

Journalists and Twitter:

How Australian News Organisations Adapt to a New Medium

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Abstract

Twitter has developed an increasingly visible presence in Australian journalism, and in the discussion of news. Many journalists have begun to explore manageable approaches to incorporating *Twitter* into their work practices, and for some – like the ABC’s ‘star recruits’ Annabel Crabb and Latika Bourke – it has already become a career driver. This article examines the positioning of journalists as ‘personal brands’ on *Twitter*, by documenting the visibility of leading personal and institutional accounts during two major political events in Australia: the Rudd/Gillard leadership spill on 23 June 2010, and the day of the subsequent federal election on 21 August 2010. It highlights the fact that in third-party networks such as *Twitter*, journalists and news organisations no longer operate solely on their own terms, as they do on their own Websites, but gain and maintain prominence in the network and reach for their messages only in concert with other users. It places these observations in a wider context of journalist/audience relations, a decade after the emergence of the first citizen journalism Websites.

Introduction: Battle Lines

Adversarial relationships between professional journalists and their would-be challengers have been a consistent feature of discussion about the future of journalism in both scholarly and professional circles over the past decade. From the emergence of the first Independent Media Center to cover the ‘Battle of Seattle’ around the World Trade Organisation meeting there in 1999 (Meikle, 2002) to the establishment of alternative media and citizen journalism as stable, recognised practices, these very terms themselves have pointed to the positioning of these new news-related practices as responding to and opposing the status quo in the professional news industry. Indeed, even where they became (semi-)professionalised themselves, sites ranging from the *Huffington Post* through *OhmyNews* to the Australian alternative news site *Crikey* have retained their critical stance which focusses on highlighting the failings of the news industry at least as much as on providing critical perspectives on political events. (It should be noted, in fact, that much of the discussion relating to the engagement between ‘professional’ and ‘citizen’ journalists has tended to focus on *political* journalism. While journalism – and news – covers a much wider terrain than politics, it is in this area that the debate has been at its most heated. This article is no exception.)

This animosity has been fuelled as much by the inherently oppositional stance of many independent citizen journalists and news bloggers as by reactions from the industry itself, however. In Australia, in particular, some deep-seated fault lines remain, and become visible again especially in debates where journalistic principles and professional honour are at stake. During the 2007 Australian election campaign, for example, conservative broadsheet *The Australian* was stung into retaliation by Australian news bloggers’ persistent criticism of its overly optimistic evaluation of the conservative Coalition’s chances to retain power in the face of deeply unfavourable opinion polls; at the time, the paper denounced its critics as “sheltered academics and failed journalists who would not get a job on a real newspaper” (*The Australian*, 12 July 2007), and even several

months after the inevitable Labor victory, Political Editor Dennis Shanahan maintained the rage by claiming, counterfactually, that “statistical bloggers forever complain about reports of movements of less than 3 per cent and essentially want polls to be banished from newspapers and public debate except during an election” (Shanahan, 21 Feb. 2008).

Although less focussed around the interpretation of opinion polls by political journalists at *The Australian* and psephologist bloggers such as the pseudonymous Possum Comitatus (now blogging under the *Crikey* umbrella), and instead dominated by more general criticism of the quality of professional reporting during the campaign, similar animosities flared up again during the 2010 Australian federal election campaign. Here, strongly-worded critiques published on the pseudonymously authored blog *Grog’s Gamut* provided the catalyst; Grog’s suggestion that little would be lost if the media scrums following the two major party leaders on campaign were substantially reduced prompted ABC Managing Director Mark Scott to rethink the public broadcaster’s radio, TV, and online election coverage, for example (Scott, 2008). *The Australian*, by contrast, again reacted belligerently rather than introspectively to such criticism: journalist James Massola, who had known the pseudonymous Grog’s real identity for several months already, chose to reveal him as public servant Greg Jericho (Massola, 27 Sep. 2008) in what many commentators saw as an obvious attempt to bully an outspoken critic into silence, only limply invoking a “public interest” defence (Massola, 28 Sep. 2008).

Such examples demonstrate the persistent ‘us vs. them’ dynamics of relations between professional journalists and the news industry on the one hand, and citizen journalists and news bloggers on the other. These dynamics are made explicit in statements such as *The Australian’s* “unlike Crikey, we understand Newpoll because we own it” (12 July 2007), for example, as well as in its aggrandisement of the 2010 ‘Grogsgate’ controversy as “the great blog war of ‘10” (3 Oct. 2010). Especially where such rhetoric is taken up by the news bloggers and citizen journalists, too, it points to an underlying structural understanding of the news media ecology (in Australia as much as elsewhere) which divides participating organisations and individuals neatly into two groups: professional representatives of the news industry with its print and broadcast publications on the one side, and amateur commentators and critics, publishing their views online on a variety of blogs and similar sites, on the other.

Further, especially with the gradual development of relatively stable structures of influence and attention on the side of alternative media, in addition to the well-established mastheads and headline shows (and their respective online versions) of the news industry, combatants on both sides of the professional/amateur divide can be understood from this viewpoint to be operating in relatively clearly defined units: they each have their own publication spaces, large or small, which online are represented by specific domain names and associated publication platforms from *theaustralian.com.au* to *grogsgamut.blogspot.com*, and which are under the sole control of their respective operators. Where these spaces and platforms intersect, they do so by linking to or citing one another (a practice more common, it should be noted, in the pages of blogs and other alternative news sites than in the Websites of the news industry), but they do not blend or blur. If, following *The Australian’s* martial metaphors, the sometimes heated debates between industry journalists and their independent critics must be characterised as ‘blog wars’, then the picture which emerges from this description is one of mediaeval warfare between clearly arranged lines of soldiers, each wearing their regimental colours.

