



**Maynooth  
University**  
National University  
of Ireland Maynooth

**What is the role of social media in a general  
election campaign? A case study of the 2016 Irish  
General Election**

**Third Year Special Topics Research Project**

**Submitted by:**

Hannah Byrne O'Morain

**Department:** Politics

**Special Topic Supervisor:** Dr. Barry Cannon

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## Abstract

This project aims to uncover the role of social media in a general election campaign, using the 2016 Irish General Election as a case study. Social media has become an important part of our every day lives, and it is important to consider the possible impact these tools could have on our political process, including their influence on the actions of politicians. Building on existing literature around political participation and social media, as well as literature on the use of social media in a general election campaign, this project hopes to provide an Irish perspective to the subject. Two main themes emerged in this study on the use of social media by political parties and candidates – *social media as a means of broadcast and consumption* and *social media as a means of involvement and influence*. This project found that, by and large, Irish political parties and politicians use social media primarily as a broadcasting tool during election campaigns to communicate their message to voters. This use of social media far exceeded its use for engagement and discussion with voters and the question of whether and how this balance will change in the future provides exciting prospects for research in this area.

## **1. Introduction**

On February 3, 2016, An Taoiseach Enda Kenny announced he would be dissolving Dáil Éireann and an election would be held on February 26. This was not announced on national news, it was not even announced on national radio. This was not done via press release or revealed in a newspaper. Enda Kenny announced the election on Twitter. The date of the election wasn't even told directly to sitting TDs in the Dáil that morning. Instead the Taoiseach took to social media to inform the country of possibly the most important political event of the year. This decision to choose a social media website over all other forms of communication - including face-to-face communication with his fellow Teachta Dála in the Dáil Chamber - is telling. More and more of our daily lives have been moving online. Our primary means of communication are becoming digital and increasing numbers of the Irish population are on social media. According to Ipsos MRBI (2016), as of January 2016, 63% of the Irish population are on Facebook, and 31% are on Twitter. Of those people who are on Facebook, 74% use it daily, while 35% of Twitter users use the website daily.

There was a lot of speculation among Irish media about whether or not this election would be the “social media election” which led to a flurry of discussions on Irish radio and television and a number of articles across Irish newspapers. Many people attribute the first serious use of social media in a general election campaign to Barack Obama in his 2008 presidential campaign. According to Mark Little, the Vice President for media in Europe and Africa with Twitter, discussed Obama's use of social media explaining how he was able to bypass traditional structures and engage directly with the electorate. According to Little, social media is “where people live”, and so social media is another door that politicians need to be knocking on (Gleeson, 2016). It was evident over the course of the campaign, to anyone who was looking, that candidates were much more active on social media during those 3

weeks in February. Politicians know they need to start using social media, but the question is whether or not they have figured out the best way to use it. Many commentators suggest that they haven't (Cochrane, 2016; Greene, 2016; James, 2016).

This project aims to look at many of the questions raised over the course of the election campaign around how important social media really is. The following are the research questions and sub questions.

### **Research Question**

What is the role of social media in a general election campaign? A case study of the 2016 Irish General Election

### **Sub Questions:**

1. How do political parties and candidates use social media during their campaigns?
2. How are users of social media engaging with political parties and politicians online?
3. How do political parties and candidates judge the value of social media in a campaign?
4. Has social media come to replace traditional media in campaigning?

### **Hypotheses:**

1. Social media is becoming increasingly important in a general election campaign.
2. Despite its growing importance, social media has not overtaken traditional media in importance for general election campaigns.

To begin, Chapter 2 will provide a review of the literature written on this subject thus far - Ireland is not the only country where these questions are being asked and much of the literature reviewed comes from the USA and other parts of Europe. This project hopes to contribute to this literature by providing an Irish perspective on the topic. The literature review addresses two main themes - social media as a means of broadcast and consumption,

and social media as a means of involvement and influence. By carrying out this research I hope to identify which of these two themes Irish use of social media on the part of political parties falls into. The next chapter is the methodology which will provide an overview of the qualitative approach and why this approach was taken. It will also explain in more detail the two methods chosen - interviews and content analysis. In Chapter 4, the findings and analysis section will discuss the data gathered and contextualise this data within the existing literature. At this point, this project will be placed within one of the two themes identified. The final chapter, Chapter 5, will conclude and reflect on the overall research process and identify areas for further study on this topic.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This topic points towards two areas of study - first towards political participation and how social media can be used to increase participation among citizens in the political and electoral process. Secondly towards election campaigns and how social media tools can be incorporated into a party or a candidate's campaign. To begin, this literature review will discuss the concept of political participation in order to provide a framework of understanding of political participation in the context of social media. Having provided a theoretical framework, the next section will look at the links between social media and political participation. At this point, two main themes emerge: social media as a means of broadcast and consumption, and social media as a means of involvement and influence. With these two themes in mind, the review will continue to look at work carried out on political participation and social media. The next few sections will turn to election campaigns, and how parties and candidates have used social media in their campaigns in other countries. This will also be placed within the two main themes.

### **2.2 Political Participation**

Lawrence (1975) discusses two concepts of political participation. The first concept is "participation as interaction", focusing on the way the individual identifies and engages with the interests of the community and works with others to achieve a common goal (1975: 454-5). The second concept is "participation as instrumental action", which Lawrence argues is related to the idea of influence and power and advancing individual interests while attempting to "influence the distribution of power" (ibid: 455). Interactional participation is defined by the process of political communication between citizens and groups "especially those organised around interests or issues that are general to the community". This communication



is carried out through “speech, through political argument and persuasion” (ibid: 456). Considering the potential contribution of social media to this kind of participation, it is possible to see how using social networking sites, such as Facebook, for example, could allow for the expansion of this kind of communication into the online arena. Users are able to create Facebook groups based on specific interests and carry out discussion and debate and organise themselves to then bring their ideas out into the wider political arena.

The second concept of participation, instrumental action, concerns itself with “gaining influence with elites” and exercising citizenship through the deployment of power and this kind of participation is linked to “self-interest and the need for legitimacy” (Lawrence, 1975: 459). Voting can be seen as an example of this kind of participation, as citizens exercise their right to determine the distribution of power, selecting a party or candidate on the basis of their own interests (ibid: 459). This kind of instrumental power is particularly relevant for this project as the focus is on electoral campaigns and how social media is used to try and influence the way people vote. Voting is seen as the most important form of participation around election time, and not only are parties and politicians encouraging people to get registered and to go out on polling day, they are also trying to convince voters that their policies would best suit their individual interests.

Brady et al. (1995) discuss a resource model of participation, listing the main resources that determine participation as “time to take part in political activity, money to make contributions, and civic skills (i.e., the communications and organisational skills that facilitate effective participation)” (1995: 271). Time and money are seen as the two “prime resources” - time can be used through volunteering with a campaign or attending a meeting, while money refers to donating to political campaigns, candidates, parties or organisations (ibid: 273). In terms of civic skills, the authors argue that “citizens who can speak or write well or who are comfortable organising and taking part in meetings are likely to be more

effective when they get involved in politics” and the places where people are expected to learn these civic skills are those arenas of early political socialisation - the home and school (ibid: 273). Later in life, adults can develop civic skills further in work, by volunteering, or through religious associations like the church (ibid: 273). An example of how social media can help to develop civic skills was found in Vitak et al. (2011) in which the authors suggest that use of Facebook for political activity allows young people to practise their civic skills, which may lead to more political participation, “with a minimal commitment of time and effort” (2011: 112). This finding justifies the need to look further into the relationship between political participation and social media if it leads to a positive outcome for users.

### **2.3 Political Participation and Social Media**

Boulianne (2015) provides a meta-analysis of 36 studies researching the relationship between the use of social media and political participation. This article is a useful starting point, as it provides an overview of much of the research that has been carried out so far. Boulianne outlines the different ways in which people can use social media and how these uses could impact on their participation. Firstly, she discusses the theory that social media is primarily for gathering information by reading updates posted by “family, friends or traditional news media organisations” (2015: 525). Research shows “approximately half of Facebook users get their news through Facebook”, and whether directly or indirectly, this can help to broaden the users’ knowledge on political issues and may lead to participation in “civic and political life” (ibid: 525). The second theory discussed by Boulianne looks at “the role of social media in creating social network ties that can be mobilised”, focusing on three strands: network size; “social ties to groups, organisations and activists”; and “diffusion through peer groups” (ibid: 525). In relation to the first strand, through the use of social media, it is argued, social networks expand and more information around politics and political participation is filtered

through. This may “increase the chance of being asked to participate in civic and political life” (ibid: 525). Research related to the second strand “focuses on ties to political or activist organisations” and how groups surrounding certain political or social issues are sustained online. Participation with these online groups is likely to lead to volunteering and other forms of civic activism (ibid: 525). The final strand of network research looks at whether or not “civic and political participation is contagious among members of a social network” - in other words, are users influenced by the political views expressed by their peers online? (ibid: 526). Boulianne’s findings suggest “a positive relationship between social media use and participation in civic and political life” (ibid: 534). In relation to election campaigns the data did not seem to suggest that social media use has any effect on voting in elections or participating in election campaigns (ibid: 534). This meta-analysis seems to point to two main themes emerging from the literature - *social media as a means of broadcast and consumption* and *social media as a means of involvement and influence*. The rest of this literature review will focus on these two main themes.

