

Twitter and Australian political debates

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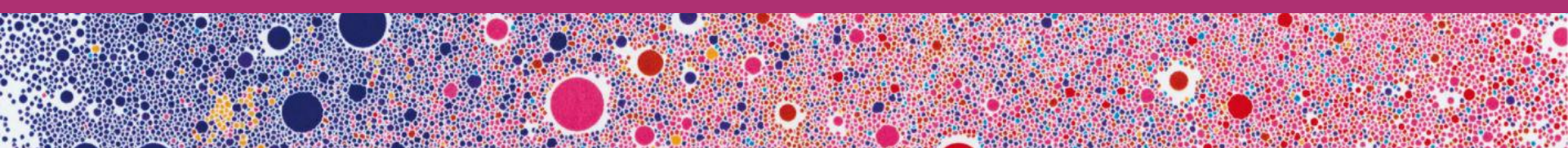
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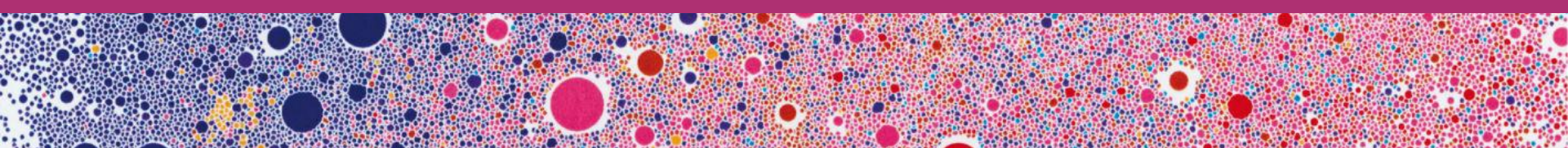
POLITICAL DEBATE ONLINE

- The potential for online platforms (individually and collectively) to reshape and/or revitalise political debate is a long-standing question
- An evolving continuum of online political discussions, developed through blogs, citizen journalism projects, social media
- Platforms not used in isolation; people discussing politics online tweet about it, blog, share links, comment on statuses...



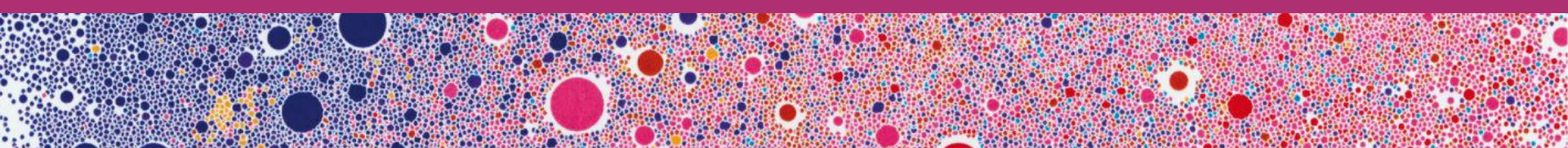
TWITTER AND POLITICAL DEBATE

- While not used in isolation, Twitter is a particularly noteworthy platform for political discussion online:
 - Public medium (mostly)
 - Brevity of messages
 - Associated features: retweets, hashtags, @mentions
- Adoption of Twitter as a popular and primary medium for live commentary accompanying (media) events, breaking news, activism (and combinations of these approaches, taking place in same space).