Modern Skirmishes

Whether – in actual as well as metaphorical war – such clean-cut heroic imagery ever resembled reality is a moot question. Today, at any rate, the battlefield situation has changed considerably, and the precise positioning of the troops is much more difficult to make out. To begin with, all three major Australian news organisations – News Ltd., Fairfax, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation – have over the past years launched or relaunched their own intermediate spaces for news commentary which combine the discursive elements of news blogging with the organisational imprint of a major news industry player: News operates *The Punch*, Fairfax reactivated its *National Times* brand, and the ABC rebadged its *Unleashed* opinion site as *The Drum*. (A fourth, similar space, *The Conversation*, operates independently with support from a consortium of

Australian universities.) Common to each of these Websites is that they draw on contributors ranging from in-house journalistic staff through recognised external experts to well-known political bloggers; now unmasked, *Grog's Gamut's* Greg Jericho regularly contributes to *The Drum*, for example, in addition to continuing his own blog.

Already, in this context, any warlike rhetoric which pits bloggers and other independent news commentators against the news industry proper hardly seems appropriate any more; dependent on one's perspective, one might say that news bloggers have infiltrated or been coopted into the industry (Highfield & Bruns, 2012). A reverse movement (from industry to independent spaces) is less prominent, perhaps, even though some journalists and professional political pundits do comment on independent news blogs or operate their own blogs and commentary sites with varying degrees of independence from their mastheads.

What the Websites found in this more complex and interconnected picture of the news mediasphere continue to have in common, however, is that they are controlled by their operators; content is posted under specific mastheads, and it is these mastheads, and the journalistic or parajournalistic ethos for which they stand, which signal to readers the context of articles and comments. Few committed, regular readers are likely to confuse the Websites of *ABC News Online* and *The Australian*, or even of *ABC News Online* and the ABC's *The Drum*; few, too, will fail to identify the distinctions between leading Australian political blogs *Larvatus Prodeo*, *Club Troppo*, or *Catallaxy*.

The situation is further complicated, however, by the rise of additional, third-party spaces for the exchange and discussion of news (amongst other purposes): by the emergence, in particular, of *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Of these, it has been the latter which has been especially prominent in the discussion of news and current affairs in Australia and elsewhere: due to the flat and open network structures which its underlying technology enables, it is particularly easy to form *ad hoc* interest publics around current and emerging issues on *Twitter* (Bruns & Burgess, 2011a), and this has been evident in the context of a number of key political developments in Australia in recent years.

The introduction of such social media spaces as platforms for political debate fundamentally changes the rules of the contest. In the first place, it has the potential to undermine the power of the masthead: what *Twitter* users share as they discuss political events are links to individual articles that may be just as likely to exist on the Website of *The Australian* as on a random political blog; if other users click on those links at all, then, they are likely to encounter articles and opinions drawn from a broad range of Websites. (Similar arguments have also been made for news aggregators such as *Google News*, which Rupert Murdoch has accused of "stealing" NewsCorp content; cf. Smillie, 2009.) *Twitter*, in other words, serves to atomise the news: inherently, the social feed of links to information which other participants have deemed to be interesting enough to share is considerably more diverse than the RSS feed of new stories which followers of any one news Website or blog would have received in the past. The more users come to rely on *Twitter* and other social media platforms as a means of discovering what is happening in the world – in other words, the more they move from news consumption practices based on subscribing to news updates or even searching for news through *Google* and other search engines (where personal preferences for specific mastheads may still be exercised as users select from the available search results), and move towards a 'news will find me' mentality –, the less likely are they going to be to receive news only from any one specific news outlet. This user-driven processing, atomisation, and reconstitution of the overall newshole through collective social media information sharing activities presents a significant challenge for established news brands (cf. Hermida, 2010; Neuberger, 2010).

Second, on *Twitter* even more so than in many other social media spaces, it is also especially difficult for such news brands to carve out a space of their own. While various news organisations have now established their own branded pages on *Facebook*, for example, such opportunities for customisation do not exist on *Twitter*; brands are able to create whole-of-organisation accounts, of course, but such accounts compete for attention and followers on even terms with all other *Twitter* participants. This is not to suggest that *Twitter* accounts such as @abcnews have not been able to amass a substantial amount of followers, but greater visibility of such accounts on *Twitter* depends not only on the number of followers they have accumulated, but

also on the willingness of those followers to further disseminate (retweet) the messages originating from the account. Additionally, general organisational accounts are often unable or unwilling to respond effectively to comments and questions received as private or public replies from their followers, acting instead purely as one-directional mechanisms for disseminating pointers to newly-published news updates.

Although this may add to an already busy work schedule, individual journalists are better placed to engage in actual conversations with their audiences through social media such as *Twitter*, and indeed, several prominent Australian journalists have begun to do so, with some even building up their personal reputations to a considerable extent through such processes; notably, journalist Latika Bourke, one of the most visible Australian *Twitter* users in the field of news and politics, was appointed by the ABC as its first dedicated social media reporter in December 2010 (*ABC TV Blog*, 2010). In such cases, however, the individual *becomes* the brand, perhaps to an even greater extent than the news organisation with which they are affiliated, and news is thereby atomised from that perspective, too: news stories encountered by readers because they were shared on *Twitter* by a specific journalist may no longer be understood by readers as bearing the imprint of a trusted news organisation, but the byline or personal endorsement of that journalist (for an international perspective on journalists' emerging *Twitter* practices, also cf. Lasorsa *et al.*, 2012).

This article examines the positioning of journalists as 'personal brands' on *Twitter*, by documenting the visibility of leading personal and institutional accounts during two major political events in Australia: the Rudd/Gillard leadership spill on 23 June 2010, and the day of the subsequent federal election on 21 August 2010. It highlights the fact that in third-party networks such as *Twitter*, journalists and news organisations no longer operate solely on their own terms, as they do on their own Websites, but gain and maintain prominence in the network and reach for their messages only in concert with other users. As social media such as *Twitter* establish themselves as important spaces for the dissemination and discussion of news within the wider media ecology, this points to a need to further redefine professional journalistic practices.