Tolbert and McNeal (2003) carried out a study on the effects of the internet on political participation in the US, particularly in relation to the 1996 and 2000 general elections. This study was written before the appearance of social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter. However, it is interesting to see how the early effects of internet use were traced in relation to political participation. Tolbert et al. make the argument that “changes in communication technology may play an important role in influencing electoral behaviour” (2003: 175). They trace the increasing importance of the media in conveying political information over time and argue that the media has a role to play in increasing voter participation in elections by stimulating interest in political affairs (ibid: 176). Their findings suggest that those who have “access to the internet and online election news” were “significantly more likely to vote in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections”, as well as

being associated with “increased participation beyond voting” (ibid: 184). What’s important to note about this study, as with other studies from the early 2000s, is that the internet has changed significantly since then. Despite this, the work carried out by Tolbert and McNeal point towards a “broadcast and consumption” use of social media when it comes to its role in a general election.

Bode et al. (2014) provide another study, this time focusing on teens, on how use of social networking sites can lead to political participation. They highlight the importance of not only looking at the political impact of using these sites, but also exploring “the growing political realm that exists within these popular websites” (2014: 415). They suggest that political use of social networking sites is different to offline participation, as well as other forms of online participation, because it allows users to both “exchange information about politics” as well as “publicly affiliate themselves with a group” (ibid: 415). They conclude that teenagers who use social networking sites for political use have a pathway into other traditional forms of participation (ibid: 423). Similar results were found in Bode’s (2012) study which suggested that Facebook use can influence political participation, particularly if users are intensely engaging with the site (2012: 365). Bode’s research seems to point to an understanding of social media as a means of involvement and influence. Therefore Bode et al seem to regard social media as something more than just a tool for broadcasting messages, but one that can also influence the political views of young people and encourage them to get involved.

Oser, Hooghe and Marien (2013) address an important issue in relation to political participation, both online and offline, which is to do with stratification. Their research examines whether or not traditional stratification patterns in offline participation, such as socioeconomic status, age, and gender, are reinforced in online participation (2013: 91). They note that before the Internet, those who were most likely to get involved in political

participation were from advantaged groups (ibid: 91). Those who argue from a mobilisation perspective would suggest that the internet provides new ways of making information available, which can draw those groups who were previously disengaged into politics (ibid: 91). However, the alternative argument is that not only will there be no change in participation patterns on the internet, but actually, it may “widen participatory gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged populations” (ibid: 91). Their findings suggest that those from advantaged backgrounds continue to be the most active in online and offline participation, which suggests “reinforcement of traditional education and income inequalities”. However in terms of age and gender, the results were different, suggesting that while some stratification patterns continue, the internet can still provide ways for new groups to become more politically active (ibid: 99). This highlights the concern about whether social media will change the nature of participation or reinforce existing stratification patterns and is an important consideration for this research - it is easy to forget that not everyone has access to the internet.

These studies show that social media can have an impact on the level of political participation that users engage in, and therefore is an important area of investigation so as to understand what role it will play in politics in the future.

## **2.4 Electoral Campaigns**

Brady et al. (2006) provide an overview of the study of electoral campaigns, beginning with a definition of a campaign. They provide two approaches to looking at campaigns - institutional/quasi-institutional conditions or “campaigns as periods of uncommon intensity in the political order” which determines how long the campaign will last (2006: 1-2). Institutional conditions include knowing the date of the election, who the candidates are, and candidates dedicating all their time to the campaign, with rules around what they can and

cannot do while campaigning. Knowing a date for an election determines both when a campaign should have started, and when the campaign will end (ibid: 2). The intensity approach, however, suggests that a campaign starts when candidates and parties start to put more effort into the campaign, begin to engage more with the media and become involved in political discussion. It can also be determined by how much attention the mass media affords to the campaign (ibid: 2-3).

The difference between these two approaches is that the institutional definition suggests a campaign only exists when an election date exists. Otherwise, there is no campaign. However, the intensity approach suggests that campaigns can fluctuate in terms of intensity and will move from ones that “barely exist to those that consume voters, parties, and the media” (Brady et al., 2006: 3). With the rise in social media use for electoral campaigning, it is possible that the intensity approach will be more common as politicians can carry out a continuous campaign without needing to know the date of the next election, and depending on external factors such as what is being talked about in the media, the level of campaigning that goes on online can vary. Therefore, social media lends itself more to the intensity approach.

The European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) (2014) provided a briefing on social media in election campaigning. The potential uses of social media in election campaigning would be of particular interest to the European Union considering “decreasing voter turnout, declining party membership...and a lack of interest in the EU” (2014: 2). The report argues that social media use could be of particular importance to new parties who may find they are bypassed by traditional media outlets and can use social media as a way of communicating with the electorate (ibid: 3). In term of campaign strategy, social media can be useful for targeting young voters, for arranging and promoting ‘offline’ events, or for the “personalisation” of the candidate, placing emphasis on the individual politician and their

personality (2014: 4-6). However, the report also warns about “the capacity of social media to undermine serious deliberation” (2014: 7). If social media is only being used as a means of broadcasting messages to a wider audience with little room for interaction, then debate cannot flourish online. This project will help to shed some light on how these tools are being used and whether or not there is space for deliberation of Irish politics online.

## **2.5 Electoral Campaigns and Social Media**

Enli and Skogerbø (2013) look at the ways politicians use social media in Norway. The findings of their study suggest three main motives for using social media during an election campaign: marketing, mobilisation and dialogue (ibid: 763-4). The first motive, around marketing, was to highlight their candidacies as well as the positions of their parties in the public sphere. However on politicians’ personal accounts, this marketing becomes more personal as they keep followers updated on their lives as well as on politics (ibid: 763). Mobilisation refers to the use of social media to encourage followers to take part in something, usually to attend rallies, meetings, and to persuade people to vote for them (ibid: 763; 766). Lastly, in terms of dialogue, social media presented an opportunity to connect and engage with voters in discussion, as well as receive feedback on political issues (ibid: 764). However, it really depended on the politician as to what degree of dialogue, if any, they would engage in (ibid: 768). This project will look at the use of social media by Irish candidates and parties in relation to these motives.

Graham et al. (2013) expand on the notion of broadcasting messages vs interaction with voters, focusing on the 2010 UK general election campaign. They described Twitter as a “core communication tool” throughout the general election (2013: 693). The authors see social media as having the potential to increase interest in participation and for politicians to build a more meaningful connection with citizens (ibid: 694). They base this argument on the concept of ‘direct representation’, developed by Coleman (2005). There are three essential

conditions for direct representation: first, two way communication between representatives and citizen; second, “this conversation has to be of an on-going and permanent nature”; and third, politicians should regularly hold themselves accountable, not only when challenged, but instead by “regularly justifying their decisions to the public” (Coleman, 2005, as cited in Grahem et al., 2013: 692). Social media provides the means of fulfilling all three of these conditions. However, the authors state that politicians often use sites like Twitter as a means of broadcasting their message, rather than for interaction (ibid: 695). Their findings suggest that “social media has provided a toolkit of political communication with an invaluable addition to establish on-going communication” (ibid: 708). Most of the campaigning carried out online reflected the kind of campaigning that is carried out offline (ibid: 708). However, even if politicians were using Twitter primarily as a means of broadcasting messages, this platform still gives a greater degree of autonomy over what those messages say (ibid: 708-9). Therefore this article stresses the communication and broadcasting aspect of social media as a means of allowing politicians to broadcast their views rather than as a tool for interaction.

Brun and Highfield (2013) discuss the use of social media during election campaigns in Australia, speculating that a growth in social media use across Australia is more than likely to result in social media becoming present in political campaigns (2013: 668). They note the way social media is often used by traditional media outlets, as Twitter has now become a common way to report breaking news in real-time and to garner how people react to these kinds of events (ibid: 669-70). A benefit of more politicians beginning to use social media is “the potential to increase the interactions between citizens and politicians, raising the level of participation in public debate, by putting these different voices in the same space” (ibid: 671). However, this does not necessarily mean debate between politicians and citizens will take place - a lot of politicians use websites like Twitter simply as a means of broadcasting messages, rather than a means of engaging with people (ibid: 672). It should also be



considered whether or not a politician tweets from their own account, or if a member of their staff posts messages on their behalf instead (ibid: 674).

