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**Empowerment vis-à-vis Disengagement: Social Networks in Canadian Political Marketing**

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**Empowerment vis-à-vis Disengagement:  
Social Networks in Canadian Political Marketing**

Derek Antoine

Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
M.A. in Communication

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Faculty of Arts,  
University of Ottawa

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which Canadian Members of Parliament use social network sites, Facebook in particular, for political purposes. The roots of this thesis are found in liberalism as discussed by John Locke (1689), Immanuel Kant (1795), Jean Jacques Rousseau (1762), and John Stuart Mill (1859; 1863), Jürgen Habermas' public sphere theory (1962) and theory of communicative action (1981), Manuel Castells' (1996) network theory, and the social shaping of technology theory as outlined by Lievrouw (2002). Other concepts that guide this thesis are the strength of weak ties, the mediated public sphere, the amateur as producer, private versus public spaces, and political marketing. From these concepts, the primary goal is to understand the views, choices, and perceptions of MPs as they use Facebook and explain the findings in light of the theoretical framework. In-depth interviews with Canadian MPs as well as a content analysis of their Facebook page or profiles were conducted to measure the ways in which MPs use this social network site. This thesis finds that MPs use social network sites for political marketing purposes rather than for engagement purposes. It is argued in this thesis that the use of Facebook by Canadian MPs is enshrined in liberalism and, consequently, has a negative effect on Canada's democracy because it elevates the individual over the community.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### **Preamble**

Canada currently has the opportunity to observe our neighbour, the last remaining superpower, come to terms with the political impact of a volatile new medium.

*Fraser MacLean – The Toronto Star*

During the 2008 Canadian Federal election, many pundits wondered what effect social network sites would have on Canada's politics. As an example of the importance given to this topic, CBC's flagship news program *The National* provided a nightly platform for reporter Susan Ormiston's tracking of social network sites and how they related to the campaign. Additionally, she was given a page on CBC's election coverage website called "Ormiston Online" that was dedicated to tracking online trends and tweets. She commented on "important" Facebook groups, opined about the effects social media would have on the campaign, and interviewed a number of Canadian bloggers. The Canadian media's interest was a result of a much larger campaign taking place simultaneously in the United States.

America was in the midst of a presidential election that followed a grueling primary process pitting then Senator Barack Obama against Senator John McCain. Obama's win in both the primaries and after the election were credited, in part, to his campaign's use of social network sites with the result of a record number of new voters casting a ballot. Not only did Obama's campaign use existing social network sites such as

Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube, it developed its own called mybarackobama.com. That site allowed Obama's campaign to communicate to a large pool of supporters in one bounded system where users created profiles that allowed the campaign to target their messages. Even today, his campaign manager David Plouffe writes in his new book about the campaign *The audacity to win* (2009) about the digital campaign that he says led to a grassroots movement to win the presidency.

In Canada, social network sites play a larger role in politics as virtually every current Member of Parliament uses one form or another. From Twitter to Facebook to YouTube, many are active users.<sup>1</sup> Canadians are also very active social network users. In the spring of 2009, CTV news learned that social network sites and blogs overtook email in popularity, growing at a rate twice as fast as more traditional forms of communications (CTV). Facebook itself brags that it has more than three hundred and fifty million active users with fifty percent of these users logging on in any given day. Surprisingly, Facebook's statistics also show that the fastest growing demographic of users is people 35 years of age and older.

This increase in use of the Internet and social network sites have led some to point to these tools as potential solutions to help strengthen Canada's democracy. Voter turnout in Canada is at a record low. Elections Canada reports that only 58.8% of eligible voters cast a ballot in the 2008 federal general election. In 2006, 64.7% cast a ballot, and 60.9% in 2004. These are the lowest voter turnout rates in Canadian history and there is a sense by some that answers can be found on the Internet. Rabia Karakaya Polat (2005), danah

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<sup>1</sup> Veteran Canadian reporter David Akin has compiled a list of politicians who use various social network sites. It can be found at [www.davidakin.com](http://www.davidakin.com).

boyd<sup>2</sup>(2008a), and others have explored the links between the Internet and political participation. These two have concluded that technology on its own will not change social institutions or democracy. Karakaya Polat (2005) in particular argues that if the reason for low voter turnout rates is convenience, then the Internet can likely make a difference. But, she says it is more likely that voter participation is in decline due to an unwillingness to participate or systemic hindrances and the Internet will have little effect. Coleman, Lieber, Mendleson, and Kurpius (2008) and Reid & Groth (2008), on the other hand, argue that well built websites can have an effect on political participation. They argue that if a website is designed in a way that makes information easier to access and understand, then there is a likelihood that those who peruse the website will become engaged and more politically active. Given this debate, it is important to examine the ways in which the Internet is being used for political purposes.

### **Research Problem and Objectives**

Jürgen Habermas (1962) describes an environment where prejudice and injustice is remedied and barriers are broken down to allow for greater equality. He says that the public sphere “may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people coming together as a public” (1989: 27). The public sphere is where people congregate to discuss and resolve issues affecting them. To Habermas, a strong public sphere, and a strong democracy as a result, must be accessible, universal, and encourage rational and critical debate.

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<sup>2</sup> danah boyd does not use capital letters in her name. A detailed explanation can be found on her website at: <http://www.danah.org/name.html>.

At the time of his writing, Habermas conceived of the public sphere taking place in coffee shops, pubs, and other public places where people congregated. Today, the Internet has become one of those places. Facebook in particular has the capabilities, features, and constituency to act as a virtual public sphere. *The Economist* magazine argues that social network sites are “like sitting around campfires again, but with vastly superior tools.” (*The Economist*, 2008) On Facebook, for example, there are tools that encourage discussion, tools for sharing information, tools for networking like-minded individuals, and tools that bring together the weak ties that open up difference. Facebook, as a communication tool, has the ability to become a public sphere but only if it is used for such purposes. Similarly, Facebook can be used to strengthen democracy, but only if it is used to achieve those goals.

The social shaping of technology theory helps to understand how technology affects society. The mere introduction of a particular piece of technology does not shape society. Rather, it is society that shapes technology and the way that it is used. As public debate around the role of social network sites and its effect on politics continues, it is important that any study around technology and politics look at the choices made and views held by users who have adopted the technology. Facebook will not revolutionize democracy if it is not used for such a purpose. Similarly, a public sphere will not be realized online through the Facebook pages or profiles of Members of Parliament unless they choose to use the site for such purposes.

Facebook is one of the more popular social network sites and will be the primary unit of analysis for this thesis. While there are many other social network sites on the Internet that are increasing in popularity, Facebook was adopted early on by Canadian

politicians and most Canadian MPs have a Facebook page or profile. This is a site that some have been using since 2006/2007. As a communication tool, Facebook has many features that provide politicians with the ability to share and react to content, build networks, allow users to drive the content of a page, and engage users. Other sites such as Twitter are less about engagement and more about broadcasting within networks. Twitter allows users to follow other users and stay current on what they post. There is little opportunity to reply or comment on the content.

Given the increase in use of social network sites and the popular discourse around how they will affect politics in Canada, this thesis explores the ways in which Canadian MPs use Facebook as a communication tool. More precisely, it examines their use through the lens of Habermas' (1962) public sphere theory, Castells' (1996) network theory, and the social shaping of technology theory to observe how MPs are using the site. It looks at attitudes, choices, and personal views. Are they using Facebook for engagement purposes to empower grassroots Canadians and follow the public sphere elements of access, universality, and reason? Or are they using it for political marketing purposes to further their own electoral success. Liberalism also plays a large role in the discussion since it is a philosophy that has, as Sandel (1996) argues, finds itself entrenched in Western society and through its practice contributes to the decline in public trust in democratic institutions. The use of social network sites by Canadian MPs will be compared to the tenet of liberalism and, more precisely, liberal utilitarianism to examine its effect on Canada's public institutions.

## **Thesis Overview**

The pillars of this thesis include liberalism, Habermas' (1962) public sphere theory and (1981) theory of communicative action, Castells' (1996) network theory, and the social shaping of technology theory. These epistemological roots are explored in detail in the literature review along with other important concepts including the role of the amateur as producer with Keen (2007) and Sunstein (2003), the strength of weak ties with Granovetter (1989), political marketing with Scammell (2003), the Internet as a public sphere, and Bennett and Manheim's (2001) mediated public sphere. Additionally, the literature review will examine how social network sites are related to these theories by exploring them in practical terms.

The central research question seeks to explore the ways in which Canadian MPs are using social network sites to engage citizens in a public sphere where citizens have the opportunity to contribute through communicative action. The sub-research questions stem from the central research question and explore whether or not MPs are using social network sites in a way that promotes accessibility, universality, and rational/critical debate. Additionally, it is asked whether Facebook, or its use, constitutes a power switch as outlined by Castells (1996; 2004).

Through content analysis and in-depth interviews, it is determined that the MPs who participated in this thesis choose to use Facebook for broadcast and political marketing purposes. Rather than viewing the social network site as a public space, the informants say that their Facebook page or profile constitutes "my space," "my microphone," and "my platform." Some argue that it is an easy, inexpensive, and effective communication tool to disseminate information. The content analysis shows that

the type of content that these politicians post tends to be items that reinforce their positions or the positions of their party leaders through video, press releases, notes, photos, and status updates. The MPs do not follow the public sphere tenets of accessibility and universality as they limit those who can join their network and do not provide discourse space for users to contribute content. Additionally, the MPs view users as “followers” who they believe are trying to access information rather than contribute to a conversation.

Similarly, the MPs who participated in this thesis have indicated that they do not create an environment for rational/critical discourse through their views and feature choices on Facebook. They choose not to respond to comments posted on their Facebook pages or profiles and do not believe that the social network site is a public space that should follow the public forum doctrine as outlined by Sunstein (2003). The in-depth interviews also reveal that neither Facebook, nor the *use* of Facebook, acts as a power switch to change the power dynamic between MPs and users. Since MPs view their relationship with constituents and Canadians in the same way as before their use of Facebook.

The tenets of liberalism and utilitarianism are found in the way MPs use Facebook. The tool, though capable of building community through its networks, is used to elevate the individual over the community at the expense of trust in Canadian public institutions. The public sphere as outlined by Habermas (1962) is fundamentally about individuals advocating on behalf of private interests. Whether or not the public sphere should be held as a model for grassroots democracies is called into question as it may potentially be contributing to the problem it seeks to address.

This thesis begins with a literature review, forms a methodology from the key theories and concepts outlined in the literature review, conducts in-depth interviews with Canadian MPs as well as a content analysis of their Facebook pages or profiles, and presents the findings with a discussion. Chapter 2 is the literature review that outlines the epistemological roots that frame this thesis and draws on liberalism, Jürgen Habermas' public sphere theory (1962) and Theory of Communicative Action (1981), Manuel Castells' (1996) network theory, and the social shaping of technology theory. Additionally, a theoretical foundation is built by examining Mark Granovetter's (1983) strength of weak ties, Andrew Keen's (2007) discussion around the amateur and social network sites, Cass Sunstein's (2007) observation of user generated media causing a filtered "daily me" as well as his account of the public forum doctrine, Margaret Scammell (1999) and Lance Bennett & Jarol Manheim's (2001) outline of political marketing, and a discussion of the Internet as a public sphere.

Chapter 3: Methodology outlines the concepts, research questions, research design and the data collection methods that guide the research being conducted. Both in-depth interviews and a content analysis are used to collect data for this thesis. The in-depth interviews with MPs explore the values, opinions, and cognitive choices that guide the way MPs use Facebook as a communications tool. The content analysis of the MPs Facebook pages or profiles examines the choices these politicians make in choosing particular features and content submissions on Facebook. The central research question examines the ways Canadian MPs use social network sites to engage citizens in a public sphere where citizens can contribute and inform MPs through communicative action. The sub research questions examine, through MPs user choices, the level of accessibility,

universality, and the promotion of rational/critical discussion in a public sphere.

Additionally, this thesis explores whether Facebook, or its use, constitutes a power switch as outlined by Castells (1996).

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis discusses and analyses the results of the interviews and content analysis. It presents the findings in relation to the relevant themes that arise from the data collection and applies them to the sub-research questions found in the methodology. It also discusses the findings in terms of the central research question and its implications. The relevant themes include accessibility in terms of friending, why MPs choose to use Facebook, the type of interactions with users, the type of posts, who drives the site, reciprocity, the filter factor, public or private space, and political marketing. A discussion is also found in Chapter 4 around the implications of this thesis to the theories outlined in the literature review.

The last chapter of the thesis is the conclusion and addresses how and why the research problem has resulted in important findings, a significant contribution to knowledge, and is beneficial for future studies. It summarizes the most significant findings as well as the central conclusion and acknowledges the limitations of this thesis.

As is discussed in the literature review, technology and social network sites are about choices. There is no deterministic element to technology that imposes or creates new social structures. Rather, it is how users choose to use the technology. These choices also revolve around how a user perceives the tool and what her<sup>3</sup> goal is in adopting the technology. The literature review also discusses democratic goals that reflect Habermas'

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<sup>3</sup> When referring to MPs in the singular form, the feminine possessive adjective is used. This will serve both to counter the abundant use of the masculine form in academia and to help ensure anonymity when discussing individual responses.

(1962) public sphere theory. For the most part, this thesis found through in-depth interviews and a content analysis that Canadian MPs are using Facebook as a political marketing tool. They tend to broadcast messages rather than engage users in discussion about the issues that are important to them. They perceive the social network site as their personal space rather than a public one and do not believe it to be a place for rational and critical discussion.

The way in which the MPs perceive the social network site is removed from the principles of the public sphere are more similar to the tenets of political marketing. They view Facebook as a tool to effectively mobilize and communicate to users for both electoral and policy success. The following chapters of this thesis provide a detailed discussion of the perceptions and choices that guide the way Canadian MPs use Facebook as a communication tool.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to discuss relevant theories to develop a context that will reflect the findings of this thesis. This thesis is relevant and timely as it looks at a new social phenomenon that is only beginning to be researched in the field of communication. More specifically, this thesis explores the ways in which Canadian MPs use social network sites as communication tools. At the same time, the study rests on a history of scholarship that has already been produced in the area of political engagement and communication. It is through examining relevant theories and previous research that the problematic is examined.

The epistemological roots of this thesis are founded in three areas: liberalism as outlined by John Locke (1689), Immanuel Kant (1795), Jean Jacques Rousseau (1762), John Stuart Mill (1859; 1863) and John Rawls (1993), Jürgen Habermas' public sphere theory (1962) and the theory communicative action (1981), and Manuel Castells' (1996) network theory. These theories present a context of the current Western political environment and ideals by which technological communication tools are being used to further grasp the choices behind the ways Canadian MPs use social network sites.

Other important theories that contribute to this thesis include Leah Lievrouw's (2002) discussion around social shaping of technology theory, Mark Granovetter's (1983) strength of weak ties, Andrew Keen's (2007) and Cass Sunstein's (2003) discussion around the amateur as producer, public versus private spheres, and political marketing.

The social shaping of technology theory is relied upon in this thesis to look at the role of actors, networks, and society in shaping how technologies are used. It is also used to explain why attitudes and views of MPs are being studied.

## **Epistemology**

### ***Liberalism and Utilitarianism***

As discussed in the introduction, voter turnout in Canada is at record lows and Canadians are becoming less engaged and have less confidence in their democracy. Michael Sandel (1996) argues that this is happening around the world in most Western liberal democracies. He says that citizens living in these countries have two primary concerns:

One is the fear that, individually or collectively, we are losing control of the forces that govern our lives. The other is the sense that, from family to neighborhood to nation, the moral fabric of community is unraveling around us. These two fears – for the loss of self-government and the erosion of community – together define the anxiety of the age.

(Sandel, 1996: 3)

Citizens are becoming less engaged in their democracies because they feel that they are losing control of the public space that governs them with the erosion of community to blame. Sandel argues that contemporary liberalism, a philosophy that emphasizes and confers a great deal of respect to the individual, is not only the dominant school of thought in Western democracies but also the reason that society is losing its sense of community. The focus on the individual causes people to act in their own self-interest rather than as a collective. The result is an erosion of community and increased distrust in public institutions.

Liberalism, as outlined by such thinkers as John Locke (1689), Immanuel Kant (1795), John Stuart Mill (1859; 1863), and John Rawls (1993) develops the idea that freedom consists of an individual's capacity to choose her own life journey. The role of the state, therefore, is to create the conditions by which individuals can make those choices (Sandel, 1996: 5). Freedom is about providing a neutral environment for individuals to determine their own lives and govern themselves based on a collective pursuit of individual happiness rather than based on what is right for the community. If individuals are happy in pursuing their own destinies, then it is good for the community. It is this contradiction, believing in the supremacy of the individual while becoming disillusioned by the unraveling of community, that is an important discussion relating to this thesis and will become apparent in the analysis of data.

The origins of individualism can be traced back to John Locke (1689) and the second book of his *Two treatises of government*. Locke begins by examining man's state of nature which he says is a state of true equality where all of the power is equally distributed and no one has more than any other person (Locke, 1689: Sect. 4). He says that:

...there being nothing more evident, than that creatures of the same species and rank, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection...

(Locke, 1689: Sect. 4)

To Locke, man was never freer than in the state of nature since only the laws of nature limited individual freedom. Each person was free to make choices and determine her own futures equally in a state that provided ample opportunity. But as time lapsed and social relationships became more complicated, individuals consented to giving up some of their

freedoms by joining with others in society under a government in order to protect not only themselves, but also their property.

At the very least, Locke argues, man owns himself and there is nothing that can take that away. Secondly, he says that man owns property. This includes such things as land and other possessions. As part of a collective under a government, Locke believes that the individual is still the most important unit and actions of the state should work to preserve freedoms and protect property. To Locke, the only reason individuals are willing to join together with others is “for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties and estates” which he then refers to in its proper term as “property” (Locke, 1689: Sect. 123). That is the framework by which man relinquished some of his freedoms to the state according to Locke. This quotation is very similar to a famous line that is still used today as some argue that it serves as the foundation for the American dream captured in the United States Declaration of Independence that “we hold these truths to be self-evident [...] that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (United States Declaration of Independence). These lines, both Locke’s and the one found in the United States Declaration of Independence are about the supremacy of the individual, maintaining individual freedom, and creating an environment that encourages self-determination. It is about individual responsibility and creating one’s own opportunity to succeed. The Declaration is an example of how individualism is enshrined in the fabric of Western society as both a moral and a goal and it forms the basis of the mighty American Dream. Humanity does this, however, at the expense of some of their liberties.

Jean Jacques Rousseau (1762) famously wrote “Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains. One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave

than they” (Rousseau, 1762: Ch. 1). Rousseau, like Locke, traces man’s state of nature. He says that the first law of man is to provide for his own preservation and tend to those things in which he owes himself (Ch. 2). He also believes that individual liberty should be held in great esteem, saying that “to renounce liberty is to renounce being a man, to surrender the rights of humanity and even its duties” (Ch. 4). Rousseau argues that governments are necessary to enforce contracts that protect property. Even today in modern democracies, the vast majority of laws concern property. Such laws, Rousseau argues, must reflect what he calls “the general will.”

