A Comparative Analysis of Political Email Lists

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Abstract

Utilising three similar, but slightly different Australian general political email discussion lists, this paper examines the degree to which these lists, as a new form of 'public sphere' (Dahlberg, 2001) can be seen to undertake, or fulfil, the 'traditional' functions of political associations (formal and informal), specifically: political socialisation, aggregation, and mobilisation. Using a combination of content analysis, observation, and network analysis to examine the content of messages travelling over these lists and the social community they embody, this paper concludes that these lists do fulfil important political socialisation functions, but do not provide the means by which political interlocutors can turn this social bonding and education into practical political expression. While each list had significant similarities, it appears that important "bracing" factors lead to the success or otherwise of lists as lively places for debate. In particular, the role of moderation and promotion is critical in the establishment of political discussion lists that develop enough 'critical mass' to sustain a community of interest large enough to appear self-replicating. The research points to the important relationship between online political forms of expression and extant political organisations, structures, and institutions for further research.

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1 University of Melbourne. E-mail: pche@unimelb.edu.au. Significant thanks goes to the coding team of University of Melbourne Public Policy and Management students who gave up valuable holiday time to assist with the data collection for this project: Jennifer Doherty, Alex Kaiser, Catherine Monte, Sandy Petrovic-Defteros, Megan Smart, and Andrew Waugh-Young.
Introduction

This paper examines the political implications of one form of Internet communication sub-media: public electronic mailing lists. Since the popularisation of the medium during the 1990s, a range of writers have speculated about the "democratising" influence of this technology, given its broad reach and participative nature (for example Hagan, 1997; Coleman, 2000; Commonwealth Centre for Electronic Governance, 2001, among many others). This is not unusual with the rise of a new communications technology, with the advent of telegraph, radio, and television seeing similar commentary and exhortation (see, for example, Bimber, 2003), prior to the emergence of clear indications of their socio-political impact. As with most new communications technologies, research into the social and political effect and implications of new media lags behind practice. While email lists have been studied for a number of purposes, limited research has been conducted (a) into the political impacts of the new technology, and (b) with specific regards to Australia. Thus, this paper attempts to address this deficit and explore a reproducible methodology for the analysis of these lists, to broaden future research in this area of political life.

Starting with a normative concern – the impact of partisan dealignment amongst the Australian voting public – this paper seeks to explore the extent to which political discussion lists may serve to provide an alternative to the "functions" traditionally provided by mass party membership. While it is misleading to imply a period of wide-scale public participation in organised political parties in Australia (a "golden age"), there is clear evidence that party membership remains in decline relative to the increase of the Australian population (Worthington, 2001:1), and that this decline is both concentrated towards younger citizens and reflects changing political interests among this cohort, and encourages machine-style politics among the major political parties (Herrnson, 1986:598) as their membership becomes less and less representative of important tactical political constituencies (e.g. marginal electorates and swinging voters). While this shift in the political landscape is moderated, to some degree, by electoral systems that disproportionately
favours major party representation in parliaments, much of the scholarship surrounding these phenomena relates to questions of metrics and measurement (e.g. measurement of levels of party affiliation; Jackman, 2002:13) or issues associated with concerns about "stability" (and the lack thereof associated with the brokerage-style of politics increasingly seen in the Australian Senate; Bean, 1996:136) and the predictability of electoral outcomes ("volatility"), the decreasing "gene pool" of potential political candidates (Mills, 1986), or the rise of "fringe" parties that lack realistic programmatic policy direction (Bennett, 1999).

To examine the political functions of electronic mailing lists in Australia, this paper reports on primary research undertaken during 2003, using established content analysis techniques in a comparative case research design. By capturing descriptive data about communication on these lists, the paper describes the political community found therein, based on the degree to which these lists provide means for political education, action, and a venue for similarities of political interest. In addition, drawing on observations about the social nature of both online groups and traditional party mechanisms, the exchange of messages online provided an possible means to apply network analysis to these lists. This final technique provides some insight into whether or not these lists can be considered, in some way, as communities, and the dynamics of these social groups. Finally, in examining the characteristics of three similar, but slightly different lists, the research provides initial insight into the impacts of list design variables, that impact on their capacity to establish self-regulating and sustaining social groups.

**The Decline of Party Affiliation**

Traditionally (and currently) formal political parties have been seen as both necessary public institutions in representative democratic systems and inevitable strategic responses to the logic of coalition building. Indeed, as Pomper notes (1977:22), while once reviled as distortions of parliamentary functions (shifting decision making from the legislature to the back room, soliciting political donations and patronage, and altering public debate towards
ritual over substance; Madison’s 1787 complaint about “faction”), in the modern period the existence of political parties has “become accepted as an accurate index of the existence of democracy itself”, supporting the democratic process with a parallel bureaucracy, training ground for future leaders, and insuring political competition, even in the least interesting of political contests. While this view is based on the assumption that modern political systems cannot function effectively without a degree of professional management (organisation both in and out of government), evidence post 1960 shows that Australia, like comparative nations (Britain, the United States), has been suffering a decline in public affiliation with political parties, both in terms of pre-election voting preferences (strong psychological affiliation and attachment to specific parties, irrespective of stated policy) and during electoral campaigns (Marks, 1993). While this is generally seen as problematic in terms of electoral stability, predictability, and the legitimacy of governments, some view the shift from close party affiliation as an inevitable feature of the decline of simple social cleavages (particularly class divisions) or a rational approach to determining election outcomes based on close environmental scanning (particularly via the media) and a willingness to vote strategically to maximise localised returns in the form of "pork" (the "late voting" phenomenon; McAllister, 2000).