Journalists, Twitter, and Breaking News: #spill and #ausvotes

The roles played by individual journalists on *Twitter* can be best highlighted by their participation in the coverage of breaking news stories. During such acute events (Burgess & Crawford, 2011), the activities of interested users converge in a collaborative effort to 'work the story' by finding and disseminating the latest information on the event, wherever it may be found; users will do so through processes of gatewatching (Bruns, 2005) which see them identify and link to relevant material found elsewhere online, as well as further disseminating available information by retweeting other users' messages. These processes can take place, where necessary, without the direct involvement of individual journalists' and generic organisational accounts, but such accounts can also play an important role in helping to facilitate and curate the processes of news dissemination and discussion which unfold, and in thereby driving reader traffic to their own news sites.

Our analysis in the following case studies builds on

User	@replies/retweets received
KevinRuddPM	641
KevinRuddExPM	426
malcolmturnbull	376
unsungsongs	248
jeamland	247
penbo	238
annabelcrabb	238
timcashmere	228
latikambourke	213
_leo_s	133
crisdeal	114
CatherineDeveny	113
Tzarimas	109
miafreedman	104
craigreucassel	100
KevinDuddPM	100
kathoc	94
sunriseon7	93
charliepick	93
renailmay	92
KateLundy	92
abcnews	91
mediahunter	87
thewetmale	84
Warlach	84

Fig. 1: Most Visible #spill Contributors

comprehensive datasets of hashtagged tweets which were gathered through the *Twitter* data capture tool *yourTwrapperkeeper*. The tool captures all tweets, including @replies and retweets, which contain the specified hashtags or keywords, excepting only retweets which are made using the *Twitter* retweet button (rather than by citing a previous tweet in a form similar to “RT @user tweet”). These datasets, which contain the tweets themselves as well as related metadata (such as user information and timestamps), were then processed using a number of custom tools which, *inter alia*, compute the number of tweets sent by or directed at (as @mentions) the *Twitter* accounts present in each dataset. (For further details on the methods and tools used in capturing and analysing hashtagged *Twitter* data, see Bruns, 2011; Bruns & Liang, 2012.)

The dramatic rumours of a potential leadership spill in the Australian Labor Party which unfolded in the evening of 23 June 2010 and resulted in the replacement of first-term Prime Minister Kevin Rudd by his deputy Julia Gillard provide an early Australian example of such an acute, political event. A close examination of *Twitter* activity patterns during the key hours between 7 p.m. (when first rumours of a spill emerged) and midnight (by which time they had been confirmed), especially within the #spill hashtag (the key mechanism for coordinating discussion of the topic), provides useful insights into how journalists and news organisations had adapted to the platform by that time. In total, some 26,000 tweets using the #spill hashtag were made that night.

A first useful measure is visibility: the extent to which journalists and news organisations are represented amongst the users whose public messages bearing the #spill hashtag were replied to or (manually) retweeted most frequently (fig. 1). Here, it is immediately notable that journalists (shown in bold) play a role, but not the most important role: even excepting the accounts @KevinRuddPM (which is mentioned frequently in #spill tweets, but does not reply), @KevinRuddExPM (a fake account becoming active and receiving substantial numbers of retweets only towards the end of the night), or @malcolmturnbull (the former opposition leader whose few tweets were widely retweeted), non-journalists such as @unsungsongs and @jeamland, who actively pursued and discussed the emerging story on *Twitter*, received more @replies and manual retweets than the journalists actually reporting on it.

A further striking observation is that the accounts of these individual journalists are considerably more visible than those of larger news organisations: amongst the 25 most visible accounts, only @sunriseon7 and @abcnews represent institutional accounts of any form; all others are directly associated with individuals, and are often bearing some variation of their name.

A closer examination of their activity patterns reveals some further differences in their approach to using *Twitter* to address the spill event, however. Of the four most visible journalists contributing to the #spill coverage, Leo Shanahan (@_leo_s) and Latika Bourke (@latikambourke) are early adopters of the #spill hashtag, while David Penberthy (@penbo) and Annabel Crabb (@annabelcrabb) join in to a considerable extent only much later in the evening (fig. 2a); this, on the other hand, has only a limited impact on the extent to which their messages are retweeted by other users: Penberthy’s generally small number of #spill tweets nonetheless result in a substantial number of retweets by other users, for example (fig. 2b).

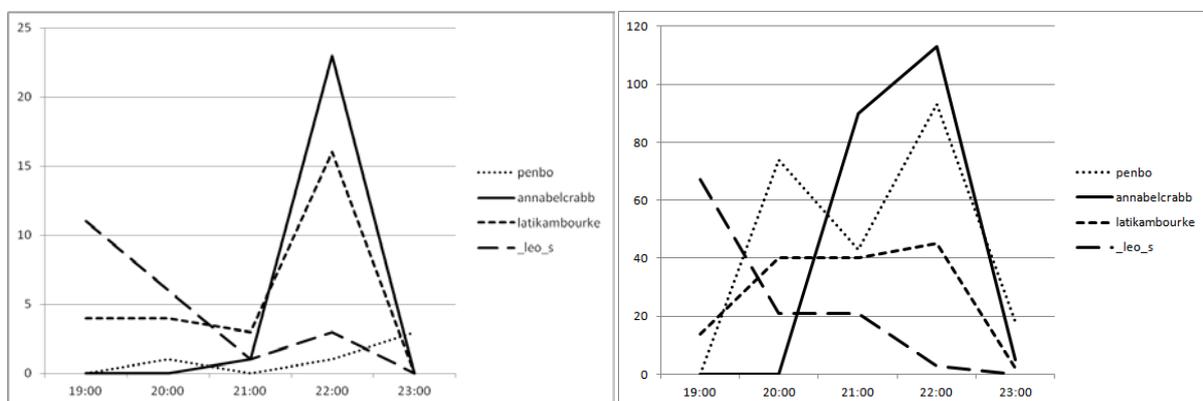


Fig. 2: a) #spill Tweets by Most Visible Journalists; b) Retweets of Messages by Most Visible Journalists