The general will, to Rousseau, is when individuals assemble and collectively make laws that both promote individual well-being and facilitate self-preservation (Ch. 5, Ch. 6). Again, decision-making is about individuals coming together to advocate on behalf of their private interests in a public space to form a general will. Much of this is about preserving the rights of the individuals and, as will be discussed later in this section, it is very similar to Habermas’ public sphere. Not only is individuality held in high esteem, to the liberal philosophical tradition, it is also morally just.

John Stuart Mill (1859; 1863) introduces the idea of liberal utilitarianism where he argues that individuals are morally obligated to pursue their own happiness. In doing so, people maximize the happiness of everyone around them. He says “the only freedom which deserves name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it” (Mill, 1859: Ch. 1). In *Utilitarianism* Mill deepens his argument and says that:

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.

(Mill, 1863: Ch. 2)

To Mill, it is not only a right but also a moral responsibility to act in a way that maximizes one's happiness. The benefits are both individual and societal because the pursuit of one's own happiness translates into happiness for the entire community. Utilitarianism is fundamentally about individuality and the supremacy of individual rights. The community, it is argued benefits from this and liberal philosophy ignores the inherent contradiction in this reasoning.

Habermas' (1962) public sphere theory is also defined in terms of individuality because the public sphere is primarily about individuals coming together and forming a collective. It is the individual, who advocates on behalf of the issues that matter to her through rational and critical discourse, that is able to make decisions that will enhance her happiness and protect her freedoms. But as individuals come together to discuss their private interests, it is possible that the sense of community suffers and causes, as Sandel (1996) argues, individuals to lose trust in their public institutions and democracy. As this thesis examines social network sites in a Canadian political context, it is important to understand the dominant political philosophy behind the society that uses these communication tools. Liberalism explains why certain users choose to use the sites in particular ways and what these choices mean to Canada's public institutions.

Returning to Sandel (1996), he argues that liberalism is the most thoroughly embodied philosophical teaching that finds itself in society's practices and institutions and its *practice*, more than its inherent philosophical failings, is leading to civic disengagement. He says that:

If the neutral state succeeds in securing a scheme of rights without appealing to a sense of community beyond the social contract, if its members can exercise their agency as free citizens without seeing themselves as claimed by civic obligation beyond consent, then abstract worries about community and self-government, toleration and moral judgment, would seem at best beside the point... The procedural republic cannot secure the liberty it promises, because it cannot sustain the kind of political community and civic engagement that liberty requires.

(Sandel, 1996: 24)

Habermas' (1962) public sphere theory emphasizes the individual over the community and its relevance in today's democracies needs to be examined. If a strong public sphere ever existed, it may have been the beginning of the end, so to speak, of community and public democratic institutions. Public sphere theory, though held by some as an ideal, may not be the strongest model for public engagement through social communication tools such as Facebook.

### ***Public Sphere and Theory of Communicative Action***

Jürgen Habermas' (1962; 1981) groundbreaking theories outlined both the rise and fall of the public sphere and detailed the societal benefits of communicative action. His discussions shape the work of this thesis because many, such as Boeder (2005) and Sassi (2001), believe that the public sphere establishes the parameters of an environment ripe for rational and critical discussion in a democratic society in a way that advances the human cause. They believe that these theories serve as important starting points when examining the Internet. Additionally, the theory of communicative action contributes to the understanding of how communication shapes social structures. From these two theories, parallels can be drawn between the public sphere salons and coffee shops that Habermas originally conceived of and today's online social network sites.

Habermas argues that the public sphere “may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people coming together as a public” (1989: 27). The public sphere is where people congregate to discuss issues affecting them. The idea builds on work of the liberal theorists outlined in the previous section. Habermas says that early public spheres took the form of coffee houses and salons where people discussed a variety of topics, from literature to politics, in a forum comprising “a certain parity of the educated” (1989: 32). It was the coffee house, according to Habermas, that brought people together and facilitated discussion in a less formal environment than previous forums. The coffee house served as a tool to facilitate communication and discussion. As will be discussed, today’s tools such as the Internet are different as they are not physical spaces and yet work to accomplish similar goals.

To Habermas, a public sphere must include three basic elements: accessibility, universality, and rational/critical discussion. For accessibility, he describes an environment where a discursive culture exists and the issues being debated are general not only in their significance, but because everyone is allowed to and do participate (1989: 37). This is a question of process over form where inclusion means that topics relevant to everyone are being discussed and debated because they are chosen by the grassroots. Issues are important because individuals decide that they are. Second is universality. To Habermas, universality cannot be reduced to individuals viewed as equals. Rather, the public sphere is a place where status is completely disregarded and people view one another as members of a “common humanity” (1989: 36). This is where public sphere theory breaks slightly from liberalism in that its universality is about common humanity – giving consideration to an entity greater than the individual even

though “private individuals” are still the primary concern. Finally, he says that a public sphere should be based on reason and rational/critical debate. Without reason, one cannot expect to advance what is right and what is wrong and Habermas explains further as he develops the theory of communicative action.

Habermas (1981) argues that communication is a key element to humanity’s survival. He says:

If we assume that the human species maintains itself through the socially coordinated activities of its members and that this coordination is established through communication – and in certain spheres of life, through communication aimed at reaching agreement – then the reproduction of the species also requires satisfying the conditions of a rationality inherent in communicative action.

(1981: 397)

Humans must be rational if they are to continue preserving their species. What makes them a dominant life form is the ability both to interact with one another in a social manner and work cooperatively to further their interests and to carry forward historical teachings through reason. Communicative action is about people cognitively being able to gain knowledge about the environment that surrounds them and putting that knowledge to use by adapting and manipulating the environment (1981: 101). Understanding is not an end but rather a piece of the communication equation that leads to social action.

Habermas says that “the interpretive accomplishments on which cooperative processes of situation definition are based represent the mechanism for coordinating action; communicative action is not exhausted by the act of reaching understanding” (Ibid).

Thomas McCarthy (1981) argues that communicative action and rationality are rooted in long held communicative dispute mechanisms whereby giving reasons for and against a particular position is a means to achieve mutual understanding in a way that

avoids coercion or force. Habermas argues that rationality and argumentation is a “court of appeal that makes it possible to continue communicative action with other means” in the face of disagreement (1981: 18). In this sense, communicative action is an arbitration mechanism. In another sense, it can also be a mechanism to correct historical wrongs.

Habermas (1981) believes that mistakes in judgment and rationality happen from time to time. Communicative action, he explains, provides longevity and a sense of progressiveness to correct mistakes. Much like the common law system and legal approaches to interpreting constitutions as living documents, communicative action allows us to revisit historical truths and shed new light on these issues. In other words, time does not hold ownership of definitions. Similarly, particular events or individuals do not hold absolute ownership either. Habermas says:

A definition of the situation establishes an order... A situation definition by another party that prima facie diverges from one's own presents a problem of a peculiar sort; for in cooperative processes of interpretation no participant has a monopoly on correct interpretation. For both parties the interpretive task consists in incorporating the other's interpretation of the situation into one's own in such a way that... the divergent situation definitions can be brought to coincide sufficiently.

(1981: 100)

Habermas (1989) blames two events on the demise of the public sphere. He argues that the emergence of the welfare state and the commodification of the media are responsible for removing motive from public discussion and reducing the quality of information presented to citizens. The result was a less interested and less informed public unarmed for rational/critical debate. Relating this to the current thesis, social network sites are entirely for-profit entities and this discussion may be relevant in that the design of these sites may have been planned to superficially engage people in order to profit from them

while at the same time hindering political engagement. It is also important to note the connections to Sandel's (1996) argument that the negative effects of liberalism in practice are far worse than the philosophy's contradictions. For the public sphere, its practice may also be more of a hindrance than any flaw in the theory. The point of this research, however, is to study behaviour rather than the development choices or effects of particular technologies and this discussion is considered only minimally in the discussion.

To Habermas (1989), the public sphere is a place where ordinary citizens can shape society through discourse and have influence over the state. He believes that reasoned communication can "weaken prejudices, increase the scope and power of the public sphere and strengthen democracy" (Boeder, 2005: 3). Researchers such as Boeder (2005) and Sassi (2001) argue that the public sphere is not nor ever has been a physical place. Rather, it is an abstract concept where rational/critical debate flourishes. As previously stated, Sassi in particular argues that the public sphere is a good starting point when examining the Internet. Others, such as Bohman (2004), Corrigan (2008), Keane (1995), McClurg (2003), McGary (2008), Rasmussen (2008), Slater (2001), Sparks (2001) and Papacharissi (2002) agree that the Internet can facilitate a public sphere if it is used for such purposes. The public sphere, in this sense, is a network and will be explored in the discussion around Manuel Castells' network theory.

Bennett, Pickard, Iozzi, Schroeder, Lagos, and Caswell (2004) add to Habermas (1989) by introducing the idea of mediated public spheres. They argue that a mediated public sphere should be assessed on the three following qualities. First is *access*. Identical to Habermas, this element examines who is allowed to participate in discussion. To determine this, it should be asked whether the public sphere is inclusive or exclusive.

Who is allowed to join the network and who is not? The second is *recognition*. Here, the question of access goes one step further. For those who are included in discussion, how much space is given to them to express themselves and share their opinions? Is there enough discourse space allotted to individuals or groups and their ideas? The third element is *responsiveness*. This element looks at whether there is a mutual responsiveness in dialogue between those who have access. When one side comments, does the other side respond? Is there opportunity to respond? Social network sites form a mediated public sphere due to the site's framework and ability for users to filter information. Therefore, the added criteria of a mediated public sphere are considered in the discussion of the Habermasian public sphere because these three elements provide a concrete and measureable interpretation of the modern public sphere.

Silverstone (2008), Hutchby (2001), Bakardjieva (2005) and Hjavard (2006) reinforce the point that the Internet and social network sites form a mediated public sphere. The latter qualifies this by saying that:

...mediation refers to the communication through one of more media through which the message and the relation between sender and receiver are influenced by the affordances and constraints of the specific media and genres involved.

(Hjavard, 2006: 5)

Habermas' work (1981; 1989) lays the foundation for an environment ripe for political engagement through communicative action. Though arguing whether a public sphere ever existed as Schudson (1992) does is to miss the point. It is about establishing goals, benchmarks, and ideals. The public sphere is where private individuals have a say over public policy through communicative action that shapes their environments. Social network sites can be communications tools that accelerate this process by connecting

decision makers to ordinary citizens in a way that provide an environment of mutual respect, recognition, and ultimately leading to collaboration. To understand this, however, one must also understand the changing nature of society and social networks as outlined by Castells (1996; 2004).

### *Network Theory*

Manuel Castells (1996; 2004) frames the notion of networks in society. Castells (1996) says that increasingly, networks are shaping power relations in today's society. He says that:

[A]s a historical trend, dominant functions and processes in the information age are increasingly organized around networks. Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture . . . I would argue that this networking logic induces a social determination of a higher level than that of the specific social interests expressed through the networks: the power of flows takes precedence over the flows of power.  
(Castells, 1996: 469)

According to Castells (1996), the interaction between networks is more important than once understood. He defines a network as a set of "interconnected nodes" that share similar communication codes. Nodes can be understood as communications intersections much like street intersections. Codes are the common language or similarity that connects a network. Members of a stock exchange, for example, share similar goals and likely communicate with "profit" codes while labour unions may communicate through different values than members of a stock exchange. He says that networks are open structures that are able to expand without limits as they integrate with new nodes (1996: 470). Most importantly, Castells argues that in a network society power rests in the

switches that connect each network. He uses the example of financial flows taking control of media empires that influence political processes. The switchers are the power holders linking together multiple networks and changing the dynamics of these relationships. Switches are the instruments of power that become the fundamental sources shaping societies (1996: 471). Political power, in other words, rests in the networks that structure society rather than the institutions, states, or large corporations that seem to exercise it (2004). He suggests that society's organization around networks is powerful because networks are not bound by borders, they are flexible and continue expanding, are more effective and efficient than other forms of organization, continuously restructure civil society at local and global levels through networks of activists, communicate in public space to define reality, and because power relations change depending on the interactions between them. From Castells' perspective, networks are a source of power in society and certain technologies can make them more effective and efficient.

Social network sites bring together strong and weak ties in one interconnected and bounded system. These sites are fundamentally about networks and how they communicate with one another as they create an ideal environment for bringing multiple networks together. Social network sites, and the way they are used, have the potential to form a powerful switch that connects networks to government officials or public institutions if they are used for such a purpose by both sides. If MPs use these sites to engage and dialogue with citizens, these online forums could strengthen Canada's democracy by creating a mutually respecting environment that gives civil society more power. Citizens and MPs would, in such a scenario, speak with engagement codes. But, as Castells (2004) contends, there is no deterministic element in how technology is used.

His approach differs slightly from the social shaping of technology discussion that will follow. While he agrees that technology does not determine society, he adds that some social structures could not develop without specific technologies. He uses the example of power grids and how the industrial revolution – and the networks that formed as a result – would not have developed without them. He continues that when it comes to networks, technology has the ability to provide new tools capable of addressing the “fundamental shortcomings” of this old form of social organization, such as “their inability to manage coordination functions beyond a certain threshold of size, complexity, and velocity” (2004: 221).

A network society can be argued to be an evolution from Habermas’ view of the public sphere since original conceptions of the public sphere continue to change. Boeder (2005) calls it a “complex mosaic of differently sized overlapping and interconnected public spheres” (Boeder, 2005). A network society is essentially a decentralized public sphere where people come together around communication codes and engage one another in specific issues that affect them. It is impossible for each individual to implicate herself in every issue or group that exists but she can take part in several networks and have varying degrees of influence in each of them. The question here is about whether societal networks encompass the ideals set out by Habermas of universality, accessibility, and an environment ripe for rational-critical discussion.

Castells’ network theory looks at the power relations that shape society. The public sphere is fundamentally about networks and social network sites can play a role in developing, maintaining, reinforcing and switching – if not becoming a switch in and of itself. All of this leads to a discussion around the role of technology in society and

whether or not communications tools such as social network sites hold deterministic elements.

## **Theoretical Foundation**

### ***Social Shaping of Technology***

Indeed, there is a vibrant debate in the popular press about the power of social media to drastically change politics in Canada. On the heels of the 2008 American Democratic primary election, many of the Canadian journalists who credited President Barack Obama's electoral victory with his campaign's use of social network sites also wondered how Canadian elections would be different given these new tools at politicians' disposal. Some argued that the use of social network sites would fundamentally change the dynamics of Canadian elections – and perhaps democracy itself. Michael Geist wrote in the *Ottawa Citizen* about Obama's campaign that “the cumulative effect of this substantial online presence is to connect with youth on their terms and in their environment, fostering a new generation of politically active supporters” (2008: D1). The quote implies that there is a deterministic element to this new technology and that it changed the relationship between the politician (Obama) and a traditionally unengaged constituency (youth) in a way that empowers the latter politically. This logic follows a technological deterministic school of thought where the mere introduction of a particular technology can dramatically alter the circumstances around it. It has been argued that certain urban designs or the introduction of mobile phones have changed power dynamics within a society (Winner 1999). Urban design in that it clumps people together based on their socio-economic status in society therefore perpetuating the cycle that keeps them

relatively in the same place as their ancestors. Cell phones, it is argued, has empowered lower income communities around the globe that lack basic infrastructure for landline communication service. Others argue, however, that it is not the technology in and of itself that holds the power to change society. Rather, it is in the way *users* choose to *use* the technology.

Suchman (1987) and Suchman and Jordan (1997), among others, talk about technology as evolving objects. They argue that technological design continues in its use since use is an important element in how technology takes shape. This is evident in the way users use certain technologies in a different way than was the original intention of its designers. The Internet, for example, was originally designed as a tool for the United States military to share strategic information in response to the U.S.S.R.'s launch of Sputnik (DARPA). It is doubtful that the designers, producers, and developers of the Internet could have imagined the enormous economic and social function it plays today. Now we see the Internet acting as a retail outlet for companies, an archive service for governments and libraries, and a culture hub where individuals share music and video, among many others. Technological development is about the social relationships and interaction between developers, users, and society.

Diffusion of innovation theory looks at adoption patterns of technology to understand how and why certain technologies are successful and not others (Lievrouw, 2002). According to Lievrouw (2002), diffusion of innovation theory roots itself in network theory in that it “[conceptualizes] society as a fundamentally interactive and intersubjective web of affiliations rather than a static, separate superstructure overshadowing human action” (2002: 184). Like Castells (1996), this theory rests on the

idea that networks shape society and work to determine the relations between individuals. Remember Castells' (2004) argument that although technology does not determine society, some social structures could not develop without specific technologies. To Castells, networks are a source of power in society and certain technologies can make them more effective and efficient. The potential for social network sites to change social networks for better or worse depends on how they are used and social shaping of technology theory (SST) explores this idea more deeply.

SST theorists completely reject technological determinism as an approach to analyzing technology and prefer to look at the complex relationships between society and technology. Lievrouw (2002) describes it as “emphasizing the importance of human choices and action in technological change” rather than technological change on human choices (2002: 185). This reinforces the point that the effects of technologies are a result of how the users choose to use them. SST theorists believe that knowledge, like technology, is a social phenomenon. Sociology of scientific knowledge theory (SSK) argues that truth is socially constructed and scientific findings are just as dependent on the researcher's own beliefs, opportunities, and relationships as the issues being researched (2002). The *strong programme* of SSK argues that “the creation and acceptance of all knowledge claims must be explained in social terms, rather than by reference to the natural world” while the *weak programme* “examines only the social conditions of knowledge growth or the sources of biased or distorted knowledge, and not the rational acts of apprehending inferences and evidence as facts, truths, or errors” (185). But even within the SST camp, there are two systems of thought that seek to analyze the

society-technology relationship: social construction of technology (SCOT) and actor network theory (ANT) (185).

SCOT analysis is similar to the weak programme of SSK since it looks at the social context of innovation and change. It explores the “choices available to designers, developers and users in the course of technological development” (185). Bijker (1995) argues that “technological change is a social process” (Bijker, 1995: 269) and involves a variety of actors that can range from dominant ideologies to clothing styles. ANT rejects both strong technological determinism and strong social constructivist approaches, opting instead to study technology in terms of the actors such as people, the technology itself, and institutions that “have equal potential to influence technological development” (186). ANT theorists believe technologies are not infinitely flexible and become “embedded and stabilized within institutional and social structures and influence or even determine subsequent technological choices” (186). Winner (1993), for example, argues that SCOT fails to examine the potential effects after a technology has been adopted. SCOT is more relevant to this thesis as it explores the social context by examining the choices made by users.

danah boyd (2008a) agrees. She talks about the illusion of technological determinism but ultimately falls on the side of a constructivist approach when discussing social media. She says:

Technology’s majestic luster makes it easy to fool people into believing that its structure determines practice. The conclusions seem obvious – video games will make us violent, the Internet will make us more informed, and social network sites will make us more politically active. Unfortunately, techno-determinist doctrine does not hold up to interrogation. Technologies are shaped by society and reflect society’s values back at us, albeit a bit refracted.

