

Bernie Finn MP
Chair of the Electoral Matters Committee
Parliament of Victoria
Parliament House
Spring St Melbourne 3001

30 June 2014

Dear Mr Finn,

Please find attached a submission to the Inquiry into the Impact of Social Media on Victorian Elections and Victoria's Electoral Administration prepared by Emily van der Nagel and Dr Scott Ewing of the Swinburne Institute for Social Research (SISR). Emily is a media studies post-graduate student investigating emerging technologies, social networks and anonymity. Dr Ewing is a Senior Research Fellow and is the author of numerous articles analysing the social impact of new technologies.

While SISR is located at Swinburne University, the views expressed in this submission are not to be taken as those of the University.

We hope the information in the report is useful to the Committee. We would be happy to provide clarification or further information if required and to appear before the Committee if that was desirable. Please note that Dr Ewing will be out of the country from 30 June to 14 July.

We wish the Committee well in its deliberations.

Yours faithfully,

Emily van der Nagel

Scott Ewing

Executive Summary

This submission presents data on Australians' use of social media and their attitudes to the interaction between internet use and politics. The data was collected as part of the Australian component of the World Internet Project, an international research collaboration tracking the adoption and use of the internet¹.

A starting point for understanding the impact of social media technologies on the Victorian electoral process is the level of adoption of the internet more broadly and the use of social media in particular.

In November 1998, just under one in five Australian households had internet access, but this figure has been steadily increasing. In 2013, 91% of Australians reported that they use the internet. The likelihood that Australians use the internet decreases with age; while all of those aged 18 to 34 were online in 2013, and the great majority of those aged 34-49 (97%) and 50-64 (93%) were, only 63% of those aged 65 and older were internet users.

Use of social networking sites has been growing. In 2009 just under a half of Australians accessed a social networking site, this increased to 69% in 2013. Forty-eight percent of Australians in 2013 visited a social networking site daily.

In terms of the attitudes of Australians towards social media's role in politics, the data suggests that young people are more likely to agree that the internet gives them more political power, and allows them to better understand politics, but all age groups tend to agree that the internet is important to the political campaign process, whether they personally use social networking sites or not.

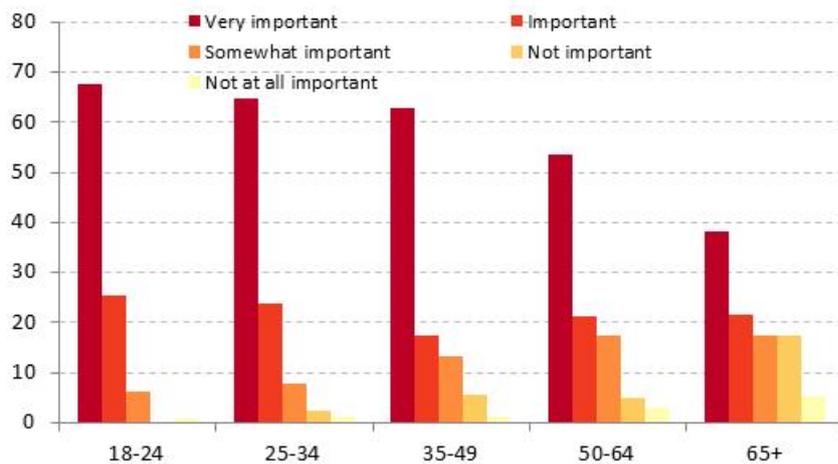
¹ The World Internet Project (WIP) is a major, international, collaborative project looking at the social, political and economic impact of the Internet and other new technologies. Founded by the USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future in the United States in 1999, the WIP now has more than 30 partners in countries and regions all over the world, including Italy, China, Japan, Hong Kong, Macao, Korea, Sweden, Great Britain, Hungary, Canada, Chile, Iraq, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates.

The key research component of the project is a sample survey of internet users and non-users. The survey is administered in different ways by the different partners but a key part of the collaboration is that partners agree to include a core of common questions in their survey

Analysis

Younger Australians are more likely to consider the internet as important to their current way of life. Ninety-three percent of those aged 18 to 24 consider the internet either important or very important compared to only 60% of those aged 65 or over.