Brun and Highfield also point out that the position of parties is important in how they use social media - “while major parties are essentially guaranteed mainstream media coverage, smaller parties may choose to adopt social media as a key tool for publicising their messages, in order to make up for their more limited mainstream media presence” (Brun and Highfield, 2013: 672). Christensen (2013) focused on the way minority “third parties” used Twitter during the 2012 US elections, focusing on the Libertarian Party, Green Party, Constitution Party and Justice Party. He makes the point that while Twitter may not be shaping politics in any useful way, by examining what minority parties are tweeting about, and which of these tweets gain the most attention, it can “shed light upon issues which the mainstream media, and their mainstream political counterparts, tend to miss or wilfully ignore” (2013: 664). Brun and Highfield's work suggests social media is primarily a broadcasting tool rather than for two way communication, though they also see the potential of social media for promoting interaction between politicians and the electorate. Christiansen also sees social media as allowing minority parties to broadcast their views and as shedding light on issues, but makes less of an argument for social media as an interactive space.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

This literature review revealed two main themes emerging from the work carried out on this subject so far – social media as a means of broadcast and consumption, and social media as a means of involvement and influence. This project will hope to contribute to this body of literature and find its place within one (or possibly both) of these themes. Political participation is integral to democracy, and it is important to consider all the ways that this may be done – we need to examine emerging tools for communication and how people are using them. Increasingly, more and more people are online and are using the Internet in

different ways. The body of work reviewed in this chapter shows that social media *is* being used as a political communicative and participatory tool, and these things become much more important during a general election campaign. However, much of the focus has been on American or other European countries, therefore this project hopes to shed some light on the role of social media in a general election campaign in Ireland.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 The Qualitative Approach**

There are many merits both to a qualitative or quantitative approach, however having chosen qualitative for this project, it is important to outline why this was seen as the most effective approach for answering this question. As Becker (1996) outlines, “both kinds of research try to see how society works, to describe social reality, to answer specific questions about specific instances of social reality” (ibid: 53). However, there is a difference between the two epistemologies. While quantitative researchers often seek “numerical differences between two groups of people” in order to find explanations of “an act based on logic of difference between groups with different traits”, qualitative researchers look more for descriptions, which will allow them to make sense of what they have observed throughout the course of their research (ibid: 55). Furthermore, in terms of the data that can be collected, quantitative methods tend to be more restrictive in the information that can be found, as questions tend to be more closed. Qualitative methods on the other hand tend to be more open, and so there are plenty of opportunities for unexpected data to emerge (ibid: 55).

The benefit of carrying out qualitative research is it allows researchers to understand a situation “from the point of view of the actor” (ibid: 56). According to Becker, epistemologically, “qualitative methods insist that we should not invent the viewpoint of the actor, and should only attribute to actors ideas about the world they actually hold, if we want to understand their actions, reasons, and motives” (ibid: 58). The disadvantage may be that we attribute meaning to something that the participant didn’t actually intend (ibid: 58). Mack et al. (2005) describe further benefits to carrying out qualitative research, following on from the point that was previously made in that participants have the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions in their own words, “rather than forcing them to chose from fixed responses” (2005: 4). In this sense, the responses that the participant gives will be

“meaningful and culturally salient to the participant; unanticipated by the researcher; [and] rich and explanatory in nature” (ibid: 4). The researcher is then able to decide which areas to delve deeper into by asking the participant to elaborate on certain points they make, moving beyond the original list of questions the researcher had come up with. By gathering responses like these it is possible for the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the subject from the participant’s point of view (ibid: 4). Qualitative methods were chosen for this project because the aim is to understand the role of social media from the point of view of those engaging with it. Rather than understanding *how often* it was used, instead this project looks at *why* it was used and *in what what ways*.

An important consideration in carrying out research of any kind is that of validity, reliability, and generalisation. In order for research to be valid, the researcher needs to make sure they are measuring what they intend to measure. To have reliability, results would be the same if the same research was repeated multiple times. In other words, the results would be consistent no matter how many times you carried out the study (O’Leary, 2014: 58). Generalisability refers to whether or not the findings from one study could be applied to a larger population in a different time or setting (O’Leary, 2014: 62). Validity was ensured by making sure interview questions related to the topic and that responses were fully explored to ensure the researcher understood the point the interviewee was trying to make. Reliability is more difficult to guarantee due to how small the project was. The same set of questions was prepared for each interview, however to truly ensure reliability, the study would possibly need to be repeated over a number of general election campaigns. Lastly, due to the number of participants interviewed and tweets analysed being so small, this project could not be considered generalisable to the wider Irish population but rather, explores the understanding of the topic from the point of view of those directly involved.

The qualitative methods employed for this project were interviews and content analysis. Interviews were one-to-one semi structured interviews with party members on the use of social media during the general election campaign. The content analysis examines tweets that came in under the hashtags #leadersdebate, #GE16 and #Vote 2016, tweeted during the TV3 Leaders Debate, February 11, 2016. These tweets were analysed to examine how users engage with the campaign online during an important debate.

### **3.2 Ethical Considerations**

When carrying out any kind of research it is important to bear in mind the principles of ethics around that research. According to Mack et al. (2005), there are four core principles to carrying out research:

- “Respect for persons”, meaning “a commitment to ensuring the autonomy of research participants and, where autonomy may be diminished, to protect people from exploitation of their vulnerability” (2005: 9)
- “Beneficence” meaning “a commitment to minimising the risks associated with research, including psychological and social risks, and maximising the benefits” (ibid: 9)
- “Justice” meaning “a commitment to ensuring a fair distribution of the risks and benefits resulting from research” (ibid: 9)
- “Respect for communities” which means the researcher should respect “the values and interests of the community in research and, wherever possible, to protect the community from harm” (ibid: 9).
- Another important ethical issue is informed consent, meaning participants understand what it is they are agreeing to and are aware they have the right to stop participating at any time (ibid: 9).

Care was taken throughout the research to ensure these ethical requirements were met. All interviewees were over 18, and were given a consent form to read and sign before the interview was carried out. In terms of the content analysis, all tweets published to twitter.com are in the public domain, and users have the option to publish tweets privately, allowing only those who they approve to read them. The only tweets available through the hashtags searched are those which were posted on public accounts, and therefore were free to be read and used by any member of the public. As explained by Burnham et al. (2008), “as the material is public, there are no problems of access and informed consent, although these would arise if the researcher wished to access material in private collections” (2008: 264).

### **3.3 Interviewing**

Interviews are a useful source of data, as they allow the researcher to talk to people and ask “what they really think, finding out at first hand how they genuinely feel” (O’Leary, 2014: 216). Most importantly, interviews can provide researchers with “rich, in-depth qualitative data; are flexible enough to allow you to explore tangents; [and] are structured enough to generate standardised, quantifiable data” (2014: 216). Carrying out interviews provides researchers with “a vivid picture of the participant’s perspective on the research topic” and is “an effective qualitative method for getting people to talk about their personal feelings, opinions, experiences”. Interviews allow us to “gain insight into how people interpret and order the world” (Mack et al., 2005: 30). However, there are also challenges when conducting interviews which are important to keep in mind, including gaining access, avoiding leading questions and “making a good impression that will keep doors open” (O’Leary, 2014: 219). The interviews in this project were semi-structured interviews. This means the structure of the interview was more flexible which allowed for the conversation to go into areas not necessarily covered by the questions prepared. The benefit of this was that I

could uncover data I didn't expect, because the respondent said something I hadn't anticipated but was relevant to my research (O'Leary, 2014: 218).

*Table 1: Interviews*

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Party Affiliation</b>	<b>Role</b>
R1	Green Party	Social Media Coordinator
R2	Fianna Fáil	Social Media Officer
R3	Sinn Féin	Candidate

For this project, two central social media operators and one individual candidate were selected for interview. The reason for this was to understand how the role of social media in an election campaign is valued from the perspective of both the wider party and the individual candidate. A mix of parties was also chosen, two bigger parties (Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin) and one smaller party (Green Party). This was done in order to uncover any differences in use and value between larger and smaller parties.

Carrying out interviews for this project highlighted some of the disadvantages of this method. For example, I had difficulty in finding respondents who would reply to my requests for an interview. All major parties were contacted about an interview through both email and phone. Of the parties contacted, only the Green Party and Fianna Fáil offices responded agreeing to an interview. Fine Gael would not agree to an interview, as they felt it would reveal sensitive campaign information. Labour and Sinn Féin central offices did not respond at all (however, an individual Sinn Féin candidate did and was interviewed). A Social Democrat candidate was contacted and agreed to interview but repeatedly changed the date or failed to respond with a confirmation of a date for interview, and so it could not be carried out.