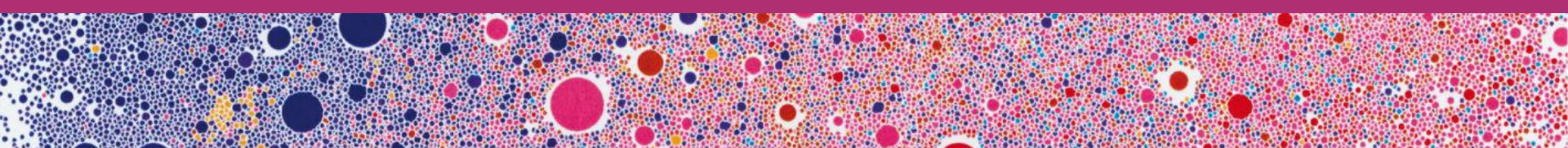
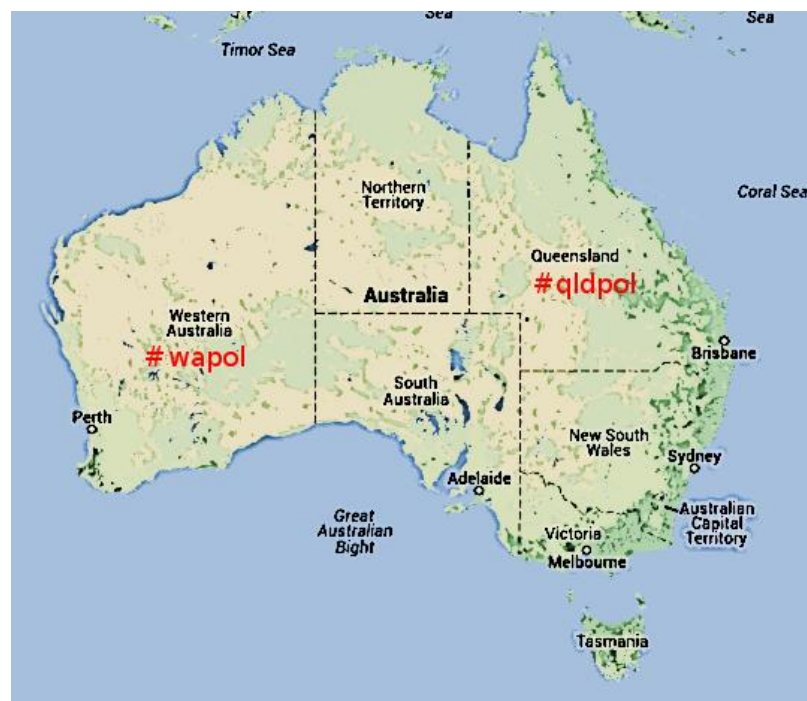
POLITICAL DISCUSSION ON TWITTER

- Potential for political debate to involve wider population than just journalists and politicians?
 - New gatekeepers?
 - Follow and respond directly to people creating news/shaping politics
- To what extent, though, are these different participants in political discussions interacting – or even contributing to the same conversations?



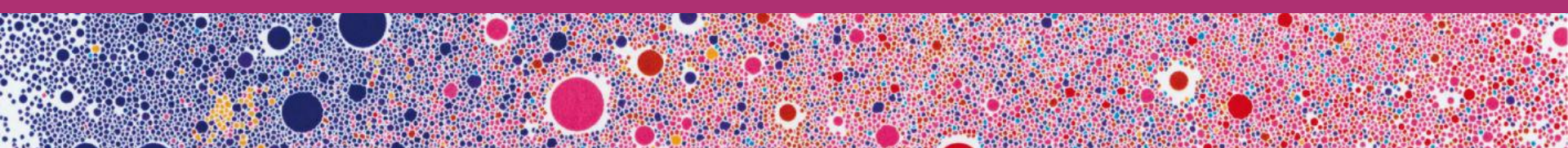
METHODS

- Comparative analysis of three Australian political hashtags; data collected between January and December 2012
 - #auspol – Federal
 - #qldpol – Queensland
 - #wapol – Western Australia
- Methods
 - *yourTwapperkeeper* captures tweets with specified hashtags from *Twitter* API
 - Gawk scripts for processing large datasets (Bruns & Burgess, 2011), *Gephi* for network visualisation