Figure 1: How important is the internet to your current way of life?



Younger Australians are more enthusiastic about social networking sites than older Australians (Figures 2, 3, and 4). Those aged 18-24 have especially high rates of engaging with social networking sites: 91% visit social networking sites at least daily, 55% post messages or comments on social networking sites at least daily, and 52% think social networking sites are important or very important.

The use of, and interest in, social networking sites decreases with age. Those who are aged 65 or over use social networking sites far less often than younger Australians, and think they are less important: just 12% visit social networking sites at least daily, 3% post messages or comments on social networking sites at least daily, and 9% think social networking sites are important or very important.

Figure 2: How often do you visit social networking sites?

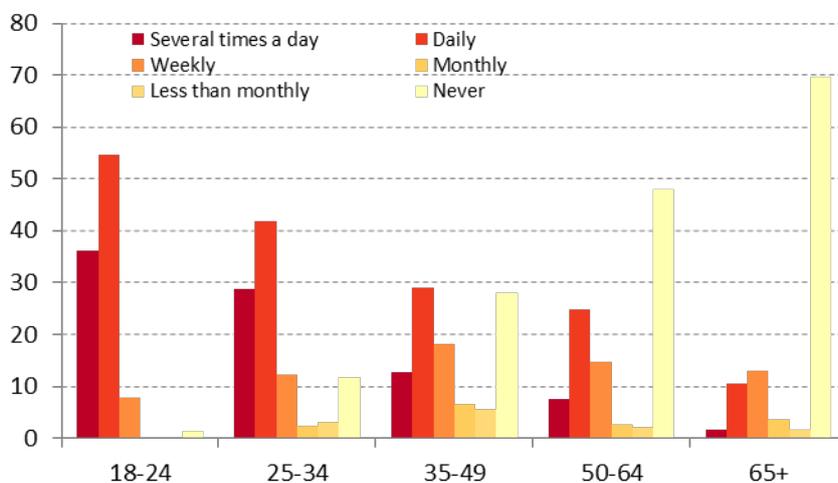


Figure 3: How often do you post messages or comments on social networking sites?

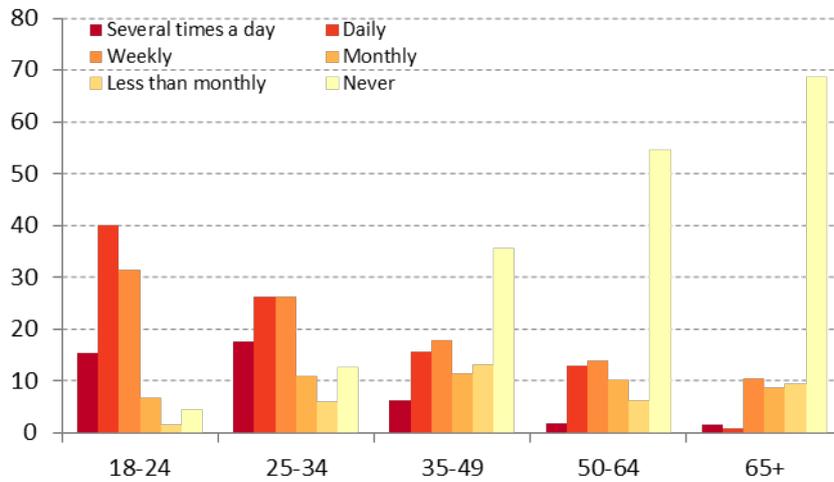
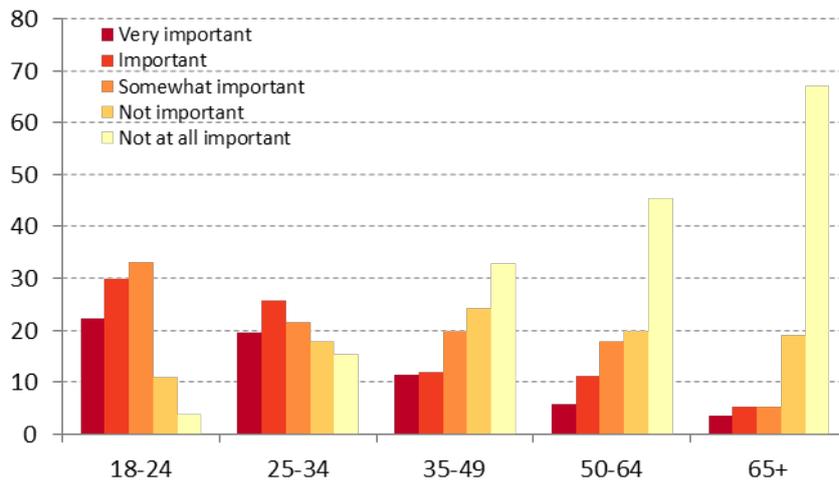


