

## **Microblogging, constituency service and impression management - UK MPs and the use of Twitter**

### **Abstract**

Twitter, a microblogging site which allows users to deliver statements, thoughts and links in 140 characters to followers as well as a wider Internet audience, is the latest online communications technology adopted by MPs. Assessing the use of early adopters, this article considers which MPs are most likely to use Twitter (e.g. tweeting), and how. Content analysis of tweeting MPs was conducted, and identified personal and political characteristics which may influence use. The data suggested that of the six characteristics tested, gender, party and seniority had most impact on adoption. Applying Jones and Pittman's (1982) typology there is clear evidence that MPs use Twitter as a tool of impression management. Constituency service is a secondary function of the use of Twitter by MPs. Where MPs use Twitter as part of their constituency role it is to promote their local activity. We note that a small group of MPs use Twitter as a regular communication channel, but most are only occasionally dipping their toe into the microbloggersphere.

### **Introduction**

Labour MP and Minister Alan Johnson claims to be the first UK politician to have used Twitter. Johnson tweeted using the non-de-plume Johnson4Deputy from March to June 2007 as part of his Labour Party deputy leadership campaign. He lost, but his use of Twitter gained him and this communication tool media coverage (Jones 2007). The number of Twitter users has increased significantly; it is estimated that in the year to February 2009 visitors increased 1,382% from 475,000 to 7 million (McGiboney 2009), up to 10 million in June 2009 (BBC 2009). Twitter's popularity raises the question of whether politicians feel that Twitter is a bandwagon they need to jump on. Alternatively, they might view Twitter as a strategic communication channel, a way of reaching key audiences efficiently and effectively. These are not new questions, research suggests that bandwagon was the prime motive of MPs' adoption of websites (Ward & Gibson 1998, Jackson 2003, Ward & Lusoli 2005). However, the adoption of subsequent online tools and applications is a more complex process, with an array of motives. Whilst some MPs jumped on to the bandwagon by adopting e-newsletters (Jackson 2006a), weblogs (Francoli & Ward 2008) and social networking sites (Jackson & Lilleker 2009), others have a strategic purpose and are using such technologies to enhance their ability to perform their representative role. A few pioneering MPs may be using online applications to create a discrete model of e-representation; a form of representation that is entirely based online and is an adjunct to the more traditional interpersonal model between MPs and their constituents (Jackson 2008). This article examines the features and functions of microblogging sites such as Twitter and how they might impact upon MPs' execution of representation. Next we will use a theoretical framework for assessing the use of Twitter by UK MPs. Third, we will operationalise a methodology for assessing

this framework. Last, we will assess how this framework explains how UK MPs use Twitter.

### **The rise of microblogging**

Twitter, like Tumblr and Jaiku is a microblogging site, which allows people to post brief updates of up to 140 characters that can supply up to the minute information, instant responses to questions or wider issues of the moment and links to websites (Grossbeck & Holostensen 2008). These updates can be posted using the Twitter website, a range of desktop tools that allow the management of feeds such as Tweetdeck or from mobile 3G devices. Therefore, microblogging has lowered the barriers, in terms of thought investment by users (Java *et al.* 2007). Twitter has become popular because its users, 'Tweeters', can send and receive messages via a wide range of delivery mechanisms (Mischand 2007, Grossbeck & Holotesen 2008, Krishnamurthy *et al.* 2008). Twitter users can choose to follow large numbers of other users and so mainly receive, or follow very few other users but encourage users to follow them. Tweeters who have more people follow them than they follow arguably aim to broadcast messages (Krishnamurthy 2008). Others have more reciprocal relationships with users and may both follow and be followed by a distinct community, or may simply follow a wide array of tweeters in order to gain news and updates without personally communicating a great deal. Inherently, Twitter appears to have encouraged a hierarchy of users (Java *et al.* 2007).

When launched in October 2006, Facebook's creators stated that Twitter's purpose was for tweeters to answer the question 'what are you doing?' (Mischand 2007). Twitter was designed to promote an update of people's daily activities to bring them closer together within networks of interest (Stevens 2008). By far the most popular use of Twitter is for self-promotion. A study of 300,000 Twitter users by Heal and Piskorski (2009) notes that 90% of posts are one way, one-to-many broadcast communication, rather than two-way, many-to-many interaction. Therefore, most tweeters follow the notion of promotion by talking about themselves.

Despite Alan Johnson's efforts, interest in politicians' use of Twitter only took off when Barack Obama and John Edwards used it to let their supporters know where they were and of upcoming events during the Democratic Party primaries in the United States (Mischand 2007). They hoped that their followers would re-tweet such details to their friends, and so snowballing the effect of the original post. During the U.S. Presidential campaign Obama's Twitter account gained 118,107 followers (Fraser & Dutta 2008), compared to the 4,600 following McCain. This suggests that Obama gave serious consideration to how he could increase his number of Twitter followers. Certainly, some commentators suggest that his use of Twitter was an important component of his online campaign strategy (Stirland 2008, Greengard 2009).

