set the relevant context. Following this, key landmark developments in online policy will be discussed in the lead up to the current online policy framework that regulates online practices across all government platforms.

The Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO), until 2014, was directly responsible for supervising the formulation and implementation of Australian online policy. The AGIMO was a fully government-funded organisation housed under the Department of Finance and Regulation (DFR) and coordinated the application of information and communications technology (ICT) to government administration services and political communication platforms, both at state and federal level (AGIMO, 2013). However, the Liberal government in May 2014 dissolved the AGIMO. A new department, the office of Digital Government Strategy,

has absorbed its responsibilities and will continue to operate within the same professional capacity. It is headed by Rosemary Deiniger, whose formal appointment is First Assistant Secretary in the Commonwealth Department of Finance. Since the introduction of the new department, no new policies have been formally introduced and the current Liberal government continues to make use of previous policy frameworks that have been established by past governments.<sup>15</sup>

The main role of the office of Digital Government Strategy, like the AGIMO, involves developing ICT policies to meet emerging trends in public digital media usage patterns across various social and cultural. This is extended towards developing online government websites that allow easy citizen access to a range of e-government services and political communication forums. The long-term goal of the office of Digital Government Strategy is to have all government websites operate from a shared system to facilitate the sharing of citizen data and user-generated information across different government departments. The office of Digital Government Strategy has also stated that with this centralisation, a proposal has been put in place for a standardised set of online policy regulations that would apply across all government departments that have an online presence.

Although the office of Digital Government Strategy has yet to make any formal changes to current online policy, its previous incarnation, the AGIMO, was responsible for formulating Australia's current online policy infrastructure. The now defunct AGIMO had two central sub-branches—the Governance and Policy Branch and the ICT Skills, Capability and Investment Branch. The Governance and Policy Branch catered more to technologically oriented issues with a priority on making sure that all government websites abide by the basic online standards of user accessibility and are well connected with each other. The ICT Skills, Capability and Investment Branch was purely dedicated to overseeing the budget allocation for online communication across different government departments. Funding proposals for new online political communication platforms were required to pass through this branch first to ensure that the proposed projects were financially feasible. The *Australian Public Service Information and Communications Technology Strategy*, Australia's

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<sup>15</sup> The Liberal party did propose several changes to existing online policy frameworks during the election in 2013, but none of these suggestions has been formally adopted since it assumed power.

current policy framework, was produced through extensive collaborations between both branches (AGIMO, 2012). The current office of Digital Government Strategy, unlike the AGIMO, continues to operate as a single unit without any sub-branches. It is important to note, however, that the formative period of Australia's online policy began in 2002, long before the establishment of the AGIMO and the office of Digital Government Strategy, during which a rich series of policy developments served as motivation and justification for Australia's current policy infrastructure.

A chronological summary of key youth policy developments and their respective significance for youth political communication is given in Table 50, and a detailed discussion of each development follows here.

In 2002, the Howard government launched an internal government initiative known as the *Better Practice Checklist* (AGIMO, 2013). The programme, which continues to run today, is intended to help executives, business managers and web managers in various government departments to quickly improve their understanding of a range of issues associated with the provision of services online. There was a presiding sentiment in government at the time that public officials needed to upgrade their skills if they were to adapt to the increasing digitisation of political communication and web-based government services. The main strategy was to educate workers on the nature of online engagement through websites and the expectations that public users may have when using these services. The *Better Practice Checklist* is an online initiative that regularly features important knowledge-based articles on different aspects of online communication practices and their relevance to particular developments in the government's adoption of technology. The majority of articles posted are technical in nature and cover issues relating to the programming and operational aspect of hosting an online communication platform. They are primarily devoted to internal and technically specific government practices such as designing and managing intranets, updating online content using content management systems, implementing website search facilities and archiving web resources.

In conjunction with the *Better Practice Checklist*, the Howard government made an official commitment to include young people in the policy deliberation process

especially in relation to youth political participation. This promise was made through the publication of an official report, *Respect: The Government's Vision for Young People* (Government of Victoria, 2002), a national initiative led by the Victorian government in consultation with federal government leaders from other parts of Australia. The Minister for Youth Affairs at the time, Monica Gould, facilitated the consultation process with state governments during the formulation of the report. The report spoke of the government's intention to include young people in deliberations about youth political participation, and more specifically on what everyday issues concerned them that deserved parliamentary discussion

**Table 50: Chronological Summary of Key Youth Policy Developments**

Year	Key event(s)	Presiding influential government(s)	Significance
2002	The launch of the <i>Better Practice Checklist</i>	John Howard (Liberal)	The programme was aimed at upgrading the skills of public servants to adapt to the increasing digitisation of political communication and government services. It consisted of a database of topical knowledge-based articles explaining how technology was used for specific government services.
2002	Publication of a report entitled <i>Respect: The Government's Vision for Young People</i> .	John Howard (Liberal)	The report looked at strategies to include young people within the policy consultation process.
2004	Concept of <i>Online Policy Consultation</i> officially added as a <i>Better Practice Checklist</i> topic/article for discussion.	John Howard (Liberal)	For the first time in policy history, young people were placed at the forefront of policy consultation processes. Key practical questions were being asked about how youth could be involved in the formulation of national policy decisions.
2010	Publication of <i>Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for Reform of Australian Government Administration</i> .	Kevin Rudd (Labor)	<p>The Rudd government publicly admits that it is administratively challenging to come up with policies to cater to the different ways citizens use and understand government services.</p> <p>The publication proposed strategies for streamlining and simplifying government policy and services under a central portal so that audiences only have to interact with one main interface to communicate with the government.</p>
2012	Publication of the <i>Australian Public Service Information and Communications Technology Strategy</i> .	Julia Gillard (Labor)	This publication built upon previous proposals established in the blueprint for reform in 2010. Its main objective was to focus on the efficient delivery of online government services to Australians. Minimal emphasis was placed on the consultative aspect of policy formulation.

and the communication channel preferred by young people to connect with ministerial officials (Bessant, 2004). The document explicitly argues for providing a strong voice for young people in online and offline government policy and programme development by consistently encouraging and engaging their input (Government of Victoria, 2002). In the context of Australian youth participation policy, this was an ambitious move forward into ‘unchartered territory’, as existing youth policy efforts (especially with regard to youth online participation in the *Better Practice Checklist*) tended to monolithically revolve around ways government bureaucrats should update their practices to work with new technological developments in government. For the first time in youth policy history, young people were officially placed at the centre of policy formulation. The mission statement of the report included the following:

[The government] recognises that the participation of a diverse range of young people encourages community connectedness and promotes the unique perspectives and needs of young people. The Government also declares itself committed to valuing the contribution of young people, to hearing their views and providing them with genuine opportunities for involvement. (Government of Victoria, 2002, p.6)

The visions contained in the report were, however, not immediately put into practice. After a two-year period of stagnation in youth policy development, the report’s aims and objectives were finally mobilised in 2004 when the concept of *Online Policy Consultation* (AGIMO, 2013) was formally introduced as a *Better Practice Checklist* document. This was another turning point in the development of online policy because the aforementioned article was the first government-produced piece under the checklist programme to explicitly recognise the role and purpose of audiences in the online communication process, as opposed to concentrating on internal government practices with technology (AGIMO, 2004). The article focused on the importance of government deliberation with citizens in producing policy. It subscribed to the belief that citizens who engage in policy building online will also be more likely to participate in government services than those that remain outside the consultation process altogether. There was a general agreement that internal government departments need to seriously consider how and when to invite citizens to provide their views on specific policies online. Below is a quote, the primary mission statement, from the checklist on online policy consultation:

The benefits of online policy consultation parallel those of traditional consultation. That is, they improve the transparency of government deliberative processes, increase the accessibility of policy-based and decision-making information, and may increase uptake by citizens of government programs ... Beyond the simple provision of a discussion document online, some of the online consultation methods that can be used by agencies are consultation portals or websites, email lists, online surveys and opinion polls, discussion forums on the Internet and e-submissions. (AGIMO, 2004, para.11)

The above statement makes it clear that citizen deliberation was becoming a key part of and an important turning point in online engagement, moving away from technical government-centred practices of communication—the proposed technological tools that included consultation portals and forums sent a clear message to employees of various government departments that audience input was a necessary component of online political communication. In conjunction with the emphasis placed on deliberation, the checklist also stressed the importance of government departments establishing ‘target audiences’ (AGIMO, 2004, para.17)—it was acknowledged that audiences come from diverse social and cultural backgrounds and government departments were obligated to recognise these differences when designing their respective consultation platforms for different sets of audiences. The following extract emphasises this point:

Some users may access the online consultation mechanism from home or from an access point where they will pay for the time spent on the Internet. The same goes for business participants. The impact upon stakeholders’ resources needs to be considered in the design and implementation of consultation processes. Similarly, consider the needs of people who can access the Internet only infrequently. (AGIMO 2004, para.20)

The task of online policymaking, at least in the context of the checklist programme, has moved beyond simply educating public officials on the technical intricacies and resource demands behind online interaction in a culturally oriented direction with particular attention to the varying social conditions that surround online audience engagement. The *Better Practice Checklist* programme could be viewed as the main policy initiative that was responsible for ‘writing in’ the role of and ambitions for media audiences in national online policy discourse.