Figure 4: How important is social networking?



The younger the age group, the more likely people are to believe the internet has an impact on politics (Figures 5 and 6). Of those aged between 18 and 24, 48% agree or strongly agree that the internet gives them more political power, and 51% agree or strongly agree that the internet gives them more say about what the government does, compared to only 32% and 31% of those aged 65+ respectively.

Figure 5: By using the internet, people like you can have more political power

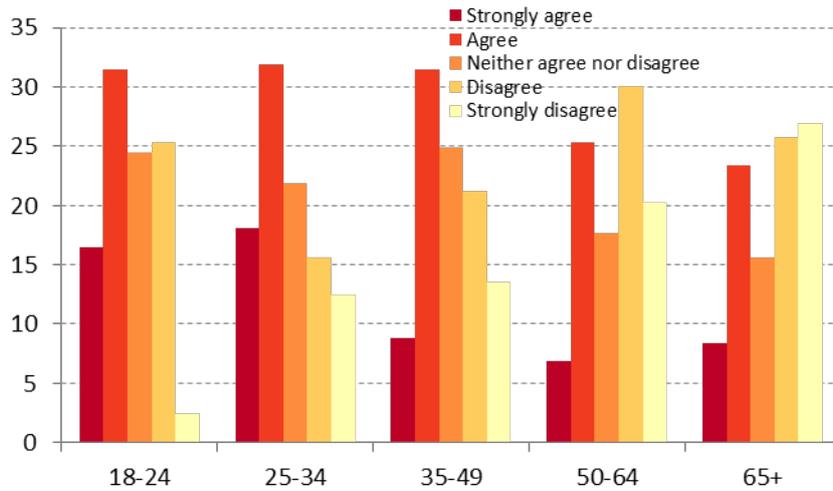
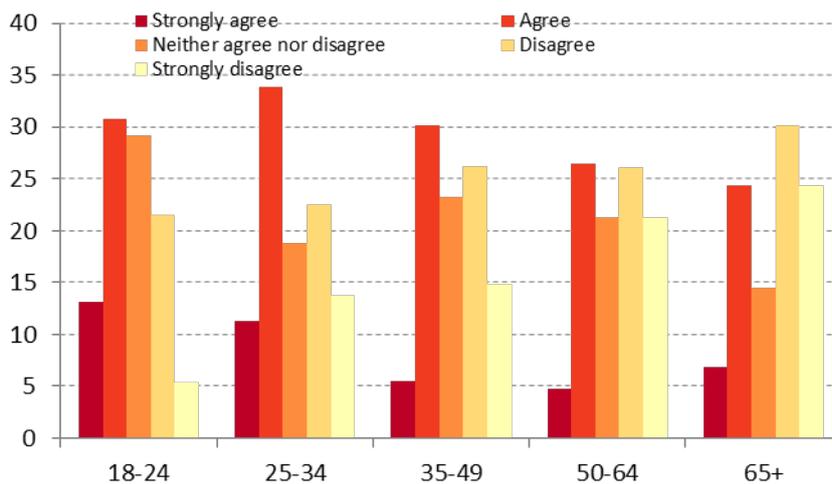
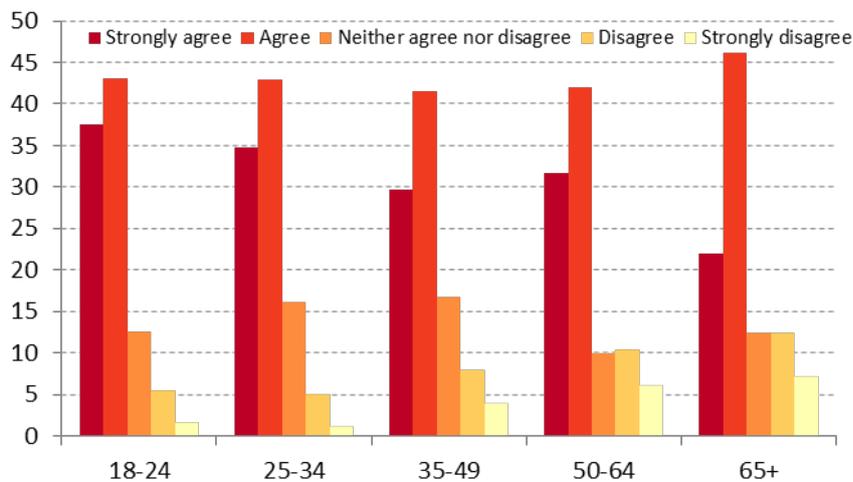


