Chapter 12

Social media and political communication

Martin Molony

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 was widely regarded as being an internet election victory. Greengard (2009, 16) described Obama as 'the first internet president' and there was widespread agreement amongst political commentators and digital media experts as to 'how politicians and the public interact [would] never be the same.' In the days following Obama's election, *The New York Times* reflected on the repetition of history in the effective use of a new medium: 'One of the many ways that the election of Barack Obama as president has echoed that of John F. Kennedy is his use of a new medium that will forever change politics. For Mr Kennedy, it was television. For Mr Obama, it is the internet' (Miller, 2008). Commentators, such as *Huffington Post* founder and editor-in-chief, Arianna Huffington (2008) went further and believed that the Obama win was entirely due to his use of the web: 'Were it not for the Internet, Barack Obama would not be president. Were it not for the Internet, Barack Obama would not have been the nominee.'

But was Obama's win entirely down to successful use of the internet? Why did he win when, just four years earlier, Howard Dean had failed having used the same approach? One might assume that Barack Obama perfected Dean's trial use of internet technologies but it is also reasonable to suggest that such electronic communication had come of age and that the electorate was sufficiently comfortable with the technologies to engage with their preferred candidate. The Web had intrinsically changed between the presidential elections of 2004 and 2008 with the growth of Web 2.0 technologies, specifically the advent of social media. The

revolution promised by Web 2.0 was based on participation and interactivity rather that the publication / broadcast or one-way communication flow that had defined the Web up to then. Whatever about the medium itself, there can be little doubt that Obama's candidacy was particularly suited to the use of an interactive, two-way communication facility provided by Web 2.0 in general and by social media in particular. As a community organiser, Obama understood the potential of crowdsourcing – and not just for financial support, but for idea generation and policy support also. For Obama, social media communication became an online version of both a sense of community for participants and in its use to organise and galvanise his supporters into action.

Hoping to emulate Obama's success, political candidates across the globe scrambled to adopt social media to their advantage. The UK's 2010 general election was predicted to be the 'internet election' but was dominated by the first televised leaders' debates, with television providing the principal innovation of the campaign. It seemed that the internet and social media were more important in influencing how traditional media operated, rather than in influencing the outcome of the election itself. British print and broadcast media were able to harness the immediacy of social media responses to an event, often resulting in the social media response itself becoming the focus of the news coverage. For candidates, the most effective use of social media was in managing their campaign workers and in providing them with the most effective information for offline campaigning. Although the parties attempted to imitate Obama's perceived success with social media – such as the Conservative Party's creation of an e-campaign system, 'MyCon' – it became clear that whatever US social media success there had been, it could not be directly mapped onto the UK political landscape. But what about Ireland? This chapter considers the growing impact of social media for political communication in Ireland. It examines the extent to which the use of social media has been

adopted as a tool of political communication, the extent to which its use has been effective in election strategies and whether the employment of social media in such instances genuinely represents a significant change in political communication or whether social media is actually far closer to traditional methods of political communication than first appears.

General election 2007

Prior to Obama's 2008 victory, Irish political candidates had not adopted web-based technologies to any great extent. The Irish general election of 2007 offered the first opportunity for a significant role for the internet by candidates and the media, the latter of which experimented with some exclusive Web events and the use of the Web to provide breaking news coverage. Citizen journalists provided an alternative media perspective with a number of bloggers providing some useful and popular online commentary on sites such as 'irishelection.com' and 'politics.ie'. Although there was some use of YouTube for party political programmes, with the Green Party using the site to premiere its party political broadcast, generally, the Web was not embraced with any great fervour by most candidates. A study of 'cyber-campaigning' in the 2007 campaign (Sudulich and Wall, 2009, 459) found that only a third of candidates set up personal web sites. This is surprising, given that a sole reliance on party-based web resources would only provide the same exposure as their party running mate(s). Although the use of electronic campaigning resources was significantly greater than in previous elections, clearly, 2007 general election candidates did not regard the use of the Web as a vital campaigning tool.

This reluctance in taking web-based campaigning seriously may be explained by the traditional campaigning style of Irish elections. Personal contact with as many individual voters as possible is expected by both candidates and the electorate. A reported 69% of voters

had spoken with their chosen candidate during the 2002 election campaign (Marsh, 2008, 256) while 60% of Irish voters reported that contact was made with their household, either by candidates or their representatives during the 2007 campaign (Sudulich and Wall, 2009, 458). The potential of the new media was described as 'offering a public sphere, a new 'town square' that, with its emphasis on user-generated content, 'might grow to offer truly alternative, citizen-oriented election coverage' (Brandenburg, 2007, 184). However, in considering the effectiveness of media spending in this election, research has indicated that traditional printed posters and leaflets still produced the most significant return on investment (Sudulich and Wall, 2011).