Similar patterns are evident also for the two most visible institutional accounts (fig. 3): @sunriseon7 tweeted to #spill only a handful of times over the course of the five hours examined here, while none of @abcnews' tweets contained the #spill hashtag. Nonetheless, the messages from both accounts were amplified through retweeting by other *Twitter* users – which in the case of the @abcnews account must mean that retweeting users manually *added* the #spill hashtag to the messages they passed along. This demonstrates a form of gatewatching which takes place *within* the medium of *Twitter* itself: users encountering non-hashtagged messages relating to certain themes manually add relevant hashtags as they are retweeting them in order to thereby make those messages more visible to other interested followers of those hashtags.

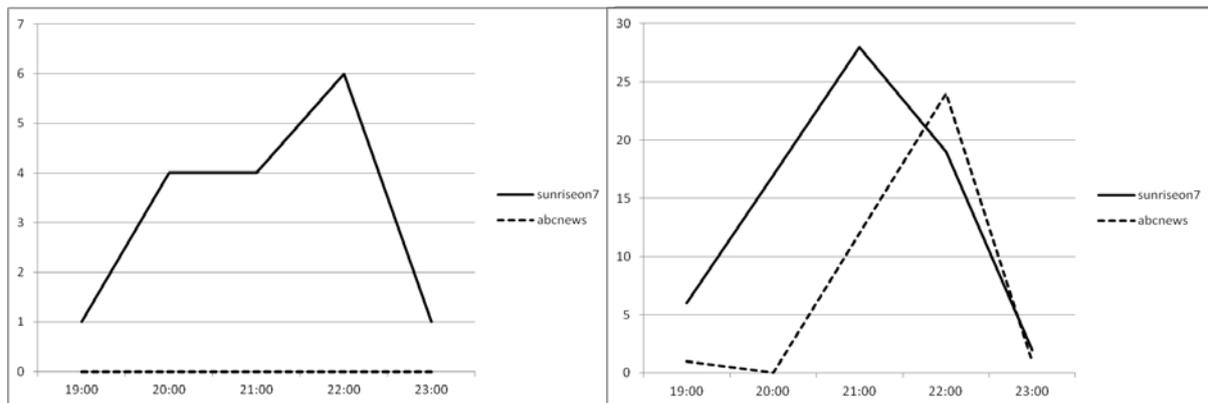


Fig. 3: a) #spill Tweets by Most Visible Institutions; b) Retweets of Messages by Most Visible Institutions

Finally, it is also notable that of the six accounts examined here, very few engaged in any significant way with other *Twitter* users through hashtagged @replies. Annabel Crabb sent some eight genuine @replies to other users in the hour between 10 and 11 p.m.; David Penberthy twice mentioned the fake account @KevinRuddExPM during the following hour; and @sunriseon7 sent one response to another user – if *Twitter* can also be a medium for the discussion of news and current events, then, the #spill dataset shows little evidence that journalists and news organisations are willing to participate publicly in this process. However, it should also be noted that public @replies sent to other users often do not contain hashtags, even if the tweet being replied to did; if journalists and news organisations did engage with their followers by sending non-hashtagged @replies to them, these tweets would not be included in the present dataset.

These patterns can be usefully compared with journalistic uses of *Twitter* during other, slightly more recent political events in Australia. One obvious point of comparison is the night of 21 August 2010, during which the federal election called shortly after Julia Gillard's ascension to the Prime Ministership was decided (also see Bruns & Burgess, 2011b). With over 66,000 tweets bearing the #ausvotes hashtag made between 6 p.m. and midnight that night, this, too, was a major *Twitter* event in Australia; in this case, however, journalists were notably more strongly represented.

In the #ausvotes case, all eight of the most visible accounts are journalists or represent news organisations (fig. 4). In addition to Crabb and Bourke, several other journalists' personal accounts are also present, as are the dedicated election accounts @abcelections and @vote7news, the overall @abcnews account, as well as the personal account of ABC Managing Director Mark Scott. Indeed, it is notable that seven of the eleven journalistic accounts included in the 25 most visible *Twitter* accounts on election night represent ABC journalists or institutional accounts (and another, then-ZUE reporter Latika Bourke, would join the ABC in December 2010).

A number of other leading accounts are also associated with media and political personalities – party leaders @juliagillard and @senatorbobbrown are highly visible, as are newly elected Greens MP @adambandt and the overall @greens account; *New Inventors* panellist Mark Pesce (@mpesce), *Triple J* account @doctortriplejpm, and comedians @lawrence_leung, @benpobjie, and Chas Licciardello (@chaslicc) also appear. If this suggests a domination of the *Twitter* #ausvotes discussion by journalists, politicians, and celebrities, in comparison to the more open field of participants in #spill, then the substantially more

foreseeable nature of election night should be taken into account here – these highly visible participants had considerably more time to prepare for the *Twitter* coverage of the event. Additionally, of course, it should be noted again that visibility as we have measured it here is determined solely by the amount of @mentions and manual retweets received from *other Twitter* users; in other words, it depends on the actions of others, not simply on the performance of journalists and news organisations themselves.