In the UK, one commentator suggested that some MPs tweets have a 'slight dad-on-the-dance floor feel' in an attempt to appear cool (Sylvester 2009). However, an alternative view suggests that the purpose of tweeting is to keep in close touch with their constituents. For example, Bradley Joyce from Tweetcongress.org noted that tweeting helped politicians quickly and clearly reach constituents (Hurden 2009). Giving support to this, Lynne Featherstone (Lib Dem), noted that "*Many of my constituents are on Twitter, and it makes sense for me to be so too*" (Featherstone 2009). A more electoral minded approach was provided by Tom Watson (Lab) in trying to encourage colleagues to sign up to Twitter, when he said "*It will make it easier for Labour MPs to engage with their constituents.*" (Labour Party New 2009). Others have suggested that such applications should be approached with caution, with Conservative leader David Cameron famously saying on Absolute Radio that "too many twits might make a twat" (Guardian, 2009; politics blog July 29<sup>th</sup>). One view suggests, therefore, that twitter is not something to be taken serious by politicians, but another views twitter as fitting a strategic view of the role of an MP, or how they get re-elected.

UK parliamentarians have been active on other online platforms, using them in different ways. MPs websites have essentially been one-way content led electronic brochures (Ward & Lusoli 2005), whereas their e-newsletters seek to build relationships with constituents (Jackson 2006). MP's weblogs have largely been used to promote their political work and thinking on current affairs (Francoli & Ward 2007), with limited evidence of interactivity. MPs have also been active across social networking sites, particularly Facebook, and sites which allow the sharing of videos and photographs. Where MPs are merely jumping on the bandwagon, their online presence has a fairly minimal role and at best is weak impression management, and may in fact lead to negative impression management for net-savvy visitors. However, the minority of pioneering MPs present a different model, where the Internet is used to enhance their reputation and meet strategic goals in terms of electioneering or representation. The ability to connect with the politician and any subsequent interactions between visitors and the MP lead to positive impressions among all visitors (Utz, 2008). Whilst MPs have used the Internet to promote their party, the evidence is that increasingly the focus has been on promoting themselves.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Our assessment of the use of Twitter by MPs will be underpinned by two interrelated theories. Given that one trait of Twitter is for users to self-promote we shall apply impression management, then with the proposed link between tweeting MPs and their constituents, we assess use within a constituency service framework. We argue that MPs will seek to attain a personal vote through being good constituency servants, however, in

order to demonstrate the activities they carry out as part of this role they must have an impression management strategy to publicise their achievements. Twitter we suggest can be one tool that can fit within this strategy.

### *Impression Management*

According to Goffman (1959), individuals consciously seek to manage what impression they give to others via their interpersonal relations. Subsequent research has developed a consensus around a definition of impression management, based on self-promotion: individuals deliberately seeking to manage the public perception of them (Tetlock & Manstead 1985, Rosenfeld *et al.* 1995, Singh & Vinnicombe 2001), towards key audiences is at the heart of impression management. Therefore, as Leary and Kowalski (1990) suggest, impression management involves two components: the motivation to create favourable impressions; and the ability to impress the target audience.

Jones and Pittman (1982) provide a typology for understanding impression management, within which actors need not be engaged in just one behaviour. This argues that those who seek to influence the perception of others display one or more of five behaviours. Ingratiation suggests that the actor seeks to generate a favourable response through flattery, doing favours and agreeing with the view of the audience. Self-promotion focuses on the actor's abilities and accomplishments, and is therefore a very egocentric form of impression management. Supplication, by being modest and identifying personal weaknesses implies that the actor needs the help of the audience. Exemplification promotes the actor as a positive role model that others should follow. This behaviour focuses on the actor's worthy personal traits. Intimidation seeks to engender fear of the actor. This typology identifies three different strategies, those that stress the virtues of the actor, those that seek to create an emotional response from the audience and those that stress power.

Impression management research has been applied to politicians seeking the attention of voters in two respects. First, voters form intuitive impressions of politicians based on style, appearance and personality (De Landsteer *et al.* 2008). Second, political actors seek to control the impression they give to maximise the impact on voters (De Landsteer 2004). Whilst the focus for political impression management research has been on how politicians shape perceptions via the media, there is evidence that the Internet may have significant potential as a persuasive channel for shaping perceptions (Stanyer 2008). Specifically considering websites, Stanyer (2008) argues that they provide elected representatives with space to present themselves to constituents. Gulati (2004), in assessing the use of their websites by members of Congress, found that they sought to promote different images: either as a 'Washington insider' or an 'outsider'. The Internet,

therefore, offers politicians an opportunity to shape public perceptions through direct and regular contact.

The political image of politicians can, in part, be created and managed through selective disclosures about their private lives (Stanyer & Wring 2004). Politicians have used the Internet as a means of providing a hinterland that shows them as likeable human beings, so representing a newer second strand of impression management. This might include providing details of their personal interests in music, sport or films, showing a sense of humour or displaying any other of a myriad of personal traits they wish to disclose. There is evidence that MPs have sought to encourage this development with websites (Stanyer 2008), weblogs (Auty 2005, Jackson 2008) and social networking sites (Jackson & Lilleker 2009). The inherent logic is that through the promotion of self (Jackson & Lilleker 2009), MPs encourage voters to develop an empathy with the politician as an ordinary human being. It is not that this expression of hinterland is unique to the Internet, but that it is an easy, convenient and controllable way of communicating such personal information. Furthermore it could be suggested that, in the process of building positive perceptions among audiences, MPs are adding value to their relationships with constituents as well as enhancing the image of democratic representation more generally.