It must be stated that the suggestions contained in the checklist on online policy consultation were not confined to government rhetoric but were followed through in practice. Days after the publication of the policy consultation checklist, the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Centrelink, the Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources, and the National Occupational Health and Safety Commission submitted their proposals to AGIMO with the intention of building their own respective online consultation portals to bring audiences closer to the policymaking process through active citizen deliberation. It seemed at the time that the process of policy formulation had taken a deliberative turn with greater emphasis placed on meeting the interests of the wider public and catering to the unique social and cultural circumstances of audiences. However, for the next six years, online policy remained fairly stagnant in terms of change in what was dubbed by the government a ‘building phase’ (AGIMO, 2010, para.3) as various government departments developed prototype online consultation models that were tested and subsequently refined to improve citizen–government interactivity.

At the beginning of 2010, however, AGIMO publically claimed on its official website that it had become increasingly difficult for online policymakers to implement media and communications policies for ‘the typical government user’ (AGIMO, 2010, para.6) as the experience of online engagement was found to elude any straightforward categorisation. This sentiment was in response to the results received from a series of government surveys, which revealed that audiences generally used government websites in contrasting ways with very different agendas. Young people and Aboriginal communities were the two audiences that were highlighted as interacting with online government websites in ways that were culturally and socially specific to different issues and challenges they faced in their everyday lives (AGIMO, 2010). Although details of these surveys were not presented through public channels, there was a clear enough indication that the unpredictability in how audiences related to online political communication websites and services posed a challenge for creating policies based on shared values.

Despite this problem, the AGIMO announced its goal of creating a ‘simple and fixed government online policy system’ (AGIMO, 2010, para.1) that was accessible and applicable to everyone and to all internal government departments. There was an

institutional struggle between building policy that was sensitive to the various social and cultural backgrounds of media audiences, which would understandably be a highly sophisticated and complex task, and at the same time keeping policy and the regulation of online communication consistent and straightforward as part of the government's long-term vision of streamlining the process of online policy formulation (AGIMO, 2010). This was clearly conveyed in a 2010 statement issued by AGIMO on its official website:

We have a challenge on our hands. We need to find a way to balance between having a standardised and simple policy strategy whilst recognizing the diversity of citizen interests from different backgrounds and cultural communities. We do not want a standardized policy set up that is adhoc, uncoordinated or insensitive. (AGIMO, 2010, para.8)

Paralleling this governmental dilemma, AGIMO also reported that more resources were needed to support the growing digitisation of various government departments, as workers in the public sector were often made to assume tasks that were not in their main area of expertise (AGIMO, 2010). There was a general belief that an external and independent organisation was needed to coordinate policy and resources for online communication in Australia. The general consensus in government was that Australia needed a simple and clearly defined central online policy framework that would be applicable across all government departments (AGIMO, 2010). An external organisation to spearhead this new approach was to be created.

In May 2010, the prime minister at the time, Kevin Rudd, made the decision to provide the Australian Public Service (APS) with a more central role in online policymaking with regard to online political communication (AGIMO, 2010). The APS is a professional, non-partisan service dedicated to assisting the government to provide services to citizens and meet forthcoming policy challenges. Although officially regarded as an independent organisation, it remains fully funded by the Australian government. The APS had originally played an advisory role in matters relating to online policy formulation; it was now sanctioned with the task of exercising regulatory authority on behalf of the government on all policy issues relating to online political communication.

The APS's first move was to launch on 8 May 2010 a strategy for reforming government administration in a policy titled *Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for Reform of Australian Government Administration*. The document contained proposed strategies for streamlining government policy and services under a central portal so that audiences would have to interact with only one main interface to communicate with the government. The strategy was expressed with a simple mission statement: 'to simplify Australian government communication policy and services for citizens' (DPMC, 2010, para.3). This statement begs a further question from a media research point of view with regard to the representation of audiences and their role, interests and objectives in online policy deliberation: what consequences, if any, will the simplification of government policy and its associated services have for the representation of audiences and their respective concerns, rights and interests? This is an important question to ask considering that the central motivation behind the government's decision to reshape online policy, with the appointment of the APS as the main online policy organising body, was after all related to the growing difficulty of generalising about what *audiences* do with online government websites and the complexity that comes with creating policy that is sensitive to different social and cultural contexts surrounding audience engagement with online media. The decision to simplify policy and communication services in Australia does provide legitimate grounds for enquiry into the effects this move may have on how the interests of audiences are addressed.

Similar to Lunt and Livingstone's (2011) questioning of the 'fate' of audiences in policy narratives generated by OfCom, the next section of the chapter will, through a concordance analysis, explore how audiences and their interests were represented in *Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for Reform of Australian Government Administration*. The objective of this analysis is to (1) understand how the reality of political communication was framed by the APS given their long-term aim of simplifying government services and policy and (2) explore how the roles, objectives and interests of audiences are represented as a consequence of that framed reality. It is hoped that both these elements of the inquiry will provide an insight into the 'implied audience' embedded within the policy narrative of the strategy. It was the first policy initiative established by the APS and served as the foundation for the policy framework in place

today.

### **7.3 Profiling the Implied Audience—the Roles, Objectives and Interests of Audiences within the Policy-framed Reality of the Blueprint Reform**

This section presents the results of the concordance analysis. The concordance words are those that have been grouped together because they are used in the same context to reference a particular theme. The findings collectively map out distinct instances of how audience interests and practices have been represented in online policy discourse within particular framed realities. Each theme accounts for specific sets of values and principles that have gone into policy formulation and the consequence of these elements for audience interests.

### **7.4 Theme A: Citizens as part of Administrative Mainstreaming**

Theme A, the most referenced category (N = 167), reflects the policy's central focus on streamlining administration and communication platforms within a single web interface to allow citizens to communicate with the government and access a range of services all by visiting a single webpage. Political communication was exclusively framed in administrative terms with an emphasis placed on factors that each government department needs to consider when collaborating with other departments to form a unified public user interface. The paragraph attached below sums up the rationale behind simplifying government policy and communication and it was selected because it contains a greater variety of concordance words from the theme than any other text corpus of the document:

Citizens often struggle to identify and use the various services offered by the Australian government and its providers, and businesses have to cope with an ever-increasing regulatory and reporting burden. The best public services in the world are integrating and simplifying the delivery of services, streamlining transactional services and making better use of online communication ... the Australian government needs to work closely with service providers to develop service networks that focus on communities and people ... It can be a daunting task for the public to deal with public service agencies, knowing where to start, who to telephone or write to. It would make a considerable improvement in efficiency if a

standardized approach across the APS was adopted for communicating with the public and between agencies. (DPMC, 2010, p.23)

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to Theme A is provided in Table 51.

**Table 51: Concordance Words that make up Theme A of the Implied Audience**

Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Simplifying/Streamlining/Standardised	These words were specifically used to refer to the government’s broader aim of centralising online policy across different internal departments (those that have an online presence).
Delivery/Transactional	Used to refer to the service and administrative focus of online policy that prioritises the efficient delivery of communication services to the public.

Of paramount importance in the strategy was the notion of convenience for both citizens and government officials. The APS prioritised ways to (1) make access to government services more convenient for citizens through automation and information sharing across departments, and (2) simplify policymaking by formulating a general standard set of online policy measures across government. There were no explicit insights into what type of content was to be shared between departments and how it would specifically enrich the engagement experiences of citizens, but nevertheless the underlying message was about the need for public officials of various departments to find ways to work together to reduce ‘regulatory burden’ (APS, 2010, p.33) for policymakers.

‘Regulatory burden’ here specifically refers to regulatory environments that consist of several different government websites from various government departments that work independently without any sharing of resources. It was believed that resources would be more efficiently utilised if internal government departments worked together on a centralised portal and database that would first present a unified user interface for citizens to contact government departments and

second provide a backend administrative system that would allow information sharing between departments. Political communication was thus predominantly defined in administrative terms that revolved around service centralisation.

Each government department was expected to abide by the following guidelines to reduce regulatory burden and facilitate processes of centralisation:

- (1) Re-use and share existing data where possible.
- (2) Provide more forms in an online format that can be automatically pre-filled and utilised across different government departments.
- (3) Introduce the option of common registration processes across government departments so that citizens have the convenience of a single login.

Audience interests and needs were not explicitly referred to or represented within this particular theme. The audience was collectively conceived as ‘the public’—there were no distinctive criteria for what kind of people/audiences made up a public or what constituted engaged publics.