Figure 6: By using the internet, people like you can have more say about what the government does



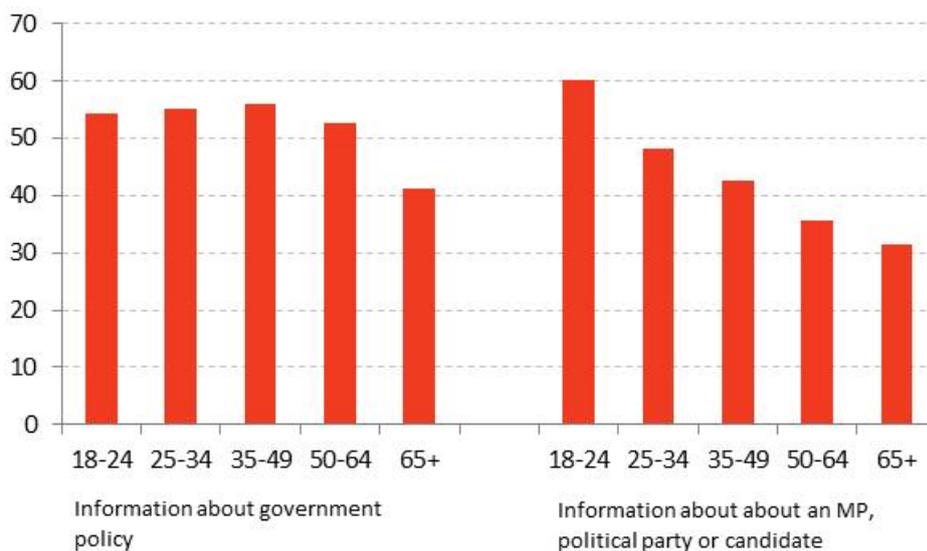
No matter how often someone actually used the internet or social networking sites, people of all age groups largely agreed that the internet is important for the political campaign process. Figure 6 shows only a slight difference between the youngest and oldest age groups, with 81% of 18-24 year olds agreeing or strongly agreeing on its importance, and 74% of those aged 65+. Few people surveyed considered the internet unimportant to politics.

Figure 7: The internet is important for the political campaign process



Just over a half of Australians have used the internet to get information about a government policy (Figure 8). Only those aged 65 or over have considerably lower rate of use at around four in ten. Conversely, using the internet to get information about an MP, political party or candidate is directly related to age. Six in ten of the youngest cohort report undertaking this activity, and the rate drops for each subsequent age group. For the oldest group, the rate is just three in ten.

Figure 8: I have used the internet to get information about government policy and I have used the internet to get information about an MP, political party or candidate



We conducted analysis using only the two younger cohorts from our sample (ie those aged 18 to 34) to investigate whether the use of social networks influences attitudes to the impact of internet use on political life. Social network users were only slightly more likely to agree that internet use could

positively affect their influence in the process. On the other hand, those younger Australians that had actually undertaken a political use of the internet (for example using the internet to contact an MP or to find out about government policy) were significantly more likely to agree that the internet improved their political influence.