### *Constituency Service*

MPs fulfil a range of roles at any one time, and Searing (1994) suggested that there were five possible roles MPs could undertake. Those MPs with ambitions may see themselves as ministerial aspirants seeking ultimately to be appointed to the Government. Most MPs, whether they hope to reach the executive or not, are likely to act as a cheerleader for their political party. Other MPs seek to become 'parliament men' and so scrutinize the Executive, for example, through membership of Select Committees. Some MPs may also develop their own subject specialism upon which they are respected as an expert. MPs have some control or say over whether, and how, they fulfil these four roles. However, in the twenty first century, individual MPs would find it difficult to ignore the fifth role Searing identified, their constituency service.

The constituency role means that an MP focuses on the needs of individual constituents and the constituency as a whole, though there is some disagreement as to the exact nature of the role. Whilst recognising that most MPs had dealings with their constituents, Searing (1985) identified the concept of a 'good constituency member', as those MPs who specifically emphasised that they sought to act as an agent to protect and advance the interest of local citizens. He

calculated that some 25% of backbench MPs could be referred to as 'good constituency members'. He identified two subtypes to the constituency role: welfare officers; and local promoters. The former sought to represent individual constituent's needs, usually in the form of casework. The latter represented their constituents' collective concerns, such as the economic wellbeing of the constituency. Searing suggested that 75% of constituency MPs were primarily welfare officers, with 15% local promoters. Taking a more historical approach Norton (1994), identified seven possible components to the constituency role: safety valve; information provider; advocate; benefactor; powerful friend; and promoter of constituency interest, though noting that the information provider and benefactor roles have largely disappeared over recent decades. Both Searing and Norton's approaches provide a means of understanding the importance to MPs of contact with constituents. However, as a framework Searing's will be adopted in this article, because Norton's historical based model does not fully explain the existing situation in which MPs currently find themselves.

The good constituency MP wants people to know that they are doing a good job (Jackson and Lilleker 2004); hence the importance of linking this role to the communication function of impression management. Research classified MPs as being proactive or reactive communicators in this sense; with some ensuring that they received as much free publicity as possible via local media for their constituency casework (Negrine & Lilleker, 2003). Presumably these MPs would now supplement this publicity by posting news to their website, and promoting their activities via social networking sites and microblogs. This raises the question of why MPs promote their hard work in the constituency. One possible explanation is that such activity may have a favourable electoral impact. However, Norris (1997) points out that MPs in safe seats are just as likely to be diligent constituency MPs, as those in marginal seats. An alternative view is made by Butler and Collins (2001), who suggest that MPs can use constituency service as a marketing tool to gradually cultivate voters. Certainly, several studies have found that MPs themselves believe that constituency casework had an impact on their vote (Barker and Rush 1970, Cain and Ritchie 1982, Buck and Cain 1990). The electoral impact of constituency service may be more complex than merely winning votes. Rush (2004) argues that MPs ignore constituency service at their peril. This suggests that avoiding constituency service may be more of a vote loser, rather than a vote winner. Norton (2004) explains this by suggesting that constituency service bolsters existing support rather than converting floating voters; however there is evidence that a good constituency MP, especially in the context of an election where there appears to be little impact on the national result, can have a significant impact (Lilleker 2006, 2008).

This debate on the role of MPs has been ongoing for many years, but the Internet adds a dimension. Jackson (2008) found that MPs who used a regular e-newsletter to reach constituents, gained electorally, including from floating voters. More fundamentally, there is evidence that the Internet may be enhancing an MP's

constituency role. Considering the use of ICTs by MPs in seven European countries, Hoff concluded that there may be a new role as 'information agents' (Hoff 2004). Focusing on the UK, Jackson (2003) suggested that websites might be enhancing existing functions, such as the constituency and partisan roles. In addition, e-newsletters were adding value to the constituency role as information conduits (Jackson 2006). The Internet makes it easier for MPs to inform constituents of events and activities happening locally, which might be of interest to them. Constituency service appears to have a link to only two of Jones and Pittman's typology of impression management: self-promotion and exemplification.

## Research questions and methodology

We thus aim to assess whether tweeting MPs have joined a bandwagon of the latest must-have fad, or are using this technology as a strategic communication channel. This was further specified in three research questions:

- 1) To identify MPs tweeting behaviour in terms of frequency of updates and their follower/followed ratio;

MPs who had signed up for Twitter (see Appendix A) were identified by those listed on Tweetminster (<http://tweetminster.co.uk/>). This listed 63 MPs with Twitter accounts on 21 March. Twelve accounts were dormant, one was fake, and two MPs never actually tweeted; 51 accounts were deemed 'sticky' (Jackson 2003).

To assess whether MPs viewed Twitter as a means for broadcasting, we created a follower-following ratio, whereby we divided the number of tweeters following them by the number of tweeters they followed. This ratio would give an indication of whether, relative to their activity and popularity, they were only speaking or also listening and even responding via Twitter.