What should be acknowledged, however, is that political parties, as social institutions, have traditionally provided members with a range of psychological and practical benefits: from the pleasure of social interaction and fellowship (McKenna and Green, 2002:120), to political and economic networks, the means for the expression of individual and collective will to power, and the skills, knowledge, and techniques to exploit the political system for partisan advantage (Rose, 1989:270-1). The extent to which all of these characteristics may be present in any particular party or branch is, of course, variable, however parties as viewed from this functional structuralist perspective can be seen as critical – but not exclusive – components in the way ideas are shaped, collectives martialled, and political action taken.

2 Although increasingly, authors are inclined to see the political character of civil society as a more “valuable” democratic expression (see, for example, Leadbeater, 1997).
Given this, what is of interest in the way political dealignment has played out in nations like Australia, is the extent to which the breaking of strong ties with parties implies a rise in political apathy, or more dramatic shifts in the nature of political participation. While dealignment is clearly seen in younger cohorts, there are contested views over the implications of this change. For authors like Norris (2004), the lack of party affiliation with younger people does not imply a new political apathy (the decline of "social capital" thesis, popularised by authors like Putnam, 2000), but reflects a greater political interest in post-materialist values, cause- and consumer-based activism, and political expression through non-institutional mechanisms (direct action, art and graffiti, protests, boycotts and consumer sovereignty). For Norris, there are strong indicators of a life-cycle process by which the level of political activity peaks (14) and where political activity based around party structures becomes preferred as the individual enters middle age. Limits do exist in maintaining this outlook, first in terms of the dismissiveness to which issues of political socialisation of the young are treated in this model (assumption of latter participation in a more meaningful manner) and second in that this view may overall normalise social change and downplay the need for longitudinal research to gauge the changing nature of participation (if any) among younger people. Certainly just as the end of distinct class dichotomies have significantly altered the nature of two party competition in Australia over the last forty years, anecdotal evidence speaks of a deeper change in the nature of youth participation in parties in Australia (Painter, quoted in ABC, 2001).

**Political Functionalism as Research Variables**

This research focuses on four areas of function that have been "traditionally" associated with mass parties (parties of the modern period, circa 1880-1970): political socialisation (the acquisition of beliefs and understandings of the political world), political aggregation (the formation of collectives large enough to effectively organise for formal political action), political mobilisation (the conversion of ideals and membership into political action), and the social networking characteristics of these groups that serves as both a regulator of these communities, and braces together their distinct collective identities.
Political socialisation has been of interest to political scientists and sociologists for nearly a century. While not an undisputed concept, political socialisation can be seen as having a number of key elements: First, and most commonly, it is associated with preference formation for particular political groups (e.g. party/faction affiliation) or ideological positions (Dawson and Prewitt, 1969:26). This preference formation provides an indicative view of how the individual will vote in any given election, the kinds of political parties or causes they will become associated with, and their general conceptual schema through which political issues are viewed. Commonly, political socialisation is associated with childhood learning and the influences of family and local community (Parsons, 1951; Marsh, 1971:464), however adult socialisation is also seen as relevant, either enriching basic biases with knowledge to act upon them or defend their efficacy, or as possible means of reprogramming basic values through analytical debate at the surface level of policy and politics (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier, 1994:182-3). Second, political socialisation relates to beliefs about one’s capacity to influence the political world (positive or negative belief about one’s political efficacy) – the basis upon which they choose to engage politically (see below). Third, socialisation is also the ongoing process of acquiring "facts" and knowledge about the political world and structures within it (Pateman, 1971).

If socialisation gives us an understanding of our capacity to affect change, this can be expressed through the aggregation and mobilisation of political actors. Both notions are related, and contested, however it can be argued that prominent social institutions – institutions like political parties, social groups (Apex, Rotary), interest and pressure groups, and the new class of activist non-government organisations – provide a means by which the positively socialised political individual can come together with others to affect change. Aggregation – to some extent – makes inherent sense given the increasing complexity of social organisation (although this must be seen in the context of indirect social benefits; see Olsen's critique, 1971), however, we must recognise diversity in interest aggregation through the range of social and cultural institutions in our public life, from those that focus on very specific member characteristics (sporting groups) or objectives (single interest
groups), to umbrella organisations formed for tactical reasons (possibly with limited expectations of longevity) and "ideological groups" – like parties – that present broad platforms for public endorsement. Clearly, the social construction of these groups (often, but not always expressed in their formal constitutional documents) defines the degree to which they can internalise dissent and variation from central founding (or emergent) principles of membership (Pizzorno, 1981:255), and the extent and nature of their acts of mobilisation (action) is similarly constructed and presented (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1992).