### **3.4 Content Analysis**

According to Burnham et al. (2008), “content analysis is a technique for analysing the content of communications” (2008: 259). The aim is to take a body of communication and interpret what is found. This is a qualitative project and therefore “the importance of the content is determined by the researcher’s judgement” and this is of course a subjective assessment, as the researcher decides on the importance and value of the material (ibid: 259). The first step, following formulating a research question, is to decide what sources will be analysed (ibid: 260). For this project, Twitter was the source chosen for analysis as it is a popular social media site which saw a lot of activity during the general election campaign. Newspaper articles and blog posts were also analysed, but only articles which directly addresses the use of social media in the most recent general election campaign.

Content analysis is useful as it allows for a large amount of material to be analysed in a systematic way, and the coding system can be replicated which could increase reliability should the study be repeated. The disadvantage to carrying out content analysis is that the focus may end up on those themes which appear more frequently, and other themes that are not mentioned as often, but may still be important, may fly under the radar (Burnham et al., 2008: 264). Bryman (2007) outlines the criteria for selecting virtual documents to analyse. Firstly, one must ensure they are authentic, as those posting online may not be who they say they are. Secondly, ensuring credibility in this case would involve making sure there are no distortions - in the case of this project, a Twitter user could be spreading false information about a candidate because of their own political interests. Lastly, it is important to remember that the internet is in constant flux and what one website - such as Twitter - has to say about a topic is not representative of all Irish people (2007: 554).



### ***Content analysed in this project***

#### News Reports and Blogs:

A number of news reports and blog posts were written around this topic. A selection of these reports and posts were chosen for analysis in order to get an idea of the general trends of social media use by parties and candidates. This includes news reports from *The Irish Times* and RTÉ, as well as blogs on the Newstalk website and UCD lecturer Derek Greene's blog *Derek Greene's Home*, among others.

#### Tweets:

Tweets under the hashtags #leadersdebate, #GE16 and #Vote 2016, tweeted during the TV3 Leaders Debate, February 11th 2016. were also analysed for this project.

Twitter is a social media website which allows users to update statuses in 140 characters or less, as well as engage in communication with other users. Despite the simplicity of the platform, it has been used as a political and social tool in a number of different ways, including during the Arab Spring protests in 2011 and the Occupy movement (Zimmer and Proferes, 2014: 250). Twitter allows users to engage in conversation through hashtags (#) which allows social media to often be incorporated into other traditional media coverage, such as television. Tweeters use the hashtag, for example, #rtept (RTÉ Prime Time) to live-tweet during the Prime Time show and share their thoughts with the public (Bruns and Highfield, 2013: 669).

### **3.6 Analysis of Data**

Interview data was taken and coded into the main topics and themes that emerged from the literature review and from the interviews themselves. This data was then analysed by linking back to literature, allowing me to place this data in the wider area of research to determine where Ireland's social media use in a general election campaign fits in terms of the two main themes that had emerged in the literature review i.e. social media as a vehicle for broadcast and social media as a means of involvement. Following this, the news reports and blogs were analysed and compared to the literature and to the findings from the interview. This allowed me to check claims made by the political parties and candidates, as well as allowing for possible additional data to emerge. The findings were then brought together in order to draw an overall conclusion.

## **4. Findings and Analysis**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This findings chapter is organised into three parts. The first section will examine the interview data and discuss this data in relation to the literature. The second section will look at the content analysis of newspaper reports and tweets while also referring to the literature. The final section will bring all the findings together and will then identify which was the dominant use of social media in relation to the two themes of this project - social media as a means of broadcast and consumption, or social media as a means of involvement and influence.

### **4.2 Interviews**

#### *Electoral Campaigns*

In their discussion of electoral campaigns, Brady et al. (2006) described two approaches to electoral campaigning, an institutional approach and an intensity approach. While the intensity approach was one in which the level of campaigning intensified and relaxed over time and was not defined by the official campaign dates, the institutional approach was defined by an election date and a set period of time in which the campaign takes place - campaigning begins with the announcement of the election, and ends on polling day. The type of campaigning varied across parties, and usually depended on the size and resources of the party.

#### **Green Party: Institutional Campaigning**

For the smaller parties, an institutional approach to campaigning was the more likely approach. For example, the Green Party explained why they would not continue to use social media to the same degree after the election as during the campaign

I was volunteering here and I obviously wouldn't be able to do that for a year, years on end, so we won't have anyone dedicated to it. Like, our press officer will do the bit of social media but we won't have the same amount of work put into our social media that we did in the campaign so we will drop off a bit ... It's the same with anything with this party, because we're so small and because we've had no money for so long it's just a case that we can't turn around and start splurging (Respondent 1, Green Party)

While social media could provide the opportunity for continuous campaigning in varying degrees between elections, smaller parties like the Green Party simply can't afford to do that. Therefore, they reserve their resources for a set period of time when an election is called, taking the institutional approach.

### **Fianna Fáil: Intensity**

Fianna Fáil's campaign approach would fall more towards an intensity approach rather than an institutional approach, particularly in terms of their social media. Part of the explanation for this would be that they have a permanent social media strategist, not just for the election campaign. However, more resources are given to social media once an election date is set.

During the intense three-week general election campaign, I managed a team of three. The team were involved in assisting with the crafting and implementing of social media strategies around our main general election themes and messages. At the moment, however, I am the only one who works on social media for Fianna Fáil. (Respondent 2, Fianna Fáil)

While not restricted to an institutional approach, institutional conditions are still important. For those parties that do take on an intensity approach to campaigning, the set date and time period will determine when parties start to increase their engagement.

### **Sinn Féin: Intensity**

The Sinn Féin TD interviewed spoke about social media as a campaigning tool throughout the year, not just around election time, which heavily leans toward the intensity approach.

First thing I'll say is we use social media all the time, not just for general elections, first of all as a constituency politician, both as a councillor and a TD, people contact you more and more through social media, so through Facebook in particular, but also through Whatsapp and other functions, partly because it's free, so people who don't have credit but their mobile phone deal allows them to, but also people are using

those as media more than straight mobile phone, we would also use them both in the constituency and centrally in the party as campaigning tools throughout the year, so whereas you'll find with some politicians their Twitter or Facebook accounts tend to get very busy in an election and then kind of drop off, we would see it as one of a range of communication tools and campaigning tools year in year out. (Respondent 3, Sinn Féin)

This respondent brought up another important issue in the use of social media as a campaign tool, that being the matter of resources. As Brady et al. (1995) explained using a resource model of political participation, time, money and civic skills are the main factors which determine participation (1995: 271). Social media and mobile phones have now made it easier for people to participate. As the respondent said, if a person does not have enough credit to phone a politician or enough time to meet with them, social media tools allow people to find ways around this with cheaper and faster communication. This quote shows a greater degree of awareness than other parties and candidates of the issue discussed by Oser, Hooghe and Marien (2013), that online participation could lead to the same degree of stratification as offline participation.

#### *Use of social media during campaigns*

Enli and Skogerbø (2013) put forward three main motives for using social media in a campaign - marketing, mobilisation and dialogue. Interviews with parties revealed that every party seemed to have different motivations. In the instance of marketing, which refers to efforts to “increase the visibility of their candidates and parties in the public sphere” (2013: 763), all parties did use social media for marketing to some degree, however Fianna Fáil and the Greens emphasised the marketing aspect. For example, Fianna Fáil mentioned the importance of social media in informing people about key aspects of their manifesto. The Greens found social media useful for presenting their policies during debates, as will be discussed further in this chapter.

Mobilisation involves encouraging online users to take part in events offline (ibid: 764). Sinn Féin was the only party who mentioned this as a motivation for using social media.

The first thing is it's a direct form of communication with voters and potential voters and we see it like that so like the press release, like the conference, like the public meeting, it's another way of doing it, the fact that you can use video and audio as well as text has certain advantages, so first of all we use it in that format and we think about it as a communication tool, but also it can be a campaign tool in the sense that it's a way of getting people mobilised to attend certain types of events, so we use to invite people, it's a way of making people aware of other campaigns we're supporting (Respondent 3, Sinn Féin)

Lastly, dialogue, that is, using social media as a way to connect and communicate with voters, was popular for all parties, and the above quote from Sinn Féin also illustrates this. All respondents mentioned engagement with users online as an important aspect of social media use.

Enli and Skogerbø's study divided politicians on Twitter into four categories - the invisible (no profile), the silent (inactive on social media), the moderate (between 10 and 100 updates mostly through Facebook) and the active (100-150 updates mostly through Twitter) (2013: 768). Throughout the campaign, all parties fell into the 'active' category, however the Green Party appeared to have been the most active, based on the descriptions of use.

We found that the majority of people were engaged around eight so we wanted to have something up at eight and have something up at 5 O'Clock, half 5 for people who were commuting to home and we wanted to have something around 12 for people who were on their lunch break, 12 to 1, and the idea was after one you might put up an article, something people might read after their lunch. 5pm, you want a picture of something that's going to like they're scrolling through their phone on the way home at picture is gonna grab them then around 8, 9pm they're at home, they've had their dinner, slowing down, a video or something like that. (Respondent 1, Green Party).