European election 2009

The European Parliament elections of June 2009 offered a more US presidential-style opportunity for the use of social media in Irish politics. With an electorate of between 778,502 and 861,727 voters in each of the four constituencies, the potential for personal voter contact was obviously limited and offered an Obama-style opportunity for the use of Web based technologies. In the run up to the 2009 election, a survey of all sitting European parliamentarians indicated a high use of personal web sites (75%) by the incumbent MEPs. On the social media front, just 21% of MEPs had a Twitter account with 62% either never having heard of Twitter or having no plans to use it. Similarly, 24% of the MEPs described themselves as using a blog extensively while 57% believed that TV was either a very effective or effective way to communicate with voters compared to 45% for print and 33% for online communication (Fleishman-Hillard, 2009).

An analysis of the use of social media within the EU constituency of Dublin (O'Connor, 2009) showed that six of the ten candidates had blogs, but that none of these generated

sufficient traffic to register on the social media measurement site 'technorati.com', indicating very low levels of traffic to these blogs. The same study noted that only 30% of the Dublin candidates had a presence on YouTube and that the activity levels, in terms of the number of videos, subscribers and views were all particularly low. O'Connor also found that, while nine of the ten candidates had a Facebook presence, the levels of support (friends) and levels of activity (posts) varied greatly. Successful Socialist Party candidate, Joe Higgins, led both criteria with 575 friends and 102 posts, while the unsuccessful Libertas candidate, Caroline Simmons, had just 84 friends and did not post to her Facebook page at all. There was no subsequent correlation between the levels of Facebook friends and the first-preference vote achieved by each candidate.

Whatever about Fine Gael's use of social media in the 2009 EU election in contributing to its success in winning over 29% of the vote and four of the 12 Irish seats, Feargal Purcell, the party's deputy director of communications, was not convinced of the potency of social media: 'The evidence is that the electorate still gets its hard political information from TV and print' (O'Connor, 2009, 77). This supports the view that it is not social media, per se, that offers a magic bullet, but that it is the application of social media to engage with the electorate that provides dividends at the ballot box. Other commentators recognised that, while the technology might allow for engagement between the electorate and candidates, provision of the technology does not necessarily mean that this happens. The *Irish Times* political correspondent and political blogger, Harry McGee, was unequivocal about suggestions of such engagement during the 2009 election campaign: 'Two-way conversations have not opened up online in the Irish political parties and their supporters' (O'Connor, 2009, 76).

Twitter's impact

Although only three years old in 2009, the micro-blogging service, Twitter, had enjoyed huge growth in the eighteen months before the 2009 European election. Twitter featured on the front page of *Time* magazine on the day of the election in Ireland, with a cover story proclaiming that 'Twitter will change the way we live' (Johnson, 2009). Statistics for the service showed a 1,460% rise in its worldwide audience over the previous twelve months, it having attracted 44.5 million unique visitors to its website during June 2009 alone (Schonfeld, 2009). Only six of the ten Dublin EU candidates had Twitter profiles during the campaign with incumbent Fianna Fáil MEP, Eoin Ryan, and Green Party challenger, Deirdre de Burca topping the poll of followers with 628 and 612 followers respectively, and with Joe Higgins not far behind with 526 followers. The remaining three candidates had only a fraction of this interest on Twitter (O'Connor, 2009).

Despite this level of engagement with Twitter, it was not until early 2010 that its potential impact on the Irish political scene became apparent when it played a part in the resignation of a minister in the then Fianna Fáil – Green Party coalition government. It was Green Party chairman, Senator Dan Boyle's prolific use of the medium that prompted calls from some of his parliamentary colleagues for him to stop his 'irresponsible' tweeting about political issues (Minihan, 2010). Boyle's use of Twitter certainly identified the potential of the medium, particularly capitalising on its semi-official nature. One could not have imagined many of Boyle's views expressed via Twitter, which were presented as being shared by his party, being published as a party press release in the usual manner. Twitter seemed to provide a means to whisper an aside, but to the general populous. Somehow, publishing a statement within 140 characters seemed to provide a degree of latitude not otherwise permitted – or expected. The informality of the medium allowed Boyle to fan the flames of a given

