

Why social media is in the doghouse for both the polities and the public

Written by Denis Muller, Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Advancing Journalism, University of Melbourne

The Labor Party's [recent decision](#) to ban its candidates from using their own social media accounts as publicity platforms at the next federal election may be a sign that society's infatuation with social media as a source of news and information is cooling.

Good evidence for this emerged recently with the publication of the 2018 findings from the [Edelman Trust Barometer](#)

. The annual study has surveyed more than 33,000 people across the globe about how much trust they have in institutions, including government, media, businesses and NGOs.

This year, there was a sharp increase in trust in journalism as a source of news and information, and a decline in trust in social media and search engines for this purpose. Globally, trust in journalism rose five points to 59%, while trust in social media and search engines fell two points to 51% – a gap of eight points.

In Australia, the level of trust in both was below the global average. But the 17 point gap between them was greater – 52% for journalism and 35% for social media and search engines.

Read more: [***Social media is changing the face of politics – and it's not good news***](#)

Consequences of poor social media savvy

Labor's decision may also reflect a healthy distrust of its candidates' judgement about how to use social media for political purposes.

Liberal Senator Jim Molan's [recent sharing of an anti-Islamic post](#) by the British right-wing extremist group Britain First on his Facebook account showed how poor some individual judgements can be.

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If ever there was a two-edged sword in politics, social media is it. It gives politicians a weapon with which to cut their way past traditional journalistic gatekeepers and [reach the public directly](#), but it also exposes them to public scrutiny with a relentless intensity that previous generations of politicians never had to endure.

This intensity comes from two sources: the 24/7 news cycle with the associated nonstop interaction between traditional journalism and social media, and the opportunity that digital technology gives everyone to jump instantaneously into public debate.

So Molan's stupidity, for example, now attracts criticism from the other side of the world. Brendan Cox, the widower of a British politician, Jo Cox, who was murdered by a man yelling "Britain first", [has weighed in](#).

The interaction between traditional journalism and social media also means [journalists can latch onto stories](#) much more quickly because there are countless pairs of eyes and ears out there tipping them off.

Read more: [***Social media can bring down politicians, but can it also make politics better?***](#)

The result of this scrutiny is that public figures can never be sure they are off-camera, as it were. This means there has been a significant reduction in their power to control the flow of information about themselves. They are liable to be "on the record" anywhere there is a mic or a smartphone – and may not even know it.

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton is caught on a boom mic quipping about the plight of Pacific Island nations facing rising seas from climate change. **Politics then and now**

On Sunday night, the ABC aired part one of the two-part documentary [Bob Hawke: The](#)

Larrikin and the Leader

In it, Graham Richardson says of Hawke:

He did some appalling things when drunk ... He was lucky that he went through an era where he couldn't be pinged. We didn't have the internet. We didn't have mobile phones. Let's face it, a Bob Hawke today behaving in the same manner would never become prime minister. He'd have been buried long before he got near the parliament.

Would we now think differently of a politician like Bob Hawke if some of his well-documented excesses had been captured and circulated on social media in this way?

Perhaps not. Hawke was of his time, an embodiment of the national mood and of what Australians imagine to be the national larrikin character. He might have thrived.

Hawke is still celebrated for his ability to scull a beer.

With Hawke, what you saw was what you got. So he had a built-in immunity to social media's particular strength: its capacity to show people up as ridiculous, dishonest or hypocritical.

And his political opponent Malcolm Fraser was, in his later years, [adept at using Twitter](#) to criticise the government of one of his Liberal successors as Prime Minister, Tony Abbott.

Yet by exerting the iron discipline for which he was famous, saying exactly what he wanted to say and not a word more, Fraser avoided the pitfalls that the likes of Senator Molan stumble into.

Indeed, US President Donald Trump's reputation for Twitter gaffes hasn't hurt his popularity among his base, and is even lauded by some as a [mark of authenticity](#) .

So it is likely that the politicians of the past would not have fared very differently from those of the present. The competent would have adapted and used social media to their advantage; the

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incompetent would have been shown up for what they are.

Read more: [Why social media may not be so good for democracy](#)

Social platforms under fire

Social media has the potential to [strengthen democratic life](#). It makes all public figures – including journalists – more accountable. But as we have seen, especially in the 2016 US presidential elections, it can also be used to [weaken democratic](#) life by amplifying the spread of false information.

As a result, [democracies everywhere are wrestling](#) with the overarching problem of how to make the giant social media platforms, especially Facebook, accountable for how they use their publishing power.

Out of all this, one trend seems clear: where news and information is concerned, society is no longer dazzled by the novelty of social media and is waking up to its weaknesses.

Denis Muller does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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