Activity patterns over time for the four leading accounts show marked differences to the #spill event, too (fig. 5). In the first place, a far more significant commitment to using the #ausvotes hashtag is evident. This is especially notable for the generic @abcnews account: where in June, its tweets relating to the leadership spill did not use the #spill hashtag at all, in August it averages some 17 tweets per hour using the #ausvotes hashtag. This alone is likely to account for its much greater visibility within the #ausvotes hashtag feed: inevitably, messages bearing the hashtag are also more likely to be seen and retweeted by *Twitter* users following the hashtag, thereby further boosting their visibility and dissemination across the Australian Twittersphere; in all, the 102 #ausvotes tweets made by @abcnews during these five hours resulted in 857 retweets. At the same time, mere activity does not guarantee a similarly boosted visibility through retweeting, as the @vote7news account demonstrates: its 53 #ausvotes tweets resulted in ‘only’ 201 retweets. If on average, each @vote7news tweet resulted in four retweets, then, compared to more than eight for @abcnews, tweet content rather than mere frequency of posting is likely to have played a role here. Similar differences in content are also likely to explain the different patterns between Bourke and Crabb. While overall, Bourke consistently tweeted slightly more frequently than Crabb, it was Crabb whose messages received considerably more retweets; her somewhat more flippant online persona may account for the discrepancy. None of the most visible accounts, it should be noted, were significantly active in engaging with their followers through hashtagged @replies; as noted above, however, no information is available on the number of non-hashtagged @replies they may have sent over the same period.

User	@replies/retweets received
annabelcrabb	1566
abcnews	1065
latikambourke	443
vote7news	377
abcelections	372
catherinedeveny	298
abcmarkscott	297
renailemay	270
warlach	263
lawrence_leung	255
leighsales	237
mpesce	231
greens	231
adambandt	227
juliagillard	204
gevauden	202
antonygreenabc	197
senatorbobbrown	195
greenj	195
macleanbrendan	192
doctortriplejpm	172
benpobjie	161
nickporter	158
emma_rodgers	155
chaslicc	152

Fig. 4: Most Visible #ausvotes Contributors

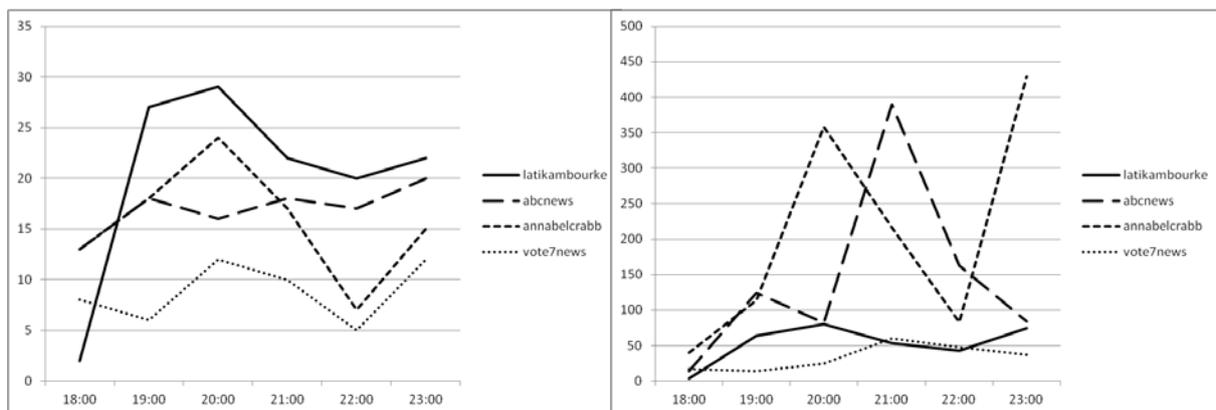


Fig. 5: a) #ausvotes Tweets by Most Visible Accounts; b) Retweets of Messages by Most Visible Accounts

Conclusion: Adapting to Twitter as a Medium for News Dissemination

The examples of the June 2010 Labor leadership challenge and the subsequent election already point to the substantial role which *Twitter* can and does play in Australian online news; it is used for disseminating and discussing the latest breaking news, as well as for covering more foreseeable events in politics and other fields. Especially in these latter cases, Australian journalists and news organisations – led by the ABC and its staff – have already made significant progress in establishing themselves in this medium, too, as key sources of information, and (to differing degrees) have found approaches to tweeting which also result in considerable visibility through retweets and replies from other *Twitter* users. To the extent that #spill and #ausvotes can be compared as *Twitter* news events, a certain learning curve may also be discerned here: certainly, accounts like @abcnews have learnt to be substantially more proactive in including hashtags in their *Twitter* messages, thereby reaching a wider number of users.

At the same time, the patterns observed in these brief case studies also point to the fact that regardless of what news organisations they are associated with, individual journalists and political commentators appear to remain substantially more able to generate significant visibility on *Twitter* than news organisations themselves; *Twitter* visibility appears driven by individual personality, not institutional imprint. Additionally, *commercial* Australian news organisations appear to be conspicuously absent at least in the two cases examined here; except for two accounts related to the Seven Network, and a handful of notable political commentators from the commercial side of the industry (@penbo, @catherinedeveny), they remain comparatively invisible. If this represents a continuing reluctance to engage with and in non-proprietary, third-party spaces for news discussion and dissemination, stemming from the ‘us vs. them’ attitudes prevalent in the past decade, such news organisations are effectively excluding themselves from an important part of the information market; *Twitter*, and social media more generally, are now well established as important sources of news-related information for their users. Such notes of caution must also apply where moves to introduce paywall systems restricting access to news Websites also prevent users from sharing links to interesting stories through *Twitter* and similar media: much as was the case with short-lived attempts during the past decade to restrict ‘deep linking’ to specific stories on a news Website (see e.g. Delio, 2002), such artificial limitations do little more than to undermine the circulation of a given news organisation’s content through the online mediasphere, thereby making the organisation overall appear less visible and less relevant.