(boyd, 2008a: 113)

The social shaping of technology approach provides a strong foundation for analyzing social media as it gives perspective to the role of users in shaping technology. Without users, technology has no purpose or function. The Internet can be a tool for democracy, but only if its users use it for such purposes. The tool itself does not hold deterministic elements that necessarily impose stronger democratic principles. This is why it is important to analyze the ways in which Canadian MPs are using social network sites to determine whether these sites are being used for engagement purposes and to build community. Other users can choose to use these sites for engagement purposes, but if the Member of Parliament – those who exercise power in Canada’s democracy – choose not to, then the efforts by ordinary users are useless.

### *The Strength of Weak Ties*

It can be argued that social network sites bring together already existing networks of people and are therefore closed to diversity. A user’s list of friends will likely include people similar to the user and who agrees with many of her values. If they are not similar on some level, it would be unlikely that these people would join the same network of friends. These sites bring together a spectrum of people from close friends, family, and acquaintances and a study of social network sites must examine the role weak ties play. Mark Granovetter (1983) challenges conventional wisdom in discussing weak ties as a positive sociological phenomenon that opens up diversity rather than imposes limits to it. He argues that weak ties become “bridges” between densely knit groups of close friends that advance the goals of each group (Granovetter, 1983). When it comes to political

movements, weak ties are what sustain and generate momentum in a way that spreads beyond an initial movement (202). Without weak ties, much of the general population would never be exposed to the goals of political movements nor would they be able to react. Weak ties broaden opportunity as they provide people with access to information and resources they would normally not have access to if they relied solely on their inner circle of friends (209).

Though weak ties come together on issues where there are similarities, Coser (1975) argues that bridging weak ties are likely to connect individuals who are very different from one another on issues other than the one that brought them together in the first place. danah boyd's study of online culture found that "strong ties are where the greatest overlap of commonality is found; weak ties open up difference" (boyd, 2005: 200). She argues that this is the case because technologies such as the Internet connect people without the restriction of space while exposing individuals to more diverse audiences (200). Communications technologies, like the Internet, play an important role in building networks of weak ties. Pool (1980) agrees and states that the number of weak ties is increased by the development of communications systems.

Social network sites are sophisticated communications systems that allow users to do all of the things they were already able to do, but better. *The Economist* magazine described this concept in a Leader article:

The point is that the uses of these networks are for the users to decide. Once reassured of this, people will then not so much 'join' new networks as 'log on' to their existing human networks around hobbies and other passions. It will be like sitting around campfires again, only now with vastly superior tools for sharing, bonding and planning.

*(The Economist, 2008: 28)*

Social network sites as communication tools can allow individuals to expand, or at the very least, maintain connections with weak ties. Binding with a weak tie in a social network increases the odds of that person being accessible when resources or information is needed and could form the switch that Castells describes to change the power relations dynamic. Switches are important and weak ties can become influential relationships. Weak ties can also enable social change through communicative action as an increase in the number of weak ties increases the likelihood of bridging or exposing ideas to other groups. Additionally, it works to sustain or increase a political movement's momentum. Social network sites as a tool for maintaining weak ties helps this cause by making the relationship more efficient. More will be discussed at the end of this chapter and in Chapter 3 when these concepts are operationalized as they relate to social network sites.

### ***The Amateur as Producer and the "Daily Me"***

Within hours of Farah Fawcett and Michael Jackson's recent and unexpected deaths, rumours began to spread over the social network site Twitter about other celebrities. Patrick Swayzie, who was battling pancreatic cancer had to publicly deny reports that he was dead, though he subsequently succumbed to his illness months later. Actor Jeff Goldblum made an appearance on The Colbert Report television program to refute accusations that he had died in New Zealand. After host Stephen Colbert referenced thousands of Twitter "tweets" and multiple Facebook groups "confirming" Goldblum's death, and the media stories that were published around the world in respectable news outlets citing the social media rumours, Goldblum jokingly capitulated and declared that perhaps he had died after all. These events show the increasing importance of the

“amateur journalist” or “amateur producer” in how society gathers and disseminates information. In the age of the Internet and user driven social media, information is instantaneous and spreads virally even when the accuracy of the information is questionable.

The title of Andrew Keen’s (2007) book summarizes his thesis succinctly: *The cult of the amateur: How blogs, MySpace, YouTube, and the rest of today’s user generated media are destroying our economy, our culture, and our values*. He believes that social media is blurring the line between professional and amateur – degrading the quality of public information in exchange for quantity. He defines an amateur as “a hobbyist, knowledgeable or otherwise, someone who does not make a living from his or her field or interest, a layperson, lacking credentials, a dabbler” (Keen, 2007: 36). He says user driven media—media that allows anybody to upload information—undermines subject matter experts and perverts the body of knowledge that people reference because everyday users post as much information as they wish with it being given equal weight to information posted by “professionals” or “experts.” He argues that we no longer rely on encyclopedias for information, turning instead to Wikipedia, a user driven website that allows anonymous editors from around the world to change content without having to prove their credentials or the purity of the information. He says the Internet allows users to disguise their identities when posting information with real life consequences. Keen uses the example of a 2006 American congressional race where a Democratic candidate’s campaign posted “guerilla style” attack ads against his opponent. The advertisements contained mostly unsubstantiated claims and had a negative effect on his opponent’s campaign. Never having to take responsibility, the candidate offered “somebody put it on

YouTube” as an excuse and washed his hands of the incident. Keen writes that “the YouTubification of politics is a threat to civic culture. It infantilizes the political process, silencing public discourse and leaving the future of the government up to thirty-second video clips shot by camcorder-wielding amateurs with political agendas” (68).

Though individuals are coming together to discuss and debate issues that they choose to discuss, this is not the public sphere that Habermas envisioned in part because one is not able to recognize others. Some groups or individuals are subject to misrepresentation by anonymous and unaccountable users. Keen would agree with the public sphere structure proposed by Habermas but would argue that the Internet inhibits the public sphere. He would say that the Internet is not a place for rational and critical debate because individual users are not forced to properly identify themselves and therefore not obliged to make rational arguments with the purpose of influencing others. Users can muddy arguments and post malicious content without having to take responsibility for their individual actions. Keen would agree with Mills (1863) that these actions both promote individual happiness and produce the reverse of happiness onto others. As a result, he suggests, these actions should not be considered moral.

Next, Keen’s argument around who is an expert can be refuted by those who feel as though laypersons or non-experts have valuable information to contribute to social debate. Steven Epstein’s (1991) article “Democratic Science” discusses the impact of layperson qualitative research methods in science and refers to the testing of a drug that researchers claimed to kill cells infected with HIV. An investigation into the way the drug was tested showed that scientific results were skewed because the study did not take into account the conditions under which subjects were using the drug. The test was flawed

because no consideration was given to the social environmental context in which those who were infected with HIV live – information that could easily have been obtained by the inclusion of laypersons in the early stages of research. A non-scientific contribution might have provided a better understanding of the context in which those suffering with HIV/AIDS live and led to better findings. This discussion is relevant because the knowledge that “experts” have, whether they are medical experts or social ethnographers, always has room for the inclusion of opinions stemming from those who are traditionally considered amateurs or laypersons.

Additionally, amateurs can use the Internet to mobilize masses for political purposes. Kahn and Kellner (2004) outline the effectiveness of the Internet to mobilize unprecedented social movements such as the infamous Battle of Seattle where demonstrators from around the world organized to press for changes during the 1999 World Trade Organization’s meeting. It was amateurs who mobilized and organized thousands of protesters to apply pressure to governments around the world.

Putting this debate aside, Keen’s point is about the motives of users when they post information on the Internet and present it as fact. Political staffers with political agendas can easily create professional looking videos and post them on YouTube. Unsatisfied customers can change a company’s information on Wikipedia without having to provide context or proof. Without knowing the intention of the producer, audiences have a more difficult time placing the message in context and therefore are not provided with complete facts to make sound judgments. This goes back to the SST discussion around how users choose to use the technology. Users can choose to contribute only

when they have something valuable to say, but they can also choose to post information for malicious reasons. But Keen applies a deterministic view of the Internet. He says:

The monkeys take over. Say good-bye to today's experts and cultural gatekeepers – our reporters, news anchors, editors, music companies, and Hollywood movie studios. In today's cult of the amateur, the monkeys are running the show. With their infinite typewriters, they are authoring the future. And we may not like how it reads.

(Keen, 2007: 9)

American legal scholar Cass Sunstein (2003) mitigates both the need for diversity of opinion and the need for experts by arguing that a strong democracy requires a strong public sphere allowing for both the exposure of a range of ideas as well as a shared experience among its citizens. Sunstein's view attempts to bridge both the individualism found in liberalism and the shared experience of community that Sandel (1996) calls for. But like Keen, Sunstein believes that the Internet and Web 2.0 are increasingly working to reduce the level of each of these democratic characteristics leading to dangerous consequences for public institutions. He says that the Internet allows individuals to filter what they see and, as a result "many people are increasingly engaged in a process of 'personalization' that limits their exposure to topics and points of view of their own choosing. They filter in, and they also filter out, with unprecedented powers of precision" (Sunstein, 2003: 1). Technology allows this to happen as users watch television with TiVo filtering their programs, sign on to news aggregator sites that only display stories that they are likely to be interested in, and use search engines that only display information once the user makes a specific request with narrow parameters. Users take on the role of deciding what information is important and what is not. In contrast, Sunstein

believes journalist experts need to play a role in filtering because they give society a shared experience from which to relate to one another.

To be able to make an informed opinion about social circumstances, Sunstein (2003) argues that one must be exposed to a range of ideas that a person would not normally choose to be exposed to. Where newspapers and nightly television news programs succeed is in their ability to display a range of topics that readers would not have selected themselves if they had the power to control it. Sunstein (2003) argues that one might not think that they have something to learn from the views of others, but once exposed to an editorial in a newspaper, the reader may very well read the argument being presented and benefit from the experience (2003: 5). Similarly, he suggests, common experience is important to democracy. First, he says people enjoy common experience. They enjoy certain experiences because they know it is being shared by others. Second, he argues that shared experience can “ease social interactions” as they allow people to communicate with one another and “congregate around a common issue, task, or concern, whether or not they have much in common with one another” (2003: 11). Third, he says that it allows individuals to identify with fellow citizens and empathize with groups they normally would not understand. All of this relates back to the strength of weak ties in that common experience brings people together only to open up difference in other areas. In turn, this allows them to discuss and understand one another on the issues that make them different.

But Sunstein argues that the Internet is working to undermine all of this. Sunstein says that “a well-functioning system includes a kind of public sphere, one that fosters common experiences, in which people hear messages that challenge their prior

convictions, and in which citizens can present their views to a broad audience” (2003: 12). As citizens increasingly use the Internet in many aspects of their lives, the tools it offers to filter information in and out causes both fragmentation and group polarization in society. When presented with an abundance of choice, Sunstein (2003: 6) argues that people will be more likely to choose material that makes them comfortable or that has been created by someone with similar views as themselves. Fragmentation arises as individuals are only exposed to views similar to their own – transforming the “daily we” to the “daily me” (Sunstein, 2003). People will only debate and discuss ideas with those who hold similar views as them, therefore limiting the range of ideas that person is exposed to. Sunstein believes that this leads to extremism and group polarization.

The idea is that after deliberating with one another, people are likely to move toward a more extreme point in the direction to which they were previously inclined, as indicated by the median of their predeliberation judgments. With respect to the Internet, the implication is that groups of people, especially if they are like-minded, will end up thinking the same thing that they thought before – but in more extreme form.

(Ibid)

Group polarization happens for two reasons. First, it happens because people are persuaded by arguments that seem convincing to them (Sunstein, 2003: 7). In a closed network where all arguments are like-minded, an individual’s position will likely move in the direction of the most persuasive argument – in a place where their beliefs will harden (Ibid). Second, people want to be perceived favourably by their peers. Once they understand what their peers think, they shift their way of thinking towards the dominant position (Ibid: 8). The Internet, Sunstein argues, serves as a breeding ground for extremism for the reason that like-minded people tend to deliberate with one another online without hearing the views of others. The Internet is about actively looking for

information since one must type in a web address or use a search engine to seek out specific information. An individual must seek out information she is interested in digesting and, as such, filters the type of information being consumed.

Sunstein's discussion about the public sphere relates to Habermas' (1981) Theory of Communicative Action. Recall that Habermas said that in the interpretation of information, "no participant has a monopoly on correct interpretation" (Habermas, 1981: 100). Both parties, he says, must incorporate one another's interpretation into their own so that each version can somehow be reconciled. Sunstein agrees with this and makes his argument about a framework that would allow diverging opinions to be exposed to one another in a strong public sphere. It is for this reason that he advocates in favour of the public forum doctrine and criticizes communication technologies that filter information.

It is this very idea of who gets to decide what information is filtered that makes this thesis relevant. There is such an enormous amount of information generated on a daily basis that one cannot begin to consume all of it. For this reason, we have professional journalists, most of whom are professionally trained, to filter the information and pass on a synopsis of what is important to us through newspaper articles, nightly newscasts, or radio programming. Herman and Chomsky (1988) would question the legitimacy of journalistic experts when they themselves filter information based on reasons outside of importance such as advertiser consideration, flak, reliance on government sources, and others. Nevertheless, the argument is that the rise of the Internet and user driven content websites reduces the amount of professionally filtered information individuals are subjected to as we choose to filter information ourselves and thus increasing levels of social fragmentation and group polarization. Recognizing the

need for a strong public sphere where exposure to a diversity of ideas and the need for shared experience stand as pillars for social cohesion, and since Canadian MPs are increasingly using social network sites to communicate with constituents, it is important to know how they are using the sites. As they using it to expose/be exposed to differing ideas or are they using it for more self-serving purposes?

### ***Public vs. Private***

New technologies sometimes cause academia to revisit old concepts. Social network sites such as Facebook, for example, has brought the notions of ‘public’ and ‘private’ to the surface. boyd (2007) outlines the debate saying that it is difficult to define ‘public’ and ‘private’ in the context of the Internet and that most scales are incapable of the unique issues that arise from mediated technologies. What it means to be public or private is changing, she says, and academia lacks the language, norms, and structures to address it. While social network sites have millions of users, boyd says that its use is often intended to be private. She says that “most participants only care about a small handful of [these users]” while communicating to them in a public way (boyd, 2007: 2).

Livingstone (2008) agrees as she notes the evolution of Internet content as users, more than ever before, are able to create, control, and share beyond selecting already produced content. The sociological effect of social network sites is that “creating and networking online content is becoming an integral means of managing one’s identity, lifestyle and social relations” (Livingstone, 2008: 394). Silverstone discovers through her qualitative study of how adolescents use social network sites that, in managing their own identity through these sites, they attempt to create private spaces for intimacy among

friends. In other words, they want to create intimate spaces where they can share information within a closely knit and bounded network. In her interviews with adolescents, the topic of privacy is raised many times as a primary concern to youth but in practice these same adolescents tended to disclose personal information that could be viewed by many users of the same network – many of whom the adolescent knew only casually. Livingstone argues that this contradiction may only be the result of the framework of the social network sites saying that some of the frustrations are the result of the site not allowing them to discriminate between who can see what information about them within the numerous networks they are associated with. This goes to the question of controlling what information is released to whom, as Fahey (1995) argues:

Instead of speaking of a single public/private boundary, it may be more accurate to speak of a more complex re-structuring in a series of zones of privacy, not all of which fit easily with our standard images of what the public/private boundary is.

(Fahey, 1995: 688)

boyd (2007) remarks that “the Internet lacks walls. Conversations spread and contexts collapse” (boyd, 2007: 3). Indeed, she argues that increasingly, social networks have many purposes in social life as “they allow people to make sense of the social norms that regulate society, they let people learn to express themselves and learn from the reactions of others, and they let people make certain acts of expressions real by having witnesses acknowledge them” (2). What makes social network sites unique is that content left by users is public indefinitely, is searchable, can easily be replicated, and has an invisible audience since strangers can often view posted content. While privacy is a desired goal, the privacy setting features of many social network sites are not strong enough to ensure total privacy. Total privacy can, therefore, never be fully achieved. That said, users can

use their settings to, in certain ways, dramatically reduce the visibility of some information to some users.

Social network sites can be conceived as both semi-private and public spaces. How they are understood, then, is a matter of choice. More and more these sites are becoming part of our everyday lives helping users to communicate with others who are both close friends and weak ties. Users can choose to use them in a closed, semi-private network or open their profiles publicly to engage other users. MPs, using the sites to communicate with their constituents and Canadians should use their Facebook pages or profiles in a public way if their goal is to engage them. As will be discussed in the section on political marketing, there are two ways that these politicians can use social network sites. Their view on whether it is a public or private space is crucial to this.

### ***Political Marketing***

The Internet is not just another broadcast medium but also a networked public equivalent to malls, town squares, or parks, where people come together for a variety of reasons. As discussed, social network sites are “networked publics where people gather en masse to do the things that they would normally do in public places. In doing so, they help construct a new public sphere” (boyd, 2008b). As more and more politicians log on to social network sites, the potential for engagement and interaction with citizens increases as a result of the nature of the space and diversity within the weak ties that come together.

boyd argues that there are two ways in which political decision makers can use social network sites. First, they can use the sites to “digitally handshake” citizens by creating an “open channel for communicating” with constituents (boyd, 2008b). In other

words, politicians can use the sites to engage citizens in public discourse within an online public sphere by allowing citizens to post comments on their page and then reacting to those comments. She says “comments are embedded in a social contract of reciprocity. Comments are not left on politicians’ profiles simply to be consumed by the aide who controls the profile: they are crafted to provoke a response by the politician or by anyone visiting the politician’s page” (boyd, 2008b). It is about interaction, engagement, and reciprocity.

While the first use of social network sites is about two-way communication, the second is more of a unidirectional broadcasting. Many politicians tend to use these sites as political marketing tools to push or test particular messages. boyd says:

Whenever I encourage campaigns to reach out and connect to the citizens of the networked publics, I’m told that politicians don’t have time for this or that it’s easier to broadcast. There’s no doubt that broadcast is easier, but it’s not nearly as effective as meaningful encounters... By not taking the time to engage in networked publics, politicians are failing to engage those who spend much of their day there.

(boyd, 2008b)

To boyd, there is a missed opportunity when politicians refuse to engage citizens interactively in the online networked public sphere. However, there is another element to broadcasting besides simple unidirectional communication. The sentiment boyd is trying to capture is that there is no mutual recognition of engagement in the online networked public sphere. She argues that there is no willingness by politicians to engage citizens, but rather a desire to use the tool as a means of political marketing. This does not preclude the idea of interactivity since marketing is increasingly taking the form of interactive campaigns but speaks to motive and outcome.

According to Scammell (1999), political marketing is a professionalization and market oriented version of political communication primarily focused on election results. The difference between political marketing and political communication, she argues, is that the former is concerned with election results whereas the latter in civic engagement. It is argued that political marketing has created political consumers rather than citizens and perhaps undermines the very nature of the public sphere, political party structures, and representative democracy (Scammell, 1999). In a sense, it also reinforces liberal individuality by treating citizens as individual consumers. Whereas consumers express themselves with monetary capital, citizen consumers express themselves individually through votes.