controversy or to rekindle an affair that might otherwise have run its course. Indeed, it was one of Boyle's missives that gave Willie O'Dea the honour of being the first politician to be tweeted out of office, when the latter had to step down as minister for defence in February 2010. O'Dea had survived a vote of no confidence in the Dáil, following a revelation that he had sworn an inaccurate affidavit in defence of a slander action against him. He was forced to revise the affidavit when a recording of the offending slander was made public. Just as O'Dea's position appeared to be safe, Boyle tweeted: 'As regards Minister O'Dea I don't have confidence in him. His situation is compromised. Probably a few chapters in this story yet.' As speculation on the minister's future was rekindled, O'Dea was forced to resign a little over 24 hours later.

In addition to being the catalyst for controversy, Twitter also came into its own for the extent to which it enabled coverage of political controversy. In May 2010 the *Sunday Independent* published an article detailing €81,015 claimed in expenses by Fianna Fáil Senator Ivor Callely. Subsequent news stories revealed that Callely had claimed travel expenses from a home in Co. Cork, some 370 kilometres from the Dáil – and his other home in Dublin's suburb of Clontarf, in his former Dáil constituency of Dublin North Central and in which house, day-to-day appearances, suggested he still lived. The unfolding story caught the imagination of social media participants. An analysis of social media commentary over the following two months showed that some 5,000 tweets, or other social media comments, were made on the topic, while three days after the publication of the initial article, there were 584 mentions of the senator during a 24 hour period (O'Leary, 2010). Most of this social media traffic was driven by messages on Twitter.

What is interesting about the social media coverage of the Callely affair was the extent to which those discussing it, based on their number of social media connections, were deemed to have a high 'measure of influence' – a measure calculated by a series of algorithms that takes into account multiple aspects of the individual author's online profile, including but not limited to, the number of followers they have on Twitter; the number of friends on Facebook; the number of posts on a message board such as 'boards.ie or 'politics.ie'. The measure of influence of those talking about Ivor Callely ranged on a scale from 0 to 10 with 27% of the comments made by people with a measure of influence of 5 or higher; while 17% of the comments were made by people with an influence measure of 9 or 10 (O'Leary, 2010). This level of influence illustrates the extent to which Twitter, in particular, can impact on other forms of social media and on the agenda of traditional media.

For other tweets, it is often only when traditional media, particularly print media, republish the messages, complete with interpretation and context that the tweets acquire potency. The release of some tweets places a perspective and / or opinion in the public domain that was previously known, or assumed, by media sources. The publication of these via Twitter provides carte blanche to correspondents to build a story around the tweet, thereby generating far more media coverage than might be expected from 140 characters. The media coverage of Dan Boyle's Twitter traffic may have prompted fellow Cork South-Central TD, Simon Coveney, to attempt to garner similar public attention. Although this did not seem to come naturally to the Fine Gael deputy, he struck gold when he tweeted a comment on a particularly poor performance by then Taoiseach Brian Cowen in the now infamous 'Morning Ireland' radio interview of September 2010. Although Coveney's tweet was not the first to comment on Cowen's performance, his wording – 'God, what an uninspiring interview by Taoiseach this morning. He sounded half way between drunk and hungover and totally

disinterested . . .' – offered the media an opportunity to push the story into new territory, in particular, the then Taoiseach's drinking habits.

Coveney's tweet prompted international media coverage, with some 457 articles published in the 24 hours following the tweet, appearing in publications in 26 countries, including the USA, UK, India and China (O'Leary, 2010a). The wording of Coveney's tweet demonstrates the 'aside type commentary' that is afforded by Twitter. It is difficult to imagine that such a remark would have been issued in a press release – or even during an interview with a journalist. Although the deputy did not accuse Cowen of being either drunk or hungover, by suggesting that he sounded like this legitimised the media questions that were put to an unsuspecting Cowen later that morning. While there had been previous comment in media circles about his drinking habits, it had been regarded as inappropriate or off-limits to broach the subject. Whatever about the wisdom of Cowen going on live radio while sounding hoarse, his response to the social media coverage demonstrated a serious lack of awareness by Fianna Fáil in monitoring social media traffic and in failing to properly gauge the potential fallout.