The Greens had a schedule for posting throughout the day and were active on the most number of social media sites including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Reddit. They used Twitter mostly for TV debates and Facebook on a daily basis. Enli and Skogerbø's study also revealed a high number of broadcasting updates as opposed to interactive activity. When asked about engagement with users, the Greens appeared to have a mix. For example, during

the live TV debates on RTÉ and TV3, which the Green Party were excluded from, the Greens had to find another way to put broadcast their policies, and social media provided them with a way to do that.

Our attitude was if we don't do it on social media then we are playing into the thing that you didn't deserve to be there. I thought it was very funny we actually ended up on the night being the fourth most talked about party on social media ... I think it played particularly well because people a lot of people we saw were saying oh why aren't the Greens there? But also something that benefited us a lot was that in many ways it was kind of a blessing in disguise because we weren't there we could see what people were talking about on Twitter and react to that. Like when people kept coming up with why is no one talking about mental health there's no one talking about the environment well we'd go here are our policies on mental health (Respondent 1, Green Party).

The Greens were able to use social media as both a way of broadcasting their messages and policies during the debates, but also as a means of interaction as they were actively responding to questions users were asking. This similar to what Christensen (2013) found in his study of minority third parties in the US, which included the Green Party among others, that social media allowed these smaller parties to bring up issues that were being ignored or downplayed by mainstream media and other larger parties (2013: 664). The Green Party in Ireland were doing the same thing during these TV debates when they responded to complaints about issues that weren't being addressed by providing their policies on those areas. Brun and Highfield (2013) also noted the importance of social media for smaller parties, as it allows them to get their message out when they've been marginalised in mainstream media coverage (2013: 672). Despite this, traditional media still remains important to political parties and this was emphasised by all parties

Traditional media still plays an important role, particularly during TV debates. What we are seeing more of now, however, is double-screen multitasking. People are watching traditional media while posting their opinions/engaging with politicians and members of the public on social media. This has the potential to influence the overall political narrative. Also, not everyone is on social media so traditional media provides those people with information they may need to make up their minds before voting. (Respondent 2, Fianna Fáil)

So much of our social media stuff was just linked to what was going on in the regular media ... you can get maybe about two to three hundred likes and maybe ten thousand people engage but that's nothing compared to the number of people who will listen to Morning Ireland or watch the 9 O'Clock news. Ireland is still very much engaged with it's traditional media and so yeah I think traditional media is still far ahead of the game but among young people I think there's definitely a benefit there to engaging with social media. (Respondent 1, Green Party)

Parties were monitoring their target audience, using data to determine which groups are most active on the different social media platforms. Overall, many were targeting young people, partly because this is the demographic they felt most likely to be active on social media. For example, the Greens felt this group would be particularly important, as generally they found younger people to be more likely to vote for the Greens. This is also suggested by studies on political participation on social media, such as those by Bode et al. (2013) and Bode (2012), which find young people are big users of social media for political expression. However, the Sinn Féin candidate felt that this demographic was beginning to change

The demographic who I noticed engage on my Facebook page the most would be women, would be in their 20s-early 40s, would usually be mothers, and increasingly they're using Facebook as a means of communication in their day-to-day life, so that demographic that some time ago we would have associated with Facebook which would be primarily teenagers, that's not my experience, now, it's not that they're not on Facebook but clearly they're not engaging with the likes of me, some do but not so much, and again, the utility of Facebook is partly it's cost and partly it is becoming a means of day to day communication and we're benefitting from the fact that people are using it more, but interestingly an increasing number of pensioners use it, certainly our experience, and increasing number of people in say the 50s and 60s category. It's handier than a text, it's cheaper than a text and that has a real value. (Respondent 3, Sinn Féin)

This suggests that the demographic using social media is beginning to broaden and move into age groups beyond teenagers and young adults, which statistics from Ipsos MRBI (2016) noted in the introduction of this project also suggest. Sinn Féin in particular appear to know their audience which helps them with more targeted campaigning.

### *Broadcast and Consumption or Involvement and Influence?*



Graham et al. (2013) focused on the use of Twitter for broadcasting messages or for interaction with voters. Broadcasting was a “traditional one-way, top-down communication flow”, while interaction meant the possibility of closing the gap between the politician and the voter, “fostering a mode of representation that is centred on interactive communication between the two” (2013: 693). Based on interview responses, it appears that all the parties covered both throughout their campaigns. Fianna Fáil described social media as a tool for communication of key messages and engagement with the public, as well as responding to other political parties

Social media played a very important role throughout our campaign strategy. It allowed us to rebut claims made by other political parties and members of the media in real-time. It also allowed us to communicate messages from our Manifesto to members of the public. Social media is also important as, unlike some forms of traditional media, it offers a two-way form of engagement. This worked quite well for us as members of the public were able to contact us via social media regarding issues that concerned them and we could answer them quickly (Respondent 2, Fianna Fáil).

While in some ways, Fianna Fáil used social media to communicate messages from the top-down, such as providing information on their manifesto, they also opened up to engagement from voters. This was also found with the Green Party, who used it to broadcast messages during debates, but also used websites such as Reddit to engage with voters and answer questions. The Sinn Féin candidate, while also using social media to broadcast messages, put a much greater emphasis on the level of interaction and engagement he found on social media

I would get every day very significant responses, so first of all in terms of likes or shares or comments, you know you'd be hitting 2 or 3 hundred interactions with text posts or image posts, with the video stuff you'd be talking 5 or 10 thousand views within 24-48 hours of putting something up, then the direct messaging increases quite significantly as well, certainly during the election and since the election the level of interaction has increased and remained at a pretty steady level. (Respondent 3, Sinn Féin)

Sinn Féin's attitude to social media therefore falls more into the involvement and influence category, while Fianna Fáil and the Green Party fell more towards the broadcasting and consumption category.

As argued by Coleman (2005), social media has the potential to allow for direct representation of citizens based on two-way communication, continuing outside of election time, in which representatives hold themselves accountable for their decisions (Coleman, 2005, as cited in Grahem et al., 2013: 692). Interview data suggests the way Irish politicians are beginning to use social media has the potential to allow for this kind of direct representation.

### **4.3 Content Analysis**

#### *Newspaper reports and blogs*

An analysis of newspaper reports and blogs straight away highlights the widespread use of social media in the 2016 general election. Facebook began tracking the level of engagement around election topics among users from November 2015, when it was first rumoured that the General Election would be called for February. Between the November 1, 2015 and the first week of the election campaign in February, there were “more than three million Facebook interactions (posts, comments and likes) relating to the general election by 600,000 people” (Quann, 2016). According to Mark Little, Twitter’s Vice-President for media in Europe and Africa, within 48 hours of the dissolution of the 31<sup>st</sup> Dáil, 10.8 million tweets about #GE16 were viewed, and during RTÉ’s Leaders Debate, 69,000 tweets were posted, making the #LeadersDebate hashtag the second most popular hashtag in the world (Little, 2016).

Derek Greene’s blog posted results from the *Insight4Election* projects carried out at UCD. This work highlighted the increased number of candidates on Twitter - 57% in 2011, raised to 70% in 2016. However, of these accounts, many were inactive for the intervening years between the last election and this one (Greene, 2016). These findings suggest that more generally, individual Irish politicians tend to take an institutional approach to campaigning as opposed to an intensity one, waiting for the election date to be called before posting on their social media accounts again. Consistent with responses in interviews, the party most active

on social media during the campaign was Sinn Féin and overall the parties with the highest average Twitter activity were the minority parties - Social Democrats, Green Party and Renua (Greene, 2016; Cochrane, 2016). McGee (2016) also noted the high social media activity on the part of Sinn Féin, especially through their use of videos with written subtitles to allow them to be viewed in silent mode on a phone - showing an understanding of how people use these social media technologies in their daily lives (McGee, 2016). The least active parties were Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, which is interesting considering both parties have permanent social media officers who do the day-to-day running of the accounts (Greene, 2016). This comes back to the arguments made by Brun and Highfield (2013) and Christensen (2013) that social media would be especially significant for smaller parties as it gives them a platform to introduce their policies, one they may not have through mainstream media. It appears the smaller political parties in Ireland were using social media in this way, as they were using Twitter the most in comparison to the bigger parties who had more coverage on traditional media. Greene also discusses the 'second screen phenomenon' during the Leaders Debate, something which was also brought up in interviews by the Fianna Fáil respondent, in which people are watching television and using social media at the same time, often using Twitter hashtags to discuss the show with other people (Greene, 2016; James, 2016). The second half of this content analysis section will look at how people are participating in this dual-screen practice.