## **7.5 Theme B: Citizens as Active Deliberative Agents**

Theme B, the second most referenced category (N = 128), provides some reason for optimism when considering the level of government attention placed on public interest and audiences. There was considerable concern that ways should be found to improve the quality of democratic participation in policy decision making. This was to enable issues of public concern to be addressed in an evidence-based way, keeping in mind broader public interests. Despite the government's ultimate aim of simplifying and coming up with standardised online policy strategies applicable across all government departments, there were plans to identify unique citizen interests and include their voices in policy deliberation. Citizens were thus, quite encouragingly, framed not simply as participants within a larger transactional service but as active socially and culturally knowledgeable members of society. The following extract, from a statement on the APS's aims for citizen consultation, reinforces this point and is selected because it contains a greater variety of concordance words from the theme than any other text corpus within the document:

An APS that captures ideas and expertise through the transformative effect of technology by citizens directly communicating their views and expertise to government through multiple channels, including Web 2.0 approaches (for example, online policy forums and blogs) ... Citizens become active and culturally knowledgeable participants involved in government, rather than being passive recipients of services and policies. (DPMC, 2010, p.38)

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to Theme B is provided in Table 52.

**Table 52: Concordance Words that make up Theme B of the Implied Audience**

Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Web 2.0/Channels/Blogs/Forums	These words were specifically used to refer to media platforms that foster public policy debate and discussion.
Views/Expertise	These words were used in the text specifically when citizens were framed as active contributors to policy debate; when their input and knowledge are regarded as vital to policy formulation.

Online technology is in this instance recognised by the APS as having the potential to open up greater avenues for citizens to connect with government and a clear differentiation is made between being an *active participant* in deliberation and a *passive recipient* of services and policies. Further, in an effort to improve citizen deliberation in policy formulation, the APS has also devoted their attention to (1) enhancing public understanding of complex social problems and (2) representing the vested interests of citizens in particularly challenging social circumstances. In order to do this, it was proposed that a survey be implemented to assess how people define online political communication and government services in their own terms. It was to be simply titled *The Survey of Citizens* and the results would be reported in individual departmental annual reports and measures taken to improve citizen satisfaction with government services.

The survey would primarily identify drivers of citizen satisfaction with government services, seek feedback on citizens' direct experience with political communication, and encourage written input on what the process means for them in their respective social circumstances and what constructive deliberation with government actually entails (DPMC, 2010). It is not clear whether this survey was ever carried out but its formulation as an idea for policy deliberation in 2010 signified an interesting development in how the government conceived citizen relationships with online media technologies.

First, there was a concerted attempt to avoid subscribing to fixed ideals or assumptions of media's role in organising online action because the consequences of online media for political participation are simply too difficult to predict with such

specificity (Chadwick, 2009; Freelon, 2010). There was a growing implicit realisation that specific ‘ideals’ of democracy or citizen deliberation can prove to be extremely demanding and limiting because these standards are often not realised in real-world political communication programmes. Though they may be useful in setting broad policy and project goals, there is a risk of losing sight of online actions that sustain an important presence in the public world of many participants but remain outside the criteria of what constitutes the ideal vision of purposeful and constructive online political engagement. There had been a concerted effort by the government to move away from unrealistic assumptions about how online media should shape political behaviour, paving the way for a renewed focus on empirical evidence rather than pure theoretical conjecture.

Second, this increased emphasis on empirical evidence through *The Survey of Citizens* moves beyond looking at media practices as fixed actions with definable outcomes, towards looking at them as actions that mobilise specific social understandings of what online political engagement means (Chadwick, 2009). Policymaking then becomes more closely aligned with issues of social form: the single practice of posting on an online forum is seen as having key wider consequences in relaying information about how young people relate to political participation. The survey was expected to systematically present the diverse social conditions that make certain media practices possible and meaningful for online participants. It is by no means a certainty that citizens will subscribe to or remain in ‘one category in perpetuity’ (Chadwick, 2009, p.19)—they are likely to define their social reality through different perspectives according to what makes the most sense to them at a particular moment in time. The task of identifying citizen communication interests through policy remains, for the most part, an open-ended process of discovery due to the absence of any pre-determined logic explaining how audiences relate to online media.

### **7.5.1 Theme C: Citizens as Key Participants in Government Accountability**

The third theme that came out of the analysis concerned the notion of government accountability. It was referenced 40 times in the text corpus. Government accountability was specifically connected to promoting transparency in communication. Institutional processes that go into the collection and analysis of citizen opinions, such as quantitative and qualitative research methods, are openly discussed with the public to foster greater trust and accountability between government bodies and citizens. This measure was put into practice with the reform of the freedom of information (FOI) laws launched by the Rudd government on 13 May 2010.

The FOI reform specifically involved strengthening citizen's rights of access to information, establishing a pro-disclosure culture across Australian government agencies through online innovation, and making government information more accessible and usable (AGIMO, 2010). Specifically, all government agencies are required to publicly release information relating to online policy planning when the information concerned does not breach national privacy or security laws and is in the direct interest of citizens. Although these latter qualifications are at best ambiguous these efforts towards an open government facilitated a more agile and flexible communicative environment. Citizen interest was exclusively framed around access and rights to publicly available knowledge and information.

In addition, government departments are required to reduce 'internal red tape' (DPMC, 2010, p.4) by making it easier for public officials in the lower tier of government to publish opinions and information received from citizen inputs without necessarily seeking prior approval from chief government executives. The aim here is to reduce the burden of compliance that officials who deal with the public face when attempting to communicate with citizens or other governmental agencies. The exact measures taken to reduce 'internal red tape' were, however, not revealed in the blueprint strategy.

In many ways, the APS's first policy strategy (*Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for Reform of Australian Government Administration*) seemed to pursue two very different conceptions of political communication and citizen interaction. On the one hand, there was pressure to simplify, automate and unite different departmental online policies under a central portal, thus ensuring convenience for both public officials and citizens. It was thought that this strategy would reduce the uncertainty and ambiguity associated with political communication as citizens would know where to go to contact government officials and the government could regulate the online practices of citizens through centralised, identifiable policy guidelines. In this sense and in this context alone, citizens were regarded as technology users who prefer straightforward ways to access government communication services.

On the other hand, there was also considerable support for celebrating the diversity of citizen opinions and inputs on policy though a systematic reliance on qualitative evidence. There were some commendable strides made towards understanding how people make sense of their engagement with online media. There seemed to be an acceptance in government that there are multiple distinct social realities behind online political communication that are dynamic and open to change and modification in particular social and political contexts.

There is a larger underlying question that remains unaddressed up to this point in the chapter: how would the Australian government standardise government policy in a 'one-size-fits' all system while addressing the diverse interests and opinions of citizens based in varying social and cultural situations that would quite clearly have different policy interests and needs? The potentially uneasy fit between enforcing standardised whole-of-government online policy measures and encouraging diverse citizen voices in policy formulation remained little explored in the APS's first policy strategy.

As explained through the concordance analysis findings, the representation of audiences and their interests was less obvious in policy narratives about centralising government policy and communication. Despite this, audience interests and the complex ways audiences understand media were clearly addressed in narratives about policy deliberation and consultation. There were no suggestions offered as to how the

process of centralising policy across government departments would enhance (or negate) active public deliberation about policy in practice.

In an effort to understand whether Australian citizen interests were actually being addressed and met in the everyday operation of public government communication websites, Macnamara (2011) prepared a government-funded report entitled *Social Media Strategy and Governance*, stemming from a research project for the Australian Centre for Public Communication. It provides a key context for understanding current approaches in Australian online policy. Macnamara's (2011) report directly preceded the eventual release on 4 October 2012 of the Australian government's most current online policy initiative, the *Australian Public Service Information and Communications Technology Strategy*.

Macnamara's study (2011) arose from the results of a structured questionnaire containing 25 closed-end questions with respondents from government, the corporate sector, PR consultancies and NGOs both in Australia and Asia. It uncovers the type of governance put in place by both public and corporate organisations to regulate the use of social media.<sup>16</sup> The findings were divided into two broad categories, differentiating between organisations that are 'doing well' and 'not doing well' with their use of social media.

Macnamara argued that in general, public organisations are effectively and successfully identifying the potential benefits of social media in facilitating 'two-way' (2011, p.3) discussions between public officials and citizens. There was a clear government acknowledgement that social media intensifies the possibilities for ordinary citizens to directly speak with government representatives on key issues, an opportunity that would be less apparent without social media.

Macnamara (2011) also commended the openness granted by the government to public officials to experiment with social media within the context of political communication, a point that he discussed in relation to the New South Wales

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<sup>16</sup> Macnamara's use of the term 'social media' in his report refers to both mainstream interactive platforms such as Twitter and Facebook and online platforms in general, such as online forum portals and bulletin boards.

Department of Education and Communities, which encourages its employees to be transparent, sincere and respectful in their conversations with the public. There were no rigid restrictions on what its employees can or cannot do with social media when interacting with the public. Macnamara's (2011) research findings, however, did also point to instances where social media use was poorly adapted. One of his key findings was that social media and more broadly online media in Australia was not used by public officials extensively enough as a tool for listening to citizen interests—a process that includes methodically going through individual public responses on social media to grasp how citizens make sense of online participation and lend importance to particular aspects of their online engagement experience.