Finally, if we accept that Olsen's critique of the logic of collective action necessitates a view that political aggregation is not strictly rational, then the institutional structure of parties – as a collection of sub-groups, regional groupings, and overarching state and federal structures, with cross-cutting factions (formal or informal) – requires greater explanation than simply the logic of faction and coalition building. While the psychological aspects of membership have been long established, it appears more useful here to define this phenomenon in terms of these groupings as communities of interest. Taking Hillery's definition (1955) of community, we can see how parties have traditionally provided members with networks of interpersonal ties, sociability and support, and solidarity sentiments and activities, all within a defined common locality. This reflects, not only the necessity of providing social and psychological benefits to increase the motivation for participation, but also the importance of trust that leads to the political commitment of members to leaders and policy platforms (Costantini and King, 1984:80-1)

**Political Email Lists as Alternatives to Parties**

From these functional characteristics of parties (though the functions also can be seen to apply to non-party political organisations, such as some interest groups that are member-based), it is possible to use these four elements as criteria against which alternatives to party membership and formation can be gauged – as a means of interrogating directly the functional utility of alternative political associations and activities to members of the body politic.
If the young (specifically) and the public (more generally) are opting out of formal party membership, alternative sources of the functional structural elements of community, and political socialisation, mobilisation and aggregation need to be identified. For, as McAllister’s work shows, the degree of rationalism exhibited by strategic late voting both indicates no decline of political engagement, but rather an unwillingness to engage with traditional institutional mechanisms and within the frameworks of their parents’ generation.

This leads us to a discussion of the political value of electronic mailing lists and the Internet more generally. There is little doubt that new media technologies will have an ongoing impact on the broader political process, just as previous significant developments in media technology did before it (the printing press, general literacy, broadcasting). However, as interactive information systems, political systems will be increasingly subject to the translation of existing processes and phenomena online, the creation of new forms of political activity, and the demise of older methods of political expression and mediation (Bimber, 1998). Email, particularly, has been noted as of particular political application, due to its "speed, multiple addressability, recordability, processing and routing [capabilities]" (Romm and Pliskin, 1998). In this vein, there as been significant discussion of the characteristics of the Internet as a "public sphere" (vis Habermas, 1989), a place of free communication where political consensus can be established (Poster, 1997:218). While these views of the public sphere abound regarding the Internet (for example Rheingold, 1993) and the pain-free consensus view of the rational debate model of decision making is agonisingly naive, it is certainly possible to see Internet groups as meeting some of the basic pre-conditions of communities of interest, and thereby fulfilling the social and political functions of parties, once the spatial and physical requirements are relaxed. Wellman and Leighton (1979:365-7) identified the need to do this in understanding urban spatial networks prior to the advent of the Internet, arguing that neighbourhoods cannot simply be seen as proxies for communities in the formal sense because of close proximity, and that cross cutting social ties need to be considered as more meaningful, tangible
expressions of community solidarity, bonding, and support. This last observation has been followed with an expansive notion of community that includes online groups. Similarly, while some authors see online ties as weaker than interpersonal ones in the physical world (Galston, 2002:56), we need to recognise that offline groups exhibit a wide range of weak affective ties, and that online groups similarly reflect a range of interests, from significant ones such as online support groups (Walther and Boyd, 2002) to less significant activities with the expected low affective ties (Wellman, et al., 1996)³.

The point here is not to locate a "virtual" analog for political parties and mass membership interest groups, as if the concept of the mass party is some platonic ideal form of political association, but rather to determine if online groups can and do fulfil these "traditional" mass party functions – becoming an alternative to party affiliation and therefore shifting the locus of political discourse and debate into the online civil society. In an increasingly complex media society, locating new sources of socialisation and mobilisation will be critical in observing the flow of political information (centralised, diffused) by researchers, determining the source of political ideas and meanings (local, regional, domestic, international) and character of these messages (partisan, objective / third party, institutionally mediated), degree of interaction and participation in the debate (its democratic nature), and the forms of mobilisation that it generates (including community self regulation). In addition, questions of increasing media pluralism through the fragmentation of communities of interest into online "ghettos" (Bimber, 1998) are of interest. Unpicking the degree of political aggregation online allows us to determine if the increasing specialisation of interests online – very positive in terms of the expression and communication of minority concerns that were structurally excluded by mass media forms – reduces the extent of ideological difference in online political groups, to the extent that they lose the creative tension necessary to generate new political ideas, pre-test positions prior to

³ The classification of activities that into either category, however, remain outside the scope of this paper. Clearly the intensity of feeling towards particular online groups can not necessarily be defined in terms of their relationship with offline
implementation or advocacy, and competitively vet political candidates or personality activists prior to mainstream media exposure (the competitive perspective on political organisations).

Research Strategy

To actionalise these research questions, a pilot study was undertaken in 2003, using three Australian political discussion lists (see below) as an initial purposive sample, as a means of testing the concepts and methods against existing case examples. Three distinct research methods were employed: content analysis\(^4\), observation, and formal network analysis\(^5\).

Analysis of message content

The content of sampled messages travelling over the mailing list was coded against a relatively standard coding frame (see Appendix 1) to describe message content. This method served as the primary tool for data collection, using over seventy data elements grouped into a number of categories:

- **Socialisation content** – the message contained information or questions about political issues or events, processes or institutions, individuals, organisations, or other matters. The objective of these questions (Q1-D5) was to determine the degree to which message content focused on political education. In addition, sources of authority in the message content were captured, such as media sources, personal or common knowledge, or political organisations, with the extent to which these sources are quoted and referenced captured. The objective of coding these elements (A1-E3) was to determine the extent to which opinions are supported with external references to increase the veracity of claims made.

- **Mobilisation content** – messages were coded to the extent that they called upon lists members to take some form of action outside of the

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\(^4\) For a similar research approach aimed at examination of the development and maintenance of behavioral norms online see Ahuja and Galvin (2003).

\(^5\) Similar work has been done with IRC channels, see Tan Yunn Gwang (2002).
list, such as communication with political actors (politicians, organisations), rallies and protests, and the formation of offline groups or collectives (C1-C9). Similarly, we were curious as to which of these lists might be "harvested" by other political groups or associations (R1-R5).