In looking at who was engaged during the General Election, Cochrane (2016), writing for *The Irish Times*, found that voters were more engaged than the parties themselves. The fact that parties could not meet the level of involvement that voters were reaching was a sign that parties did not use social media effectively. According to Cochrane, the parties mostly used social media with a one-way broadcast approach and failed to really engage with the issues being brought up by voters. Of those parties that did make better use of social media,

and in particular candidates who directly connected with voters, their exposure on social media went beyond what could have been possible through traditional canvassing methods (Cochrane, 2016). This emphasises the potential of social media, and suggests that parties will continue to look for the best ways to engage voters in elections to come. Data analyst Barry James, writing on his blog *ge16tweets.com*, also argues that the use of social media by political parties was “amateur” (James, 2016). Parties could have better organised themselves in order to schedule when social media would be used and coordinate with candidates and party activists. A party that planned its use of social media better, would have had an advantage over others (James, 2016). From interview data, the only party who appeared to have a scheduled, coordinated place for social media use was the Green Party. However, can it be said this gave the Greens an advantage over other parties? While their online posting may have reached a greater audience, likes on Facebook don’t appear to translate into seats in the Dáil. At the same time, it is possible that the Greens would have gotten a much smaller share of the vote had they not used social media in this way. As pointed out by James in another post, “Twitter won’t get you elected” - those parties who tweeted the least got the highest share of the vote (James, 2016). For established parties, therefore, the conclusion may be that neglecting social media will not greatly damage the chances of being elected. However, had one of these two main parties better utilised social media, would they have managed to gain a majority - or at least more seats - and thus avoid the difficulties that have followed this election around forming a government? Unfortunately, there is no way to really know except to continue researching the impact social media has in Irish elections.

Virtually all of those who wrote news reports and blog posts on this topic were unanimous in stating that social media did not determine the outcome of this election.

## Tweets

According to the newstalk.com website, over 35,000 tweets were posted during the TV3 Leader's Debate, with their analysis claiming most of the tweets addressed how the leaders were performing, rather than the issues at hand (Quann, 2016b). My own analysis of tweets during this show until the #Vote2016 hashtag returned similar results, however the main thing which was taken away from this analysis was the broadcasting nature of virtually all Tweets that were posted. While people were engaging with others through their use of the #Vote2016 hashtag and others, there was very little direct interaction between users, parties and/or politicians. Instead, all posters were broadcasting a message which they did not necessarily expect a response to. For example, the Labour Party tweeted a quote from Joan Burton - "We have to change our health system - we need to move to primary care. - @Joanburton #GE16 #vote2016" (Tweet, Labour, 2016). This tweet does not ask for engagement from other users, it does not try to start a conversation about whether or not people agree or disagree, it simply makes a statement. Election candidates used Twitter in a similar way. This kind of tweeting very much falls under the 'broadcasting and consumption' theme which has been identified. All parties were using Twitter in a similar way throughout the entire debate. However, parties were not the only users for whom Twitter was primarily a medium through which to broadcast messages. Others used it in a similar way to show their support for a particular party or candidate. Some users tweeted about policies on behalf of their preferred parties, while others used it to refute claims made by the politicians in the debate. This use of Twitter is consistent with findings from Graham et al. (2013), whose study of politicians during the UK 2010 General Election campaign found that while Twitter was seen as a "core communication tool", it was first and foremost used as a platform for broadcasting messages rather than interacting with voters (Graham et al. 2013: 708).

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

Both interviews and content analysis carried out for this project show that political parties are investing time and money in social media for their campaigns. While social media is not regarded as the most important factor in election campaigning, no party or commentator dismissed its importance - election campaigns are about getting out your message to voters and social media is seen as another communication tool which allows the parties and candidates to do that. In general, data from interviews is consistent with data from content analysis, particular in regards to which parties appeared to be most active on social media and how it was used. By and large, interviews showed parties using social media as a means of broadcast and consumption, and this use was also found in the content analysis as all blogs and newspaper reports saw social media as being used as a broadcasting tool, and the analysis of tweets also showed Twitter as being used as a means of broadcast and consumption. However, all parties interviewed did bring up the use of social media as a way of interacting with voters, and this was particularly emphasised by Sinn Féin. This highlighted the benefit of using the two methods, interviews and content analysis, as if I had only carried out content analysis, I may not have discovered this other emerging use of social media in political campaigns.

Given the dominance of the use of social media as a broadcasting medium as against a medium for interaction, the fact that 30% of candidates do not have Twitter accounts, and the inactivity in many candidates' accounts between elections, one is driven to the conclusion that a) the importance of social media is recognised by political parties b) that its precise influence and the nature of that influence remain unclear and c) that the use of social media in Irish politics and elections has yet to mature.

## 5. Conclusion

Social media has become a pervasive part of our everyday lives. This research project aimed to look at the role of social media in a general election campaign, focusing on the 2016 Irish General Election. In doing so, the project hoped to evaluate the importance of social media for political parties and its potential for future campaigns. Literature highlighted the importance of political participation in a democratic society and provided a theoretical basis for increasing political participation among citizens - this project suggests social media may provide another means of political participation and the literature around that topic supported that view, particularly studies on young people on social media. The literature also looked more specifically at election campaigns and the ways political parties can use social media in their campaigns. Many of these articles were quite recent, showing an emerging body of work on this subject and this project hopes to add to this work by providing an Irish perspective. The review of the literature identified two main themes - social media as a means of broadcast and consumption, and social media as a means of involvement and influence. These themes provided a framework for the overall project.

The methodology for this project was qualitative as the project looks at how parties and candidates evaluated the role of social media in their campaigns. There were, of course, shortcomings to this method, particularly the difficulty in arranging interviews with parties and politicians post-election: as the members of the new Dáil Éireann turned all their energy towards forming a new government, it appeared less time was available for interviews. However, content analysis made up for this shortcoming, as the use of social media was a big topic in newspapers, on television and radio, and online, throughout the campaign. This allowed for greater analysis than would have been possible with just three interviews, as well as a point of comparison for interview data. Analysis of tweets provided another perspective yet again, as it allowed for insight into how the general public use social media to voice their

opinions around politics and the election, and to determine if people were really engaging. For future research, it would be preferable to interview all parties who campaigned during the general election, and it would also be suggested that a longitudinal study be carried out to determine the trends in the use of social media across a number of general election campaigns. This would provide real insight into its importance and whether or not it will increase in importance over time.

This research found that social media *is* increasing in importance for general election campaigns, proving my first hypothesis to be true. This came across all three interviews as well as in the content analysis of news reports and blogs - everyone who wrote about this topic throughout the election suggested that social media is an important element to the election. However, it was also found that, despite this growing importance, traditional forms of campaigning like door-to-door canvassing and traditional media outlets, like television, are still key to winning an election, and social media has not overtaken these things in importance - this proves my second hypothesis to be true. This is particularly evident in statistics from the analysis of blogs which showed those parties who used social media the least got the highest number of votes - the strong consensus was that you cannot win an election on Facebook.

However, does this does not mean that social media is not an important area of research. The fact remains that large numbers of people took to social media to discuss the election, and all political parties employed some social media strategy. While most analysts suggested that parties have yet to figure out the best ways to use social media, parties themselves are starting to catch on. This research found that, in general, parties and candidates in Ireland used social media as a means of broadcast and consumption. However, research also showed that parties were beginning to use it in other ways, and this use leans towards social media as a means of involvement and influence. This suggests that further



research could be carried out to determine whether or not parties are beginning to use social media more for interaction with the electorate and if this could have any influence over how people vote. Social media is still a fairly new phenomenon, particularly in comparison with television and radio. As we all still get to grips with the best ways to incorporate this tool into everyday life, political parties too have to find the most effective ways to use social media for their campaigns. The way it was used in this election may not be the way it will be used in the next, and so work should continue to be carried out on this topic.

As they confront the opportunities and demands of social media, political parties must take account of the shifting makeup of audiences involved in particular social media - for instance the use of Facebook by mothers for day to day communication where they might have expected instead to reach young teenagers - and this adds a fascinating complexity to this whole area of interest, not only for politicians but also for the political researcher.

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## **Appendix One: Example of questions used in Interviews**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **General**

1. In what way are you involved with Fianna Fáil?
2. How many people work on social media for Fianna Fáil?
3. What guidelines if any were you given on how the party wanted to use social media?
4. What social media websites are you most active on?

#### **Campaign**

1. Was social media an important part of Fianna Fáil's campaign strategy? Why?
2. In what ways were social media used during the campaign?
3. Was there a particular group of voters you were hoping to target with social media?
4. Did you find people were engaging with the party throughout the campaign? How were they engaging?  
Did you find there were any voters engaging on social media who you didn't expect?  
What websites did you find the most users engaging on?
5. Do you think you used social media differently to the other political parties?  
(If yes) In what ways were you different?  
(If yes) Do you feel you had an advantage over the other parties in that sense?
6. In your opinion, how significant will social media be in elections to come?
7. Do you find traditional media, like news coverage and access to TV debates, are still critically important in an election campaign?