Bennett and Manheim (2001) argue that political parties have learned to use communication technologies not to engage citizens in rational public discourse, but to mobilize and demobilize different segments of the electorate. They do this by breaking audiences into narrow segments and communicating differently and directly to each of them. As a result of the technological sophistication of campaign marketing in areas such as voter research, message development, advertising, and free-media management, Bennett and Manheim say that political marketing has led to a furthering from the ideals of an enlightened public. Political communicators identify vulnerabilities of their target, identify audiences, develop and test messages and themes, and legitimize them through third parties (Bennett & Manheim, 2001: 287-288). The goal in using the technology is not to engage people in rational policy discussion nor build community, but to help political marketers in each of these tasks.

Scammell (1999) argues, however, “the use of promotional instruments follows the establishment of party/candidate objectives and strategy developments. It does not lead the way. Marketing therefore disputes accounts of political change that attempt to explain modern campaigning largely as a response to media developments” (Scammell, 1999: 739). She goes on to say that blaming the packaging of politics for lower political participation is “effectively to do what critics claim to despise in modern politics: to elevate style over substance” (Scammell, 1999: 739). She argues that marketing is not a purely self-interested and manipulative form of political communication since consumer activism has forced a “powerful political agenda on to the public stage” with a speed and innovation that cannot be compared (Scammell, 2003). But this is a question around intention rather than effect and Scammell seems to ignore the fact that the “packaging” may reinforce dominant political schools of thought and works to perpetuate the problem rather than address it.

Adding to this is political theorist Brian Massumi (1999) who writes about the power of affect. His argument is that politicians have become very successful at sidestepping political ideology by using affective campaigns that appeal directly to emotion. George Lakoff (2002), William E. Connolly (1999), and Thomas Frank (2004) have all studied this phenomena in the United States through the conservative right’s moral politics movement. Conservatives in the United States have been very successful in mobilizing constituents around the issues of abortion and culture and using this organization to advance right wing economic agendas (Frank, 2004). The best example, however, comes from Massumi (1997) as he discusses the style in which this movement has disseminated its message. Former American President Ronald Reagan, also known as

the Great Communicator, was the most effective in approach. His speeches, Massumi noted, were like the reflexes of a mime and were powerful because they let the audience draw their own conclusions.

That power is an interruption. A mime decomposes movements, cuts its continuity into a potentially infinite series of sub-movements punctuated by jerks. At each jerk, at each cut into the movement, the potential is there for the movement to veer off in another direction, to become different movement. Each jerk suspends the continuity of the movement, for just a flash, too quick really to perceive – but decisively enough to suggest a veer.

(Massumi, 1997: 233)

Similar to how one reads a misspelled word correctly provided that the first and last letters are in the proper place, listeners to Reagan's speeches filled in the blanks to continue the movement of each jerk in his speech. This tactic is powerful because individuals produce their own conclusions and are more likely to accept them as a result. With social network sites, similar capabilities exist through increased interactivity and allowing individuals users to contribute and interpret their own content within a framework. A Member of Parliament may post an opinion and provide users with the opportunity to append their own views with a Facebook comment feature, for example. Similarly, this ability to interact with the opinion gives users a level of attachment and ownership once they have contributed to it.

In this regard, Facebook and other social network sites can be very effective political marketing tools. They have features that allow users to broadcast messages to wide networks as well as provide tools to gather feedback on how users react to those messages. They also work to categorize users by network in a way that allows them to segment and tailor messages for specific constituencies. Users can categorize members of

their networks by age, geography, interest, school, and others. The interactivity of social network sites also contribute to their success as a marketing tool and social network sites have been used in political campaigns in the United States dating back to the 2006 federal midterm election (Williams & Gulati, 2007).

### **Theoretical Framework for Social Network Sites**

Social network sites, and Facebook in particular, can form a public sphere because they can act as virtual town halls, coffee shops, and meeting places. They bring together networks of people and provide tools that facilitate communication between individuals and groups. Moreover, they are mediated public spheres in the sense that the technology has options to enhance or limit accessibility, universality, and rational/critical debate. It is through users' choices that the space can resemble more or less Habermas' notion of a public sphere that facilitates communicative action. The technology, the Member of Parliament user who establishes the Facebook page or profile, as well as the staff members tasked with maintaining the site, act as intermediaries between different users. For the purpose of this study, it is the Canadian Member of Parliament or a member of her staff who chooses the features that will set the parameters for their Facebook page or profile. The degree to which the theories discussed in this chapter relate to the Internet and social network sites can be explored in the following ways.

In terms of accessibility, MPs can choose who is allowed in and who is left out depending on the friending options and account type they utilize. Facebook pages, for example, allows anyone to join as a "supporter" and be able to see and contribute content within the parameters set by the Member of Parliament. Facebook profiles, on the other

hand, have more limited friending and participation options with users as they are required to make specific requests to friend the Member of Parliament. In both cases the Member of Parliament has the ability to delete her friends if she desires. More concretely, MPs who use Facebook profiles can choose different levels of friending options, limiting those who can engage with them and the content they post. In addition, they can choose to delete users for various subjective reasons.

In terms of recognition, MPs can choose how much space those who are able to access the Facebook page or profile can contribute. Features such as the ability for users to post on the Member of Parliament's wall, create or join a discussion topic, post a comment under a post, tag her in a photo, and enable users to contribute and lead discussions on the topics of their choosing. Additionally, the way MPs view comments left by users reflects the level of recognition given to them. MPs can consider comments when deliberating before a vote in the House of Commons or taking a position on a particular issue. They can also choose to ignore the comments and give them little weight in decision-making. They may not disregard status and view users as followers rather than equal members of the network.

The final public sphere element is rational/critical debate. Bennett et al. (2004) discuss this in terms of responsiveness in a mediated public sphere. This also relates to boyd's (2008b) notion of reciprocity and is relevant to whether the Member of Parliament engages in dialogue with users and chooses to respond to comments posted on her Facebook page or profile. boyd says that comments by users are posted to elicit a response from the politician. This can be in the form of responding to content such as wall posts, notes, comments, private messages, and discussion feature topics.

Rational and critical debate, as well as reciprocity, are important because democracy requires a sphere that facilitates a ground-up system of government where citizens have an influential voice in how they are governed and also builds the kind of community that encourages citizens to have confidence in their democratic institutions. All citizens must have the opportunity to access the public space in a meaningful way. Habermas' public sphere theory lays a framework for a model of democracy from below system and in studying communications tools such as social network sites, which politicians are increasingly using to communicate with constituents. His work establishes a framework for social interaction where the goal should be to encourage access, universality, and debate between constituents and decision makers. Whether this framework should be held as a model to use will be discussed at the end of this thesis.

Facebook as a power switch in Castells' (2006) network theory is about network technology or network communication changing power relations in society. For the purpose of this thesis, it is about changing the relationship between the Member of Parliament, who is a political decision-maker, and Canadians – whether they are direct constituents or citizens across the country. To observe this operationally within the context of this thesis, however, power switches must be about perceptions and attitudes. Do MPs view their relationship with constituents differently? For there to have been a change, a recognition of it must be seen by one of the parties involved. In this case, it is how the MPs view the relationship in contrast to the relationship prior to using Facebook. Remember that they were all elected officials both before and after social network sites became popular.

Communicative action is about how we interact with one another in a way that allows us to learn, help one another, and understand our environments so that we can ultimately shape the environment that surrounds us. In this scenario, average citizens are powerful because they are able to learn and through communicative action influence others through their interactions. Studying the tools that enable social interaction is necessary for gauging whether or not they help or hinder the communicative action process. As the public sphere is increasingly taking the form of multiple interconnected networks, Castells' work looks at the role of networks and switches that form power relations. Switches are what connect individuals and weak ties to one another. Power switches change with each new network formation and, as a result, influence changes as well. Social network sites act as tools to make networks more effective and efficient, bringing together strong ties as well as the weak ties that open up difference. These sites may simply be tools that improve networks but they may also serve as power switches themselves, acting as the connector between politicians and citizens. What is important in this discussion is the role of communicative action and networks in shaping society and having an effect on power dynamics.

Facebook is also a tool that can bring together weak ties. This is important to consider when looking at how social network sites are being used. For this, it is important to examine the way MPs view those who are part of their networks. This is a question of perception and one that can help determine whether or not the politician is able to benefit from those weak ties. If she views her network consisting of followers rather than contributors, then it is unlikely that she will benefit from the diversity of opinion that opens through similarities in another area. If her friends or supporters consist of a variety

of individuals from a variety of networks, then there is the possibility of there being strength in weak ties and the ability to share differing vantage points.

The discussion around the role of the amateur and the need for not only diversity of ideas but also shared experience provides a framework for a well functioning democracy. In a sense, this discussion complements Habermas' work because it echoes his point around the need for accessibility, universality, and rational/critical debate. Without shared experience, it would be difficult for citizens to be able to enter into a common public sphere and participate fully as they would not "be on the same page," so to speak nor work to build community. Similarly, without being exposed to views that differ from one's own, a person could not rationally or critically think about these positions. As Sunstein points out, people tend to congregate around views that make them comfortable. The Internet, he argues, makes this worse. While his view is somewhat deterministic, it is still valid. What should be added to Sunstein's argument is the idea that the Internet only helps users do what they are already comfortable doing offline. This is why it is important, in the case of politicians interacting with constituents, for users to use online tools for purposes other than reinforcing already existing views. A politician should choose, for a stronger democracy and a stronger public sphere, to use the Internet to expose others and themselves to new and conflicting ideas and build community in a way that advances the democratic goals of society.

Looking at social network sites as an element of the "rise of the amateur" as Keen (2007) discusses, one must look at the degree to which MPs give recognition to users who comment or post on their Facebook pages or profiles. Since this thesis is examining intent rather than effect of how MPs use Facebook, it looks at the weight given to responses and

comments left on the Member of Parliament's page or profile. It can also reflect in how much space is given to users and the degree to which her site is user driven. The goal should also be to elevate the amateur to bring a more knowledgeable citizen. The amateur here is both the Canadian citizen and the Member of Parliament.

The discussion around political marketing is important because it raises questions around the use of social network sites as broadcasting tools rather than tools of engagement. There are two ways in which politicians can choose to use these sites. On one side, they can be used for political marketing purposes where messages are tested, constituents are narrowcasted, and groups are mobilized or demobilized for electoral gain. On the other side, they can be used as engagement tools where interaction and communication can lead to communicative action and therefore have an effect on public policy. Resolving this dichotomy is crucial as we look to strengthen Canada's democracy and understanding social media as a communications tool.

Operationally, all of this means understanding the intent behind the way MPs – those who exercise power and have a responsibility to engage citizens – choose to use Facebook as a communication tool, how they view the tool itself, and how they view users that sign up as members of their Facebook networks. They may view it as a tool designed to help them broadcast their messages to diverse audiences with the goal of building networks and support for election results, as described by Bennett and Manheim (2001) and Scammell (1999). If MPs are not using Facebook and other social network sites for political engagement, then it is likely that they are using it for political marketing purposes and this needs to be investigated in a way that measures intent.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

The thesis explores the ways Canadian politicians use social network sites as communication tools to interact with other users. It examines the behaviours and attitudes of Canadian MPs in the face of new communication tools to understand whether they are using Facebook for engagement or for marketing purposes. Using social shaping of technology theory, this thesis is about the choice, perceptions, and views of MPs as they use Facebook. Drawing on the previously explained theoretical framework, this thesis attempts to answer one core research question that will be expanded upon further in this chapter. As well, multiple sub-research questions will also contribute to the understanding around how MPs choose to use Facebook in their roles as parliamentarians.

#### **Concepts and Operationalization**

One of the key elements that that needs to be defined is the concept of *social network sites*. boyd and Ellison (2007) define them as “web-based services that allow individuals to 1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd & Ellison, 2007: 2). This definition, though accurate, focuses on boyd and Ellison’s study of social network sites as a tool for identity representation. As these sites allow users to interact with one another,

share photos and videos, post notes, blog, and engage others through instant messaging, they may also allow for creative ways of expression and interaction. All of this could lead to a form of engagement between users and public policy decision makers if they choose to use them as such.

boyd and Ellison (2007) caution against using the term “social networking” because most users use these sites to facilitate interactions within already existing networks of friends, colleagues, and family members. Although this is true for most users, the unit of analysis of this research is Canadian MPs who use these sites for different reasons. It is more likely that politicians use social network sites not only to communicate with already existing networks, but also to expand their networks. This happens regardless of whether the goal is to broadcast or engage with users. For this reason, it is acceptable to use the term “social networking sites.” In the present thesis, the researcher uses the term “social network sites” to further the notion of these sites as fundamentally about networks.

A second concept that also requires expansion is *political engagement through social network sites*. Drawing from Jürgen Habermas and danah boyd, political engagement through social network sites is broadly defined as an inclusive and accessible communications space based on a contract of reciprocity between politicians and other users that encourages rational and critical discussion. This is about creating an environment that reflects Habermas’ public sphere and determining whether or not the uses of social network sites by Canadian politicians fosters any of those elements. This definition is high level and needs to be broken down and operationalized.

The first important element of the public sphere is *accessibility*. Recall that to Habermas, this means having a discursive culture where everyone is allowed to participate. As a result, the issues that are debated are relevant because they reflect a grassroots and populist democracy. Topics that average citizens want to discuss are discussed and as a result, are considered to be important. To Bennett et al. (2004), this is a question about who is allowed in and who is not. On Facebook, this happens through friending options and policies that allow for the removal or inclusion of users.

The second important public sphere element is *universality*. Habermas defines the public sphere as a place where status is completely disregarded and individuals are viewed as members of a “common humanity.” Since this thesis is limited to the study of Canadian MPs, the approach looks at whether politicians view those who post comments on their Facebook “walls,” for example, as members of a common humanity and equally able to contribute to public debate or discussion. Bennett et al. discuss recognition as the mediated public sphere’s universality equivalent. Recognition is about providing discourse space to those who are granted access. Are users permitted to drive content and post on a Member of Parliament’s wall? Recognition ensures that Facebook is being used in a way that is participatory and allows the opinions of the grassroots to be considered as important as those of the Member of Parliament.

The third important public sphere element is *rational and critical debate*. To Habermas (1989), creating an environment ripe for rational and critical debate is one of the most important elements of the public sphere. It is crucial for his theory of communicative action and society’s ability to advance what is right and what is wrong. Bennett et al. (2004) discuss this in terms of responsiveness. They ask whether there is

dialogue or mutual responsiveness in a mediated public sphere and danah boyd discusses this in terms of reciprocity. She tells us that comments are posted on a politician's "wall" with the expectation that the politician will respond. If a Member of Parliament chooses not to respond to comments of users then there is little chance that they are engaged in rational and critical debate with other users.

A fourth concept is *power switches*, as outlined by Castells (1996). As he argues, it is the network switches that shape power relations in society rather than the individuals and institutions that appear to have influence. It is important to explore whether or not social network sites, given their unique platform as potential user driven communications tools, form a power switch between networks – that is between MPs and citizens. If they do, then it could be the case that social network sites – in the way they are being used – are tools that have an impact on relations between political decision makers and average constituents. Given that this thesis studies attitudes and views about Facebook, it is important to examine whether MPs have noticed any change in relationship with Canadians since adopting Facebook as a communications tool.

In light of the literature review, the following assumptions apply to this thesis. First, social networks sites are rapidly growing in popularity and, for those Canadians who wish to use them for such purposes, they will increasingly become a communication tool for civic engagement and discussion. Second, as was demonstrated in Chapter 2 of this thesis, many hold Habermas' public sphere theory (1962) as an ideal and benchmark for democracy. Reconciling both whether it is being used in a way that reflects the public sphere and whether that model is appropriate given the democratic problems facing the country are important questions to explore. Third, the public sphere on Facebook forms a

mediated public sphere and the notions of access, recognition, and responsiveness advanced by Bennett et al. (2004) are used to operationalize Habermas' (1962) theory. It forms a mediated public sphere because of the structural limitations and user choice in filtering information and limiting who can contribute content where. Fourth, since the public sphere increasingly takes the form of networks, it is important to examine the power switches that shape society. If certain technologies form a power switch, then examining how they are used becomes increasingly relevant as they demonstrate who is influential in Canada's political decision-making system. Fifth, technology is fundamentally about how users choose to use them. There is no inherent technological determinism in social network sites. Rather, the power is in how users choose to use them. Their attitudes, points of view, and feature choices become crucial determinants in this thesis.

Adding to important concepts are key definitions that will help explain the features and technical terms related to Facebook.

*Friending:* this happens when a user submits a request to be added to another user's list of network contacts. This is a requirement for those using Facebook profile styles. Typically, the new friend will gain access to information posted on the other user's page including their wall, notes, message history, some conversations between other users, videos, photos, and other information. Not only do they gain access, but depending on the settings, they may also be able to contribute content to the joined Facebook profile. There are various privacy settings that control the level to which a friend can see such information. It is even possible, if the user chooses not to use privacy settings, for another

user who is not a friend to see the person's information without joining the network or making a friend request.

*Supporters:* this typically takes place on specially designed Facebook pages for celebrities and politicians allowing a user to join a network by self-declaring as a "supporter" rather making a formal friend request. This is different than "friending" because it does not require the owner of the page to accept or reject the user. Some politicians may choose to use this format because it requires less work to accept friendship requests and opens up the page to a wider audience. Once listed as a supporter, the user gains access to content and is able to contribute similarly to how this happens when one friends another user. MPs can still choose to remove users from the network if they wish to do so.

*Wall:* this is the place on a user's page or profile where others can publicly post comments and other content for the user. Other users can view and reply under the content – creating a grouped together discussion where other users can participate. This is one of the most popular ways to publicly communicate with users and share information. This feature is available in both the Facebook page and profile styles. Depending on users choices, the wall can range in accessibility that restricts, limits, or enables user participation.

*Status:* this is a widely used feature that allows users to express a statement that is broadcast to other users on their networks. Status updates appear on a network's newsfeed. Examples of status posts include how one is feeling, thoughts on a particular subject or event, or statements outlining a person's activities at the time of posting.

*Newsfeed*: this is a feature of the site that summarizes updates from friends or supporters in a user's network. This could include wall posts, status changes, photo posts, new notes, etc. When a user updates her information or posts new content, it is broadcast across the network. It can often be the catalyst that prompts a user to visit the Facebook page or profile of another user.

*Page vs. Profile*: these are two versions of Facebook sites that users can choose from to form the overall look and functionality of the site. The Facebook Profile is an option that most users use. Although there are engagement features present such as a wall and ample opportunity for comments and feedback, its design facilitates broadcasting. The Facebook Page option is more about engagement as friending is made easier and there are more engagement features available such as discussion boards and page reviews, among others.

*Discussion boards*: are features that allow, depending on the settings the Facebook page host chooses, users to develop discussion topics and create a discussion around particular issues. Friends and supporters can comment and post their opinions or arguments in the thread for everybody to see and comment on. This feature is only available on the Facebook page style.