- 2) Which personal characteristics of MPs (age, cohort, gender) and which political characteristics (party, marginality of seat, seniority) drive the use of Twitter

Age was assessed simply on the basis of a series of age bands: 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65 and over. Cohort was based on the Parliament during which an MP was first elected. Marginality of seat was based on *Finer et al.*'s (1961) percentage of majority model, where seats were divided into those that were safe (11 per cent of votes over the next highest candidate), near-marginal (5.1 per cent to 10.9 per cent) or marginal (5 per cent or under). Seniority was judged on whether an MP was either a Government Minister or an Official Opposition Frontbencher, determined by consulting the official list on Parliament's website ([www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk)) at the end of the data collection<sup>(3)</sup>.

- 3) To assess whether MPs are using Twitter as a tool of impression management, and/or a channel enhancing their constituency service role.

A content analysis of MPs' tweets was conducted in June 2009. A sample of two sites

was analyzed and classified by both researchers to ensure intercoder reliability. After discussion on 4 of the coding elements where differences were found and minor revisions to the classifications being implemented, the outcome for the follow up test was 100 percent.

The coding sheet comprises two different conceptual components. The first part (outlined in table 1), operationalises Jones and Pittman's (1982) model of impression management, and includes Schutz's (1997) adaptations of this model. Schutz studied forty two talk-show guests on German television, a third each of politicians, experts and entertainers. She found that the politicians were most likely to use exemplification and self-promotion, but found no evidence of supplication and intimidation. The second coding sheet focuses on identifying the expression of personal traits (outlined in table 2). Although not part of our theoretical framework, we add to this table 'promotion of party' to introduce a comparative element of whether MPs are engaging in more overt partisan activities as well.

### **Table 1 & 2 about here please**

Table 3 outlines the coding sheet used to assess whether Twitter helps MPs in their constituency role. This coding sheet adapts Jackson's (2006) model for assessing MP's roles online. This schema suggests MPs acting within their welfare role will mention live casework, these would not be sensitive or controversial topics raised privately by a constituent, but casework already in the public domain; whereas when promoting their activity the MP talks about constituency wide issues. When an MP 'seeks views on local issues', the MP asks constituents their opinion on local issues. When providing local information, the MP is acting as a conduit for what is happening, political and otherwise, in the constituency which might be of interest to constituents. Promoting local community activity is added value, where the MP tries to enhance a sense of community in letting constituents know of activities in which the MP has no role, other than to promote them. Engaging in dialogue is where the MP is explicitly discussing publicly with constituents local constituency issues.

### **Table 3 about here please**

#### **Who is using Twitter?**

As might be expected, Twitter has attracted a number of MPs normally associated with being Internet pioneers, such as Lynne Featherstone (Liberal Democrat), Kerry McCarthy (Labour) and Grant Shapps (Conservative). We also see those who might normally be



considered in the second tier in using new Web technologies such as Liam Byrne (Labour), Norman Lamb (Liberal Democrat) and Angus Robertson (SNP). However, a study of Appendix A suggests that up to about 20 of our sample are not normally considered to be leaders in online political communication, such as Ed Balls (Labour), Douglas Carswell (Conservative) and Susan Kramer (Liberal Democrat). This implies that some MPs not normally associated with new technologies may consider that there is something different about Twitter.

The 51 MPs using Twitter represents just 7.9% of all current MPs <sup>(1)</sup>. Both personal and political characteristics influence those MPs motivated to tweet. Gender has an impact, where 19.4% of all MPs are female, but women provide 29.4% of tweeting MPs. As might be expected age does influence which MPs use Twitter. The most likely age for tweeting MPs is 45-54 (33.3%), then 35-44 (29.4%), suggesting a gradual generational change in the use of new web technologies such as Twitter. This is supported, to some extent, by the cohort of tweeting MPs, with those elected in 2005 being the most likely at 35.3% to use Twitter, though the 1997 cohort provides 33.3% of these MPs. Therefore, in terms of personal characteristics a female MP, aged 45-54 and elected in 2005 might appear to be most likely to tweet.

All the political characteristics appear to have an impact. The three main parties dominate, providing 49 of the 51 tweeting MPs, only two minor parties with a single MP each who used Twitter: the SNP and SDLP. Both the Liberal Democrats and Labour are over represented, and the Conservatives under represented. The Liberal Democrats have only 9.8% of all MPs, but provide 17.6% of all tweeting MPs. Labour has 54.2% of all MPs, and provides 66.7% of tweeting MPs. The Conservatives have 29.8% of all MPs, but provide only 11.8% of tweeting MPs. The Liberal Democrat's use of Twitter is consistent with previous research that the third party has tended to be quick to become Internet-savvy adopting each new web technology (Jackson 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2005). The Liberal Democrats may believe that the Internet helps them overcome any disadvantages they have with traditional mass media. The number of Labour MPs may be the result of a 'push' from the Labour Party, fronted by Tom Watson, in February 2009 (Labour News 2009) to encourage more of their MPs to engage with constituents via Facebook and Twitter. If party is a strong indicator of the use of Twitter, marginality is much weaker. There were 93 marginal seats (14.4%) at the 2005 General Election, 95 near-marginals (14.7%) and 458 safe seats (70.9%). Marginality had a weak effect on the use of Twitter, with MPs in 19.6% of marginals, 17.6% of near-marginals as opposed to 62.7% of safe seats tweeting. Seniority appears to have quite a strong impact. Whilst backbench MPs are the most likely to use Twitter, with 56.9% as opposed to 43.1% of Frontbenchers <sup>(5)</sup>, yet in proportional terms this suggests that seniority does have an impact, as there are far fewer than 43% of MPs sitting on the Frontbenches. This suggests that a Labour frontbencher facing a close electoral contest would be the most likely to tweet.