This problem, Macnamara (2011) suggests, is one that originates from the lack of a proper qualitative empirical framework in public organisations to analyse what bearing postings on social media have on how online political communication is experienced and rationalised by citizens. He argues that educating public officials and staff through guidelines on how to thematically analyse online data would go a long way towards understanding citizen interests in communication matters (Macnamara, 2011). The main weakness of Australian communication policy according to Macnamara (2011) lies in its lack of focus on how citizens themselves understand their role and responsibility within online communication platforms and the significance of online media in defining what political communication means for them. Although there seems to be a keenness by public officials to implement social media as a primary tool for political communication, a proper set of guidelines explaining how citizen interests should be registered and institutionally evaluated is still lacking. This assertion was supported by the questionnaire responses received by Macnamara (2011) from key government communication officials and PR practitioners: there were no references to any fixed guidelines on how youth social media responses should be qualitatively analysed to assess how citizens define their online engagement experience. There was simply a lack of focus in policy on citizen interests.

## **7.6 The Current Phase in Australian Online Policy Formulation—a Thrust towards Service Delivery**

A year after Macnamara's (2011) seminal report, in October 2012, Australia's latest policy initiative—the *Australian Public Service Information and Communications Technology Strategy*—was launched under the Gillard Labor government. A concordance analysis of the report was conducted to determine whether Macnamara's concerns in regards to the state of Australian online policy—the lack of focus on citizen communication interests—is reflected in the latest national online policy framework. The analysis was also meant to fulfil the broad empirical aims revealed earlier in this chapter, which concern (1) understanding how the reality of political communication was framed by the APS given their long-term aim of simplifying government services and policy and (2) exploring how the roles, objectives and interests of audiences are represented as a consequence of that framed reality. The findings from this empirical analysis will facilitate charting of the changing focus of Australian online policy from 2010, when the first online strategy was released, to the present. This time-based comparison will be useful for understanding how the representation of audiences and their interests is connected to policy practice and institutional conceptions of online political communication.

The *Australian Public Service Information and Communications Technology Strategy* represents an official government attempt to consolidate and put into action previous proposals and ideas that were established within *Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for Reform of Australian Government Administration Strategy* (AGIMO, 2013). The secretary of the DFR, David Tune, officially launched the strategy.<sup>17</sup> Its mission statement, which appeared on the old AGIMO website and the current APS and DFR websites, suggests that current policy emphasis is oriented towards effective *service delivery* with an acknowledgement of open engagement. This mission statement was published in multiple places on different government department sites together with a link to the policy strategy. Although more incisive empirical analysis of the document is needed before any conclusions can be made, the mission statement

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<sup>17</sup> The Department of Finance and Regulation (DFR) is the central ministerial agency that oversees the operation of the Australian Government Information Management Office and the Australian Public Service.

serves as a useful starting point to grasp the driving force behind current online regulation:

The APS will use ICT to increase public sector and national productivity by enabling the delivery of better government services for the Australian people, communities and business, improving the efficiency of APS operations and supporting open engagement to better inform decisions. (DFR, 2012, p.12)

This quote identifies productivity and efficiency as key considerations that underlie online engagement and provides an interesting contrast to the mission statement of the 2010 strategy, which foregrounded citizen deliberation and consultation as primary aspects of its objectives. This comparison does perhaps give a rough picture of the general direction taken by the new online policy strategy. Findings from the concordance analysis conducted on the *Australian Public Service Information and Communications Technology Strategy* document is presented below.

#### **7.6.1 Theme A: the Efficient Delivery of Communication Services through Online Technology**

Theme A, the most referenced theme (N =184), reflects the policy's central focus on *delivering a range of communication services* for citizens to communicate with various government departments. There is particular emphasis here on training web administrators and government website developers to design platforms that reach global standards of user accessibility. 'Online communication' in the above sense was framed as a specifically tailored 'product' for citizen consumption. The government was regarded as producers of communication services for citizens. Citizens on the other hand were considered to be independent consumers with the individual responsibility of choosing the right communication service to fulfil their specific needs. Online communication was perceived to be part of a well-oiled, one-way transmission of information and knowledge from government officials to citizens—there were no specific references in the policy document to how citizens themselves can provide important 'learning points' for government officials on what their communication preferences are.

The following is a quote from the policy document that most strongly references Theme A. This quote was chosen because it contains the greatest variety of concordance words from Theme A when compared to any other text corpus in the entire policy document:

To improve productivity ... governments must deliver better services—more effective use of ICT/social media delivers improved productivity and streamlined, high quality government services that are personalised, easy-to-use and can be linked to other services. To realise this outcome we are:

- (1) building capability—improving ICT knowledge, skills and capacity across the APS to deliver more efficient, effective and improved services
- (2) improving services—using ICT to simplify and join together services that government provides to individuals and businesses, while ensuring security and privacy
- (3) citizens have the responsibility to select suitable communication services on offer to fulfil their respective goals. (DFR, 2012, p.12)

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to Theme A, from the analysis of the *Australian Public Service Information and Communications Technology Strategy* document, is provided in Table 53.

**Table 53: Concordance Words that make up Theme A in the Analysis of the APS Strategy**

Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Services/Deliver/Delivery	Used to refer to communication in terms of service delivery; transactional terms.
ICT/Technical/ Capability/Productivity/Improve/Improved/Efficient	Used to refer to the technical ability of technology to provide important communication services to the Australian public. The emphasis is on how technology automates and mechanises the provision of services in a secure and purposeful manner.

It is clear from the above quote that the primary focus of the online policy strategy revolves around the delivery of better government services for Australians with minimal emphasis on how public officials should actually engage with the information provided by citizens online. The government is almost exclusively framed as a ‘provider’ of communication services. There is no reference to more fluid

forms of online interaction with citizens outside the market-oriented confines of production and consumption. Online political communication appears to be framed in the policy document as a scripted process, composed of clear targets, protocols and objectives for public officials to achieve in terms of optimising communication service delivery.

### **7.6.2 Theme B: Using Digital Media to Facilitate New Forms of ‘Creative Engagement’ Experiences for Citizens**

Theme B, which was referenced four times, reflects the policy’s peripheral focus on using digital media technology to foster more diverse participatory experiences for citizens interested in engaging with government (N = 4). There is little elaboration in the policy document on the exact ways digital media can influence the participatory experiences of citizens or how citizen experiences with media can be identified in the first place. The quote with the strongest relevance to the above theme is:

The government also aims to harness the full potential of digital new technologies to promote innovative ideas and creative participatory experiences for citizen engagement and citizen communities. (DFR, 2012, p.12)

An explanation of how each concordance word relates to Theme B, from the analysis of the *Australian Public Service Information and Communications Technology Strategy* document, is provided in Table 54.

**Table 54: Concordance Words that make up Theme B in the Analysis of the APS Strategy**

Concordance word	Context in which it was used that justified its inclusion under this theme
Innovative/Creative	Used to refer to government openness in exploring new and original ideas for citizen engagement.
Experiences	Used to refer to the value placed by the government on overall citizen engagement experiences that did not specifically refer to transactional services.

The findings from the analysis convey two important overall points about Australia’s current online policy strategy. First, current policy emphasis on service delivery seems to suggest that the ‘citizen-consumer’ is an appropriate term to describe how audiences are framed in policy as the ‘implied audience’. Citizen interest in communication was reductively defined by the government as the efficient consumption of structured communication services. It seems that the wider public and social concerns of citizens were not defined outside the boundaries of the transaction of communication services. Much of the language used in the policy document implies that online regulation is an economic activity that caters to ensuring the efficient supply of public communication services to consumers. The subjective online experiences of citizens through their engagement with online media and negotiation with its everyday protocols and expectations remain outside of policy concern. This is of course not surprising when we consider the government’s ultimate goal of centralising online policy formulation and management—matters relating to the transaction of communication services are much easier to regulate under a centralised government-wide framework than matters relating to specific citizen concerns, interests, rights and engagement experiences (Livingstone & Lunt, 2012).

Second, given the lack of government policy attention to the meaningful relationships citizens forge with government websites and the challenges they face in coping with government expectations and assumptions of media-related political and social change, it seems that Macnamara’s (2011) assessment of the current state of Australian online policy is highly accurate. As the findings show, there is an absence of any framework in the latest policy document to assess how citizens define their online engagement experiences or where their interests in online political

communication are situated. There was also a lack of focus on how the presence of online media and its interactive opportunities affect citizen understandings of policy-relevant areas such as citizenship and public participation. The complexity of defining citizenship identity and categorising experiences of public participation—an aspect that featured quite prominently in parts of the 2010 strategy—seems to be, at least for now, not the main issue of focus in Australia’s online policy.

### **7.7 Youth Online Policymakers—‘Victims’ of Mediatisation?**

Despite the above findings, we must retain some level of sympathy for online policymakers in specialised government sectors such as the youth political communication sector. They are faced with the challenge of not succumbing to and negotiating with the wider pressures of mediatisation—more specifically, the ministerial decision to establish a central set of online policies to regulate the online activities of all government departments no matter what their areas of concern or focus are. This approach to managing online policy seems to represent the current and future dominant ‘media logic’ behind the formulation and implementation of online policy in Australia. The challenges faced by youth political communication policymakers are heavily determined by the systematic patterned consequences and pressures that the introduction of online media have brought into policy planning and formulation at a national level.