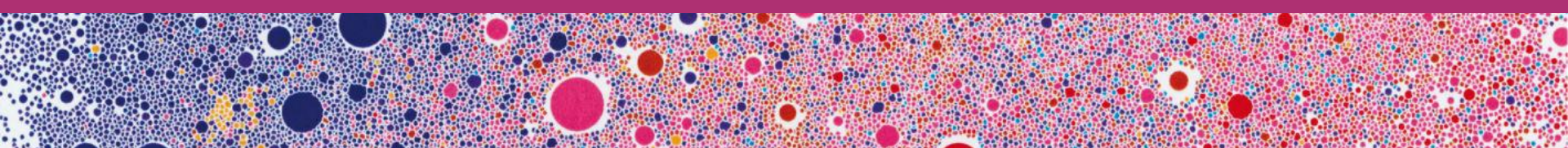
AUSTRALIAN POLITICS

- Federal politics: currently led by centre-left Australian Labor Party (ALP), Prime Minister Julia Gillard; next election due in September 2013, expected to be won by centre-right (conservative) Liberal/National coalition, led by Tony Abbott. Voting is compulsory (93% turnout in 2010).
- State politics:
 - Six states, all bicameral systems except Queensland (unicameral)
 - Start of 2012: three states ALP in power, three Liberal. (Liberal-National Party took power in Queensland in March 2012).



AUSTRALIAN POLITICS AND TWITTER

- Twitter more widely taken up – by politicians and general public – than previous technologies such as blogging.
- Accounts established for sitting politicians
 - At Federal level, 146 of 226 members of Lower and Upper Houses present on Twitter (July 2012)
- Hashtags for different political events/broadcasts:
 - #ausvotes, #ausdecides, #qldvotes – election campaigns
 - #qt, #waqt – Parliamentary Question Time
 - #qanda, #insiders – Q & A, *Insiders* political panel shows



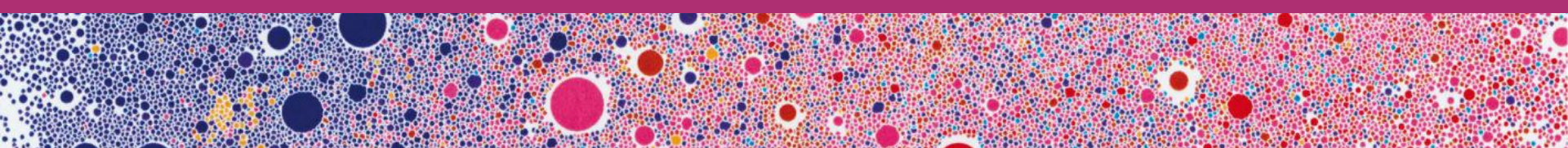
#AUSPOL

- Popularised around 2010 Federal election (alongside election-specific hashtags such as #ausvotes) as overarching label for Australian political topics
- Endured post-election; however, rather than a space for political debate, seen as increasingly polarised and frequented by trolls:

Viewing and participating in 'discussions' on the Twitter stream of #auspol is to immerse yourself in a political cesspit. It is the dark alley in Twitter you walk down when you wonder if you have told anyone where you were going that night.