## Talking or listening?

As might be expected MPs use Twitter in different ways, with the overall number of tweets within one month varying from one to 827. A small number of MPs tweet regularly, so that in the month studied Kerry McCarthy (Lab) had 827 tweets, Eric Joyce (Lab) 668 tweets and Sandra Gidley (Lib Dem) 463. Conversely, 2 MPs only tweeted once, as if they tried it and did not like the new technology. There are no statistically significant relationships between any of our six characteristics and actual behaviour of MPs on Twitter.

Most MPs tweeted about what they were doing each day, such as constituency visits and activity in Parliament or Whitehall. For example, Sadiq Khan (Lab) tweeted *"First oral Transport Questions this morning – 10.30am in the House of Commons. A bit nervous."* Senior politicians have a tendency to mention the various media interviews they have done, or their policy announcements, Ed Balls (Lab) tweeted *"just driving back to the House of Commons after Channel 4 News interview with Jon Snow...Been a long day."* Though one MP, Peter Lilley (Cons) primarily tweets news stories rather than his own activities. Interestingly, some MPs provide a ring-seat view by tweeting during set-piece parliamentary debates. For example, several MPs tweeted live during the election of the new Speaker, with Sandra Gidley (Lib Dem) tweeting 107 times throughout the whole process. Jim Knight (Lab), advertised the fact that he was looking for a Special Adviser, *"I have a vacancy for a Special Advisor and thought that the Twitter community should know."* Some MPs, such as Tom Harris (Lab) regularly linked a tweet to their website or weblog. On balance, it appears that, for less than half of tweeting MPs this has become a regular part of their political life, but the rest seemed to have only dipped their toe in, and presumably decided that it was too cold in the micro-bloggersphere.

The number of followers ranged from David Chaytor (Lab) with 63 through to Tom Watson (Lab) with 4,441. This is probably not a surprise given Watson has been one of the MPs most closely associated with the Internet <sup>(6)</sup>. The next three with the greatest number of followers were all fairly well-known and either were or had been Ministers. John Prescott (Lab) had 3,735 followers, Sadiq Khan (Lab) 2,259 and David Lammy (Lab) 2,189. This might suggest that access to other media helped drive traffic to their tweets. Whilst we note above that proportionately the Liberal Democrats are the most likely to tweet, it is in fact senior Labour figures who seem to be most popular. Twitter does not appear to have created a more level playing field.

The number of those who MPs follow ranges from zero through to over a thousand, with a median of 133. While the follower/following ratio does depend on other users choosing to engage with the MPs to an extent, all seemed more inclined to broadcast than converse though to varying degrees. Phil Willis does follow more than follow him, fellow Liberal Democrat Susan Kramer seems to reciprocate by following those who follow her; in contrast Conservative Peter Lilley follows no-one and Labour's John Denham and

Hazel Blears choose to follow only one person each. In terms of building a network, there seem to be some who follow all MPs of a particular party, while some followers who comment or retweet regularly can be identified as constituents. Therefore, it seems that MPs are able to both build their own network as well as gaining one due to partisan affiliations. However the larger the follower group the harder it is to identify how the network is comprised. Equally political journalists who use Twitter tend to follow all tweeting MPs, suggesting that there are benefits in terms of gaining publicity across wider media.

The follower/following ratios varied from 1, where clearly the MP was as likely to look at other tweeters as they were them.. We suggest that a ratio of 10 or under indicates that the MP, if not necessarily undertaking a conversation is certainly listening to the views of other tweeters or wishes to appear to want reciprocal relationships with followers. Therefore, 30 of our MPs seem keen to follow others and maybe listen to other tweeters. This would suggest that they would be more likely to hear others' views of themselves and act accordingly (Schneider 1981, Thompson & Luthans 1983). Eight MPs had ratios of over 50, or in the case of John Denham's (Lab) 745, which suggest that for him and others who tend not to follow other users that Twitter is essentially a one-way megaphone. It could be argued that having a large number of followers is simply a measure of Twitter popularity, but it is noted that a convention is to both be followed and to follow others. While MPs may need an audience to make Twitter a viable conversation tool, it may equally be the case that they must follow others in order to receive messages and so use this application in the same way as other Tweeters. Overall, most MPs recognised that twitter was not just simply a broadcasting medium, but also a receiver as well.

### **Impression management and/or constituency service**

Table 4 shows the overall count of tweets for impression management, promotion of self and constituency service. The strongest overall score is impression management, but this is mostly comprised of self-promotion, and a limited amount of ingratiation. After impression management, the next most likely function of Twitter is promotion of self, particularly displaying a sense of humour. Constituency service is next, but is clearly much less than implied by some commentators (Hurden 2009, Featherstone 2009, Watson 2009). Partisan promotion of their own party, including attacks on opponents, is the least common feature.