By contrast, it would appear that a more productive way of maintaining and improving a news organisation’s prominence in the mediasphere would be to encourage more journalistic staff to become active on *Twitter* and in other, similar media forms; to create personal accounts for professional use and to promote their own and their colleagues’ journalistic work. Regular activity of this sort alone, using relevant hashtags and sharing up-to-date information, appears to be able to generate significant visibility. Whether it is also necessary to engage directly in @reply conversations with other users is less evident from the data presented here; further research will be required to explore journalists’ day-to-day professional activities on *Twitter*, beyond breaking news and major events, in more detail. What does appear certain is that any careful structural distinctions between journalists and audiences, between professionals and amateurs, between ‘us’ and ‘them’ are no longer sustainable: in the news dissemination and discussion spaces of social media, we’re all just sharing what we know.

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Fig. 2a)

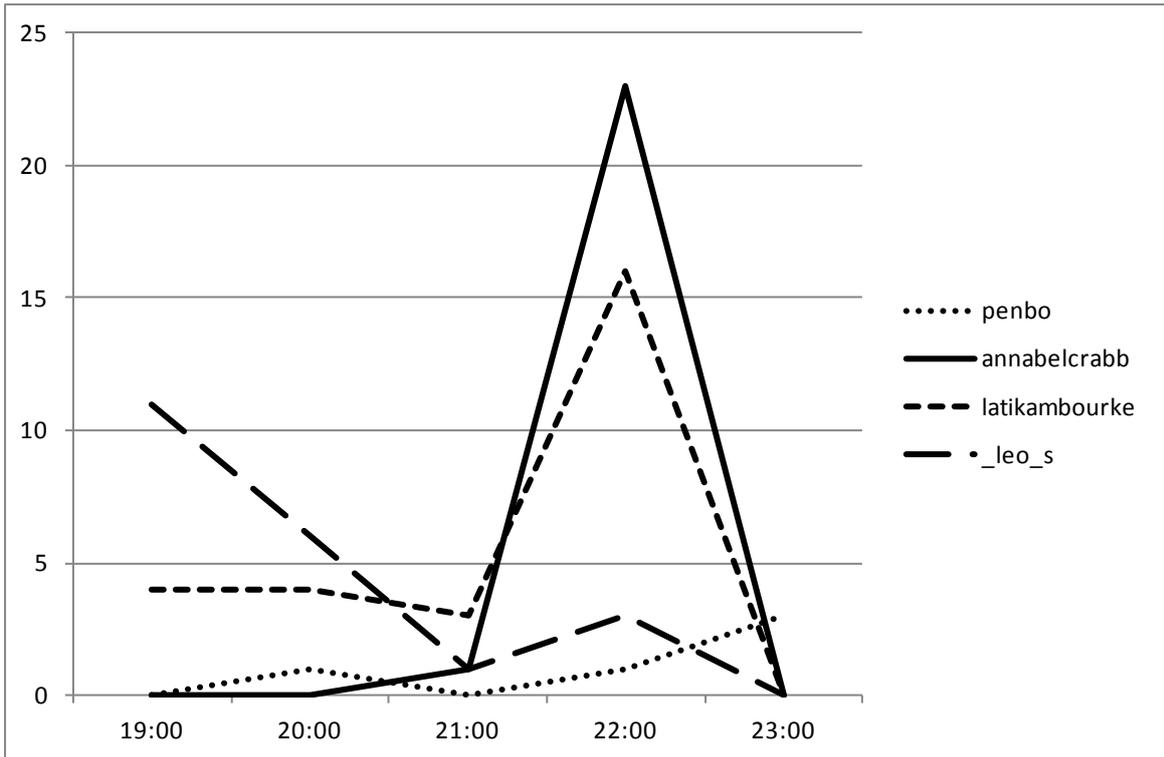


Fig. 2b)