Of course, the informality of Twitter has not always worked to the advantage of the tweeting party. Some of Dan Boyle's messages may have crossed the line from time to time. In particular, his 2011 comment on the arrest of the managing director of the IMF, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, on foot of allegations of sexual assault in an upmarket New York hotel – 'Strauss-Kahn sexual assault allegations are of course of the utmost seriousness, but paying $3,000 for a hotel room isn't all that far behind' – resulted in a backlash. While such a remark might have gone without too many ripples – or even unnoticed – had it been made as part of an informal conversation or speech, Twitter, despite appearing to be a transitory medium, does appear in 'writing' and, as with traditional media the written word remains 'on the

record'. Boyle soon back-peddled on his association of a humorous remark with an accusation of a sexual crime: 'In the words of Hilary Clinton, I miscommunicated – and badly, it seems.'

General election 2011

The 2011 general election saw a significant increase in the use of internet tools and social media, placing the medium alongside traditional media. Two social media platforms in particular, had, by this time, been engaged with by a critical mass of the Irish electorate and were adopted by candidates in a meaningful way. Facebook reported some two million Irish accounts, while just-under 200,000 Irish people had Twitter accounts. Accordingly, the 2011 election candidates focussed their social media efforts principally on these two services: 79% of the 566 candidates had a Facebook account, while 57% had Twitter accounts (McMahon, 2011).

The main political parties sought the advice and expertise of international social media consultants, some of whom had been associated with Barack Obama's success just three years previously. Each of the party's websites was integrated with social media, with links to their presence on Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and YouTube. In addition, the websites invited visitors to keep up-to-date through email subscriptions – and, of course, invitations to join the campaign.

The most dramatic use of the Web in the 2011 campaign was Fine Gael's conversion of their existing website to a three-page site, featuring a video of an informal Enda Kenny inviting the public to comment on what was wrong with the country. The site also featured pages on 'How we can improve the country' and 'How can we win your support?' Although the site

generated a lot of media commentary and appeared to engage the public in offering their opinions, the height of attention was garnered from the fact that the site was hacked within a week. The site was transformed several times during the campaign, with the party claiming 400,000 hits (Wall, 2011, 96). The party also created a 'digital task force' of 30 full-time volunteers to drive their digital strategy, which included the creation of an 'e-canvasser' tool similar to that adopted by Obama in 2008, allowing the party to organise and manage their supporters.

The Labour Party also adapted its website in an innovative manner with constituency specific video messages featuring Eamon Gilmore, links for which could be emailed to others by those visiting the site. This represented an interesting application of the technology to provide targeted material, but which was driven by user interaction. The party broke new ground with the provision of an iPhone 'app' that allowed users to follow the party leader's public appearances via an interactive map and view images of party hustings. Party political use of Twitter before and during the 2011 election campaign demonstrated some strategic thinking in how to maximise its impact, rather than just attempting to blindly build a large group of 'followers'. Attempts made to develop a distinct relationship with Twitter followers include Fianna Fáil's announcement, first on Twitter, of the results of its leadership contest shortly before the campaign. Other parties released sections of policy documents first to social media followers before releasing them more generally.

Such attempts at a strategic use of Twitter took place against a background of Twitter-based controversies that had managed to capture the public – and media – imagination in the 18 months prior to the election. While Twitter was a significant element of the 2011 campaign, it was generally more gainfully employed by the observers, rather than by the participants,

including media organisations, political commentators and interested members of the electorate. Voters with a particularly well-informed view on a given topic could now contribute to online public debate alongside the political candidates – often getting a head start on the debate as Twitter discussions grew organically while candidates were embroiled in television or radio debates on the topic. The use of Twitter hashtags such as #ge11, (general election 2011), #rtedeb (RTÉ leaders' debate), #tv3ld (TV3 leaders' debate) provided online banners under which people gathered to follow and contribute to on-going discussions. The level of engagement in political conversation using social media could be seen in the levels of Twitter traffic around these hashtags: 63,000 tweets were sent using the #ge11 hashtag during the final four days of the campaign, while a further 22,000 were sent on the first day of the count (Healy, 2011). What was particularly interesting in the use of hashtags was the extent to which discussions grew using media hashtags such as #vinb (TV3's Vincent Browne Show), #lastword (Last Word radio show), #sixone (RTÉ's Six-One News), #twip (RTÉ's The Week in Politics) and #rtept (RTÉ's Prime Time). The widespread adoption of these hashtags meant that Twitter conversations and debates evolved around particular media programmes, often in parallel to the actual broadcast and sometimes in response to topics prompted by the producers. This parallel media experience, referred to as social viewing / listening was to become a challenge and opportunity for broadcasters. They could no longer expect to hold the exclusive attention of their audiences – but the flip side was the opportunity to feature centrally in the parallel social media conversation.