### **Table 4 about here please**

As with MP's use of social networking sites (Jackson & Lilleker 2009), use of Twitter seems to be largely about the MP promoting his/herself so building an

impression of them as a professional or an individual. When referring to the constituency it is largely talking about events attended, and work they have done. Hence, their activity within the constituency is media agency, as this work tends to also be publicised in local newspapers. Few tweets contain any party political material at all. Across constituency tweets the pattern is consistent, though Labour's Anne Snelgrove used all her six tweets to provide information to her constituents, three of which were surgery times, the majority however just promote their activities. When managing their reputation and offering an impression, it is mainly MPs talking about the positions held, linking sometimes to various reshuffles and appointments taking place.

The other general point of interest is that it appears there are two tiers of engagement. Some use Twitter fairly rarely and sporadically, but often with a specific function in mind. For example, the sharing of local information as noted above, or the sharing of more general information such as blog links, pictures or news items. However, others are using it on a daily or, hourly, basis and present a mixture of strategic and functional texts. They include replies to tweeting friends, jokes and off-hand remarks ranging from observations about big issues such as climate change to the quality of performance of a colleague on the floor of the House. These highly frequent tweeters, including Sandra Gidley (Lib Dem), Eric Joyce (Lab), Kerry McCarthy (Lab), Sion Simon (Lab), Jo Swinson (Lib Dem), Tom Harris (Lab), Jim Knight (Lab) and Tom Watson (Lab), appear to have formed a cross-party Twitter community that share exchanges, ranging from the trivial to comments on the future of parliament and the role of digital and Web 2.0 technology. This was evidenced best as some of these tweeted plaudits at Parmjit Dhanda's (Lab) failed bid to be speaker. Dhanda caught their imagination by suggesting the public vote on debate topics via Twitter or Facebook, and should be allowed greater access to parliament. These highly proactive Twitter users agreed, Dhanda himself blogged the election, but did not enter the Twitter debate as he is not a user.

Some interesting observations emerge from more rigorous statistical tests, with these reported as regression coefficients with significance scores. MPs elected most recently appear to be most likely to be promoting themselves and advertising their achievements, both national and local, and talking of their work (Pearson  $r^2 = 0.387$ , sig to .010). However, there is no link to age, suggesting this is generational behaviour. More interesting, male MPs are least likely to be asking for help from other tweeters or seeking their views; female MPs however are likely to do so ( $r^2 = 0.376$ , sig to .007). Perhaps reinforcing a gender difference, male MPs are most likely to boast of achievements and abilities ( $r^2=0.287$ , sig to 0.047). Other statistically significant findings are questionable due to the low number of responses, for example, MPs in marginal seats are most likely to provide information for constituents, however, few did this and Anne Snelgrove skewed the data. Marginality did seem to be a driving force for MPs to refer to dialogue they

are engaged in on constituency issues, though this is not exclusively their preserve either as the results of regression demonstrates ( $r^2=306$ , sig to 0.029). On the whole MPs in marginal seats are slightly more likely to tweet about the constituency ( $r^2=.237$ , sig to 0.094), to be modest and self-deprecating ( $r^2=.241$ , sig to 0.088) and be least party political ( $r^2=.240$ , sig to 0.088).

## Conclusion

In terms of summing up the data, we note the number of tweeting MPs is a small minority as only one in ten MP's Tweet. Six personal and political factors, to varying degrees, appear to influence which MPs would tweet. Of the personal characteristics gender and age are the strongest indicators. Women and those aged 35-54 are most likely to tweet. Women may feel that, as a direct communication channel, Twitter helps them bypass disadvantages in access they have to traditional print and broadcast media. Whilst marginality has a weak effect, it is party and seniority which are the strongest political factors. Largely tweeting is the preserve of MPs from the three largest parties, especially Labour and the Liberal Democrats, possibly for similar reasons. Government MPs may feel that in the current political climate their opinions are not necessarily accurately portrayed via the media, and the Liberal Democrats may feel that their views are not portrayed at all. Tweeting is not the sole preserve of backbench MPs, rather Government Ministers and Opposition Frontbenchers may view Twitter as a useful way of explaining what they are doing. Whilst the age characteristics imply a slow generational uptake of Twitter, the needs of party and the use by senior MPs may encourage a much quicker uptake in the run-up to the General Election.

As with any new technology, there are a wide range of approaches from MPs to Twitter. Some promote general news stories, others drive traffic to their other online presences, many use it to essentially say "look at me, I'm working really hard". MPs, generally under pressure from the expenses scandals highlighted by the Daily Telegraph in June 2009, may feel that Twitter is another means of justifying their role. There are clear differences between those who have barely used Twitter and the tweeting enthusiasts. We suggest that the seventeen MPs who tweeted more than 50 times in the month studied, potentially represent the basis for any wider change Twitter will bring. However, of this seventeen there are, at present, less than ten who seem to have wholeheartedly adopted Twitter and these appear to have formed a parliamentary community. For these MPs, Twitter has become a virtual 'smoking room' where they tease one another, gossip and occasionally score political points. Such Twitter pioneers are engaging in what is an almost unique function for MPs, they provide an ringside view of political activity. As a result, they may become a conduit between disillusioned members of the public, and an under fire House of Commons. This community may be a factor of the low numbers of MPs who use the tool, however, it may also be a feature of the way these particular MPs operate as communicators. All those who have wholeheartedly adopted Twitter are also active on the social networking site Facebook and some use filesharing sites YouTube or Flickr or offer their views via regularly updated weblogs. Therefore they seem to be