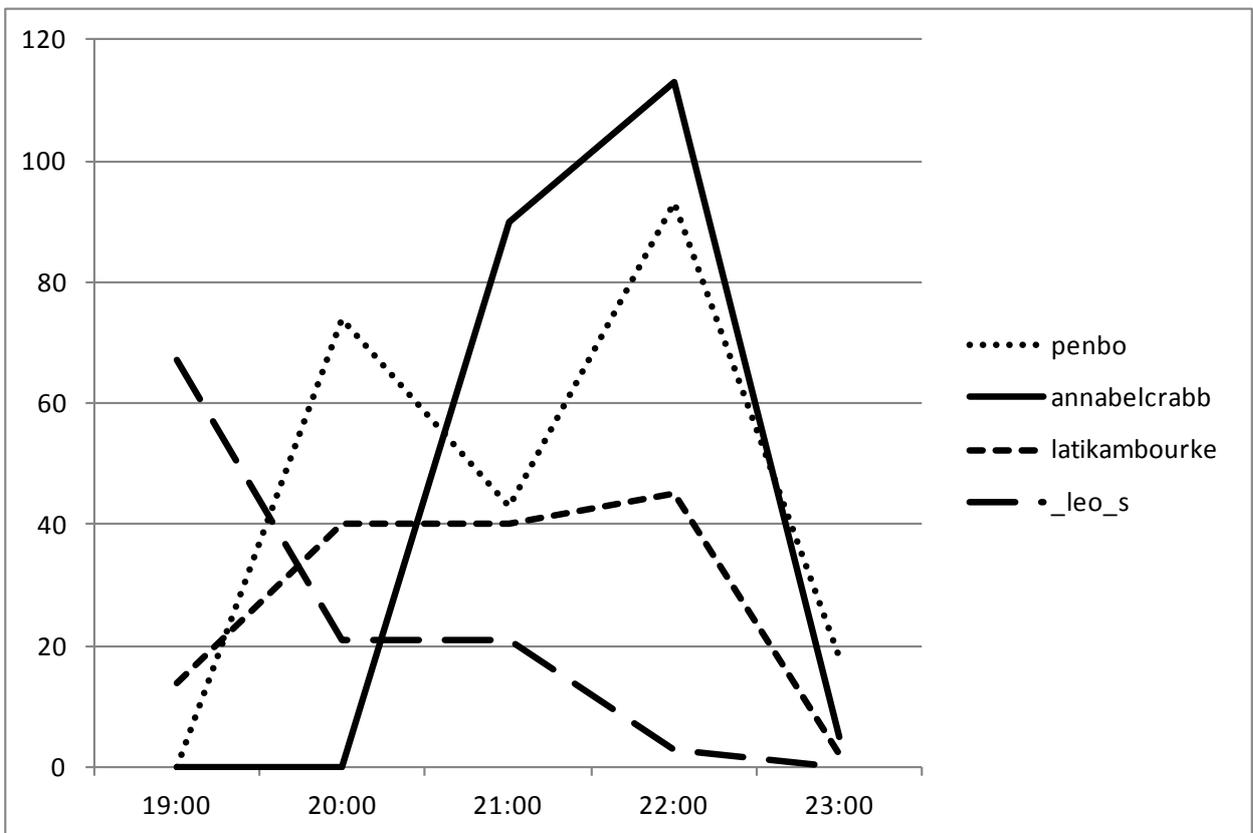


Fig. 3a)

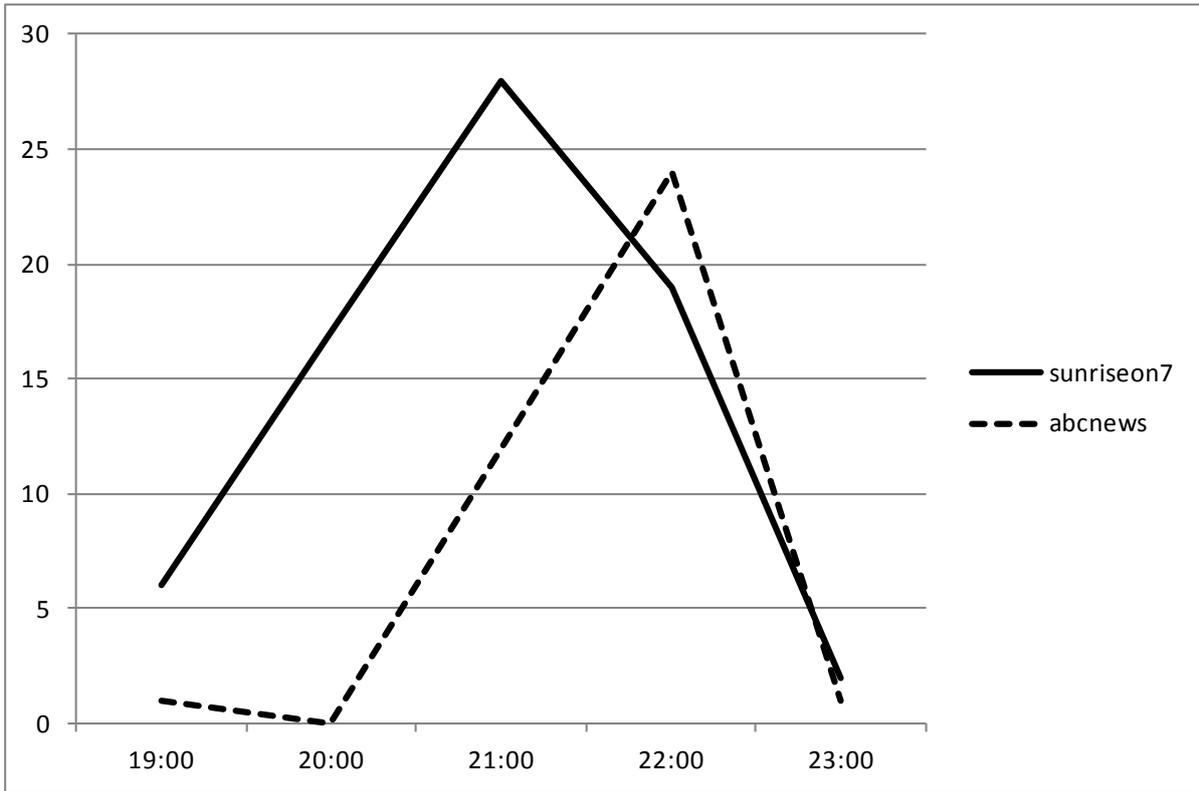


Fig. 3b)