*Page reviews*: allow users to send feedback to the page's owner. This is helpful for MPs to understand how their page can better meet the needs of users in their network. This is only available with the Facebook page style.

*Information Tab*: allows a user to post information about herself. Information such as interests, favourite quotes, favourite books, employment information, education, and others are typically the elements that are populated. In the Pages format, politicians

can post the name of the position they are seeking. This feature is more about broadcasting and informing others since there is no opportunity for users to provide feedback or update the information.

*Photo and Video sections:* are features that allow users to post photos or videos that either they themselves have taken or third party videos that they wish to share. Similarly, users can post pictures and have them appear in the photo sections of other users by “tagging” them in the photo.

*Tagging:* is an action that allows a user to associate content to another user’s Facebook page or profile. Photos, for example, can be tagged to include other users. In turn, the photo will appear in the other user’s photo album. This can occur with notes, video, links, status updates, etc.

*Events:* is a feature that makes it easier for users to organize events and gather a group of people for offline events.

*Notes:* this acts, in essence, as a blog. Users can post their thoughts or articles about whichever topic they choose. Other users then have the option to comment on the note if the host user permits it within her settings.

*Links:* allow users to post links from external websites. These links then appear in the newsfeeds of others within one’s network and expand the reach of information being posted. Users can comment under the links if the “comments” feature is enabled.

*Comments and “like” options:* this feature allows a user to express herself under a post or a status update. Users can post a comment or check off the “like” button to express satisfaction with what has been posted. This option is commonly used and is a

standard feature until it is disallowed in the privacy settings. It tends to be one of the more popular features that allow users to provide feedback on content.

*Facebook Page Insights:* is a tool for those using Facebook pages that allow one to analyze the users who have joined the network. It provides information to the administrator of the page on her supporters such as language, region, sex, interaction frequency, and quality of interactions with the page. This information is useful for political marketing purposes.

The main concepts of this thesis are accessibility, universality, rational/critical debate, recognition, responsiveness/reciprocity, and power switches and they need to be operationalized in terms of Facebook.

*Accessibility:* operationally, this happens first and foremost at the friending stage. A Member of Parliament must make her page or profile accessible to anyone who wants to join her network of friends or supporters. This means using settings and having a friending policy that is inclusive of all who wish to join the Member of Parliament's network. This is examined by looking at two elements. First, who is given access to the Member of Parliament's network and who is excluded? Second, what is the Member of Parliament's policy around who is removed from the network? Can users criticize the Member of Parliament, for example, without the risk of being removed?

*Universality:* this will be observed by examining the amount of influence online communication through Facebook has on a particular Member of Parliament when it comes to public policy issues. In addition, universality is about exploring the degree to which the Facebook pages or profiles of MPs are user driven. Do they enable features that provide discourse space for users? How much discourse space are users given? Do

they treat comments posted on her wall equally to email messages or letters? What is their intent in using Facebook as a communications tool?

*Rational critical debate*: operationally, creating an environment for rational and critical debate is about how MPs interact with constituents, Canadians, and other users who have joined their networks. It is also about whether MPs respond to messages through the tenets of reciprocity advanced by boyd (2008b) and responsiveness advanced by Bennett et al. (2004). Reciprocity and responsiveness is about acknowledging and engaging with the users and the comments posted on a Member of Parliament's Facebook page or profile.

Since this thesis looks at attitudes and views, it is important to know if MPs believe Facebook should follow the tenets of the public forum doctrine as outlined by Sunstein (2003) to understand if rational and critical debate is encouraged. Sunstein argues that a properly functioning democracy requires both the exposure to differing views and a level of shared experience. His thesis rests on the public forum doctrine that arose from a United States Supreme Court decision holding that governments must ensure that streets and parks be kept open to the public for expressive activities. Governments are required to ensure freedom of expression even if citizens prefer, for example, not to be exposed to protesters on the streets or differing points of view. The public forum doctrine, Sunstein argues, serves three important functions. First, it ensures that those who want to be heard have access to an audience. Second, it allows speakers to have access to specific groups and institutions who may be the direct target of a speaker's opinion. Third, it increases the likelihood that people will be exposed to a wide variety of

views (Sunstein, 2003: 4). Sunstein believes that all of this can lead to a certain level of shared experience:

In a pluralistic democracy, an important shared experience is in fact the very experience of society's diversity. These exposures help promote understanding and, perhaps in that sense, freedom. And all of these points are closely connected to democratic ideals.

(Sunstein, 2003: 5)

With respect to social network sites, Sunstein would argue that politicians should treat Facebook similar to the way they treat sidewalks and parks by allowing individuals/users to express themselves freely without restriction. The result is that the politician gains a sense of shared experience with constituents and is exposed to new and differing ideas that may influence how she thinks. Similarly, using these sites as breeding grounds for weak ties allows for diversity of opinion.

Granovetter (1983) explains that weak ties open up diversity – something that is important for rational and critical debate to occur. Weak ties increase the likelihood of an individual being exposed to political movements and diverse opinions. This makes the individual more capable of understanding the environment that surrounds her and being able to act in ways that help shape it. Weak ties are important to Habermas' (1962) theory of communicative action because they encourage the principles required in a rational and critical democracy. Facebook as a “networking” tool brings weak ties together. For politics, they can be ties related to policy issues, geographic regions, political affiliation, difference of opinion, and many others.

*Power switches:* a power switch acts as an intersection between two elements or phenomena and changes the power relationship. The question posed in this thesis is about whether Facebook, or its use, is a power switch that changes the way citizens interact

with their elected officials. It is difficult to operationalize how one would determine a change in power switches since it is difficult to know what form the change will take. It is more relevant, therefore, to explore the changes MPs have observed since adopting social network sites, and more precisely Facebook, as a communication tool given that each of the interviewees were politicians before and after using Facebook. If the power dynamic has changed, then the Member of Parliament would have noticed, or at the very least reacted to a change.

## **Research Questions**

The central research question of this thesis is:

In which ways are Canadian MPs using social network sites to engage citizens in a public sphere where citizens have opportunity to contribute through communicative action?

Additionally, the thesis will seek answers to the following sub-questions:

1. Are MPs using Facebook in a way that is accessible?<sup>4</sup>
2. Are MPs using Facebook in a way that respects Habermas' public sphere tenet of universality?<sup>5</sup>
3. How are MPs using Facebook to create an environment for rational/critical debate through Bennett et al.'s (2004) tenet of responsiveness, in a way that

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<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to determine whether or not a Member of Parliament's use of Facebook necessarily leads to accessibility. What will be investigated, therefore, is whether the Member of Parliament is willing to and is taking steps to use features that can better enable an environment of accessibility.

<sup>5</sup> Same comment as above.

follows the public forum doctrine, and in a way that increases the number of weak ties they are exposed to?

4. In what ways does the use of Facebook by MPs indicate that the site has the potential to act as a power switch?

## **Research Design**

This research focuses on one social network site: Facebook. Although many social network sites are relevant, including Twitter, YouTube, MySpace, and others, the space limit of this thesis does not allow for more than one social network to be thoroughly studied according to the aimed objectives. Additionally, the features of each of these sites are different and choosing one of these sites as a unit of analysis narrows the research question to provide a quality result. Facebook is one of the first social network sites introduced in Canadian politics and most MPs currently operate Facebook pages or profiles. In terms of public sphere theory, Facebook has many features such as discussion groups, one to one communication, one to many communication, many to many communication, public “walls,” friending capabilities, and video/picture posting features that open up the possibility of it becoming such a space.

This thesis uses a qualitative approach to research where emphasis is placed on meaning and context rather than positivist data collection. According to Neuman (2007), interpretation of the data is conducted in three ways. First, the researcher learns about the meaning, motives, and reasons behind the social behaviour exhibited by the research subjects. Second, the researcher uncovers the underlying coherence and meaning behind

the data. Third, the researcher applies the data to theory and gives it general theoretical significance.

One of the important elements of qualitative approaches to Jackson, Gillis, and Verberg (2007) is that studies be informant driven rather than theory driven. Researchers collect data in the field and then apply that data to theory, not the other way around. This ensures that the findings do not show what is already known concerning the research topic. For this reason, the researcher developed a loose theoretical framework that was amended once the research was completed to add theories that reflected the data collected.

To Jackson et al. (2007) the investigator must be “fully immersed in the data in an attempt to bring order and meaning to the vast amounts of narrative that result” (2007: 430). In more precise terms, this thesis is an ethnographic study, attempting to “understand human behaviour in the cultural context in which it is embedded” (2007: 432). This thesis does so as it seeks to understand the behaviour of Canadian MPs in light of a new phenomenon of new communication tools in the culture of Western liberal democracy.

To ensure that this study is accurate, Jackson et al. (2007) suggest addressing several questions. First, it is important to know how truthful the findings are and by what criteria we can judge them? This question is resolved in the analysis of the data collected throughout the study. Preliminarily, however, it can be stated that the criteria used to determine truthfulness relies heavily on the method in which data is collected. The development of detailed memoing forms and strong theoretical coding is integral to this piece. Additionally, response confidentiality is guaranteed to the informant so that no

quote is attributed to its author. This measure will make the informant more comfortable in sharing her views in an honest way.

Second, Jackson et al. (2007) ask if the results can be replicated? It is strongly believed that this study can easily be replicated with similar results since the sample size is large enough given the small constituency of MPs who are actively using Facebook as a communication tool to constitute an accurate representation of MPs who use Facebook. Additionally, and as will be demonstrated in the following chapter, the results show very little difference in the responses between the MPs interviewed.

Third, they ask how it can be ensured that the results do not reflect the researcher's bias? Given that the researcher has spent time working for a Member of Parliament caucusing with the Liberal Party of Canada, it is important that the study cover not only Members from the Liberal Party. It is also important that the interview questions and content analysis coding be reviewed by an external party prior to the study taking place.

Finally, Jackson et al. (2007) argue that qualitative research studies rely on both credibility and transferability. Their quantitative research method counter-concepts are validity and generalizability, respectively. They argue that credibility is dependant on the accuracy of the description of the phenomenon under investigation and is enhanced by repeatedly interacting with participants and using different data sources including different persons and methods (2007: 457). This study observes the behaviour of several MPs and uses two data collection methods in an effort to meet this standard.

Transferability is strengthened when data is presented in a way that is not context bound. Indeed, Jackson et al. (2007) argue that "the researcher must provide sufficient detail in

the study report so that readers can assess the appropriateness of the findings to other settings” (458). To this end, all of the information related to each finding is reported in Chapter 4 so that readers can apply the information to other settings.

After the completion of the content analysis and the in-depth interviews, the thesis uses the criteria listed above to determine whether or not Facebook is being used for political engagement purposes, political marketing purposes, or for reasons that have not been anticipated.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Two data collection methods were used to gather information for this thesis. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with Canadian MPs in an effort to understand their perceptions and choices as they use Facebook. According to Jackson et al. (2007), in-depth interviews are used to collect information about a respondent’s perception.

“Typically,” they argue, “in-depth interviews are done to solicit people’s descriptions and explanations of events in their world...Quotations are used to illustrate the points the author wishes to make in the research report” (Jackson et al., 2007: 448). Questions ranging from “how do you use Facebook?” to “do you think Facebook should follow the tenets of the public forum doctrine?” were posed to the MPs in order to explore their views and attitudes towards the social network site. The uniqueness of this thesis is that it looks at behaviour, choices, and perceptions concerning social media rather than looking at the effects of how they are used. The social shaping of technology approach outlines a framework whereby these elements are held to be important in determining how a particular technology is used in society. Conducting in-depth interviews with Canadian

MPs is an investigation method that helps the researcher understand these elements and better comprehend how social network sites are being used. Once the interviews were completed, the researcher categorized the findings into themes. These themes arose from the data provided by the informants to the researcher and reflected commonalities in their answers.

To complement the in-depth interviews, a content analysis was also conducted on the Facebook pages and profiles of the MPs who participated in this thesis to catalogue the features they chose to use. This is important because there are features that, if enabled, can contribute to an environment that encourages discussion and interaction between MPs and the Facebook users that have joined their networks. This includes features that range from discussion board applications to friending options. The content analysis catalogues the way in which MPs use Facebook by observing the parameters they have established through feature choices as well as how they interact with users. Data was collected using a content analysis form with coding criteria that was designed by the researcher. The researcher used the list to determine the style of Facebook page, friending openness, settings related to engagement features such as the wall, photos, discussion boards, comment features, information posted by the MP, and level of reciprocity.

For each of the participating MPs, the researcher conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews at locations of their choosing. All of the interviews, with the exception of one, were conducted in the Member of Parliament's office. The fourth took place near Parliament Hill. Each respondent was asked a series of questions based on an interview guide. When the participant provided an answer that was worth exploring further, the

researcher asked probing questions to gain a deeper understanding of the issue being discussed. Only after the interviews did the researcher complete the content analysis.

The researcher identified MPs who use social network sites through Facebook searches and newspaper articles about politicians who use the site and randomly chose participants from that list. The researcher has chosen interview candidates from the list of current MPs rather than candidates in the 2008 federal election because acting MPs have a responsibility to interact with and engage their constituents. Those candidates not elected, though they may have used these sites while campaigning, no longer have a responsibility to their constituents once they are defeated.

Four informant interviewees participated in this thesis. There were three prominent MPs who caucus with the Liberal Party of Canada and one prominent MP with the New Democratic Party of Canada who participated in this study. One of the Liberal MPs asked her Director of Communications, the person responsible for using Facebook on her behalf under the guidelines she established, to respond to the questions. None of the MPs from the Conservative Party of Canada responded to the researchers request for an interview.

Ethics approval by the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board has been secured for this research study for the reason that the interviews require the participation of human subjects. In addition to obtaining ethics approval, the researcher presented extra measures to ensure that the reputations of the MPs being studied were not compromised. Given that the subjects of this thesis are public figures, the researcher guaranteed that the specific answers provided to the researcher will not be directly attributed to the interviewee. For example, the results will provide the names of the MPs who participated,

but will not associate those names to particular quotations. This additional measure will ensure that any political opponent of the Member of Parliament will not be able to use answers provided against her for political purposes. In addition, this measure will improve the level of trust between the researcher and the subject increasing the likelihood that the Member of Parliament will provide honest answers.

Data is analyzed following the qualitative analysis method of theme analysis. According to Jackson et al. (2007), this method is about finding themes based on similarities and differences in the data, writing a summary overview, and condensing the findings in a way that deals primarily with relationships among the parts of the culture. In the chapter that follows, all of the data is presented in the themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews and the content analysis. These themes are then analyzed by answering the research questions and discussing the findings in a way that advances the theories used.

## Chapter 4

### Findings and Analysis

This thesis is primarily concerned with social network sites and how they are being used for political purposes by Canadian MPs. Facebook features provide a variety of tools for interaction and it closely resembles an electronic public sphere. The central research question of this thesis is to explore the ways in which Canadian MPs use social network sites to engage citizens in a public sphere where citizens can contribute to and inform MPs through communicative action. Sub research questions are asked to help answer the central research question.

This chapter discusses data in themes related to the findings, and analyzes them in relation to the sub-research questions. The literature review from Chapter 2 guides the discussion around findings and analysis by drawing on the relevant themes and theories previously outlined.

#### **Findings**

The data is presented in themes that arose during the data collection process. The in-depth interviews measure the perceptions, views, and choice rationale of MPs as they use Facebook while the content analysis examines the feature choices they make in establishing a framework for their page or profile. Since the two data collection methods have been chosen to complement each other, and given the nature of the application, findings of both are presented together under each theme. The information collected from the in-depth interviews and content analysis have led the researcher to discuss the

findings in the areas of accessibility as it relates to Facebook friending, the reasons MPs use Facebook, the types of interactions with users, the types of information posted, who drives the site, reciprocity, the filtering effect of Facebook, Facebook as “my” space rather than “our” space, and political marketing.

### *Limited Accessibility*

Friending is an important part of social network sites and Facebook in particular. It is the mechanism by which people join online networks of other users and gain access to their page or profile to view and contribute content. In this case, the researcher is observing the way Canadian MPs allow other Facebook users to join their networks. There are two options available to the Member of Parliament. First, if she uses the Facebook Page style, users can automatically join their network simply by choosing the “become a supporter” option. Once they have done so, they become full members of the network and gain full access to the content. They also have the ability to contribute content within the parameters set out by the Member of Parliament. The second option is for those who choose the Facebook profile style where users must request access to join the Member of Parliament’s network. Once a user has done so, the Member of Parliament can choose to accept or ignore the friend request. Depending on the privacy settings used, non-members can contribute content on a spectrum dependant on what the Member of Parliament chooses to allow. They are still required to make a friend request to be able to contribute content. The Facebook page style is more open as it allows users to self-declare and there are no limits to how many members the parliamentarian can have whereas the Facebook profile restricts the number of friends a user can have to 5,000 users.

When asked if *anyone* can friend the Member of Parliament, two respondents<sup>6</sup> answered affirmatively saying that anyone can join their network. They use the Facebook page style, which allows users to self-declare as a supporter. The other two respondents use the Facebook profile style where individuals are required to request permission to become a friend. Of those two respondents, one answered in the negative saying that not anyone can become her friend on Facebook. She explained that at one time, she did allow everyone who requested to become her friend but found that some joined her network for “malicious reasons.” She says that “people who’s sole intention is to rant or trash me are not welcome.” As a result, she says that she often deletes users from her network because she is not interested in reading what they have to say. The other respondent argued similarly, saying that “most of these people are not friends at all.” Some names, she says, “come up often and at times they are deleted.” She then told a story about a time when she deleted a constituent and that person confronted her at a function in her riding. One of the respondents raised the issue of structural limitations to Facebook. She says that she has the maximum number of friends the site will allow at 5,000 people. She says that she has a 1,500 person waiting list of people wanting to be her friend. From time to time, she says she deletes people at random so that she can add new people.

Each respondent was very clear during the in-depth interview that they are prepared to delete users and exclude them from their networks for a variety of subjective

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<sup>6</sup> To ensure anonymity, responses are presented at random and their order does not reflect any particular respondent. “The first” respondent here may not be “the first” respondent in another section, for example.

reasons<sup>7</sup>. The first respondent says that she uses the Facebook page style because the supporter function of friending “disavows” those who join for “malicious intent. “ She says that these people sign up to be “[her]” supporters and their comments then become their own. This response suggests that there is judgment placed on users who sign up as supporters before any comment has been made on her page. The comments have been prejudged as being at arms length from the Member of Parliament and should not be taken seriously. There is an assumption that motive disqualifies some users from being allowed to be part of the discussion. She says some join for “malicious intent” and it is for that reason that she claims no responsibility for their actions. When comments become too negative or are racist, the Member of Parliament deletes them and removes the user from her network.

The second respondent’s answers reveal that she too has parameters for which she is willing to disqualify users from participating on her profile. She says that it has happened when a group of people have, in a coordinated manner, friended her on Facebook with the sole purpose of “ranting” and “trashing [her].” They joined her network with the intention of posting negative comments on her wall and under her posts. She continues that those people are not welcome on her site and she removed them. Again, this respondent is prejudging the comments by certain users in her network, gives little weight or recognition to certain opinions that are posted on her Facebook profile, and deletes those who publicly disagree with her too often.