- **Social indicators of content** – message tone (missive, argumentative, offensive, swears, conversational, instructive, ironic, on-topic humour) was coded to determine the "friendliness" of the online environment (T1-T9), and specific non-political social characteristics of message content was captured, such as intra-list gossip, or social event organisation (O3), as a means of developing an understanding of the "signal to noise" ratio of the list, i.e. the amount of time spent in purely social conversation as opposed to "strict" observation of the content conventions of the list (i.e. discussions of politics).

- **Aggregation indicators** – finally, a number of measures were included (I1-I7) as a means of determining the political ideological position of the speaker in order to determine the degree to which list members shared similar, or compatible, ideological positions. Recognising the limited value of the traditional left-right political spectrum, this included postmaterialist, feminist, ecologist, fascist/nationalist, and non-specified, but articulated, ideological points of view. This set of measures was supported by measures aimed at determining other affiliations of list members (S1-S10) to determine patterns of association membership (if any) – current or in the past.

Overall, the problems of formal content analysis are recognisable here: the desire to cover a range of complex variables from unstructured original communication creates problems of missing data, data reduction, and there are clearly problems in terms of the fit between coding frame elements and the functionalist and network theory being applied (Neuman, 1994:277-8). On the other hand, the clear advantage of this approach lay in the ability to survey large amounts of archived online material, free of interviewer effects, and produce a range of descriptive statistics from the material. Some limited use
was made of observation of the message content, allowing the researcher to focus on specific elements of the overall data from the simple reading of very large numbers of messages during a concentrated period of time.

In actioning the content analysis, email content was coded into a Microsoft Access database to streamline data collection and eliminate the necessity to process paper forms. A team of seven volunteer coders were engaged over a four day period, coding 1,833 unique messages from online archives over the time period 1st August 2001 to 31st November 2003 (inclusive). The coding team were provided with an introductory briefing seminar on the content analysis method, subject topic area, and use of the coding system, as well as a five page lookup sheet for each data item (codec). Combined with the relatively straightforward coding frame (reliance on "yes/no" data elements), the intercoder reliability score for the data collected was over ninety percent.

Social Networking Analysis

Wellman (1997:179) has long argued that computer networks, as artefacts of human social structures, are social networks. The network perspective gives us insight into the organisation of collectives and communities that do not necessarily fit within hierarchically-structured institutions (parties) or pure market environments (Frances, et al., 1991:14-7). The advantages of analysing email lists are two fold. First, lists are self-defining groups, participation and membership need not be a researcher applied characterisation, but is directly observable via the flow of communication. As such, the population is bounded, not by geography, but by membership of the list. Second, the documentation of these exchanges, and particularly header information (to and from fields), make email ideal for tracking patterns of communication between dyads. Thus, by capturing the origin and destination of email messages on the sampled list and the frequency of these ties (Haythornthwaite, 2002:165), the data set allows us to examine the social structure of these lists.
The social structure is interesting here because it provides insight into the nature of the email list as a social network of (informational) exchange relationships, density of these ties, the existence of cliques and subgroups, centrality of key actors, and key actors that link together disparate parts of the overall social network (Scott, 2000). Unlike other analysis of electronic mail, the focus here is not to overlay electronic communication on existing social networks to determine the cross-cutting functions of new media, nor examine how communications patterns change with technology introduction (Garton, Haythornwaite, and Wellman, 1999), as public lists (where all subscribed members gain access to the messages travelling over the list), our concern here is not to determine privileged members of the group in terms of the inclusion or otherwise of actors from information (attentiveness to message content is beyond the scope of this study), but to explore the nature of these lists as "conversations": the degree to which the lists can be seen as highly connected places of communication where discussion is general (i.e. where actors have large numbers of interactions across the membership list of the group), rather than the formation of clusters with block points that would indicate relatively closed communications within the "space" of the list – the formation of a number of parallel conversations being undertaken simultaneously.

To undertake this analysis, the Ucinet software package was employed to develop preliminary network maps, using clustering to show the pattern of interactions on the surveyed lists. Ties were identified in terms of the quantification of exchanges between list members (replies to, messages directed to), allowing the direction of conversation to be both determined responses and dyadic interlocutors (exchanges between actors). At present the analysis (figures below) remains at a limited level, and the clear problem of associating "general" messages in these networks is unresolved. As a message only becomes valuable in these maps when responded to, those who post messages to the list but attract no responses, become isolates and have been excluded from the network diagrams, and this may possibly create an artificially low density for the networks. This is because, while network analysis uses both ties and nodes as units of analysis, the method effectively
only "validates" responses. This appears problematic in that, while an uncommented upon email may signify either lack of interest or social inclusion, it possibly may also signify tacit acceptance of the message content. This is clearly a research limitation that will need to be addressed before further analysis of this data can be attempted, however, the existing data does provide some (limited) observational information for ascertaining the character of these lists as social networks.

**Sampling Decisions**

As a pilot study of the research methodology, a relatively cautious approach was taken to sampling the political discussion lists under consideration. In Australia, a large number of political discussion lists exist, from Usenet newsgroups (e.g. aus.politics), to highly specific lists formed within existing political organisations (such as parties), for highly instrumental ends (action-oriented lists), around specific policy segments or communities, or international lists that have participation from Australians (which can include all of the above). For the purposes of the pilot, general discussion lists were focused on, because of the initial concern with the cultural shift from mass parties (and the associated general debate afforded by these institutions). Clearly, the success or otherwise of this pilot methodology will allow further exploration of the content analysis method, coding frame, and social networking tools to other forms of political list.