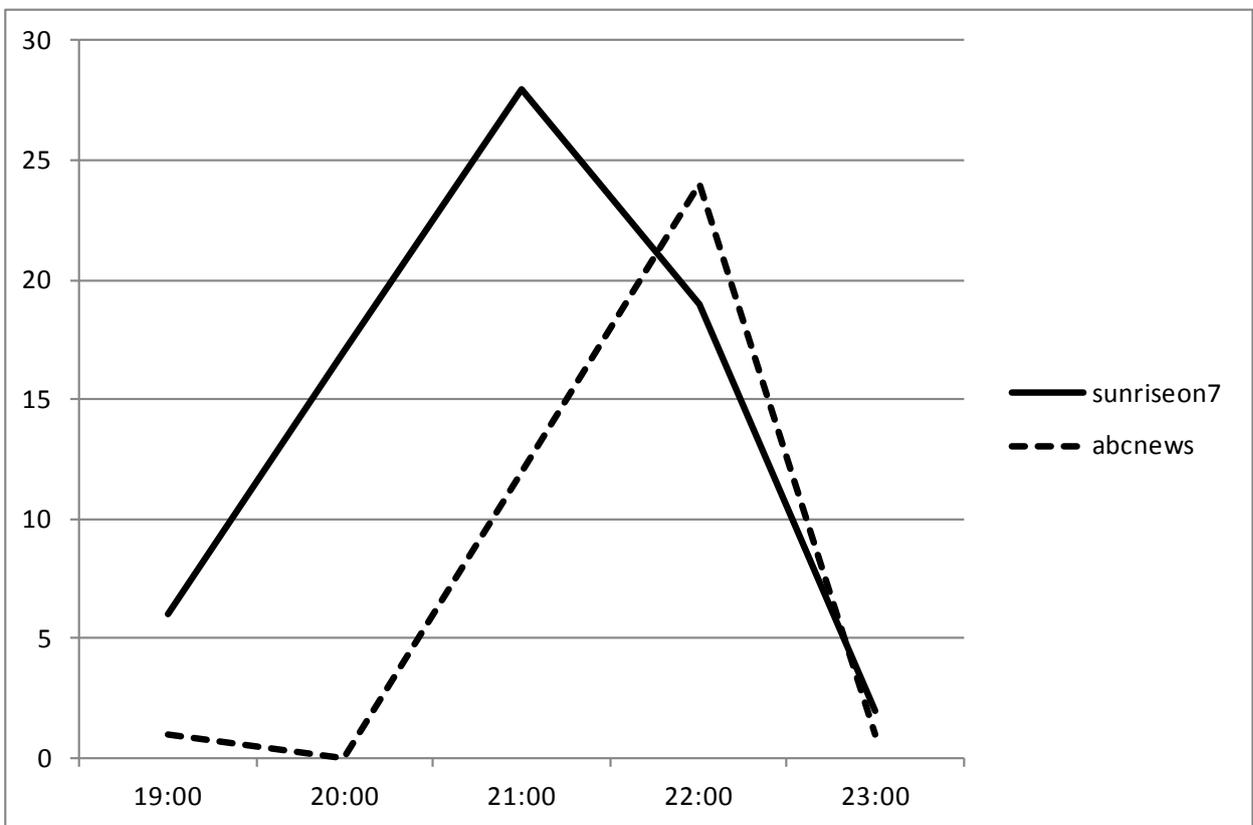


Fig. 5a)

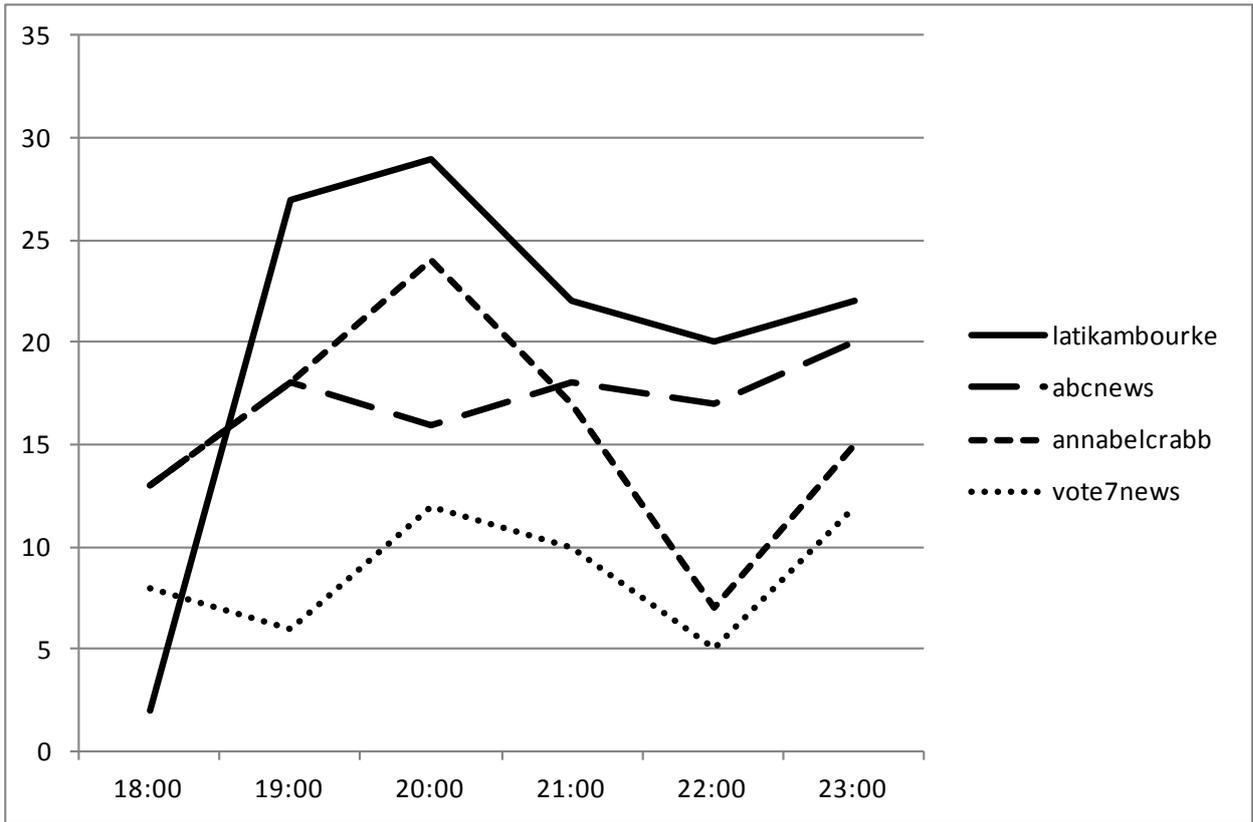


Fig. 5b)