The third respondent, though she also deletes comments that “go over the line,” seems to give more legitimacy to users’ comments than any of the other respondents. She

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<sup>7</sup> This term is used in the findings to reflect the data collected during the in-depth interviews showing that MPs used differing criteria and definitions. How they defined terms such as “malicious” or “ranting” were entirely personal.

says that engaging with users “gives you a sense of who is out there and what they’re interested in.” She adds that Facebook can be “a barometer of how people feel about [an issue].” She says that she makes a point to read every comment that is posted on her Facebook profile and seems to be more willing to take those comments under consideration. When asked if she could name any particular issue or instance where these comments influenced her, however, she was unable to provide an example but reiterated the point that she does take them into consideration. Her use of the word “barometer” is an important choice of language as it implied a certain level of strategy. More will be discussed when the theme of political marketing is elaborated upon later in this chapter, but there is a sense that she uses Facebook as a tool to gauge which issues are “hot button” issues and how to handle them. This information can guide her to determine which issues to stay away from and which ones seem to rally supporters.

The fourth informant’s response indicates that she differentiates the status of those who are a part of her network on Facebook. When discussing the type of friends that she has, she says that people sign up to her network as a supporter to “follow” both her and the issues she advocates. She is an opposition critic for a topical portfolio<sup>8</sup> and believes that people are interested in knowing her views, what she is saying, and how she is approaching the topic. These are people not only from her riding, she says, but from across the country. Her choice of the word “follow” and the implication that she is the expert on the matter indicates that she believes users want to hear what she has to say rather than engage her, influence her, or participate in some form of constructive discussion. She says instead that “supporters” “follow” her. Their sole purpose, in her

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<sup>8</sup> As are all of the participants.

view, is to be taught things or be informed by her, the Member of Parliament and critic for this particular portfolio.

The content analysis supports the interview data and shows that half of the MPs interviewed use Facebook pages and the other half used Facebook profiles. Two people use both, but this is primarily due to the fact that a user is required to have a Facebook profile to be able to set up a Facebook page. Those who are most active use the Facebook profile style rather than the supporter page, which is symbolic given that pages provide far greater interaction opportunities.

### ***“My Communication Tool”***

Participants were asked why they chose to use Facebook as a communication tool. The answers indicate that MPs use it primarily to broadcast information to large audiences. The medium is a “tool” for them to use in a way that helps them achieve their goals rather than a tool for all users who sign up to Facebook.

One of the respondents says that it is a “cheap, simple, and timely tool” to communicate with people. She says it is useful for “keeping in touch” with people from various geographic areas and Facebook reaches an audience that her website does not. The website, she argued, is more for constituent related information while Facebook is for a broader audience. To her, the site is a tool to connect individuals with her so that she can stay in contact with them.

Another says that, first and foremost, she absolutely detests Facebook because it could be designed in a much cleaner and organized way. She is not entirely sure what Facebook should look like but complains that information is often difficult to find.

Nevertheless, she argues that she uses the social network site to have “a conversation” with people<sup>9</sup> – especially with both those who are interested in her critic portfolio and those living in remote parts of her constituency. She is interested in the technology insofar as it allows those who want to connect with *her* do so in a convenient manner.

The third respondent states that she uses the site for two reasons. First, she says that she uses it as a tool for public communication to strangers. She says that she posts a variety of information on Facebook to inform people about her views, broadcast her videos, and post content. In this sense, she uses it as a broadcast tool to disseminate information to large audiences that follow her. Second, she says she uses it as a substitute for emails. She sends jokes to friends and family through Facebook and sends direct messages to people. She primarily sends messages to users who she is already familiar with, such as her children and close friends. To this respondent, Facebook is both a private and public messaging system.

The final respondent says that she posts about “Hill issues.” The content that she contributes to her Facebook concerns topics she is involved with in Ottawa. Those include critic portfolio, her whereabouts, and other pieces of information similar to this. To her, it is primarily about informing users about the issues that matter to her or the issues she believes matter to them. She does not respond to the messages left by others and tends to believe that individuals sign up to her network only to be informed about the issues that she is working on.

The primary focus for all of these MPs is to communicate to large audiences with a tool that is easy and effective. During the course of the interviews, there was little to no

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<sup>9</sup> Whether it is actually used for “conversation” will be discussed in subsequent sections dealing with reciprocity.

mention to about Facebook being used as a tool for people to reach or engage with MPs in a constructive way. For those who did mention engagement, as will be explored later in this chapter, they were unable to provide examples of how this was happening and an observation of their behaviour on Facebook shows that they are not involved in such activities. To them, Facebook is about unidirectional broadcast communication over “digital handshaking.” This leads into another important theme relating to the ways in which MPs choose to interact with users.

### ***“Follow Me”***

The type of interaction MPs have with users in their network is important as it measures the degree to which they engage with those who sign up to be their friends or supporters. It is known from the discussion around friending that MPs have many friends from all over the country. The users who are the most important to them, however, are their constituents. Three of the four MPs reported that they receive, on a regular basis, private messages from constituents. They receive messages that range from comments, feedback on particular issues, questions, or requests for help. One of the respondents said that many times, constituents gain access to her faster on Facebook than if they were to send an email or letter to her office since she personally updates Facebook daily. The only request she will not answer is requests for help. Skeptical of privacy protection, she says that Facebook is a private company headquartered outside of Canada and she is not comfortable with private information being transmitted through that channel. Another respondent answered that she rarely responds to Facebook messages and only replies to

personal ones from her friends and family. The third respondent said that she does not answer any of the messages.

Since all of the respondents were politicians both before and after Facebook, the researcher asked whether there was a change in the way these MPs interacted with Canadians since adopting Facebook as a communications tool. Three respondents replied in the negative. One argues that Facebook “is simply a tool” for the politician to get their messages out – implying that she is engaged in the same communication activities as before, and only slightly different. Another says that it is hard to tell whether there is a change in the way they interact but generally speaking, she says no. The only difference, she adds, is that people walk up to her on the street and say: “Hi, I’m so and so, and we’re friends on Facebook.” She contends that this does not necessarily constitute a dramatic change in the way she interacts with constituents but says that she feels more vulnerable. She feels this way because she is exposing herself to a wide audience on a daily basis in a space where they “can comment directly” on what she has to say. This fear is telling because it demonstrates the reluctance of using a medium where users can attach their own comments to yours. A primary goal of any politician is to control the focus and parameters of public discussion around various topics. If a stranger is able to append a rebuttal to a politician’s statement, they lose control and risk a murkier debate.

The only Member of Parliament to say yes said so because of a remote fly-in only area in her riding that she believes has been empowered since adopting Facebook. These remote communities have established campaigns to build schools and are advocating a variety of other issues affecting them using Facebook to get their messages across. She says these communities use the site to “de-isolate” themselves from the rest of the

country and they take it very seriously. When users outside of the community posts negative comments on the wall of their advocacy group, for example, a member of the community will often call her Parliamentary office to express a frustration that “someone wrote something bad on *the* Facebook.” She says that in this sense, she believes the site has given her constituents a new tool to connect with people outside of their isolated communities and be heard on their issues without having to travel to Ottawa. This change, however, reflects a change in the community and how they relate to the rest of the country. It does not necessarily have an impact on the relationship with the Member of Parliament. Additionally, telephones and emails have also worked to de-isolate remote communities and have already allowed these communities to mobilize over the telephone and the Internet.

While constituents join the networks of MPs, those who sign up to a Facebook page or profile may find themselves in a different category. For example, there are many who join a Member of Parliament’s network for the issues they advocate or the critic portfolios that they have been assigned. All of the respondents embrace the fact that many in their networks are from across their constituency, the country, and the world and are joining for a variety of reasons. They believe that people friend them primarily because they are MPs but also because of the critic portfolios or issues they advocate. The participants interviewed for this thesis are prominent MPs with substantial portfolios.

All of the respondents expressed that they found it useful to connect them with people across the country that have “similar views” on the issues they advocated. They believe their “followers” have similar interests, forming weak ties as a result. One Member of Parliament alluded to this by saying that there are some who have very little

in common with her who, together and in a concerted way, use her site to attack her positions. Groups of people who disagree with her on a particular issue will sign up to her Facebook profile for the sole purpose of flooding it with content that disputes the views of the Member of Parliament. Her response, she says is to delete these people with the result of eliminating differing views from her network.

As previously mentioned, one of the respondents referred to the users that joined her network as “followers” who wish to inform themselves about her work and her issues. The work she does is hers and the issues she advocates are hers as well, even though she has a responsibility in a representative democracy to reflect the voice of her constituency.<sup>10</sup> The implication here is that the Member of Parliament feels as though Facebook is a place where users can join *her* network and listen to what *she* has to say. It is not about users wanting to be part of the discussion or influencing her position. To her, it is about them *following* her.

### ***Type of Posts***

The type of content the MPs contributes to the Facebook page or profile is important because it shows whether she is interested in engaging users or marketing to them. For example, if the Member of Parliament posts items for discussion such as an article in a newspaper that disagrees with her position, then it is for engagement purposes. But if she only posts notes, videos, or pictures from her party’s central office that re-enforce her

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<sup>10</sup> Although the Canadian constitution vaguely defines the responsibilities of MPs, the role of representing constituents is something by which many parliamentarians campaign and the Canadian population has come to understand this as central to their role.

position, then it is more likely that she is using Facebook for political marketing purposes.

For the most part, the in-depth interviews and content analysis show that MPs post their press releases, articles or videos of them in the media, speeches in the House of Commons, updates on her whereabouts, and links to articles they find interesting. One Member of Parliament specified that the content she posts are “things that reinforce the Leader’s message.” This sort of content would include articles that agree with the party leader’s position, notes that express similar views as the leader, or items that make the leader appear to users in a desirable manner. Two respondents say that they post lighter items such as music videos and jokes. One of the respondents says that, interestingly, people are the most critical when she posts things that are too personal or too comical. For that reason, she has stopped posting those items and restricts her postings to politics.

The reason Facebook is such a success is because it fits into Western liberal tradition in that it is designed to empower the user in its application. Facebook views all of its users as individuals who are able to make individual choices in how the site is used. It is the user who is able to make decisions. They can, if they choose, decide which features they want to enable, set parameters around who and how others can interact with them, personalize their page or profile with intimate photos and video, and many more. Users are drawn in by the features because the final product is designed by each individual user. As Brian Massumi (1997) would argue, each user has the ability with each veer, to take Facebook into a new direction. They make their own conclusions and are more likely to accept the final product. Additionally, by posting the type of content that is listed above and enabling features that allow users to comment, individuals can

attach their own interpretations and opinions within the context of the original post. The content that MPs are posting are items that reflect or support their points of view and any response is made within the context of that opinion.

### ***Member of Parliament Driven, not User Driven***

The features available on Facebook can allow for varying degrees of user participation. MPs have two options when setting up their Facebook accounts: they can make their page or profile user driven whereby users have opportunities to contribute content, lead discussion, and generally drive what types of discussions occur, or they can limit the space available to users to drive content giving them control of what is posted and limiting participation. Making a Facebook page or profile user driven is important for the mediated public sphere element of recognition as outlined by Bennett et al. (2004) and for the principles of the public forum doctrine as outlined by Sunstein (2003). It is important because a public sphere must encourage an environment of rational and critical discourse according to Habermas (1989). Bennett et al. (2004) define recognition as providing discourse space to those who have access to the mediated public sphere. Without discourse space on a Member of Parliament's Facebook page or profile, the user becomes nothing more than an observer with limited contribution in the network.

During the in-depth interviews, the researcher outlined the public forum doctrine as defined by Sunstein (2003) and asked whether or not the MPs believed Facebook – and their page or profile in particular – should be treated as one of those spaces. For the most part, the respondents were clear that they do not view the social network site as a public space for public debate or discussion. Rather, the space is viewed as a private website,

similar to other websites, owned by the politician and viewing the site is a privilege, not a right.

The first respondent says that: “Facebook is like a Member of Parliament’s office building. We may permit some writing on the wall of the building, but it is not necessarily a public space.” She says that comments that are “extreme or derogatory” are taken down. She deepens her statement by saying that other limits on what can be written include both hostility and comments “that are not constructive.” For this respondent, Facebook is not a public space for open and free expression of one’s opinions. Rather, it is an extension of her “office building,” which is a private space and subject to limitations. There is ownership of the space as she considers it as “her” office building. The idea of ownership will be explored further in this chapter.

The second respondent answers that she treats her Facebook profile like any other aspect of her life. She says that: “people can join and have a conversation, positive or negative, like they would in [her] home.” But she adds that “if people want to participate in that conversation, fine. But if their comment is trash or racist, it gets deleted.” During the interview, this respondent had a great deal of frustration when answering this question because she says that many people post hurtful and negative comments towards minority groups in her riding. She says that she, quite simply, does not tolerate this type of behaviour. Her frustration culminated to a point where, when answering the question, she began to use profanity in describing how people should “[expletive]” themselves and “get [their] own space.”

The third respondent answered that yes, Facebook should be treated as a public space and follow the public forum doctrine. She adds, however, that it requires limits.

She says that she deletes comments that “go over the line” or are “offensive” and “you get a sense of who people are.” In her response, she says that her Facebook profile is “my space” and “my microphone” adding that if people want a platform, they should “get [their] own.” The Facebook profile, therefore, is *her* platform that belongs to *her*, not to the users who join the network. This respondent believes in the idea of treating Facebook as public space but in practice, treats it as a private space. The fourth respondent answered that she “really [didn’t] know.” She does not think it is a “yes or no” answer but left open the possibility that it could be such a space. She admits, however, that she does not pay much attention to what users post on her Facebook page and very rarely reads other’s content. The content analysis of her page shows that she does not interact with users and, as a result, does not practice any of the tenets of the public forum doctrine. This respondent falls squarely into the category of MPs who do not intend to use Facebook to encourage or engage a rational and critical debate.

On the question of how user driven each Facebook page or profile is, every respondent clearly understands that her site is mostly driven by herself rather than other users. The content analysis shows that all of the MPs have disabled their walls and do not allow users to post new content. They all post information for others to react to but provide little space for users to post content for them to react. The types of information that they post include press releases, media appearances by the Member of Parliament, updates about what they are doing, articles, music videos, speeches, and jokes.

Again, the content analysis confirms the respondent’s answers as most have chosen limited wall accessibility to other users and have limited their ability to post photos and videos. Only one participant has enabled a discussion board that is open to

allowing all users in the network to create their own topics of discussion. Those interviewed are aware that they choose to use features that limit accessibility. The amount of space they allow for users to provide content is very limited and hinders Facebook from being used as a place where users can adequately contribute to discussion. To the MPs, people follow *them on their* sites to hear about *their* points of view rather than the other way around. Users are able to join the Member of Parliament's network of friends but are not able to contribute meaningfully.

### ***Reciprocity***

Both boyd (2008b) and Bennett et al. (2004) consider the notion of reciprocity as a fundamental part of a public sphere and social network sites. boyd discusses the expectation of users who post comments on a politicians' wall. She says that users post comments expecting to illicit a reaction from their politicians. Bennett et al. make the same argument in the context of the public sphere, arguing that dialogue and mutual responsiveness is a key element to a mediated public sphere.

The interviews show that, for the most part, none of the MPs are willing to engage with users that post comments on their Facebook page or profile. While many admit to reading the posts or comments left by others, they rarely interact with them and almost never respond. Through the content analysis, only one post is discovered where a Member of Parliament makes an attempt to respond directly to a comment left by a user in her network. Interestingly, of all of the substantial comments on her profile that begged for a response, the Member of Parliament chose to answer the most non-controversial one – responding to a comment under a photo saying “once a punk always a punk.” The

response was simply, “you got it buddy” and then went on to explain where the picture was taken.

Most of the respondents, however, admit to answering private messages sent to them through their Facebook inboxes. One in particular says that it is a quicker way of reaching her since she sends “quick” responses back through Facebook. Queries sent to her constituency office are filtered through staff, responses are then drafted, and sent to her for approval and revision before being responded to. On Facebook, however, it is she who directly controls the site and is responsible. Regardless of whether the Member of Parliament responds to individual comments, none of the respondents engage in any form of public discussion with the comments left under posts, videos, notes, or articles left by the users for discussion.

Another Member of Parliament answered that she simply does not read the comments posted on her Facebook page and therefore does not react to them. Her staff are instructed to keep an eye on the comments but they are not expected to convey to her the contents of what users are expressing. It is completely left to her staff to delete comments and choose whether to bring issues expressed on Facebook to her attention. She says that this rarely happens. As a result, this Member of Parliament is absent from the discussion and has therefore removed herself entirely from what users try to express to her. She is not respecting the notion of reciprocity by the fact that she is, at the very least, not present.

The MPs interviewed do not seem to engage users nor do they respond or react to comments posted on their pages or profiles – even as one of the respondents refers to her use of Facebook as “having a conversation.” A one-way conversation is not a

conversation. In reality, the way they are using Facebook is aligned more closely to the action of broadcasting information, albeit with limited ability for users to react to it without fully engaging in a discussion. Equally important, if a user chooses to comment in a way that does not conform to the subjective limits imposed by the Member of Parliament, the responses from the in-depth interviews are clear that it is likely these comments would be deleted and not viewable to anyone else. These users may even risk being unfriended.

In the context of the MPs interviewed, the tenet of responsiveness is not present in the way they choose to use Facebook. Not only do they limit the space available for users to comment but they go on to ignore the comments posted when users do take the time to post something. Reciprocity and responsiveness are important elements for a public sphere to encourage rational and critical debate and it is clear that MPs are not interested in respecting them.

### *The Filter Factor*

Sunstein (2003) and Keen (2007) discuss social media as a tool that helps individuals filter in and filter out the information they are exposed to. Individuals have the ability to expose themselves, for example, to articles they want to be exposed to, points of view they agree with, and other individuals who share their points of view. This ability is dangerous, according to Sunstein (2003) and he argues that individuals become more extreme as their exposure to different views decreases. Keen (2007) calls this “the cult of the amateur” as people make their own decisions about what they are exposed to as opposed to traditional information gatekeepers such as journalists. The notion of filters

relates to the previous theme of reciprocity in that Facebook allows individuals to be exposed to the people they want to be exposed to and allows them to delete or disallow comments that differ from their points of view.

The interviews reveal that the MPs generally discourage members of their networks from posting comments for public consumption on their Facebook page or profile. They have all enabled a limited wall feature and reduced the ability for other users to post information. Instead, users are only able to react to content posted by the Member of Parliament. MPs chose to limit users' ability to contribute new content as well by limiting users access to other features. The content analysis shows that users are not able to tag MPs in photos, for example. Photos are an important part of communication as they provide a visual that, once tagged, become a part of the Member of Parliament's Facebook page or profile. It is impossible for photos that show the Member of Parliament in an unflattering manner or that portray the politician engaged in an activity contrary to her rhetoric to be added to the Member of Parliament's collection of photos. The MPs primarily use the functions that enable one-way communication such as the status bar, the events application, the information tab that allows them to write personal information about themselves, limited photo albums, limited video collections, notes that can only be written by them, and share links that only they can post.