#### **Other**

1. Are party members, particularly those who ran for election, encouraged to use social media, and in what ways? Do most candidates post themselves or does a member of their team do the posting?
2. What recommendations if any does the party give to its members on how they should use social media?
3. Now that the election is over, does social media remain important to your party?

## **Appendix Two: Copy of interview transcript**

### **Respondent 1, Green Party**

#### **I: Tell me how you yourself are involved with the Green party?**

**R1:** I would have been one of two people who was running the social media. Don't know if there was an official title, I think I was referred to as social media community manager I think that's sort of a made up title but if you need a title say social media community manager.

#### **I: So there's two of you that run the social media?**

**R1:** I would have been doing the day to day stuff like posting, posting regularly and that sort of thing and his job would have been cutting videos and editing pictures and that kind of thing.

#### **I: Were you given any guidelines at all about what to do with social media?**

**R1:** So the guy I was doing it with had experience of doing it in Brussels for the European Green Party. He was the one who was giving me the guidelines from his experience of how to do it.

#### **I: What kind of advice did he give?**

**R1:** We found that the majority of people were engaged around eight so we wanted to have something up at eight and have something up at 5 o'clock, half five for people who were commuting to home and we wanted to have something around 12 for people who were on their lunchbreak, 12 to 1, and the idea was after one you might put up an article, something people might read after their lunch. Five, you want a picture of something that's going to like they're scrolling through their phone on the way home at picture is gonna grab them then around eight, nine they're at home, they've had their dinner, slowing down, a video or something like that.

#### **I: That's really interesting, so you kind of knew each day what it was that you wanted to put out there.**

**R1:** Well generally on the day we would have had an idea of what kind of image we wanted to use for five. We had a back stop because the guy who did our posters also did a bunch of graphics for us so we had a kind of a little bedrock in graphics there. Then at eight generally something he would have been working on the day before or if something kind of came up and he said oh I did a video and he would cut it in an interesting way for Facebook and put it up that day. The thing at 12 generally was unless we'd found something it was generally whatever was in the news that morning.

#### **I: So what social media websites would you have been most active on?**

**R1:** We would have been active on Facebook. Facebook would have been kind of our daily one. We used Facebook every day. We would use Twitter but mostly for like TV events, like suppose something if there was an event, if there was something to comment on we'd, we would use Twitter but mostly for like TV. Like suppose something was on like a debate was on one of our candidates was on TV if there was event if there was something to comment on we would do it on Twitter but for something regular it would have been Facebook. And then as the campaign wore on Instagram as well. A lot of stuff we would have had on Facebook we would have had on Instagram as well.

**I: I happened to be on Reddit as well and I saw that the Green Party posted on Reddit as well.**

**R1:** Yeah. We had a guy doing that, I didn't know much about it. I'm fairly new to Reddit. We had a guy doing that. I don't know to what extent he was involved with I think he was working with the other guy. The other guy was also a campaign manager for one of the lads candidates in Dublin so the guy doing the Reddit was part of that guy's campaign he would have been posting that stuff.

**I: I just thought it was interesting because the last thing you expect to see on a Reddit is a political party trying to engage with Reddit users.**

**R1:** People on Reddit were more favourable to us in fact there was some poll they did that had like we were the third, second, depending on the demographic we were first I don't remember which one the most popular party among Reddit users so I mean there was definitely...I think it was a good thing to do like I wish we had thought of it earlier because I think it's the kind of thing that you know kind of build up that kind of engagement with people but it's definitely something I think worked I don't think anyone was less likely to vote for us because we did it.

**I: So for the Green Party was social media seen as an important part of the campaign?**

**R1:** I think at the time it was just another branch of the campaign like the conversation was, the most important thing is getting people out canvassing and I think it was Oh and if you can also do social media. It wasn't until after the campaign was finished that we really realised how much of an impact it had for us. A lot of especially young people had engaged with us a lot. Our attitude towards social media was oh this will be really good for when we're not in the debates. Like I mean I remember the day of the seven way debate like we were in the court at two Eamon was sort of ready to rush off to Limerick to rush off to get on a train but we had also at the same time we had had our battle plan of ok this is what we're going to do and it's all based on social media it's all based on Twitter and we had that ready and I think that it worked. But it was for individual moments like that that we thought about social media support not as a sort of overall thing.

**I: I noticed you were quite active during the TV debates...**

**R1:** Our attitude was if we don't do it on social media then we are playing into the thing that you didn't deserve to be there. I thought it was very funny we actually ended up on the night being the fourth most talked about party on social media. They were talking about it afterwards on the debate coverage and the guy from Twitter said to David McCullough he said guess who the fourth most popular party was and David Oh Sinn Fein, Fine Gael, no it was the Greens, David McCullough shut him up quite quickly because obviously I think RTE were embarrassed a little bit by the fact that they had ignored us and we had got a good reception.

**I: So do you feel it almost played in your favour?**

**R1:** I think it played particularly well because people a lot of people we saw were saying oh why aren't the Greens there? But also something that benefited us a lot was that in many ways it was kind of a blessing in disguise because we weren't there we could see what people were talking about on Twitter and react to that. Like when people kept coming up with why is no one talking about mental health there's no one talking about the environment well we'd go here are our policies on mental health and nobody could turn around and go well you weren't talking about mental health at the debate because you weren't there. Now obviously



I'd say Eamon probably would have brought up mental health there because we had a really good policy on it. It was helpful that we didn't have to worry about it, oh is he going to bring that up or not, we could go that's our policy on it.

**I: But do you still think that traditional media for election campaigns like being on newspapers and debates and all that kind of thing is important?**

**R1:** Oh absolutely it's the most I mean so much of our social media stuff was just linked to what was going on in the regular media and you know you can have a really good post on Facebook and it can get you know, especially if you have got next to no money which we did, so you can get maybe about two to three hundred likes and maybe ten thousand people engage but that's nothing compared to the number of people who will listen to Morning Ireland or to the nine o'clock news or to ... Ireland is still very much engaged with its traditional media and so yeah I think traditional media is still far ahead of the game but among young people I think there's definitely a benefit there to engaging with social media.

**I: So was that kind of your target group when you were looking at social media?**

**R1:** It had to be because for a variety of reasons, one because they were the sort of people who were most on social media I mean that was sort of obvious; two was because poll after poll had said that younger people were more likely to engage with us than older people and now for a couple of reasons that's obviously because we were in government and a lot more younger people were sort of like don't really kind of care about it because maybe they weren't engaged at the time or maybe they just think you know they look at this government they look at previous government they go ok I'd prefer the previous government and then it's just traditionally young people are more likely to vote Green that's it. I mean our largest the largest audience we had for the month of February was men aged 18 to 24 on Facebook, 24 per cent of our audience was that and what we found interesting was that you know we had gone into the election our target voter is a woman she's about 30 to 35 you know that kind of thing and yet we were finding on social media was that the people who were liking our stuff were giving the most positive comments were generally men in college. So it was interesting so I don't know if that's related to the amount of people the type of person who's on Facebook it could be more to do with that but it could've but it was definitely interesting.

**I: So aside from those people who were engaged on Facebook were there any kind of groups that you didn't expect to find, because you went on social media for the younger audience but was there any unexpected groups that you found would engage?**

**R1:** Not that I saw. I think it was pretty much exclusively young people young men in particular. I think there was one Repeal the Eight was the only thing we targeted specifically towards women and that was mostly on Instagram most came through Instagram on that. But yeah mostly young men.

**I: Why do you think most of the engagement was Instagram?**

**R1:** I'd say because the imagery thing and also because women are engaged more with Instagram than they do with Facebook that's what the data shows that young women, especially younger women have moved off Facebook to Instagram. We didn't go out of our way to target Instagram we were boosting on Facebook and oh we had our Instagram account in the boost and we said ah yeah why not and it was actually all of them went into Instagram because more and more people started engaging with it on Instagram

**I: Overall was it Facebook that people engaged most on or was it Twitter?**

**R1:** Facebook day to day and on the leaders debate that night obviously would have been Twitter because we put more money than we thought we were putting into it because Twitter were bloody expensive but would have been Facebook day to day because most people are on Facebook

**I: Do you think in terms of all your social media activity do you think you did it differently to any other political parties kind of a different strategy?**

**R1:** Yeah I think so I mean the numbers bear this out because there was a study that came out I think it was, Queens did it recently enough that we had the most trusted campaign and I think the most positive I could be wrong in that but there was a concerted effort in never going negative. Early in the campaign we put up one post like it was a dark looking storm and it was we have a plan and even as we were looking at it we got a good response we were like oh it didn't fit in with everything else we were doing which was bright and positive. You know especially as the campaign went on it became more and more obvious that the larger parties were obsessed with trying to out slander each other and out mud sling each other and we didn't like that and we just tried to keep it positive and people reacted well to that I think. We tried to do a lot with graphics. Be creative, be more interesting, it was the same with the posters that we did off-line it was just trying to be eye-catching and kind of stand out and catch people's imagination because like we're not as a party we're not going to win on the boring stuff. We don't have nearly enough money to do that. So you just have to be creative and whether that's dealing with the press and some of the launches we did or whether that's online we can't be boring.