The regulation of youth public interest is not always in the hands of youth policymakers themselves—technological change and advancement in Australia seems to have brought about government-wide plans for standardising online policy across all departments in an effort to improve efficiency and productivity. The current Liberal government under Prime Minister Tony Abbott has recently announced (23 January 2015), that plans are underway to provide all Australian citizens with a single ‘digital identity’ (Massola, 2015). The purpose of this plan is to further streamline all government services, from healthcare to tax rebates, under an online portal that is more sophisticated and centralised than what is currently on offer (Massola, 2015). As a way of working towards this objective, the Abbott government has set up a new Digital Transformation Office within the Department of Communications. The Digital

Transformation Office will be headed by the Minister for Communications, Malcolm Turnbull, and will comprise a small team of developers, designers, researchers and content specialists working across government to develop and coordinate the efficient delivery of digital services (Massola, 2015). Although the details of this new venture have not been revealed in their entirety, official plans have also been announced to provide iPhone applications for citizens to access government services, contact local politicians on a fixed set of issues and to conduct everyday monetary transactions (Massola, 2015).

As before, there continues to be a growing focus on service delivery that, to some extent, remains detached from issues of subjective everyday citizen interests. Australian online youth policymakers are thus inevitably made to gear their efforts towards delivering the stated expectations and aims of government policy. Although the government's move towards centralising policy measures for political communication is aimed at *easing* regulatory burden, this move may rather ironically create greater dilemmas for policymakers and government bureaucrats in various government departments, including those in the Australian youth sector, in their attempts to adapt and tailor standard policy measures to specific goals and ambitions unique to their organisation.

Vromen (2012a) has argued that the standardisation of online communication policy in Australia and its emphasis on service delivery has resulted in youth policymakers thinking about ways to provide *more* novel opportunities for young people to speak to government without necessarily thinking about how these policies actually address young people as active political agents with existing preferences derived from their lived experience. Vromen states that government emphasis on the productivity, automation and efficiency of service delivery to citizens has turned youth policymaking into a rather mechanistic and top-down process where the provision of new and moderated online services for young people to use have taken centre stage over considerations about how these websites could actually be integrated meaningfully into the everyday lives of young people who face their own sets of challenges. In other words, quantity has in some respects overshadowed quality. Thus youth citizens in Australia may be empowered with these new online projects but they are not necessarily engaged in independent debates and conversations about public

issues or able to determine how they will express themselves and join with other young people to deliberate or take action on government online platforms.

Vromen (2012a) has made it clear that youth policymakers will never be immune to the wider pressures of industry standardisation and automation unless proper public appeals are made by people within the youth sector to reclaim the potential for independence outside government-wide policy regulations. This would enable government youth political communication websites to engage in rational decision-making in the interests of the public. Although the possibility of having an independent policy regulator outside of government for the youth sector has never been explicitly brought into discussion in the current Liberal-led Australian government, the AGIMO (2010) had previously indicated that the government would not leave the regulation of youth government websites to an independent youth-affiliated body for fear that there will be future problems in terms of responsibility and accountability. Given the above stance, it would be fair to assume that online youth policymakers in Australia would continue to be subject to the statutory obligations and bureaucratic principles that have been put in place by the government for managing online political communication.

## **7.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has tackled the wide-ranging pressures and influences that mediatisation brings to communication policy decisions and attempts to define and frame citizen interests. It has addressed the complex social effects of online media on policy-oriented understandings of (1) how young people construct and understand citizenship identity and (2) their experience of online public participation. The concordance analysis conducted on Australia's latest online policy strategy document revealed that government officials are intent on defining and regulating online communication within the limited context of communication service delivery while giving negligible attention to how citizens form social relationships with media through their own engagement experiences. It was argued that the 'implied audience' is a useful concept to understand how policy discourse mobilises specific presumed 'realities' about the role and objectives of media audiences.

The main point made so far in this thesis is a simple but important one: public officials, policymakers and youth participants within the AYF are all embroiled in the common struggle to arrive at a plausible account of what media-related political and social change should be about and more precisely what problem(s) media technology should solve, while facing the pressure and expectation of conforming to particular dominant ways of thinking about online media and the organisation of practices that surround its operation. The final chapter in this thesis recaps the main arguments and findings from this research and places these insights within the broad historical context of political communication research.

# **Chapter 8: Conclusion: The Materiality of Youth Political Communication in the Digital Age and the Era of Multiple Problems and Solutions**

## **8.1 Introduction**

This thesis has examined the complications behind using online media as a tool to solve youth political engagement problems. The AYF tells a broader story about how online initiatives do not necessarily solve targeted political communication problems but can instead bring forth more difficulties in how governments engage with young people. While it initially set out to solve the problem of low youth participation rates, the AYF became part of a longstanding government struggle over youth efforts to decentralise online youth political communication projects in Australia. The AYF serves as a symbol of the practical difficulties in managing online political communication platforms in a media-saturated era where governments are expected to use online media to engage with young people. Key findings have pointed to the difficulties youth faced in making sense of how online postings should inform policy, the bureaucratic hurdles public officials encountered in addressing young people directly, and the pressures experienced by policymakers towards adopting a centralised policy framework. These difficulties served as an additional challenge on top of what the AYF first set out to do: raise youth participation numbers. This final chapter revisits key findings and locates them within the context of contemporary Australian youth political communication research and subsequently within wider debates on media and political communication research as a whole.

Australian empirical research on local youth political communication has traditionally been concerned with questions of power in terms of how youth participatory culture is regulated by government practices and protocols to address specific problem areas, most notably low youth participation rates (Henman, 2013; Vromen, 2012a; Xenos et al., 2014) . These studies have concluded that there is a systemic problem in Australia over how governments use online media to connect

with young people. Politicians tend to be cautious in how they use online media, preferring to see it as a tool for providing information on voting and party politics rather than stimulating open debate and participation (Henman, 2013; Vromen, 2012a). These empirical observations were made through an analysis of government websites based on the type of interactivity provided, how user submissions were managed and what the online objectives were. There is a general sentiment that Australian political communication is a process that is carefully managed by the government which has assumed the role of closely determining how technological change will inform youth participation (Henman, 2013; Vromen, 2012a).

There has been a concerted call for governments to change the way they use online media technology to connect with young people (Henman, 2013; Vromen, 2012a). This move is supported by the belief that government use of online media technology should reflect contemporary youth interests in politics. It has been argued that online initiatives should promote open discussion and debate on youth lifestyle issues and everyday challenges as opposed to formal political goals and values. In conjunction with this, it has been stated that governments should allow elected youth representatives to run online youth initiatives independently with minimal official intervention (Henman, 2013; Vromen, 2012a).

This thesis has contributed to existing Australian scholarship by arguing that while such changes are certainly useful, the issue at hand may be *more* about the overall difficulty of using media to solve political problems than about government attitudes to media technology. As discussed in this thesis, the introduction of online media brought about practical difficulties in the most routine and basic areas of managing and using online media effectively. In addition to this, changing media practices in youth political communication, as evidenced with the AYF, were influenced by longstanding political struggles in youth political communication history. Youth and public officials had to adapt to a social context where online media was seen as necessary to successful political communication regardless of the challenges at hand. People's understanding of social reality and the problems they faced evolved in different ways through the way media was appropriated in specific moments in time to manage real-world circumstances. A look at key findings from this thesis further illustrates the challenges that online media pose in political

communication, difficulties that may not be fully addressed by a shift in government attitudes to media technology alone.

It was argued that youth posters in the AYF faced difficulties in translating everyday concerns into policy relevant ideas. They wanted guidance and resources on how to present their issues in ways that informed policy. The lack of government intervention *added* to the problems and confusion youth faced in understanding what to do with online media. This finding suggests that online resources pose difficulties in how communication is organised, led and coordinated. While Australian researchers have argued for minimal government intervention in online discussions together with more youth-driven debates (Xenos et al., 2014), these suggestions are not easy to implement nor are they confirmed recipes for success. It is difficult to know what level of government intervention is necessary for effective political discussion. The problem of undermanaging online discussion is just as pertinent as overmanaging it. There is a level of unpredictability to the outcomes of government media practices in online political communication—a risk that public officials have to take when engaging with young people online.

Interviews with steering committee members in the AYF reflected a genuine desire to address youth concerns directly and propose policy suggestions. Their capacity to act however was drastically limited due to the bureaucratic restrictions in place that required all proposals and public replies to be overseen by executive members in the ministerial committee before implementation. The highly centralised administrative set-up within the AYF was part of a longrunning historical governmental preference for centralised rule over youth political communication. Seen in this way, non-hierarchical and decentralised approaches towards implementing online projects (Xenos et al., 2014; Henman, 2013; Vromen, 2012a), as advocated in Australian research, become harder to envision. This is because such a change would require a major dismantling of entrenched political outlooks on the management of youth political communication at all levels of government. The absence of common goals between key decision makers and ordinary public officials further impedes a government-wide embracing of open participatory spaces for young people.