The three lists selected for analysis were: Australian Politics, Online Opinions, and Political Lobby. Each of the lists were easily accessible through online archives (provided by either Microsoft's MSN or Yahoo! Groups), allowing their content to be harvested from the web archive. For comparative purposes each list has a number of differences in its design and operation: Australian Politics is a vanilla list, unsupported by either web-based content or list moderation. Online Opinions, at the other extreme, is the discussion list developed to support the www.onlineopinion.com.au electronic journal, an extensive publishing enterprise that publishes opinion material on current political affairs and maintains its list as moderated by the magazine's editor,
Graham Young. In between these two extremes was Political Lobby, a general discussion list, but one supported by an informative politics website that serves as a portal to existing 3rd party content. The characteristics of the three sampled lists are provided in Table 1.

**Table 1: List Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Australian Politics</th>
<th>Online Opinions</th>
<th>Political Lobby</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>groups.msn.com/australianpolitics</td>
<td>groups.yahoo.com/group/OnlineOpinions</td>
<td>groups.msn.com/politicallobby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderated?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| List Description          | "Hi! Welcome to the Australian Politics discussion. Anyone of any political persuasion is welcome. Feel free to say what ever you want. But please keep it reasonable. There are no rules on what politics you display, only how you display it, please respect everyone's right to their own opinion."
|                           | "On Line Opinion is a not-for-profit e-journal that aims to provide a forum for public social and political debate about current Australian issues. We publish articles to stimulate a public discourse on a range of topics. It is not the editors' intention to dominate these pages – these articles are gathered from a variety of independent sources and are published in the belief that ideas are the essence of progress and that issues and opinions should be addressed, not suppressed."
|                           | "Welcome to Political Lobby - Australian politics on the net; the website for the politically aware. Our mission is to provide you with a one-stop-shop for all things political in Australia." |
| Supporting Website Content| None                | Electronic Journal: Magazine-style current affairs content | Webportal: Deeplinks to political news coverage, press releases and the Australian Parliaments |
| Sponsoring Organisation: | None (independent yahoo! group) | National Forum Inc | Australian Millennium Youth Foundation Inc |
| Member (subscribers)      | Unknown             | 1257                     | Unknown                     |

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6 From respective list or supporting website (access date: 18/12/03).
7 As at December 18, 2003.
A Comparative Analysis of Political Email Lists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unique Authors(^8) (% active(^9))</th>
<th>57 (N/A)</th>
<th>98 (78.4%)</th>
<th>38 (N/A)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Following the selection of the target lists, table 2 outlines the number of sampled messages for coding from the three lists. Of the three lists, Australian Politics and Political Lobby had modest traffic that allowed the entire 28 months’ worth of communication to be sampled, while Online Opinions message volume was such that only a subsample was possible of the messages on this list. Overall, as table 2 illustrates, there was significant variation in the numbers travelling along each list.

Table 2: Sample Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Australian Politics</th>
<th>Online Opinions</th>
<th>Political Lobby</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sampled Messages</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>1,480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Messages per Author</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>15.1+ (47.74)(^{10})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Period(s) Sampled</td>
<td>August 1, 2001 - November 31, 2003</td>
<td>August 1, 2001 - October 8, 2001; February 1 - 19, 2002; August 1 - March 4, 2003; August 1 - September 20, 2003; November 1 - August 1, 2001 - November 31, 2003</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^8\) Number of unique authors posting during the sampled period.
\(^9\) Percentage of members who are active posters (posted at least once during the sampled time period).
\(^{10}\) Given that the sampled period is not as extensive as the other two lists, this figure is largely under representative of the actual average posting figure (over the total timeframe of the study). As estimate (extrapolation) is provided in parentheses.
A Comparative Analysis of Political Email Lists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>30, 2003</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This is a complete sample of the list from inception until November 31, 2003</td>
<td>Periodic sample of list due to quantity of list traffic. List predates. List originated in April 2000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Issues with Internet Research**

The development and expansion of the network of computer systems called the Internet has introduced a radically new form of communication that combines a range of media types (text, imagery, audio, video, animation), communication paradigms (one-to-one, narrowcast, broadcast, multicast), and forms of participation (interactivity, self-publishing, anonymity, role-play, etc.). This diversity makes generalisation and study of this technology complex, with different forms of Internet communication often employed in concert to achieve particular objectives. This has both positive and negative characteristics for the social researcher that should briefly be reflected upon prior to any discussion of research strategy.

On the negative side, there are a range of limitations and considerations researchers face when attempting to describe and explain social and political activity online. Many of these problems are associated with difficulties determining population characteristics (Best and Krueger, 2002) where they are attempting to use the medium as a sampling tool to draw conclusions about offline populations, specifics associated with the nature of the communications medium itself (for example, when talking about email the text-based communication method implies a degree of data reduction through the loss of paralinguistic cues; see Chen and Hinton, 1999), and issues of deliberate or performative deception (Donath, 1996). Most significantly, however, the distorted population online – generally reflecting a higher
A Comparative Analysis of Political Email Lists

socioeconomic community (Servon, 2002:1-8) – has clear indications when attempting to use online communities indicatively.

More positively, the reach, archival capabilities, and digital nature of communication online provide the resource starved researcher with significant advantages in undertaking research with large sample sizes, automation of data collection, and analysis, free or lowcost transcription (Chen and Hinton, 1999). Furthermore, we need to recognise that, in addition to research models that focus either on Internet populations in of themselves or as proxies for offline communities, new media provides interesting possibilities for controlled group experimentation (Latané and Bourgeois, 1996).