**I: So in terms of the success in getting two TDs into the Dáil do you think social media in any way played a part in that?**

**R1:** I think it helped to detoxify the Greens slightly. I mean we put up a meme early enough that was sort of my proudest moment which was making fun of the Simpsons' Party thing that had been going on and it got a good response I think it made people go, look again at the Greens and I think what that meant was that our candidates could knock on the door and people wouldn't because it's incredibly frustrating when you knock on the door and people said things like Oh I thought the Greens were gone so this was our way of at least trying to stop people from saying that. Do I think it made a difference to those two in particular? No. I think Catherine, I went out canvassing with Catherine, the woman is a machine, serious, she's terrifying, she's just, she worked incredibly hard. She had her own social media person engaging with stuff on her behalf maybe that influenced a good bit but I think most of it was hard graft. With Eamon again I think he put in the hard graft in trying to go into as many places as he could and also he had a good profile. I think was it helped with was maybe in areas where we didn't have a strong candidate and it might have made a couple of people look again at the Green Party. And also it might have just helped in I think it helped people to look again at the Greens anyway. Maybe not those two or maybe not enough to bring them over the line certainly but made people sort of go oh, the Green Party. I'd say it was like party-wide, like it probably helped towards getting our two per cent but I don't think it would have had an influence on getting those TDs in.

**I: In your opinion how significant do you think social media is going to be in the elections to come?**

**R1:** It's impossible to predict. I mean you would imagine it's going to be important. But we're a weird country we listen to a lot more radio, we watch a lot a lot more TV than and we watch more specific, kind of the country sits down and watches the 6 o'clock news I mean that's what we do I mean which is unusual because that doesn't happen in other

countries. So I don't know that it will have the same influence it would have in other countries. At least not immediately. Part of me hopes so because I think it's a great way to reach out to people, part of me hopes not because it's so demoralising when you put up this really good post with really amazing graphics and you get like 200 likes, like 200 people like that post and then you're on Fine Gael's page and they've got like 500 likes on the most boring, stodgy thing. And you know the only reason they got that was because they pumped loads of money into it. So I don't know. I'm hoping that if it does that it levels the playing field, that it doesn't just mean that the big boys have somewhere else to plough loads of money into. But I think it's very difficult to predict right now.

**I: When you think social media you almost think about it as something that is free but it's actually not true.**

**R1:** No you're only reaching about 10%, like, when you post and it's only 10% of your followers which is nothing, like for us that's 200, 300, but no we've gone up about a thousand and a half likes so it's like 450 people, that's still nothing, like. So you need to be ploughing money into it to make a difference.

**I: Do you feel you're trying to keep up with the bigger parties who have mainstream media access?**

**R1:** That's where you have to be creative. You've got to be different and even to be positive unfortunately is being different. I like everyone else had a thing at the side of my desktop with Sinn Fein will destroy the country and my specific candidate argues that they are sort of ruthless but also pretty negative and I don't think it helps them. We're trying to be positive I think we're trying to give people the idea of wanting to vote Green rather than not wanting to vote anyone else. That was our stated aim I think.

**I: Were candidates encouraged to use social media?**

**R1:** The candidates definitely did work and I've been on the Green party group and the Facebook secret group we had and I would have been on that on the debate especially the last leaders debate pumping, guys you're doing great keep tweeting, keep running. What I did was I would have my own tab open, I'd have three tabs open, I'd have one with the notifications, Tweets I could respond to them, like I'd set up a list of all our candidates so every time a candidate tweeted I'd retweet them and one with a hashtag which is #votegreen2016. I'm very happy with the hashtag and then retweeting what was coming in in those two streams and then respond to what they were saying. I think the more you retweet your members the more they want to tweet because they feel like ok the party is listening to me, supporting me. That might be why it seemed like a lot of members were tweeting because we were encouraging them. Not necessarily all the time saying get out there and tweet but just having them, like, they tweet something we go okay we'll re-tweet you, it's a good Tweet and we want to be saying here's what members think, we don't want this to be here is what Eamon thinks all the time. To get back to the hashtag. I know the hashtag has nothing to do with your question, the idea behind the hashtag was it's a pan-global hashtag #votegreen2016, all over the English speaking world people use #votegreen2016 or #votegreen2014 or #votegreen2012 depending on the elections so the reason we went for it was because a) it meant we could hook into that global Green network because there are Greens all over the world, the Green Party are in government in Mongolia at the moment as far as I know, last time I checked they were anyway, so it made me kind of hook into that. It also meant that if someone was tweeting it was clear, it was clear like #votegreen2016. During our convention we were on the same day as Fianna Fáil and there were several times that we, and I was trying to get everyone to tweet I was like keep tweeting keep tweeting to

the members after every panel because there was only about 200 like less than 200 people in the room and that's compared to thousands of people who were down the road at Fianna Fáil but we actually were the number one tweeted thing in Ireland several times at several different intervals we leaped over them. What I was especially happy with was the fact that if you were looking at the sidebar, looking at the trends, and Fianna Fáil had #af16 for Ard Fheis 16 which could mean anything but if you see votegreen2016 that's clear it's a really clear thing. Now it takes up more characters so it's a bit of a pain in the ass but it does it's clear in what it means. and thirdly the best thing about that of all is if you want to tweet at us attacking us, you're like oh the Green Party are terrible, oh I hate the Green Party #votegreen2016. You know you have that at the end as well so you sort of, I really appreciated that.

**I: For the members then it was just more encouragement they weren't necessarily given any orders to tweet something?**

**R1:** No we wouldn't have said that I think like our members generally support us a lot anyway because we're so small you're kind of like a more tiny group so if we put something up on Facebook they're more likely just to like it and share. They want to, I think people really identify with the idea of being Green. The only time we said we want you to be tweeting was I think during the last debate maybe we said it before the seven way leaders' debate but I don't think we did. I might be wrong but during the last debate there was a concerted effort on my part to post in the group and to say to people I mean we need you to tweet we need you to retweet us and engage. I don't think I ever said retweet I think I just said tweet talk about what the Green Party will do and let's make sure our case is made in this last thing and the main reason for that was because during that one we had spent all our money on the previous debate the seven way debate and the Social Democrats had put money in to put themselves on top of the thing in the last debate so we were like OK we have to find some way to make ourselves talked about so we did it.

**I: Now that the election is over do you still see social media as important in the years in between the election and before the local election and then the next general election?**

**R1:** It will definitely be incredibly important for growing ourselves because we're trying to get a youth wing group set up around the country and Facebook is a main way of engaging people through that and yeah it's a good way of keeping people up to date. I don't, we won't, like I was volunteering here and I obviously wouldn't be able to do that for a year, years on end so it's kind of a case we would need so we won't have anyone dedicated. Like our press officer will do the bit of social media but we won't have the same amount of work put into our social media that we did in the campaign so we will drop off a bit. I'm hopeful that it will remain positive and more people will look at it and go, Oh we want if nothing else to get engaged with the Green Party. I'm hopeful but I don't know because

**I: is it just a matter of resources that you just can't**

**R1:** Yeah, I mean pretty much. It's the same with anything with this party because we're so small and because for so long we've had no money still because we don't actually have any money yet because we've to wait until the Dail reconvenes or the government is formed to put together the Oireachtas group that actually doles out the money, the funding so we still have no money. Because we've had no money for so long it's just a case that we can't turn around and start splurging we're sort of in that mode where we're like, this will be gone tomorrow like we can't be going crazy with it.

**I: So you won't drop off social media altogether but you just won't be giving it the same amount of dedication?**

**R1:** We wouldn't be able to.

## Appendix Three: Copy of consent form

**Participant Identification Number:**

### CONSENT FORM

#### **What is the role of social media in a general election campaign? A case study of the 2016 Irish General Election**

**Name of Researcher:** Hannah Byrne O'Morain

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my Research Project for my Special Topics BA Project at Maynooth University, NUIM. My research is designed to examine the role of social media in the recent 2016 General Election campaign.

All of the interview information will be kept confidential. I will store the tapes/notes of our conversation safely. Your identity will be kept confidential and I will use a code number/pseudonym to identify your interview data. Neither your name nor private information will appear in the final research project, though your party will be mentioned.

Your participation is voluntary. You are free to refuse to take part, and you may refuse to answer any questions or may stop at any time. You may also withdraw at any time up until the work is completed

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact me at [hannahbyrneo@gmail.com](mailto:hannahbyrneo@gmail.com)

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the above. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to refuse to answer any questions and to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
3. I understand that my name will not appear in the final project.
4. I agree to take part in the above study.

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Name of Participant

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Date

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Signature