The empirical analysis of youth policymaking in Australia revealed key challenges for policymakers. The centralisation of online policy across all departments meant that youth policymakers were compelled to adopt a one-size-fits-all policy framework which fell short of addressing specific youth concerns. The digitisation of youth political communication actually resulted in less effective youth policy, as the youth sector fell under a centralised online policy model that focused on the provision of e-government services. Policymakers had to conform to national policy standards to ensure administrative efficiency. These forces of influence were beyond the control of specific government departments. Australian research on youth political communication has generally concluded that local policy initiatives need to focus on creating online spaces that allow young people to define participation on their own terms (Henman, 2013; Horsley & Costley, 2008; Vromen, 2012a). However such changes are difficult to implement as youth policymakers have little room for experimentation and innovation to determine what policies are most suited to encouraging youth participation. Their practices are bound by government-wide media regulations that determine how media technology should be implemented.

This thesis has argued that online media pose problems for effective youth political communication. While Australian scholarship has rightly argued that a shift in government attitudes towards online media technology is important in nurturing youth interest in participation (Henman, 2013; Horsley & Costley, 2008; Vromen, 2012a), there are practical barriers limiting what public officials can achieve with media within the broader context of established political regulations and beliefs. The next section of this chapter examines the implications of these findings within the field of media and political communication research as a whole.

### **8.1.1 Empirical Chapter on Government Practices: Challenges in Online Political Mobilisation and the Different Social Forms of Mediatisation within an Organisation**

Chapter 5 made the point that media influence does not always work in highly visible or orchestrated ways within online political communication organisations. Although online political communication projects have the capacity to flexibly adapt to changing political and social environments, transitioning between different goals

and ambitions relating to interest groups, social movements and political parties—a concept Chadwick (2009) referred to as organisational hybridity—they may be less mobile in reality where there are conflicting and divergent ideas within the same organisation about how to manage and respond to technological change. The implication here is that mediatisation can assume different social forms and instigate different goals within government, leading to divergent ways in which technology is perceived and applied as a solution to political communication problems. The concept of problem solving with digital media assumes different meanings and significance throughout the organisation. Particular caution must be exercised in equating online media technology with organisation-wide political mobilisations, as the mediatisation of political communication does not bring about a guaranteed ordered consensus within any organisation over how and when it should assume specific ambitions and goals and what they should be about.

The empirical findings from the chapter showed that technological change and mediatisation might be expressed, managed and understood in three distinct ways. First, through the mediatisation of political communication arises a necessity for governments to publicly represent digital technologies as key solutions to specific political communication problems. Strategic methods are employed to frame online projects as necessary and effective solutions to specific challenges in political communication. Emphasis is placed on publicly conveying key declarations about what digital technology will achieve to mitigate or solve current or potential problems as soon as these narratives surface in both online and mass media platforms. There is a deliberate performative dimension to this aspect of managing technological change and problem solving, where government officials look to symbolically show that they have control and authority over how digital media influence political communication; the introduction of online media to political communication is represented as a decisive public act aimed at eliciting a clear purpose.

Second, mediatisation brings its own infrastructure and hierarchy of internal governance that determine how online projects should operate as youth political communication platforms. The formulation of internal bureaucratic regulations within online political communication organisations means that the scope of technological change—how it should be enacted and what it should achieve—is systematically and

meticulously planned rather than spontaneously created. Quick, seamless transitions between different organisational structures, objectives and goals to address specific social or political issues are difficult to execute without prior bureaucratic approval and validation, underlining the fact that the influence of online media on official practices and the goals of public officials tends to be uniform and structured rather than unplanned and improvised. Media influence is in this sense regulated through a fixed governance infrastructure that determines how digital technology will be used to communicate with young people and solve specific problems.

Third, the mediatisation of political communication can bring about challenges to dominant official protocols concerning how online media should work. Informal projects and collaborations between public officials within the organisation are important indications of how online media's role and purpose as a problem-solving tool is confronted in an attempt to construct alternative and independent understandings of its significance in political communication. However, these practices may not always be visible to everyone within the organisation and may operate on the periphery of the organisation's day-to-day operation. Here we see how certain mediatised cultures are articulated and assembled through practices that respond to centralised power in meaningful ways.

The chapter as a whole serves as an important reminder that mediatisation can assume different social forms within an organisation, bringing to the fore varying objectives and opportunities, each providing different explanations of media's centrality in organising the reality of political communication. The introduction of online media leads to divergent ways of understanding digital technologies as solutions to political communication problems, which in turn make it difficult for organisations to switch between different goals, ambitions and practices as a united and cohesive entity. Although online media offer greater technical potential for political organisations to shift between practices typical of interest groups, parties and social movements, they can also add an additional layer of constraint as people have multiple goals and agendas requiring different applications of online media as a solution. In addition to this, not all practices with online media and ideas for technological change receive the necessary internal backing from key members in government and thus fall short of becoming official organisational objectives with the

ability to affect social and political reality.

The bottom line is that the relationship between online media technology and organisational reform is not necessarily driven by a united logic or a centralised objective: online media is central to different people in different ways which makes it *harder* and not easier, in reality, for online political communication organisations to switch between diverse goals and ambitions or organisational forms as a united front. This raises questions as to whether political communication projects are always more streamlined with digital technology given the multitude of ways online media are perceived and appropriated, through various practices, regulations and bureaucratic protocols, as political communication tools by members of government.

Just as media organise reality in specific ways by providing the government with a platform to forge direct and meaningful connections with citizens, the real-world practices, attitudes and perceptions of government officials explain and demonstrate diverse understandings of online media as a problem-solving tool. Studying the process of mediatisation involves unearthing how online media change informs reality while also being susceptible to the influence of government practices in managing technological change. It should be accepted that media influence does not always work with the same degree of precision and synchronicity throughout the whole organisation—centralised bureaucratic regulations, protocols for maintaining the public image of technology as decisive solutions and the presence of individual initiatives and negotiations with these dominant frameworks of perception and practice lead to a matrix of varying understandings of how technology should be applied as a solution to political communication problems. In these instances, technology refracts rather than converges ideas about how media should serve as a tool for political communication, making it difficult to achieve swift and neatly orchestrated political and social outcomes.

### **8.1.2 Empirical Chapter on Youth Postings: the Presence of Multiple Indicators of Mediatisation**

Chapter 6, the empirical chapter on youth postings, showed that although the introduction of online media may be originally meant to solve a specific problem

through interactive engagement, it can potentially end up assuming different meanings for different posters, outlining different problems and solutions that might not necessarily be part of the original government objectives and aims. This renegotiation of what online media means and what problems it is intended to solve brings to the fore different practices, expectations and ambitions that may be located in very different social circumstances and contexts. There exists an underlying impulse among posters to contextualise online media use within specific local realities and experiences. There are *multiple indicators* of mediatisation that are concurrently present in the form of (1) the visible interactive features and infrastructure online media provide for youth and its consequent influence on youth engagement experiences and (2) the different ways youth appropriate online media to decipher what their problems are and how, if at all, online media fit as solutions to these problems. Engaging with online media then involves an interaction between two different forms of consciousness: one about what online media actually offer in terms of its technical infrastructure and the other about how technology can be adapted to address a local experience, circumstance or problem in reality.

For example, a major finding from the chapter on youth postings was that government efforts to adopt a policy of non-intervention in moderating and guiding online discussions proved unpopular among posters who felt that proper and systematic government guidance was necessary for political discussion to be purposeful. Posters that subscribed to the above sentiment faced challenges in deciphering and predicting how their responses to specific youth issues should be structured, while the government was intent on minimising its influence on how online discussions took place.

The implication here is that media's power in moulding social reality is not fully realised in the official accounts and documented ambitions of what it is supposed to achieve—one must also take into consideration how online media are strategically appropriated within specific cultures of practice to grasp their unpredictable and uneven influence on political communication. The customary idea of using media to solve particular political communication problems, though well intentioned, seems to fall short of capturing how people's localised practices inform and explain the mediatisation process and subsequently reconfigure how we should conceive media

technology's objectives and significance. In other words, the mediatisation process cannot be comprehensively summed up by a single problem and solution or be conceived as a purely technical or government-driven mechanism to effect a particular social and/or political outcome. The mediatisation of political communication serves as an important reminder that media influence not only stems from media technology itself but is also co-articulated through people's practices in negotiating how online media fit within their respective social worlds.

In addition to the above, the chapter on youth postings makes the broader point that it is difficult to define youth online participatory culture under a specific category because varying practices, identities, expectations, interests, challenges and ambitions are articulated through the mediatisation of political communication. There are multiple mediatised cultures, each foregrounding particular perceptions and values of reality underlying specific narratives of online media's significance to political communication and having varying degrees and types of reliance on government infrastructure. The concept of thickening was used to suggest that the original core government intention of connecting with young people using digital technology can potentially be 'thickened' (Hepp, 2013) in different ways through youth negotiations with local realities and challenges, bringing forth various dominant patterns of thought and articulations of social reality and experiences, each leading to different sets of problems and solutions.