Underneath all of the content, however, users are provided an opportunity to post a response comment for all users to see and react to. Although comment features become spaces for users to contribute their thoughts and post content, it limits the space available for users to lead and initiate a topic of their choosing. All comments are posted within the context of the content they are reacting to. Only one of the MPs has enabled a discussion

feature on her Facebook page and has applied settings that allow users to create their own discussion topics. This feature allows users to discuss issues that matter to them and encourage others, including MPs, to be exposed to topics other than the ones that they themselves have chosen.

The content analysis also shows, as was previously discussed, that MPs are reluctant to participate in discussion or react to messages. They read the messages, and the extent that they react to them is to delete the ones they find “trash,” “go over the line” or “inappropriate.” The MPs interviewed do not, through the features they use, create an environment for engagement. As a result, they work to filter out information that they are unwilling to be associated with. By deleting users who continuously disagree with the politician, they are also limiting the negative comments that appear on their Facebook page or profile.

Another way that MPs expose themselves to different ideas is by joining Facebook groups and supporting Facebook causes. Again, the MPs interviewed indicated in the in-depth interviews that they are careful about the groups or causes they join. They typically join ones that they strongly believe in and rarely if ever contribute or view the content on those pages. For the most part, they stick to their own Facebook pages or profiles and do not stray very far away. Their Facebook world, in a sense, is their own page or profile that they themselves have created. This leads to the following discussion around ownership of the space.

### *“My Space, My Platform, My Microphone”*

One of the most interesting discussions in each of the interviews surrounded the idea of the Facebook page or profile as a public forum. Recall that most respondents answered this question in the negative. One of the respondents said that: “this is my space, *my* platform, *my* microphone. Get *your* own. Why give some people *mine* if *I* don’t feel like it.” Again, there is this notion that this is “my” space as opposed to a public space where people need to follow the rules set by the Member of Parliament. This respondent adds another element to this, which is the idea that it is her “microphone.” In this sense, the respondent is framing the platform in terms of a unidirectional communication. Through the microphone, one person can speak to many people at the same time without them having adequate means to talk back and reply. It is not designed or viewed to be a tool for rational and critical debate. Rather, this respondent understands Facebook as “my platform.”

The second respondent says that “If people want to participate in [her] conversation, fine. If their comment is trash or racist, it gets deleted. [Expletive] you, get your own space.” Again, this respondent refers to this space as *her* space. She even went as far as to say that “it really is a personal page that has become prominent” because of her status as a parliamentarian. This is about “my space” and is a personal page, not a public one.

The third respondent says that: “Facebook is like a Member of Parliament’s office building. I may permit some writing on the wall of the building, some graffiti, but it is not necessarily a public space.” To this respondent, Facebook is a private space where users are “guests,” much like any other website the Member of Parliament may have. The

suggestion that the Facebook page or profile is like her office building puts the site in the same category as a private space that is rented or leased by the host and therefore she can set whatever rules she chooses to govern the use of that space.

The Facebook pages and profiles of the MPs are viewed as private places rather than public spaces. The MPs treat them as such and create subjective rules that govern the use of these spaces by others who join their online networks. In a sense, these sites become individually owned, private property. This belief relates back to both liberalism and the discussion around private versus public in the literature review. MPs view these sites as private spaces while using them as public ones. To them, users join their private networks in the same way that they join clubs or mailing lists, to receive information within the closed group.

### ***Political Marketing***

Scammell (1999) outlines the notion of political marketing as a professionalization and market oriented version of political communication primarily focused on election results. Bennett and Manheim (2001) argue that political parties have learned to use communication technologies not to engage citizens in rational public discourse, but to mobilize and demobilize different segments of the electorate by breaking them into narrow segments and communicating differently and directly to each of them. As a result of the technological sophistication of campaign marketing in areas such as voter research, message development, advertising, and free-media management, Bennett and Manheim say that political marketing has led to a furthering from the ideals of an enlightened public. Political communicators identify vulnerabilities of their target, identify target

audiences, develop and test messages and themes, and legitimize them through third parties (Bennett & Manheim, 2001: 287-288). The goal is not to engage people in rational policy discussion, but to help political marketers in each of these tasks. To Bennett & Manheim, political marketing is about the self and how communication tools can be used to assist the individual.

The manner in which those interviewed discuss Facebook as a communication tool leads the researcher to believe that they view it primarily as a marketing tool, but in a less calculated and less sophisticated way than is described above. One respondent refers to Facebook as a “cheap, simple, and timely” tool to communicate with Canadians. It is a platform that makes it easy to post “digestible” information and let people know about what she is doing in Ottawa. She says it “reaches” those who “do not visit the website.” On whether it is an engagement tool, the respondent says that: “Facebook is not really a tool for feedback. There is not a wide enough sample size.” From this comment, the respondent indicates that she understands the question about engagement and feedback in terms of data collection. Since it is “not a wide enough sample size,” the information gathered is not meaningful enough to influence her views. To her, it is primarily a marketing tool over an engagement tool.

A second respondent refers to Facebook as a “barometer” that lets her know about “who is out there and what they’re interested in.” Facebook is about knowing what issues are “hot” issues and what content people react to. If the Member of Parliaments posts an opinion and it receives negative feedback, for example, then she knows that she needs to change her messaging rather than change her view on the subject. It is about testing the message rather than the content. Again, this is about marketing rather than engagement.

The third respondent discusses Facebook as a tool for others to “follow” her and find out about the issues she is working on. Again, they “follow” *her*, not the other way around. They join *her* network to receive *her* updates. It is her issues and her work that users are interested in and she reinforces this notion in her actions given that she does not bother to read the comments left on her Facebook page by users. These comments are left, according to boyd (2008b) in a contract of reciprocity whereby users expect to illicit some form of response. Instead, the Member of Parliament has taken herself out of the discussion and uses the tool only as an effective broadcast medium.

The type of information that the MPs post are primarily marketing communications pieces such as press releases, media appearances by the MPs, speeches in the House of Commons, information about what they are working on, “stuff that reinforces the leader’s message,” and other similar items. The content analysis also shows that these politicians primarily post first person authored information and items that can be considered marketing communication that fall within the types listed above. For the most part, political marketing is precisely what they are doing, albeit in a less obvious manner.

The MPs interviewed are not scientifically calculating their messages and segmenting constituencies. Rather, they are informally broadcasting and testing messages. Although their methods are less systematic, they are still using the techniques of political marketing in their use of Facebook as a tool. To them, it is a tool *at their disposal* rather than a tool to help constituents, Canadians, or others communicate *with* them. They use it in the same way they use issue based constituency flyers and website messages.

This use reflects political marketing in a way that serves as an example to how liberal utilitarianism has become embedded in Western society. The use of Facebook as a communications tool reflects a view by MPs that the social network site is fundamentally about individuals. Individuals sign up to create their unique accounts and log on to pursue their own agendas. MPs create their own private space in which they own for the purpose of advancing their political agenda and building support to get re-elected. It is a 'fend for yourself' mentality in a space where individuals come together to pursue their own private goals. The politicians choose to use the site for self-serving political marketing reasons rather than engagement and community building with potential risks to the public trust in democratic institutions.

### **Analysis**

The analysis of the findings is conducted first by using the sub-research questions to guide the discussion as the findings relate to public sphere theory, network theory, and followed by a discussion around how the findings relate to both liberalism and utilitarianism. In the discussion that follows, a deeper discussion will look at the implications of the findings on both the public sphere theory and liberalism as well as what they mean to Canada's political institutions.

### ***How are MPs using Social Network Sites in light of Accessibility?***

Accessibility is one of the elements Habermas (1962) describes as key to a public sphere. He says that the issues being discussed are considered to be important because everyone is allowed to and do participate. At its core, accessibility is a question around who has

access to the public sphere. Who is allowed in and who is not? Bennett et al. (2004) agree and argue that access is also crucial in a mediated public sphere such as social network sites.

Operationally, access on Facebook is about friending. MPs are able to control who gains access to their Facebook page or profile and subsequently their networks. Those who are granted access can view and contribute content. If a Facebook user wants to be able to gain access, there are two ways in which this person can do so. They can request to join the Member of Parliament's network through a friend request if the Member of Parliament uses the Facebook profile style or self declare as a supporter if she uses the Facebook page style. The former is more restrictive than the latter because every request requires approval. There is a second aspect to this as well which is, once a user gains access to the network, who is able to remain in the network and what are the Member of Parliament's views on unilaterally removing users?

Indeed, the research shows that accessibility is limited in several ways. First, it is restricted by the structural limitations of Facebook. For those who choose to use the Facebook profile style of site, there is a maximum number of friends one can accept in a network. Once a user has reached 5,000 members, they are no longer able to add friends until they delete others. Those who use the Facebook page style are permitted to have an unlimited amount of supporters – but even those MPs manage their networks by periodically removing individuals from their list for a variety of subjective reasons.

The in-depth interviews showed that MPs are willing to delete friends. Most of the respondents remove users who have posted comments that they find offensive or “[cross] the line.” One admits to deleting friends regularly so that she can make room for new

people who are on a waiting list of approximately 1,500 users that have made friend requests. Additionally, all MPs interviewed admit to rejecting requests as they are made for a variety of subjective reasons.

For those who are able to gain access, there is a perception by MPs that Facebook is a tool to communicate externally in a way that updates “followers” about the subjects and issues she cares about. There is not a sense that the users within their network are given much space to discuss the things that they want to discuss. For a forum to be accessible under Habermas’ (1962) public sphere theory, they must not only have access but must have the ability to drive content. They are not given this space nor is everyone allowed to participate by joining the network freely. A number of limits are imposed by MPs resulting in diminished capabilities.

As a result of Facebook’s structural limitations, the limited access given to users wanting to join the network of a Member of Parliament, and the limited space available for users who do have access to initiate issues and topics of their choosing, this first sub-research question can be answered in the negative. MPs are not using Facebook in a way that is accessible both by structural limitations and by choice through feature selection and friending guidelines. The perception by MPs is that not all users can be their friends. Their choices reflect this as well.

### ***How are MPs using Facebook in light of Universality?***

To Habermas, universality is defined as a space where status is completely disregarded and individuals view one another as members of a “common humanity” (Habermas, 1989: 36). In this regard, universality is about users, but MPs in particular, viewing the

opinion of others as equally important as their own. Adding to this is Bennett et al.'s (2004) notion of recognition. For those who have access, they ask, how much discourse space are they given? The identifier is the degree to which the features used by the Member of Parliament create an environment on the Facebook page or profile that allows users to meaningfully contribute content.

Operationally, universality and recognition can be examined in the way the Facebook pages or profiles are constructed by MPs to see how much space users other than the MPs are given to drive discussion. Questions relating to the type of features used, the degree to which the site is (and is viewed as) user driven, and the intent of the Member of Parliament in using Facebook should all be considered.

From both the in-depth interviews and the content analysis, it is clear that the MPs who participated in this thesis do not allow nor want their Facebook pages or profiles to be user driven. They all argue that Facebook is a communication tool that helps them communicate *to* constituents, Canadians, and other individuals. Again, this is about users following the MP rather than the MP engaging users. None of the MPs leave room for the notion that users may have joined the network to contribute to a larger discussion and gain access to someone who is a government decision maker sitting in the House of Commons. Instead, users join *their* networks and little weight is given to the idea that they are creating a public space with the potential to build community.

With respect to features, none of the MPs have enabled the wall function for users of the network. The wall feature is the easiest and most popular way to communicate and share ideas with others in a public manner. Not enabling this feature greatly limits the way users within a network can interact with the Member of Parliament as well as other

users in that same network. The most popular features enabled by the MPs interviewed include one-way communication functions such as the information tab, the status update function, notes, links, and limited photo sharing. It is the MPs who frame discussion with posts with users left only to react to their content. Even the type of content the MPs contribute includes such things as press releases, which are expressions of their views on various topics, material that promotes them, or items that support their party or leader. Other non-controversial items such as music videos or jokes are also posted and are not meant to be political. MPs and users are not viewed to be equal partners by the former and therefore do not have equal space.

Given that the Facebook pages and profiles are not user driven and not enough space is provided for users to contribute meaningfully, it is clear that MPs are not using Facebook in a way that is universal nor follows the tenets of recognition. Status is not disregarded. In a way, status is reinforced and intensified as the Member of Parliament views these people not as constituents but as followers. The Facebook page or profile *belongs* to the politician and users are able to visit the site and join the network at the pleasure of the Member of Parliament who reserves the right to remove any person for subjective reasons.

### ***How are MPs using Facebook in light of Responsiveness?***

Rational and critical debate is one of the most important features of Habermas' (1962) public sphere theory. Without rational and critical discussion, a public sphere cannot exist. It rests in Habermas' (1981) theory of communicative action that rationality enables people to adapt, learn, and coordinate in a way that allows them to correct historical

mistakes and solve problems in a rational manner. Bennett et al. (2004) operationalize this with the notion of responsiveness. They say that a crucial element of the mediated public sphere is the idea that all parties acknowledge one another and respond to each other's points. boyd (2008b) refers to this as reciprocity, arguing that, in the context of social network sites and politicians, users post comments specifically to elicit a reaction from the politician.

Operationally, this takes the form of the way MPs interact with the users that join their network. Do they respond to messages? What kind of messages? Why and why not? This also relates to the public forum doctrine insofar as it gauges how MPs view Facebook as a medium for open and public debate. Finally, it relates to how MPs view Facebook in terms of either public or private space.

The in-depth interviews show that most of the MPs respond to private messages through Facebook but none of them respond to comments left on their Facebook pages or profiles. They are not interested in engaging in any dialogue or debate, let alone rational or critical debate. Recall that there is only one post that was responded to out of the many posts from users. This happens because the respondents argued that Facebook is not a public space for public discussion.

When asked if the use of Facebook should follow the principles of the public forum doctrine as outlined by Sunstein (2003), the MPs argue that they do not believe that they constitute such places. They refer to Facebook as "my space" and "my platform" and "my microphone." They said it is "like [their] office building" and don't feel as though they "have to share it if [they] don't want to." MPs place many limits on what can be expressed and delete many comments for various reasons. As a result, their

use cannot be considered consistent with the public forum doctrine. Although Facebook seems to bring together weak ties in that it creates networks around issues, geographical constituencies, critic portfolios and more, MPs remove users from the network who seem to stray too far from their own personal views.

MPs are not using Facebook in a way that encourages rational and critical debate. This is evident in their interaction with constituents, the way they view those who join their networks, their unwillingness to engage in discussion with those who post comments on their pages or profiles, and the fact that they are willing to delete comments and users for a variety of reasons. An environment ripe with rational and critical debate requires, in a mediated public sphere, reciprocity and responsiveness. These elements are not present in the ways that the MPs interviewed use the site and this sub research question can also be answered in the negative as a result.

### ***How are MPs using Facebook in light of Power Relations?***

Castells (1996; 2004) talks about networks and technology. He says that networks are shaping power relations as they create the power switches that structure society. Strong and weak ties come together in one interconnected and bounded system and alter the way individuals communicate with one another. Castells (2004) takes somewhat of a social shaping of technology approach by arguing that although there is no deterministic element in technology, some social structures would not be able to develop without specific technologies.

Castells' (1996) discussion around communications nodes and new social shaping makes it difficult to operationalize power switches as it is difficult to know what form

power switches will take. It is more relevant, therefore, to explore the changes MPs have observed since adopting social network sites, and more precisely Facebook, as a communication tool given that each of those interviewed were politicians both before and after using Facebook.

Although one of the MPs indicates that she notices a difference in the way she interacts with her constituents, the reality is that there is no difference. This informant argues that the lobbying efforts by her constituents in remote regions of her riding calling on the Government of Canada to build new schools, for example, constitutes a difference in the way they interact. The reality is that her perception of these constituents remains the same as can be seen in her response to questions around friending, engagement, and the public forum doctrine. In fact, these are the same types of community lobbying campaigns that already exist offline. Where constituents may now use Facebook groups, they once held town halls or community meetings. Where they send Facebook messages to groups, they once sent emails, letters, and made telephone calls. The lobbying is the same as before but with new communication tools that help campaigners convey their messages. The Member of Parliament responds to the Facebook campaigns in the same way as the others. The other respondents agree and say that there is no difference in the way they interact with constituents or Canadians at large. One reiterated the point that it is a “tool” to send information that is “always relevant” and the other two answered no, not a change from what they could tell.

For Facebook, as a technology and as a new way of building or maintaining networks, to be the catalyst for change in social structures between MPs and citizens/constituents, there would had to have been a shift in the way MPs perceive their

relationships with Canadians. It is clear from the in-depth interviews that no such shift has occurred and, as a result, this sub-research question can also be answered in the negative.

### ***How are MPs using Social Network Sites in light of Liberalism?***

Each of the themes used to present the data point the researcher to examine the tenets of liberalism. Liberalism is fundamentally about the individual and government should be designed to provide a neutral environment where people can make their own choices and shape their own destinies. This political philosophy, and the utilitarian sect in particular, holds not only that the pursuit of individual happiness is just, it is also a moral responsibility insofar as it advances the goals of an entire society.

At a broad level, MPs tend to view Facebook as a communication tool for them to use rather than a tool to build community and engage in a network. They view it as a “cheap, simple, and timely tool” to communicate externally to broad audiences and they believe those who join their networks have done so to “follow them.” This assumes that the individual happiness of users is to learn from the Member of Parliament and stay in contact with them. All of this is seen in the way MPs interact with users in their networks in their choices in friending guidelines, and the type of content that they post.

In terms of friending, MPs allow anyone who wishes to friend them join their Facebook network but will delete people who, in some cases, disagree with their opinions or who the politician believes to have joined for “malicious intent.” There is no utility for the politician to include users in their network of friends who counters her arguments and

embarrasses her. One respondent admits that she feels vulnerable since her posts are distributed to such a large audience who have the ability to comment.

Their use of this social network site is to build networks of supporters to advance their individual goals and get re-elected. Their goal in using the technology is primarily self-interested as can be seen in the content they post. Press releases, articles that reinforce their viewpoints, and speeches that they have given are posted not to engage in a discussion but rather to market and reinforce their own messages about particular topics. Users are not given the opportunity to meaningfully drive the content within the network since MPs use the site as a tool for 'me' to communicate with 'you' rather 'us having a conversation.' Community is lost and rather than the social network site being used for networks, it is used in a way that reflects individuals in a network.

Again, MPs think of their Facebook page or profile as "my space" rather than "our space." It is a piece of property much like owning a website's domain name or operating an office. Private property is important in liberalism and MPs view their Facebook pages and profiles as their property. It is about what the site can do for them rather than what it can do for the network of people who have joined together for a variety of reasons. Political marketing is concerned primarily with the individual and the utilitarian principle of pursuing one's own happiness. By using the site to create division among users, test messages, and ignore the opinions of others, MPs are demonstrating how much liberalism has seeped into the way they operate and communicate with constituents.