For party-based candidates, headquarters provided advice, training and support. There were attempts by most of the main parties at a 'one size fits all' approach to the adoption of social media by candidates. However, as with any skillset, there was a great variance in the expertise and experience across the range of candidates. The extent of the lower end of the

spectrum of social media experience was evident in the story of one incumbent politician asking for his social media communications to be restricted to voters in his constituency. The irony of a 'social' media being used by an organisation to emulate the expressions of individuals was not lost on social media commentator, Suzy Byrne (2011), who was unequivocal in her view of the use of social media accounts on a party-wide scale: 'Candidates who hand over control of their personal accounts to someone else are silly, parties who take control of their candidates accounts give the impression of a) having no faith in their candidates or b) having no clue or c) complete paranoia of message control.'

For independent candidates, social media could provide the proverbial level playing field, particularly if the candidate was prepared to really engage with voters. The 2011 election attracted 235 candidates outside the main five parties, with some 189 of these being free of any party affiliations (Wall, 2011). This was the greatest number of independent candidates in any Dáil election and provided an opportunity for the electorate to move away from traditional party politics. One such independent was 23-year-old student candidate, Dylan Haskins, who seemed to understand social media best practice: 'I'm taking questions from constituents and answering them on my website. It's a conversation, not a speech. It's a way of communicating with people' (Devlin, 2011). While candidate Haskins never made it to Deputy Haskins, successful independent candidates did ensure that they were sufficiently covered on the social media front. For example, Luke 'Ming' Flanagan had over 3,000 Twitter followers during the campaign, together with some 1,700 Facebook 'likes', while Michael Lowry boasted over 5,000 Facebook friends.

There were mixed opinions on the extent to which such electronic campaigning translated into votes. Positive correlations were found between a candidate's popularity on Facebook or

Twitter and the number of first preference votes they received (McMahon, 2011). However, this is just as likely to be an indication of the stronger candidates having adequately covered themselves on these social media platforms, rather than their election success having been due to their social media activities. Correlations can be made between the levels of internet activity by Fine Gael and the party's gradually-increasing support throughout the campaign, mapped by the various campaign polls. Much was made of the party's e-canvasser tool, based on Obama's 2008 approach and Fine Gael's temporary substitution of its party website and its use of Twitter. However, Fine Gael was also the largest opposition party to a government whose unpopularity was unprecedented, with a significant proportion of the electorate favouring anybody but Fianna Fáil.

Despite buying in the best advice on the subject, most candidates still failed to understand the 'social' part of social media. Many still considered this new form of communication as just another channel through which they should 'broadcast' their message to the electorate. The other misunderstanding that most candidates had was about the personal nature of social media. Given that it is an individual who subscribes, or follows, a particular social media account, it is most effective when the tone is that of an individual conversation, rather than an en masse 'my constituents' approach. The growth in the use of mobile devices to access social media services has increased this expectation of a personalised experience. Experiencing social media in this way suggests a personal relationship and, ironically, a level of privacy in the manner in which one communicates. It is not that social media participants expect the development of a unique relationship with each and every follower or subscriber, but that the attitude and tone of communication would be more closely related to a personal conversation rather than to a town hall meeting.

Creating, developing and maintaining social media communication in such a personal manner is time consuming. It also requires the ability to be comfortable with the conversational tone required. Most importantly, if it is to work well, it requires genuine engagement that can only work with two-way communication. In some respects, this is one of the hallmarks of Irish politics, i.e. that such a high number of voters have traditionally met and spoken to their preferred candidates. However, with some notable exceptions, the 2011 election campaign did not allow this traditional personal contact to transfer to social media conversations. Mirroring the perceived role of social media in the previous year's UK election, political commentator, Kevin Rafter, echoing the views of many commentators, was unambiguous about the overstated expectation of social media: 'Social media got plenty of attention, but in terms of political communication the 2011 election was all about television, and, in particular, about the televised leaders' debates' (Farrell et al, 2011).

Again, one must ask if the interactivity provided by social media is needed in a society where relatively easy access to personal contact with existing and aspiring deputies already exists. Conversely, as social media grows in everyday use, perhaps it will provide the means by which the electorate can continue to enjoy personal contact with their preferred candidates, but by electronic means. As to the impact of social media use on a candidate's potential for success in the 2011 general election, correlations have been made that suggest successful candidates had a higher social media profile (McMahon, 2011; Curran and Singh, 2011). However, one has to question the cause and effect for such correlations. Was the use of social media a determining factor in their electoral success or did the better-placed / better-resourced candidates ensure that they had an effective social media strategy? It is difficult to prove the former, while the latter could be assumed of all forms of political communication.