The complex interdependencies between media change and the subsequent cultural responses it attracts when digital technology is appropriated in specific realities mean that political communication projects cannot be reduced to a single problem and solution. The terms and conditions that define the success or failure of online political communication projects resist any simple generalisation. This is because there will inevitably be many different ideas of success and failure, of what works and what does not, depending on how media technology is appropriated to manage reality.

Online political communication draws into focus the fundamental assumptions, decisions, practices and expectations of posters attempting to interpret the political significance of media. The cultural work of meaning-making and interpretation are

just as crucial as indicators of mediatisation as are the practical consequences of online media infrastructure for communication forms and social interaction.

### **8.1.3 Empirical Chapter on Policy Practices: Linear Instances of Media Influence in Online Political Communication and Particular Contradictions**

The final empirical chapter, Chapter 7, argued that online media constrain how policymakers can address diverse youth interests. The Australian government has standardised online policy for all internal departments, prioritising administrative efficiency over policy deliberation. The chapter's findings point to two broader implications for understanding mediatisation: (1) how online initiatives err toward the linear and formulaic and (2) how the mediatisation of political communication creates conflicting social pressures and expectations within government, resulting in the absence of any obvious cultural and social change, which, it is argued, is also an important form of media influence. Both conceptions of mediatisation show the centralising tendency of media through its ability to effect particular social outcomes.

First, from the perspective of policymaking, the mediatisation of political communication and the broader digitisation of government services have led to a strategic realignment of policy goals that are less about issue-based public deliberation and more about technical service delivery. There is a central media logic—structured objectives, values, principles and practices—that revolves around how online policy is constituted. Public communication through policy is in this instance charged with a specific role. In other words, media influence on policymaking has become more, rather than less, deterministic and fixed since the digitisation of political communication. This point highlights that networked media does not always lead to dispersed and diverse forms of influence on social life. There are certain empirical exceptions where the introduction of online media results in a more unitary and constrained interpretation of social reality, such as policy is defined solely in terms of technical administration and public service delivery.

Although scholarly arguments have generally argued against using the concept of media logic to describe the heterogeneity of media influence, especially in the online environment (Couldry, 2009; Hepp, 2012), there are specific situations where

online media influence appears to operate in a linear way. In the context of policy formulation in Australia, online political communication could be understood as serving the simple technical function of delivering services efficiently to citizens, a stark contrast to how political communication was previously conceived before governments went digital when multiple public interests and grassroots interactions with ordinary members of the public were a central part of policy formulation. In the above context of policymaking, the mediatisation of political communication, across all government departments, reinforces media's centralising role in organising and mainstreaming the scope and purpose of online policy in youth political communication. Media stands in as a social centre through which policy objectives and practices achieve specific legitimacy and fixed meanings in reality. There are moments in reality when media influence, in certain circumstances, can seem to structure social interaction in a particularly ordered way with predictable social and political consequences.

The second implication of the policy chapter revolves around the possibility of conflicting moments of media influence, where the digitisation of political communication creates conflicting social pressures to which governments are compelled to accede: public officials look towards maintaining effective centralised control over online communication through policy standardisation while hoping to meet mainstream expectations for issue-based deliberation and interaction—processes that require flexible online governance policy strategies. These contradictory moments of media influence mean that assessing how online media work and their success or failure moves beyond understanding isolated instances of what specific groups of people are doing with media. It also involves an appreciation for how opposing forces of media create *deadlock*—situations where a particular demand or impulse created by online media is overridden by another. Seen in this way, the process of mediatisation and more specifically media influence is thus not only about social or cultural progression and explicit social change: it may also explain empirical instances where such changes are simply absent.

Media's influence in maintaining the *status quo* is evident in how online political communication policy continues to work in addressing service delivery, hence ignoring what government officials set out to do with online media in the first

place: connect with young people's diverse everyday issues. The centrality of media in how reality is perceived and constructed is apparent even in instances where existing social arrangements are maintained and reinforced rather than challenged or changed. In the context of youth political communication, we have to be careful about claims that relate media's lack of influence to an absence of explicit cultural or social transformations. The mediatisation of political communication can lead to the strengthening of existing articulations and understandings of reality and their inherent points of difference and contradiction. Online media may not always be guaranteed to transform youth political communication reality.

The three empirical chapters in this thesis looked at the mediatisation of political communication from the perspective of youth participants, public officials and policymakers. In each of these social worlds, we saw how the process of mediatisation operates through the reciprocal relationship between media change and cultural and social change. Just as mediatisation explains the prevalence of certain opportunities, practices, interests and expectations, people's practices in reality—and more broadly the materiality of online communication—shape mediatisation in crucial ways. It is the constant interaction between these dialectical forces that determines how and why media matter in political communication. The fact is that mediatisation is highly contextual and situational: it means different things for different groups of people faced with particular challenges, agendas and constraints at particular moments in time. The mediatisation of political communication makes it hard to judge the contributions, successes and failures of online political communication projects due to the absence of a defining problem and solution in the first place. These conundrums in assessing the social benefit of media influence have prompted media and political communication scholars to question the viability of a normative ethical framework for assessing the contributions of online media to political communication and if such a framework is even possible.

## **8.2 Future Research Directions—Mediatiation and its Consequence(s) for Ideas of Success and Failure (or what is ‘good’ and ‘bad) in Online Political Communication Projects**

This section proposes specific directions for future research. It starts by explaining why debates on the mediatiation of political communication have ultimately led certain scholars to the subject of media ethics and the broader question of how media influence complicates ideas of success/failure and right/wrong in online political communication projects. It is argued that scholarly attention on ethical concerns (concerning media) follows an acknowledgement that media are central to people’s political communication experiences for different reasons, bringing forth different roles, objectives, identities and responsibilities, so much so that it has become difficult to fathom what successful online political communication should be about. There is a sense that though online media is prevalent in almost every aspect of political communication and a potential solution for governments in reinvigorating political engagement, there is still widespread uncertainty over what online projects must achieve to be socially and politically beneficial. The second part of this section asserts that online media ethics may not necessarily be about distinguishing between a universally normative notion of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ but rather it is about the practices, assumptions and objectives through which these distinctions are made and reworked by different people in different social circumstances (Couldry, 2013; Livingstone & Lunt, 2013). This analytical process is referred to as ‘meta-ethics’ (Couldry, 2013; Livingstone & Lunt, 2013). It is stated that future research should explore the contested meanings behind success and/or failure in online political communication, as these assessments, and the assumptions upon which they are based, are themselves conditioned by particular mediated contexts.

Research into the mediatiation of online political communication raises questions about how success and failure should be applied and understood as part of a broader effort to understand the actual viability of online media’s contribution to real-world political communication processes. As Couldry (2013) states, the question of what online media must do for political communication to be socially and politically beneficial is inevitable, but it is one that holds no consensual answers because the

significance and meaning behind digital communication in such projects is socially inscribed in different ways—their intended purposes and aims are uniquely appropriated and modified to fulfil specific objectives in particular circumstances. Also, the significance and consequences of these online projects do not rest upon the practices of the government alone but on the reciprocal relationship between technological change and infrastructure and the actions of *all* key informants, including public officials, policymakers and participants (Couldry, 2013; Livingstone & Lunt, 2013). As a result, notions of accountability and trust become difficult to perceive as online political communication moves beyond being simply about the relationship between governments and participants.

The concept of mediatisation and its application to digital communication has opened up broad scholarly dialogue on ways and methods of assessing the wider public benefits of online media influence both on political communication and other collaborative non-government public engagement projects (Couldry, 2013; Hepp, 2013; Livingstone & Lunt, 2013). There are two central detailed reasons as to how debates on mediatisation have led to a critical questioning of ways of assessing online communication. First, scholars have realised that narratives of success and failure in online political communication projects seem to work on the presumption of a finished theory of media transformation, but as has been suggested before, media-related social and political change is an ongoing and open process (Couldry, 2013; Hepp, 2012; Krotz, 2001). The consequences of mediatisation are not measurable in the sense that one investigates a certain phenomenon, such as low youth engagement numbers, at an initial point in time, and again at a second point in time, then characterises the differences as either successful or failed instances of media influence (Hepp, 2012). This is because media influence does not revolve around a fixed concept of change but affects different people in different ways, compelling us to understand the concept of mediatisation as an ongoing multi-dimensional process in which individual practices and experiences interact with media technology in particular unique ways at different times. It is difficult to conclusively judge the success or failure of online political communication projects as this involves imposing an artificial boundary around what media influence is, when it happens and what it is supposed to achieve.