## **Discussion**

Habermas' (1962) public sphere theory, Castells' (1996; 2004) network theory, the social shaping of technology theory, and liberalism establish a framework that is important when studying communications technology within the context of politics and democracy. They establish benchmarks for any individual using a particular communication technology, explain social structures in a way that allows the researcher to understand how a technology can be used, and provide a background to understanding how technologies are adopted. Moreover, it allows the researcher to grasp the extent to which Western liberal culture finds itself in the way Canadian politicians use communication tools.

The findings and the analysis of sub research questions demonstrate how the MPs who participated in this thesis view and are using Facebook as a communication tool as compared to the benchmarks set out in the literature review. It is clear from the answers provided in the in-depth interviews and the content analysis that MPs are not using this social network site in a way that respects the tenets of the public sphere. Facebook is not being used in a way that promotes accessibility, universality, and rational/critical debate.

In terms of accessibility, MPs are using Facebook in an exclusive way by limiting those who are allowed to join their networks as friends or supporters. For those who are allowed to join, many are removed from the network depending on the vague and subjective guidelines set out by individual MPs. With respect to universality, MPs are not following this tenet either as they do not disregard the status of those who are members of their networks. In fact, they reinforce and amplify them by referring to users with such descriptors as "followers" in a way that diminishes users' status to one that is below that

of the Member of Parliament. Additionally, they do not provide the discourse space needed for users to drive the content of the site. Rather, it is the Member of Parliament who drives the site with users being limited to reply with comments below the content posted by her. Bennett et al.'s (2004) notion of recognition, therefore, is not being followed.

With respect to providing an environment for rational critical debate, the MPs interviewed not only chose features that limited interaction and engagement, they also expressed the fact that they were not interested in making their site user driven. They also express their views that they, for the most part, do not believe Facebook is a public space that should follow the tenets of the public forum doctrine. Rather, their Facebook page or profile is considered to be *their* space similar to *their* office buildings where some discussion is tolerated but subjects are limited. Those comments that are posted by users intended to provoke reaction are either not responded to or the Member of Parliament does not bother to read the comments. Without engaging in the act of reciprocity, MPs are unwilling to use Facebook in a way that encourages rational and critical discourse. Moreover, the fact that MPs are replying to private messages reinforces the point that they believe the social network site constitutes a private space. It is a tool for one-to-one private rather than public conversations. The effect of this on the public sphere is that discussions and arguments are not made public for other members of the public to react to. Opinions are kept private and discussions are limited to the few people who are directly involved.

With respect to power switches, MPs do not indicate that they view any changes in the way they interacted with constituents, Canadians, or any other user in their

Facebook networks. There is no noticeable change in power dynamics since the adoption of Facebook as a communication tool by users or MPs that has been observed by the MPs.

All of the sub research questions have been answered in the negative leading the researcher to answer the central research question in the negative as well. The MPs in this study are not using social network sites, and Facebook in particular, in a way that encourages a public sphere that is accessible, universal, or encourages rational/critical debate. The findings indicate that the MPs who participated in this thesis are using the site for broadcasting information.

Instead, the way that these MPs describe their use of Facebook indicates that they use it for political marketing purposes. They want to communicate easily digestible messages to large audiences in a way that is simple and inexpensive. The types of content they post are items that reflect key messages of their positions or reinforce those of their party leader. Feedback from users within network is regarded in terms of understanding how users feel about particular issues if taken into account at all. MPs are interested in knowing what are the “hot button” issues and which posts provoke what kind of reaction. They believe Facebook constitutes their platform to express themselves, their microphone, and their space.

The sophistication in the use of political marketing as outlined by Bennett & Manheim (2001) is not observed in how the MPs who participated in this study use the site even though the tenets are apparent. That is, while they view social network sites as political marketing tools, they do not actively segment constituencies, intentionally mobilize or demobilize groups, and scientifically test messages. Their political marketing

activities through Facebook are more informal. First, the research shows that they develop messages and test them by posting the messages on Facebook, using it as a “barometer” to discover what issues are “hot button” issues and to “see who’s out there.” Their methods, however, are not systematic as some of the MPs read the comments infrequently. Second, although they attempt to legitimize their own opinions with third party information, they do so in an ineffective manner. When they are the ones posting articles or videos that reinforce their messages, users may react less favourably than if the information were posted by another user. Third, they use the site for advertising purposes as their status updates and new content posts appear on the newsfeed of users who have joined her network. The effectiveness of this action is high even though the MPs do not utilize this method in a systematic way. Rather, they post everything and anything they can think of to keep themselves relevant in other users’ newsfeeds.

### ***What Implications do the Findings have on the Public Sphere?***

Social network sites reflect the values of society as they are fundamentally about how users choose to use them. In a sense, they form a microcosm of society in which offline behaviour can be observed. It is clear from the research that MPs are not following the tenets of Habermas’ (1962) public sphere. But even more than that, the findings show that the politicians interviewed, those entrusted with engaging Canadians in the political, and those who are using social network sites to communicate with them in their environment, are not interested in using the site to engage people. Rather, they are using the site to further their own goals through political marketing techniques, which, according to Bennett & Manheim (2001) leads to a distancing of democratic goals. Even

though some have argued that the public sphere would strengthen grassroots democracy, one must ask whether this is the case.

Let us suppose that MPs did, in fact, use social network sites in a way that was accessible, universal, and encouraged rational and critical debate. Would democracy be strengthened as a result? The answer lies outside of the scope of this thesis but a theoretical examination of the definition of Habermas' (1962) public sphere through the lens of Sandel's (1996) argument that liberalism in practice is destroying community would suggest that it would not. In its essence, the public sphere is still about individuals who, in a public place, advocate on behalf of their own self-interests. Sandel would argue that this happens at the expense of community and furthers society's growing sense that they no longer have control over their public institutions. The public sphere is too strongly based on liberalism and may not be suited as a model to follow when the goal is to increase confidence in democratic institutions. The public sphere reinforces the individual as the important unit in society and, in practice, may lead to problems in the application of communicative action. Social change requires, as Sunstein (2003) points out, community based on shared experience and exposure to difference that brings people together.

### ***What Implications do the Findings have on Liberalism?***

Liberalism as a political philosophy, its tenets of individuality and utilitarianism in particular, has become enshrined in how we live our lives in Western liberal democracies, in how we treat one another, in the ways in which we act, in how we organize our

economies, and in how we govern ourselves. This thesis shows that it can now also be found in the way Canadian MPs use social network sites to communicate with Canadians.

This thinking has led Canadian politicians to use Facebook in a way that seeks to advance individual goals rather than build community. Facebook as a communication tool is designed to allow for engagement/community building since it is fundamentally about networks. Facebook is used for building new and also maintaining existing networks. It links together strong ties and weak ties. MPs, however, are choosing to use the site for more individualistic purposes – viewing it as a collective of individuals advancing their own goals rather than those of the community. The impact can be felt in Canada’s democratic institutions.

While Sunstein (2003) tries to bridge the gap between community and individuality, he is unable to and his description of how social media are being used points to the failure in the practice of how they are being used. Again, technologies are about how users choose to use them much more than they are about how the technologies are designed. This is fundamentally about choices and in Sunstein’s analysis, he concentrates on the technology and leaves out the spectrum of choices at the user’s disposal. In this thesis, both engagement and disengagement were explored as options for MPs as they use the social network sites and it is obvious that they have chosen to use Facebook for the latter. MPs understand the space as a communication tool, as mediated sphere that they can try to control, and as their property.

The implication this thesis has for liberalism is that it shows to what extent the philosophy is enshrined in society. MPs, those with a responsibility to engage users and build the trust in public institutions to effectively run government have chosen not to, but

instead to treat the medium as collective of individuals. Even they themselves are individuals who are using the site for utilitarian purposes in marketing themselves, trying to build support for their issues, and ultimately getting re-elected.

***What Implications do the Findings have on Canada's Democracy?***

The implications of the findings of this thesis on democracy are pessimistic. If public trust is in decline because, as Sandel (1996) argues, liberalism is so entrenched in society that the notion of community is in decline, then the way that Canadian MPs use social network sites indicates that this trend will only increase. Again, through the use of Facebook MPs are using the site in a way that reinforces individuality by using the site as a tool to help them advance their goals. They are not, even though the communication tool has the capacity since it is fundamentally about networks, choosing to use it to build communities and give Canadians a sense that they have a say in how they are governed. MPs are elected to office during elections. But between elections, however, they are not required to seek any outside opinion as they make important decisions that impact their constituents.

From the information provided in the literature review, Sandel (1996) would argue that the role of the MP is to build a sense of community. He would say that, in this context, the MP should be using Facebook in a way that brings citizens together and helps them understand one another's points of view. Sunstein (2003) would agree, arguing that politicians should be treating Facebook the same way as sidewalks or public parks. Indeed, they should be treated with guidance from the public forum doctrine. If MPs were engaged with citizens in this fashion through social network sites, then the

Habermasian (1962) public sphere of accessibility, universality, and rational critical debate might come to fruition.

Though many believe that social network sites will be the saviours of Canada's democratic institutions, the reality is that they are not being used as such by those who hold the power to make this happen. This is a result of the political culture of individuality that affects how they use the online medium and until that culture changes, how these sites are used will not change.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

#### **Significant Findings**

This thesis begins by outlining the discourse around social media. Journalists and pundits from across the political spectrum have argued that social media would either revolutionize public institutions and have a drastic impact on democracy or only enable people to continue doing the things they already do. It also begins with a discussion around the problems facing Canada's democracy, namely that citizens living in Western liberal countries are increasingly losing the sense of community that builds trust in public institutions.

Through in-depth interviews and a content analysis, this thesis takes a social shaping of technology approach and applies it to the ways in which Canadian MPs use social network sites. An examination of the views, perceptions, and choices by Canadian MPs are observed and the researcher examines whether their use changes social power structures or democracy. First, the thesis outlined liberalism as discussed through the works of John Locke (1689), Jean Jacques Rousseau (1762), and John Stuart Mill (1859; 1863) to provide a context of Western society and point to the ways in which it affects political participation. Liberalism was discussed further through Sandel (1996) to link the philosophy to its everyday application on democracy. Second, Jürgen Habermas' public sphere theory (1962) was compared to the ways in which Canadian MPs use Facebook. The tenets of accessibility, universality, and rational/critical debate were enriched by

Bennett et al.'s (2004) mediated public sphere tenets of responsiveness and recognition. Third, the thesis outlined Manuel Castells' (1996) network theory and explored the notion of Facebook, or its use, constituting a power switch. Fourth, the social shaping of technology theory was outlined to serve as a base for the research since it explains the role of users in the form technology evolves. Additionally, the notions of political marketing, the role of the amateur as producer, the public forum doctrine, public versus private, and the strength of weak ties were explored to both operationalize and capture important concepts related to this study.

The significant finding of this thesis is that Canadian MPs are not using Facebook in a way that engages users. Instead, they use the site to broadcast information and market themselves while limiting user interaction. They post marketing communication pieces such as press releases, speeches, and content that reinforces their leader's message. Their use of the social network site is individualistic and utilitarian as MPs are interested in advancing their agendas and pursuing their own goals. They view the site as a tool for themselves rather than a tool for society to build community and the result may be at the expense of public trust in public institutions.

Comparing the data to Habermas' (1962) public sphere theory, it is clear through the data collection that MPs are not using the social network site to engage or empower users in a public sphere. With respect to accessibility, MPs have created an environment where not everyone is welcome. For those who use the Facebook profile style, they limit accessibility by rejecting friend requests for a variety of subjective reasons. All of the MPs interviewed admit to actively deleting users who sign up to their networks for reasons that range from wanting to make space in the network for other users to

displeasure with the content of a user's contribution. Arbitrarily removing users from the network does not constitute accessibility. Additional to choice, the structural limitations of Facebook do not allow for the page to be accessible because, for those who use the Facebook profile style, their network is limited to a maximum of five thousand friends. This means that even if a Member of Parliament wanted to make her site more accessible, she would not be able to given this limit.

In terms of universality, it is clear from the interviews that MPs are not using the social network medium to break down barriers and create an environment that disregards status. In fact, many view their site as an extension of their office where constituents may contact them for constituency support. It is considered to be a place where "followers" can update themselves on what their Member of Parliament is up to but not as a place for dialogue. Even for those users who post information or opinions, the participants indicated that they do not treat those comments in a way that has an impact on their decision-making process. MPs do not provide adequate space for users to contribute content or drive the site in a way that allows users the ability to bring forward issues that matter to them. To Bennett et al. (2004), this is about recognition and allowing for appropriate discourse space to users. It is clear that this discourse space is not given to users since their Facebook walls are disabled, discussion boards are disabled or limited, and limits are imposed on users wanting to tag the MPs in photos or videos.

In terms of fostering an environment of rational critical debate, MPs are very much aware that they are not creating a space for discussion. They disagree that the public forum doctrine applies to Facebook and they subjectively delete comments that "go over the line." Without the ability to dissent or expose others to differing viewpoints,

there can be no true rational or critical discussion. Additionally, many of the MPs do not read the comments posted on their pages or profiles and are therefore absent in any conversation that may take place. Members of Parliament view their pages or profiles as private spaces designed to help them communicate with others. Not the other way around. Multiple participants used words such as “my platform,” “my microphone,” and “my space” to discuss their Facebook account. They give a sense that the page is just another communication marketing tool to reach a wide audience instantaneously with little to no cost. There is benefit to the speed given that one of the golden rules of political communication is to sell your message early—before anyone else—to frame the debate on your terms. If a politician can send short messages instantaneously through social network sites to get ahead of an issue, they can try to frame a debate before their opposition or traditional news organizations.

In terms of reciprocity, the content analysis and the in-depth interviews show that MPs do not engage with the comments posted on their pages or profiles. The only visible response by one of the MPs who participated in this study is to a non-controversial comment. There are many comments on each MP's page or profile that justify a response, but none of the respondents choose to do so. They all admit to not wanting to participate in this. One respondent even went as far as to say that letting people sign up as supporters through the Facebook page style allows her to “disavow” any comments posted by users in her network. The comments belong to the users and have no connection to her in any way.

Next, the thesis compares the use of Facebook by MPs to the notion of power switches in a network society. The in-depth interviews led the researcher to conclude that

there is no evidence that would indicate that Facebook or its use changes the power dynamic between political decision makers and citizens. The tool and the way it was being used mirrors traditional means of communication – one on one interaction through private inbox messages and one-to-many communication through broadcasts and postings. Facebook as a tool has changed nothing in the way these two groups interact with one another.

In addition to the findings based on the epistemological roots of this thesis, there are three other significant findings that merit discussion. First is the level of awareness of political marketing activities. Not only are the MPs engaging in political marketing, they are also very much aware of it. They know that they use the site to promote themselves, broadcast messages about the issues they are working on, and build a network that will provide an advantage in a future election. They understand that the type of content they post is material that reflects their own opinions or attempts to legitimize them. This perception is also made clear by the way they view members of their networks. They are referred to as “followers” rather than “constituents” and provided very limited discourse space where users can initiate their own discussions.

Second, although the MPs use the social network site as a political marketing tool primarily, they do not do so in a scientific or systematic way. Rather, their use reflects an informal political marketing. They understand that social network sites can be powerful marketing tools but their main goal is to broadcast messages rather than collect data on constituents, narrowcast to small segments of the population, test messages, or mobilize and demobilize constituencies. While some of this does happen, it is either unintentional or conducted as small experiments.

Third, MPs view Facebook as their private space rather than a public or shared space. Their Facebook page or profile is treated the same way as their personal website, their office building, or their private homes. It is their site and people are welcome to browse, but not contribute meaningfully. Any member of the network who the Member of Parliament believes to have “crossed the line” or contributed in a negative way risks being removed from the network. To them, the sites constitute “my platform” and “my microphone.” As one of the interviewees said “why should I share mine if I don’t want to.” The site is not considered to be a public space that should follow the tenets of the public forum doctrine as outlined by Sunstein (2003) since it is considered to be “my space.”

This way of thinking closely reflects liberalism as outlined by Locke (1689), Rousseau (1762), and Mill (1859; 1863) and calls the public sphere theory into question as a model to be used for building community. The public sphere theory (1962) is about individuals advocating on their own behalf about the issues that matter to them. Sandel (1996) argues that the practice of liberalism is often more detrimental to democratic institutions than the philosophy itself. In this case, the same can be argued. Although the theory may be flawed, the data in this thesis shows that MPs are using social media not to bring people together, create common experience, and generate discussion about various topics. Rather, the site is used as a tool to advance one’s own goals. Whether their use actually works to engage a new generation of voters is still to be seen. But if the perception of Canadian MPs as they use the technology is any indication, it likely will not.

In conclusion, the data leads the researcher to believe that these new technologies are mirrors of previous technologies, perhaps with a slightly younger and more complex face. This study shows that the MPs who participated and use social network sites do not use the sites to engage constituents or Canadians in any form of public sphere. They view the technology as a new tool to help them do what they were doing before: marketing to Canadians and getting re-elected. This technology is not going to revolutionize Canadian politics so long as politicians choose not to use them for that purpose.

### **Limitations and Implications**

The purpose of this thesis is to study how current MPs choose to use social network sites. As a result of not studying political candidates and defeated MPs, the research of this thesis does not encompass the wider political class—those who present themselves during election campaigns—to find out how they use these tools for political purposes. It would be important in future studies to look at this because, increasingly, movement organizers and political opponents are setting up Facebook sites or uploading YouTube videos to challenge MPs. Studying them may add to the equation of a wider discussion around social network sites and political engagement in general. Another limitation to this research is the fact that production and design are not considered. An interesting and relevant discussion would seek to understand how the developers of social network sites, Facebook in particular, came up with initial concepts and navigated their way through design options. This would provide an understanding of the framework that users work within and would help to explain the range of choices users really have when using technology. It may also explain why one piece of technology was successful over

another. In the case of social network sites, for example, boyd and Ellison (2007) explain how the first site was launched in 1996 but failed because other systems were not in place to support it.

Social networks sites are about how they are used. MPs's use is important because they are the ones who make decisions in Canada's democracy. Constitutionally, MPs are mandated with the task of approving or rejecting government legislation. From there, they have created larger roles for themselves as ombudsmen, facilitators, and constituent megaphones. They are elected by their constituents and have a responsibility to represent them. Understanding how they use social network sites is important because they are an integral decision making institution in Canada's democracy. Observing how they choose to use these sites helps to explain how their use will affect those institutions. This thesis looks at the choices, perceptions, and views of MPs as they use the social network site and opens the door for future studies on effect – that is, what effect their choices have on the public sphere and political engagement.

This thesis looks at intention and makes assumptions about effect of the use of social network sites in politics. Future studies should look into effect more closely by examining previous campaigns where social network sites played dominant roles and look at how it affected the relationship between citizens and politicians. A future study should also look at whether a grassroots movement's use of social network sites to change the relationship can have an impact on how parliamentarians view their use of the technology and whether, in turn, it would change how they use it. Additionally, a study should be conducted that looks at the wider political class from nomination candidates to election candidates and so on. They have different motives than those who have already

been elected and it would be interesting to see how they use the sites as opposed to elected MPs.

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