**Research Findings**

Based on the research to date, the following descriptive statistics have been developed from the content analysis.

Table three (below) focuses on the substantive message content of the three email lists sampled. Overall, in examining the first two functional aspects traditionally associated with political parties (socialisation and mobilisation), we can see that, across the three lists, questions and answers about political affairs dominate list traffic, illustrating a strong socialisation function, as would be expected. In addition, those lists connected to political content (Online Opinions through its associated eJournal and Political Lobby via its deeplinking portal) also attract "supported" commentary, with nearly half of all Online Opinions messages containing some reference to a source of validation for the message content. These sources tend to be some form of media, with other online sources popular (while it may be assumed that the Online Opinions discussion list would revolve around the material within the Journal, this tends not the case from observation, with the discussion list at times running quite independently of the opinion articles published on its main website), but "traditional" press and print news sources commonly cited for two of the lists. Overall, the degree to which these references were substantiated (referenced, quoted, or linked to) was variable, however the
greater the use of internet references to support message content, the greater the tendency to quote large slabs of text (cut and paste) in the messages.

Table three also illustrates that the three lists have relatively limited mobilisation characteristics, with online opinions particularly low in terms of "activist" messages. Certainly none of the lists are hunting grounds for the established parties or major social groups, with the majority of recruitment messages attempting to convince list members to join other discussion lists, rather than offline political associations. While one list has nearly one in ten messages focused on political action of some form or other, the tendency for these mobilisation messages is largely towards low effort activities, such as emailing political figures or organisations about current issues of public debate and concern.

Table 3: Substantive Message Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Australian Politics</th>
<th>Online Opinions</th>
<th>Political Lobby</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contains question(s)</td>
<td>17.64%</td>
<td>22.36%</td>
<td>20.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question types:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Policy issue or event</td>
<td>41.94%</td>
<td>63.84%</td>
<td>61.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Political process</td>
<td>22.58%</td>
<td>9.86%</td>
<td>4.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Individual (personage)</td>
<td>10.75%</td>
<td>7.67%</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Organisation or group</td>
<td>8.60%</td>
<td>7.67%</td>
<td>4.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Other</td>
<td>16.13%</td>
<td>10.96%</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conveys information on subject</td>
<td>79.41%</td>
<td>77.97%</td>
<td>80.68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject types:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Policy issue or event</td>
<td>36.59%</td>
<td>57.65%</td>
<td>60.68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Political process</td>
<td>22.15%</td>
<td>15.74%</td>
<td>8.55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Individual (personage)</td>
<td>21.54%</td>
<td>9.23%</td>
<td>15.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Organisation or group</td>
<td>9.55%</td>
<td>8.94%</td>
<td>14.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Other</td>
<td>10.16%</td>
<td>8.44%</td>
<td>0.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes reference to authority source</td>
<td>19.60%</td>
<td>47.29%</td>
<td>37.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority source type:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Media source

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>22.52%</th>
<th>39.93%</th>
<th>27.27%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internet only</td>
<td>41.18%</td>
<td>38.24%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press / Print</td>
<td>41.18%</td>
<td>36.26%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book</td>
<td>8.82%</td>
<td>9.63%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>2.94%</td>
<td>8.50%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>2.94%</td>
<td>4.82%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>2.94%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2.55%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Authority individual

| Authority individual | 13.91% | 21.61% | 13.64% |

### An organisation

| An organisation | 10.60% | 8.82%  | 13.64% |

### Personal experience

| Personal experience | 9.93% | 17.42% | 22.73% |

### Personal position

| Personal position | 0.66% | 4.64%  | 4.55%  |

### "Common" knowledge

| "Common" knowledge | 17.22% | 2.26%  | 9.09%  |

### Other

| Other | 25.17% | 5.32%  | 9.09%  |

### Substantiation of Authority Source

| Substantiation of Authority Source | 17.44% | 36.89% | 9.8%  |

### Substantiation type:

#### Quote

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>44.3%</th>
<th>73.68%</th>
<th>25%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modal Quote Size</td>
<td>Sentence</td>
<td>Paragraph</td>
<td>5+ paragraphs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Reference / Link

| Reference / Link | 29.11% | 25.11% | 66.66% |

#### Other

| Other | 26.58% | 1.2%   | 8.33%  |

### Promotion of selling of product

| Promotion of selling of product (political) | 13.72% | 1.41% | 7.16% |

### "Call to arms" – invites action

| "Call to arms" – invites action | 9.80% | 0.74% | 6.54% |

### Type of action:

#### Contact (some person/group)

| Contact (some person/group) | 39.13% | 20%   | 46.66% |

#### Rally / protest

| Rally / protest | 8.69% | 6.66% | 0%    |

#### Petition

| Petition | 4.34% | 13.33% | 0%    |

#### Offline meeting

| Offline meeting | 4.34% | 33.33% | 33.33% |

#### Form a new group

| Form a new group | 8.69% | 0%     | 13.33% |

#### Commit an illegal act

| Commit an illegal act | 13.04% | 6.66% | 6.67% |

#### Distribute information

| Distribute information | 0% | 0% | 0% |
A Comparative Analysis of Political Email Lists

- Other 21.73% 20% 0%

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recruitment message</th>
<th>9.80%</th>
<th>0.54</th>
<th>2.18%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Recruitment type:
- Join this group 85.71% 87.5% 100%
- Volunteer with this group 14.28% 0% 0%
- Donate to this group / cause 0% % 0%
- Anti-recruitment ("don't join") 0% 12.5% 0%
- Other 0% 0% 0%

One explanation for the limited use of these lists for political mobilisation may lie in the degree to which these lists aggregate similar political interests. Taking volunteered ideological positions of speakers (table 4, below), we can see that there is a high tendency for the author of any particular message to volunteer some statement of a meta political position (party affiliation, ideological leaning) to contextualise their message content (these figures are based on aggregations of authors’ messages, not percentages of emails).