Presidential election 2011

If the social media revolution was to have the anticipated impact on Irish politics, then the Irish presidential election of 2011 would offer an opportunity to see this in action. Effectively, the entire state represented a single constituency for each candidate. Presidential elections are also, by definition, more personality focussed than other Irish elections. Given these factors, social media should provide a means to connect directly with potential voters and to represent the personal voice of the candidate to electors and to the media. Little did anyone know at the outset that a single tweet would ultimately tilt the balance to determine the outcome. With seven candidates, the 2011 election was to provide the greatest ever range of choice in an Irish presidential election. The inclusion of four independent candidates also diluted the influence of party allegiances in determining the outcome. These factors should have increased the potential for social media to influence the ebb and flow of electoral support during the campaign – whatever about influencing, or determining, the outcome.

In his analysis of the adoption of social media throughout the campaign, Ciarán McMahon, of candidate.ie, pointed to the 'upward only' general trend of social media followers, in that social media users rarely 'unfollow' or unlike accounts. Although McMahon was to revise that contention slightly as the campaign unfolded, the observation is a valid one and must be borne in mind when attempting to make any link between social media support and electoral support – each voter has only one vote, but can like as many candidates as takes their fancy. Despite that health warning, the five-week analysis of the social media 'support' for each candidate reflects the cut and thrust of the campaign as the ultimate real contenders became apparent. By the final week of the campaign, social media figures reflected the opinion poll results of a two-horse race between Seán Gallagher and Michael D. Higgins. While there was certainly a correlation between social media support and electoral support, it is likely that the

social media support was reflecting the wider electoral support, rather than the former determining the latter (see 'candidate.ie', blog entries at pages 1364, 1393, 1405, 1415 and 1430).

It was widely accepted throughout the campaign that Seán Gallagher was the candidate that was most effectively harnessing the potential of social media (Browne, 2011). As an independent candidate, the numbers of followers he garnered on Facebook and Twitter were impressive. Despite this, Gallagher was at one with each of the other candidates in using social media as a 'broadcast' medium, to 'push' their communications to voters. None of the presidential hopefuls adopted any aspect of social media in an interactive manner, either by inviting followers to influence the campaign or, indeed, in putting a question to their followers via social media. Whatever advantage the party-based candidates might have had in accessing other resources, very little attempt was made to harness the network of social media accounts of fellow-party politicians. When one considers the number of friends and followers connected with each individual account, it is quite surprising that party strategists did not capitalise on this social media potential.

Despite the social media shortcomings of the 2011 presidential election campaign, it will be remembered for the impact of social media on the outcome, or rather, the impact of one tweet in the dying days of the campaign. As the candidates gathered in an RTÉ studio for a final campaign debate hosted by the 'Frontline' current affairs programme, Seán Gallagher enjoyed a substantial lead in the polls that appeared to be growing as polling day approached. This lead was to be swept aside within 24 hours following the airing of a bogus tweet promising the appearance, at a press conference, of a witness to Gallagher's collection of funds for Fianna Fáil. This announcement seemed to completely wrong-foot Gallagher and

his inability to provide a solid response was reflected in the negative reaction of the studio audience. The swing against him was reflected in final opinion polls published in the following days before a media-blackout took effect.

Conclusion

'Tweet-gate', as the Gallagher affair came to be known, represented something of a watershed in the relationship between media (old and new) and politics. Many have attributed Gallagher's fall at the final hurdle to the use or abuse of social media; others have blamed sloppy journalism in the failure of the 'Frontline' team not to validate the source or content of the tweet. Others disregard the manner, or means, of the communication and point to the revelation of close ties between Gallagher and Fianna Fáil that had not previously been publicised. It is in this latter explanation that the truth about the potential of social media for Irish politics is to be found. In itself, social media will not radically change Irish political life. However, as a means to an end it does present important opportunities for new modes of genuinely two-way political communication. Regretfully, the most beneficial use of social media – that of real engagement with the electorate – is likely to be ignored in favour of its potential to damage opposing candidates' campaigns or to abuse politicians in relation to policy. The tragic suicide of Fine Gael TD, Shane MacEntee in December 2012 following persistent and anonymous abusive comments that were directed towards him on social media websites was a stark reminder of the potency of such technologies and the multitude of purposes to which they can be put.

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