highly proactive communicators who have gone beyond using the local media to publicise their activities (Negrine & Lilleker, 2003), and so communicate with one another due to holding common attitudes relating to both communication and use of new technologies and applications. While cross-party work is not as unusual as may be assumed, and there is an all party group that work on issues relating to the use of new technologies which some of these users belong to, the style of open communication between MPs is unusual and appears to be an organic community that has formed around the use of Twitter. Certainly early adopting blogging MPs did not appear to act as a network of bloggers (Jackson 2008), whereas some do with Twitter. The community may dissolve somewhat, and partisan communities emerge, if such communication behaviour becomes more mainstream or it may subside as the novelty wanes; currently however it is an interesting feature of Twitter use that seems particular to this application.

Those MPs who attract most followers are not automatically those who tweet most. Rather, some form of celebrity offline as with John Prescott, or online with Tom Watson, and ministerial rank seem to attract most followers. The extent of the importance of seniority seems to be unique to Twitter. Whilst senior MPs may have been slightly more likely to have had websites (Jackson 2003), this is nowhere near the extent to which this is the case with Twitter. Some of the most regular tweeters, such as Eric Joyce and Sandra Gidley receive far fewer followers. Moreover, there appears to be a political divide. Although the Liberal Democrats are the most likely to sign up to Twitter, it is Labour MPs who are more likely to attract large followings. In terms of the follower/following ratio, there is a clear difference. Those MPs who tweet less, are more likely to view Twitter as a megaphone and follow few other Tweeters. The pioneers, however, are also likely to follow other Tweeters. This suggests a qualitative difference in how they use the technology.

There is clear evidence that MPs use Twitter as a tool of impression management. However, it is of a particular form, using Jones and Pittman's (1982) typology the most popular by far is self-promotion, with some weak evidence of ingratiation. Moreover, this self-promotion is largely based on their qualifications or positions held, and so emphasising the hard work they are engaged in. Of ingratiation, this is largely based on agreeing with other tweeters, and presumably building relationships with them. As an adjunct to impression management, there is evidence that some MPs are developing self promotion strategies (Jackson and Lilleker 2009) as a role through Twitter. As with weblogs and e-newsletters, MPs are actively seeking to create a sense of a hinterland through Twitter. By appearing as human beings, with a sense of humour or everyday interests, they hope that this may influence the perception of followers. Constituency service is a secondary function of the use of Twitter by MPs. Moreover, the new information based roles identified by Hoff (2004) and Jackson (2006) do not appear to shape Twitter based constituency service. Rather, where MPs use Twitter to enhance their constituency role it is to promote their own activity within the constituency. Therefore, both the promotion of self, and how MPs promote their constituency service

reinforce the use of Twitter as an impression management tool. What Twitter appears to be adding to both of these approaches is an enhanced stress on individualism, as opposed to the collective party. Twitter may be assisting a slow move away from a traditional party centred approach, and one which is more MP-centric.

There are a range of reasons behind Twittering, from promoting constituency surgery hours, through more specific service-oriented functions to being conduits of party or departmental information, or communicating gossip on the day-to-day events in the House of Commons or the life of the MP. While all of these may have a strategic purpose there is no one single usage that is predominating among UK MPs. However, while the least frequent Tweeters tend to use the tool for a single purpose, focusing on the most frequent users, one gains a sense of a group of highly proactive communicators. This is fundamentally different from MP's use of Facebook which they use as a normal citizen to keep in touch with their friends, rather than as part of their representative role (Jackson & Lilleker 2009). These MPs will combine a range of functions across most of the variables identified, so presenting themselves as hard working parliamentarians, constituency servants as well as individuals with a strong sense of personal and political identity. Arguably this can have a positive impact upon political engagement in a number of ways. Such tweets can break down the barriers between representative and the represented, can encourage greater trust and interest and build an impression of the MP that surpasses pejorative media narratives. Equally, it can make the MP appear more accessible, particularly those who not only tweet frequently but also respond to other Twitterers. While in the early phase of usage, there may be some electoral benefits, however more broadly there may be democratic benefits if MPs and the public begin to listen to one another, correspond, and so adapt the micro-blog platform to incorporate a more participatory platform of engagement.

## Footnotes

- 1)
- 2)
- 3) During the month of June there had been a major Government reshuffle and a number of ministerial resignations. It was decided that identifying those with Seniority at the end, rather than the beginning of the month gave a better insight into seniority given the quite unusual political circumstances in the UK surrounding the MP's expenses revelations.
- 4) Because of 2 vacancies, there were only 644 MPs in June 2009.
- 5) Frontbenchers were those in the Government or the Official Opposition Frontbenches.
- 6) He was also until the Government reshuffle in June a Government minister.