This is quite interesting and more promising than expected\(^\text{11}\). Overall, what we can see is that members of these lists stick closely to "conventional" ideological conventions (left-right) rather than adopting alternatives (with the exception of those specifying themselves as "nationalist"\(^\text{12}\)), but that both Online Opinions and Political Lobby contain a diversity of political opinion within the conventional spectrum. It appears, but the inference is tentative, that there is a relationship between the greater consensus of ideological positions on a list to be reflected in a higher level of mobilisation messages – thus Australian Politics, with a tendency to centrist, right, and nationalist affiliations to have a higher level of mobilisation messages. What is clear from the second half of table 4, is that list members are not adverse to action, with a tendency for list members to be "joiners" of groups and organisations. Thus, given a lack of apathy, list membership does not appear to be driven around

\(^{11}\) Allowing the less reliable inferred assignment of political position to be excluded from analysis.

\(^{12}\) Nationalist was a term used, rather than the associated term of fascist in this case (caveat: these two positions were coded as one element).
motivations for political action through the list itself. Clearly, therefore, offline associations and action groups remain preferred by these online participants.

Table 4: Author Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author volunteers their ideological perspective</th>
<th>Australian Politics</th>
<th>Online Opinions</th>
<th>Political Lobby</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>15.78%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ideological positions volunteered:

- **Left**: 0% 47.63% 33.32%
- **Centre**: 10.94% 17.42% 0%
- **Right**: 29.77% 22.22% 33.32%
- **Most-materialist**: 0% 0% 0%
- **Feminist**: 0% 0% 0%
- **Ecologist**: 0% 0% 0%
- **Nationalist**: 29.77% 0% 16.68%
- **Other**: 29.77% 12.73% 16.68%

Author identifies membership of organisation / group

| 33.92% | 51.86% | 18.42% |

Group Memberships:

- **Political party member**: 14.3% 13% 28.6%
- **Political party official**: 4.8% 0% 0%
- **Non-party, non-religious group member**: 28.7% 6.5% 71.4%
- **Non-party, non-religious group official**: 4.9% 6.5% 0%
- **Faith organisation member**: 14.4% 6.5% 0%
- **Faith organisation official**: 4.85% 0% 0%
- **Public servant**: 4.85% 17.3% 0%
- **Deliberately independent (non-aligned)**: 0% 10.9% 0%
- **Private sector**: 0% 22% 0%
Given the ideological differences between the lists, table 5 (below) illustrates that tenor of these lists: the tone of message content. While a subjective coding decision, the figures presented in table 5 would indicate that the lists tend to be rather conversational in tone, but that the two unmoderated email lists (Australian Politics and Political Lobby) are more likely to feature messages designed to offend, and contain swearing. Interestingly, the tendency for the moderated list to be conversational and have less negative message content does not reduce the level of argumentative discourse, with Online Opinions more likely to feature argumentative messages than the unmoderated lists. Moderation, therefore, does not appear to suppress debate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Australian Politics</th>
<th>Online Opinions</th>
<th>Political Lobby</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missive</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argumentative</td>
<td>10.07%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>12.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offensive / Insulting</td>
<td>15.22%</td>
<td>5.62%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offence directed to:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In reply to original message</td>
<td>29.23%</td>
<td>44.94%</td>
<td>28.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another list member</td>
<td>9.23%</td>
<td>12.36%</td>
<td>3.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offlist person / group</td>
<td>61.54%</td>
<td>42.7%</td>
<td>67.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swears</td>
<td>4.22%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>5.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swearing directed at:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author of original message</td>
<td>38.89%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another list member</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offlist person / group</td>
<td>61.11%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussional / Conversational</td>
<td>49.65%</td>
<td>54.95%</td>
<td>41.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructive / Patronising</td>
<td>6.32%</td>
<td>7.13%</td>
<td>5.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satire / Irony</td>
<td>3.04%</td>
<td>4.54%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humour (jokes)</td>
<td>1.17%</td>
<td>1.26%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Finally, as a potential location of social chatter, none of the lists particularly feature this form of communication (off topic messages based around maintaining or discussing the social characteristics and dynamics of the list itself (table 6, below). While Online Opinions was most likely to do this, these messages made up a small proportion of list traffic, and tended to focus on one specific member of the list\(^{13}\) during the sampled period. Excluding these messages (coded as intra-list "gossip"), the majority of messages coded in this category tended to be messages of support, congratulating other list members on good postings, rather than substantive engagement with their subject matter (coded as "other").