Second, scholars have also argued that narratives of success and failure work on the premise that people have fixed identities, responsibilities and objectives over a sustained period of time (Couldry, 2013; Hepp, 2012; Krotz, 2001). Governments are expected to communicate and connect with the public in a certain way to attract citizen interest whereas participants are expected to respond constructively to these efforts. As this thesis has shown, both government bureaucrats and posters at different times and in different contexts adopt different identities that call for different objectives as a way of managing technological change. The roles people assume and the objectives they undertake when engaging online are not singular, fixed or complete but are continuously articulated in various guises. Based on the above argument, scholars have asserted that specific benchmarks for success and failure in online political communication projects are difficult to formulate and/or apply in online contexts as people simultaneously subscribe to a host of different identities that require different objectives.

The above discussions of the difficulty of judging the success or failure of online political communication projects, or in what instances online media are ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for political communication, has led to a collective questioning of how online political communication should then be assessed for its contributions to social reality and politics (Couldry, 2013; Hepp, 2012; Lunt & Livingstone, 2013). The main point is that if notions of success and failure are counterproductive for capturing mediatisation and its associated complexities, then how and on what basis should online media projects be assessed for their benefit and contribution to political communication?

Couldry (2013), and Livingstone and Lunt (2013) have offered an answer. They believe that questions of ethics in online political communication should not be about distinguishing between a universally conceived normative notion of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ but rather it should focus on the practices, assumptions and objectives through which these distinctions are made and reworked by different people in different social circumstances (Livingstone & Lunt, 2013)—in other words, people’s independent reflections on ethics through their engagement with and around online media contribute to what media ethics is about in the first place. This approach has been labelled ‘meta-ethics’ (Couldry, 2013; Lunt & Livingstone, 2013), which argues

for a methodical examination of the empirical pre-conditions through which specific people and organisations arrive at particular assumptions and ideas about what success or failure mean. A focus on meta-ethics, as the authors have indicated, is useful because it is based on a presumed understanding that media influence is co-articulated through the combined involvement of various people and organisational sectors involved in online political communication. There is also an implicit acceptance in the concept of meta-ethics that a rule-based solution for assessing political communication projects involving a fixed set of protocols and standards for how online media must work to be considered a success is not a viable way forward.

Livingstone and Lunt (2013) argue that public declarations about the failure of particular online political communication projects are useful because they provide an entry point into analysing the assumptions upon which such assertions are made. This involves acknowledging how different ethical positions, on what success or failure should entail, are connected to different ways of understanding and making sense of the reality of online political communication and the practices and values employed to arrive at such judgements. This means that particular normative judgements about the perceived failure or success of an online political communication project are themselves conditioned by particular mediatised contexts—understandings of how online media should organise social and political reality. Assessments of failure and success are in some ways mediatised articulations of social reality.

Future research directions in youth political communication might look at the differences and tensions between various definitions of success or failure used by youth participants, mainstream media practitioners, policymakers and public officials and the associated assumptions on which these assessments are based. As this research has shown, government opinions on successful political communication may be rooted in particularly broad and tangible national visions such as raising youth participation numbers. However, as discussed previously, youth participants may perceive the success or failure of such projects based on specific contextualised circumstances where media technology is perceived as a potential solution to a particular local problem.

It is hoped that such an analysis would first encourage researchers to empirically

explore the different assessments of the success or failure of online projects as a way of unravelling the broader dilemmas and constraints of using new media technology in solving political communication problems. Mainstream media narratives of failed online political communication projects and associated public disenchantment with government efforts in using media technology are common themes that have surfaced in many democracies (Chadwick, 2013; Couldry, 2013). It is useful then to empirically foreground the presuppositions that accompany these various judgements and how certain facts, such as low youth participation rates, connect with specific values, preferences and assumptions. Analysis of the mediatisation of youth political communication is then not limited only to how media organise and shape the reality of political communication, but expands to encompass how people reflexively think about the overall social and political benefits of media influence in specific mediatised contexts.

Questions over what success and failure mean in online youth political communication do bring forth even more precise ideas for future research projects. As a starting point, an empirical study could be conducted specifically on the level of social media use, such as Twitter and Facebook, in youth political communication projects both within Australia and globally. The rationale behind this is to understand the reasons behind the level of social media use in online youth projects and its influence on youth online discussion and project outcomes. In the case of the AYPF, the use of Facebook was restricted to specific government announcements while Twitter was excluded altogether due to the difficulty involved in keeping up with and moderating public comments. The paradox between government efforts in fostering greater online interactivity and its reluctance to embrace socially interactive platforms could be examined further. Perhaps it is worth exploring whether governments themselves are afraid of failure and thus opt for the safest and less-interactive option. The broader point is to determine, if relevant, the prevalence of self-imposed government restrictions to levels of online interactivity and the reasons why.

Finally, future empirical studies could also devote greater focus on how youth participants understand and come to terms with the failure of specific online government projects, both in Australia and internationally. While this thesis has not specifically interviewed youth participants, future projects could collect qualitative

interview data on youth sentiments towards government driven projects. The significance of this study lies in uncovering how young people react and respond to failed government initiatives and the influence this has on their online engagement practices and general opinion of government youth platforms. It is important to know whether these failed attempts create a climate of scepticism towards government projects, and if there is a pattern to youth reactions in different western democracies? Findings from the above project would be useful for governments to have when formulating and framing future online youth political communication projects, especially after initial setbacks such as low youth participation rates.

### **8.3 Conclusion: Final Thoughts and the Current State of the AYP**

It is hoped that this thesis has not only made a significant contribution towards the study of media and social change and emphasised the reciprocal nature of this relationship, but also offered useful insights into how online political communication projects are sites where *both* problems and solutions become negotiated and carefully assembled as part of managing technological change. This necessitates an expanded scholarly focus on how the centralising tendency of media (Couldry, 2013) is consistently enacted through the practices of key informants in the political communication process, articulating sometimes conflicting explanations of online media's broader significance for political communication.

Although online media may seem like an obvious solution to youth political communication problems and more specifically a suitable tool to drive public engagement, such a reading of media influence may inadvertently fetishise media's role within a particular context without taking into account how these online initiatives are appropriated and subsequently modified to mean different things for different people with varying interests. The problems and subsequent solutions that are assembled with media technology are themselves often products of negotiation stemming from an ongoing process of confrontation and compromise with the laws, regulations and protocols associated with the introduction of online media. Seen in this way, media technology will not satisfy everyone with a neatly packaged solution to specific preconceived problems because there will always be other problems and potential solutions—located in very different social and cultural circumstances—that the same technology is expected to address. The introduction of online media in political communication sets up a mutually constitutive environment where technological infrastructure and the subsequent social practices that respond to and modify what these affordances mean in the first place consistently act upon each other to produce a variety of situational problems *and* solutions. In this respect, for media and political communication scholars, the study of media influence in political communication does not only orient us towards a particular relationship or a specific empirical phenomenon: it can also direct us to a *general* explanation of how media is, in different ways, built up as a central reference point to make sense of social reality.

The AYF case study captures the highly contextual nature of media influence in the way media organise social reality in specific ways, bringing to the fore contrasting expectations, challenges and struggles. Throughout these chapters, we have observed how government officials are immersed in bureaucratic challenges to push their proposals across to ministerial advisors, how young participants are embroiled in a struggle to seek government guidance despite an official reluctance to intervene, and how policymakers have had to adapt their policy strategies accordingly in tandem with broader consumer-driven, government-wide goals in public consultation. Each of these mediatised experiences shows how online media structure particular ways of communicating and engaging while also being susceptible to specific transformations in terms of its role, function and broader purpose. The empirical findings presented in this thesis, however, are by no means definitive observations about how online media technology works in Australia, as the process of mediatisation is constantly being shaped and explained through changing social and political developments and practices.

At the time of writing, the AYF has undergone yet another shift in management with the instatement of the Liberal government under Prime Minister Tony Abbott in the 2013 general elections. The AYF is currently spearheaded by the Minister for Education, Christopher Pyne. It has been publicly announced that the AYF will be subject to a design and content update. It remains to be seen what these refinements will actually entail or if the communication architecture of the website will continue to revolve around a forum-based format. No new official documents, strategies or proposals have been uploaded or formulated since this research commenced in 2010. The government has since stopped introducing new topics and the website now appears to load a generic message on start-up, informing visitors that the government is still considering options for youth political participation and representation (AYF, 2010). The nature of these options, and whether the AYF will continue to function as Australia's main youth political communication platform in future, remains unknown (AYF, 2010). A NewsBank search for recent media reports on the AYF, which involved searching for the terms 'AYF' and 'Australian Youth Forum' through a database consisting of Australia's state and national newspapers, found no media reports on the AYF for the years 2012 and 2013.

The continuously dwindling level of activity from both government staff and youth participants in the AYF suggests that the contextual story surrounding mediatisation is constantly changing, bringing about new forms of practice and expectations that shift how and why media is central, or not, to people's interpretation of social reality. To banish the AYF as yet another failed government attempt at using media technology is to gloss over the vast range of individual practices located in different social settings and circumstances that inform mediatisation in particular ways—the very actions that shed light on the contested meanings behind the significance of online political communication and digital media.

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