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**Table 1 Impression Management Typology (Adapted from Jones and Pittman's (1982) Impression Management Typology and Schutz (1997) model of Impression Management)**

Behaviour	Characteristics	Indicators
Ingratiation	To appear likeable	Mention that MP has helped people or organisations Tells self-deprecating anecdotes Agreeing with other tweeters
Self-promotion	To appear competent	Referring to their abilities Referring to personal achievements Referring to qualifications or positions held
Supplication	To be viewed as needy	Soliciting help because of lack of abilities or knowledge Highlighting their own shortcomings
Exemplification	Actions to appear exemplary & worthy	Claiming worthy attributes Claiming moral values
Intimidation	To appear dangerous or threatening	Expressions of power Suggesting punitive actions

Tells self-deprecating anecdotes  
Agreeing with other tweeters

Referring to personal achievements  
Referring to qualifications or  
positions held

Highlighting their own shortcomings

Claiming moral values

**Table 2 Evidence of promotion of self**

Category	Measurement
Detail of personal life (family and everyday activities of a non-political nature)	Yes/No
Identifies personal interests, such as sports, music, film or leisure	Yes/No
Displays sense of humour	Yes/No
Promotion of party	Yes/No

**Table 3 Constituency Role (adapted from Jackson 2006)**

Category	Measurement
Refers to individual casework/constituents	Yes/No
Refers to constituency issues	Yes/No
Seeks views on local issues	Yes/No
Provides local information	Yes/No
Promotes local community activity	Yes/No
Refers to their activity in the constituency	Yes/No
Engaged in dialogue on constituency matters	Yes/No

**Table 4 References within tweets linked to strategic uses by MPs**

Feature	Measurement	Mean Average
Ingratiation	Mention MP helping people/organisations	1.02
	Tells self-deprecating anecdotes	0.29
	Agreeing with other tweeters	3.25
Self-promotion	Referring to their abilities	0.96
	Referring to personal achievements	4.90
	Referring to qualifications or positions held	15.49
Supplication	Soliciting help, lack of ability/knowledge	0.61
	Highlighting their own shortcomings	0.22
	Claiming worthy attributes	0.41
Exemplification	Claiming moral values	0.63
	To appear dangerous or threatening	0.06
Intimidation		
Impression	Total	26.98
Management	Detail of personal life (family, etc)	7.29
	Identifies personal interests, sport/music,	6.57
	Displays sense of humour	7.55
Promotion of Self	Total	20.82
Promotion of party	Total	11.00
	Refers to individual casework/constituents	2.59
	Refers to constituency issues	2.57
	Seeks views on local issues	0.35
	Provides local information	0.51
	Promotes own local community activity	0.57
	Refers to their activity in the constituency	6.33
	Refers to dialogue on constituency issues	0.92
Constituency Service	Total	13.89



## Appendix A

MP	Address
Adam Afriye (Con)	@AdamAfriye
Ed Balls (Lab)	@edballsm
Celia Barlow (Lab)	@CeliaBarlowMP
Hazel Blears (Lab)	@HazelBlearsMP
Ben Bradshaw (Lab)	@BenBradshawMP
Kevin Brennan (Lab)	@KevinBrennanMP
Liam Byrne (Lab)	@LiamByrneMP
Douglas Carswell (Con)	@DouglasCarswell
Ian Cawsey (Lab)	@iancawsey
David Chaytor (Lab)	@chaytord
John Denham	@johndenhammp
Mark Durkan (SDLP)	@markdurkan
David Evennett (Con)	@davidevennett
Lynne Featherstone (LD)	@lfeatherstone
Frank Field (Lab)	@frankfieldteam
Sandra Gidley (LD)	@SandraGidley
Linda Gilroy (Lab)	@LindaGilroy
Julia Goldsworthy (LD)	@jgoldsworthy
Tom Harris (Lab)	@TomHarrisMP
Eric Joyce (Lab)	@ericjoyce
Sadiq Khan (Lab)	@sadiqkhan
David Kidney (Lab)	@davidkidney
Jim Knight (Lab)	@jimknightmp
Susan Kramer (LD)	@SusanKramer
Norman Lamb (LD)	@normanlamb
David Lammy (Lab)	@DavidLammy
Peter Lilley (Cons)	@MPPeterLilley
Kerry McCarthy (Lab)	@KerryMP
Sarah McCarthy-Fry (Lab)	@smccarthyfry
Gillian Merron (Lab)	@GillianMerron
David Mundell (Con)	@mundell
James Plaskitt (Lab)	@JamesPlaskittMP
John Prescott (Lab)	@JohnPrescott
Andy Reed (Lab)	@andyreedmp
Linda Riordan (Lab)	@Linda_Riordan
Paul Rowen (LD)	@PaulRowne
Angus Robertson (SNP)	@MorayMP
Alison Seabeck (Lab)	@alisonseabeck
Grant Shapps (Con)	@grantshapps
Virendra Sharma (Lab)	@VirendaSharma
Sion Simon (Lab)	@sionsimon
Anne Snelgrove (Lab)	@annesnelgrovem
John Spellar (Lab)	@Spellar
Gisela Stuart (Lab)	@GiselaStuart
Jo Swinson (LD)	@joswinson
Tom Watson (Lab)	@tom_watson
Steve Webb (LD)	@Stevewebb1
Phil Willis (LD)	@philwillismp
Anthony D. Wright	@tonywrightmp
David Wright (Lab)	@DavidWrightMP
Derek Wyatt (Lab)	@wyattd