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Australian Politics</th>
<th>Online Opinions</th>
<th>Political Lobby</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of messages containing socialising messages</td>
<td>1.26%</td>
<td>4.45%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialising type:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Gossip&quot; (intra-list)</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>34.85%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social events</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3.03%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>62.12%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given the tendency for the lists to be largely "functional", in that they focused on political disputation, discussion, and information sharing over social support activities, and generalised bonding, the network diagrams presented below are illustrative of the degree to which the lists sampled can be reified. Overall, and in summary of the four sociograms presented, we can see that the two low traffic lists cannot be clearly classified as "discussional communities" – in that they have a group identity based on general

\(^{13}\) A member of the list who had suffered a brain injury and posted erratic communications to the list that sometimes created offense from list members. A reasonable amount of the social list content concerned discussions of this individual by himself (self-disclosure), another individual (his girlfriend), or Graham Young, the list editor.
participation by members. Clustering analysis on both the Australian Politics and Political Lobby lists shows very clear sub-groups separated by a small number of linking bridges – a weak connection overall. Partially this is explained by the limited message traffic and correspondingly long sampling period – in that the turn over of participants was relatively high, separating some nodes temporally. However, overall it appears that there exists a critical mass of participation (rather than members) that leads to the reduction of sub-groups within the list. Additionally, while the role of the list moderator has been noted as a possible reason for reduction in offensive messages (above), it is clear from the reduced sociogram (figure 4) of Online Opinions (where limited exchanges between nodes have been excluded) that the list moderator had not become central to the operations of the list (in effect, had not assumed "leadership" of discussion). Thus, it appears that this list has developed self-organising characteristics that have integrated participants into a singular community without heavy handed direction.
A Comparative Analysis of Political Email Lists

Figure 1: Australian Politics Sociogram, step 1, less isolates, with clustering
Figure 2: Political Lobby Sociogram, less isolates, with clustering
Figure 3: Online Opinions Sociogram, less isolates, with clustering
Figure 4: Online Opinions Sociogram, step 4, less isolates, with clustering
Conclusions and Directions for Further Research

Overall, as a pilot study, the results reported above do provide some illumination of the function of general political discussion lists in the post-Internet media age. Beginning with a hypothesis that the decline of mass party affiliation and identification leads the politically engaged to relocate the functional and psychological benefits of political associations, political discussion lists were identified as one avenue where the historical functions of mass parties may be located today.

In taking three general political discussion lists as the basis of a pilot study of the content analysis and social networking methodology, we have been able to identify a clear political socialisation function of these mailing lists, indicating a lively source of civic debate can be found in these fora. The finding that these lists do not serve as a focal point for political action and mobilisation may be seen as problematic for proponents of mass political action. However, the high level of group membership among list participants indicates that this level of political interest is not lost to the community, but that the lists are not seen as an avenue for political action. This result may be the outcome of the nature of the sampling process, in that general lists, by nature, incorporate a wide range of political interests and debate topics, and so may fail to “focus” attention and action by list members. It may be likely that future study of single interest, or internal party or interest group lists would demonstrate a much more significant focus on mobilisation. However, a question of concern remains that while the broad nature of these lists allows for a general political education in the same way that major parties under the two party system required attention across the full spectrum of policy issues (and therefore both developed complete political agendas, and the discipline of determining priorities), the tendency for this broad ranging interest to be driven by offline events (issues based discussion), teamed with a lack of mobilisation activity, would appear to reduce the practical value of the political socialisation of the lists. In traditional party machines, focused as they are upon the contestation of political office, socialisation goes beyond the acquisition of a broad-ranging political knowledge, but is teamed with
structural and process understandings of policy making systems (applied knowledge). This lack may limit the functional value of these lists.

Finally, in unpacking issues of list popularity (membership), traffic, and social management, the results of this research were quite surprising, in that the lists tended to be very instrumental in their approach, limiting "superfluous" social communication to, at times, the bare minimum. While this bespeaks a serious purpose to the list membership, it would appear that with neither practical political objective, nor affective ties, the sustainability of these lists in the face of applied pressure (say, internal disputation) may be questionable. This conclusion, however, needs to be treated with some caution – not because the loss of paralinguistic cues inherent in the email form may underplay strong attachment to the social network by members, but because the data reduction of the coding frame design (by nature) may exacerbate this methodological problem. In addition, while social networking analysis has proven very powerful in other applications to information communications technology, significant alterations to the data collection approach – to incorporate isolate postings, and ideational data (which may be difficult to gather in conjunction with archived messages) – will be needed to develop this pilot methodology into a more generally useful (comparative) toolset. Overall, surveys of list members may be necessary, as, if we are looking for a new site of youth participation, the tendency of members to cite print media (newspapers) and lack of post-materialist ideological identification implies these participants site well within their middle years. Robert Putnam’s conclusions continue to show their head.
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A Comparative Analysis of Political Email Lists


### Appendix 1: Coding Frame

#### Message Content: Recruitment
- R1: Join group/organisation
- R2: Volunteers needed
- R3: Donate...
- R4: Endowment
- R5: Other than above

#### Speaker identifies themselves as
- S1: Member political party
- S2: Officer political party
- S3: Member community/nongovernment
- S4: Other, identify
- S5: Member NFP
- S6: Official/other
- S7: Public servant
- S8: Deliberate independent
- S9: Private Sector/Other

#### Message tone is
- T1: Informative
- T2: Persuasive
- T3: Offensive/Harassing
- T4: Slurs
- T5: High conversational
- T6: Instructional/Forceful
- T7: Humorous
- T8: Humour (jokes)
- T9: Other than above

#### Message predominantly off-topic, and contains
- O1: Personal
- O2: SNW
- O3: List social issues
- O4: Other than above

#### Political ideology / position of speaker is
- P1: Traditional spectrum
- P2: Far left
- P3: Far right
- P4: Centrist
- P5: Fascist/Authoritarian
- P6: Other, explain
- P7: Other, explain

#### Any additional notes

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