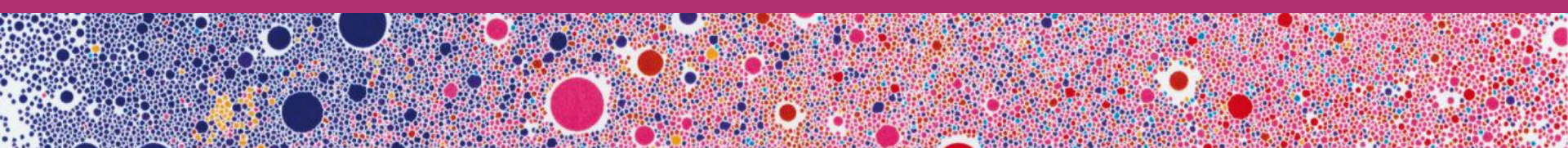
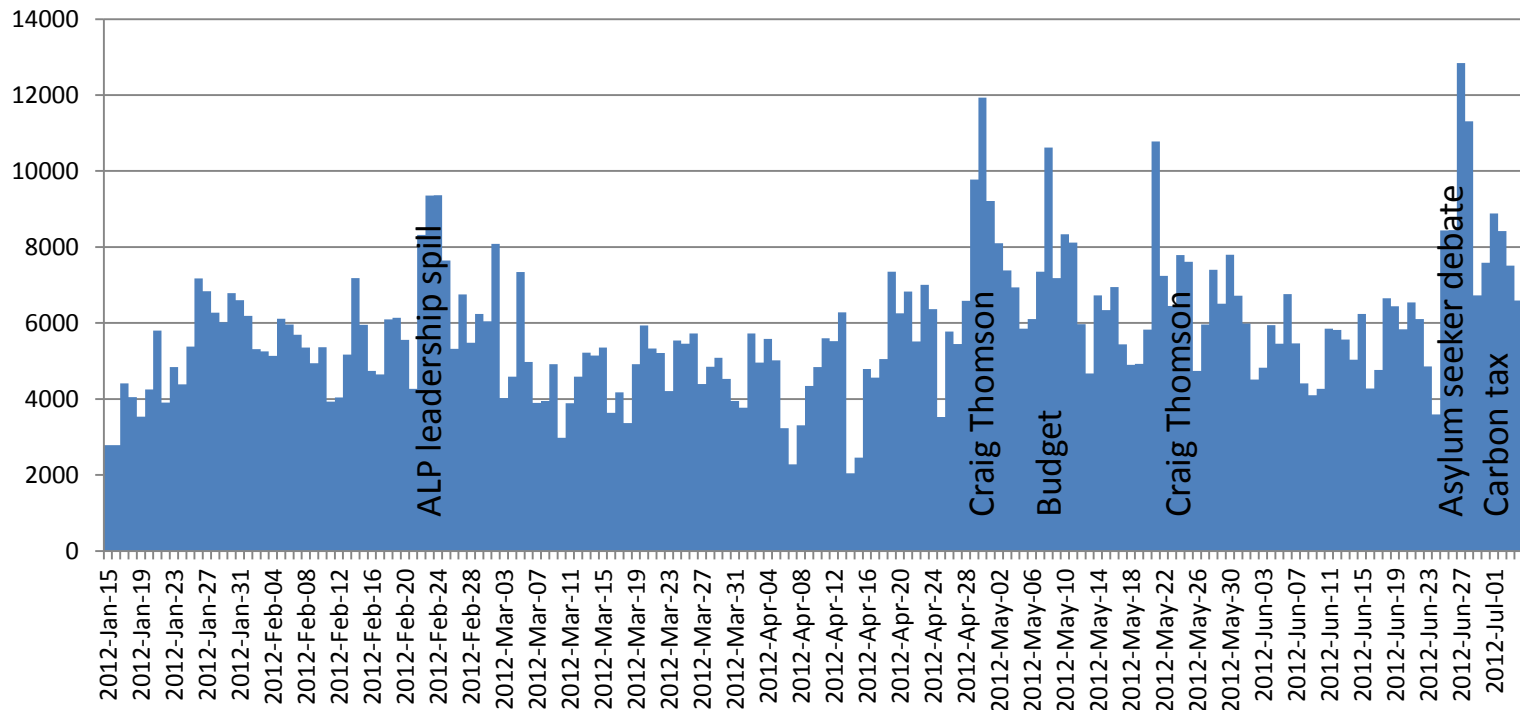
(Jericho, 2012)

- State-based hashtags less afflicted by this development (in general)?



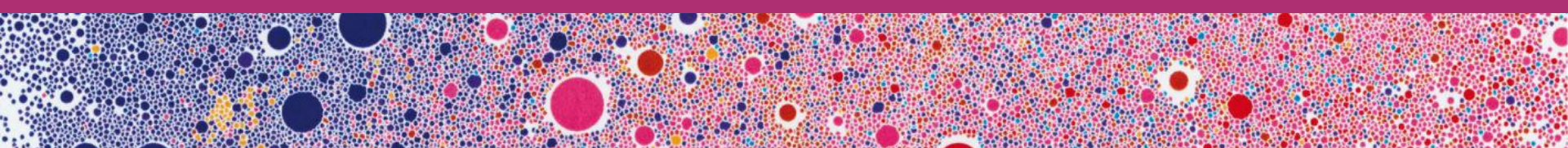
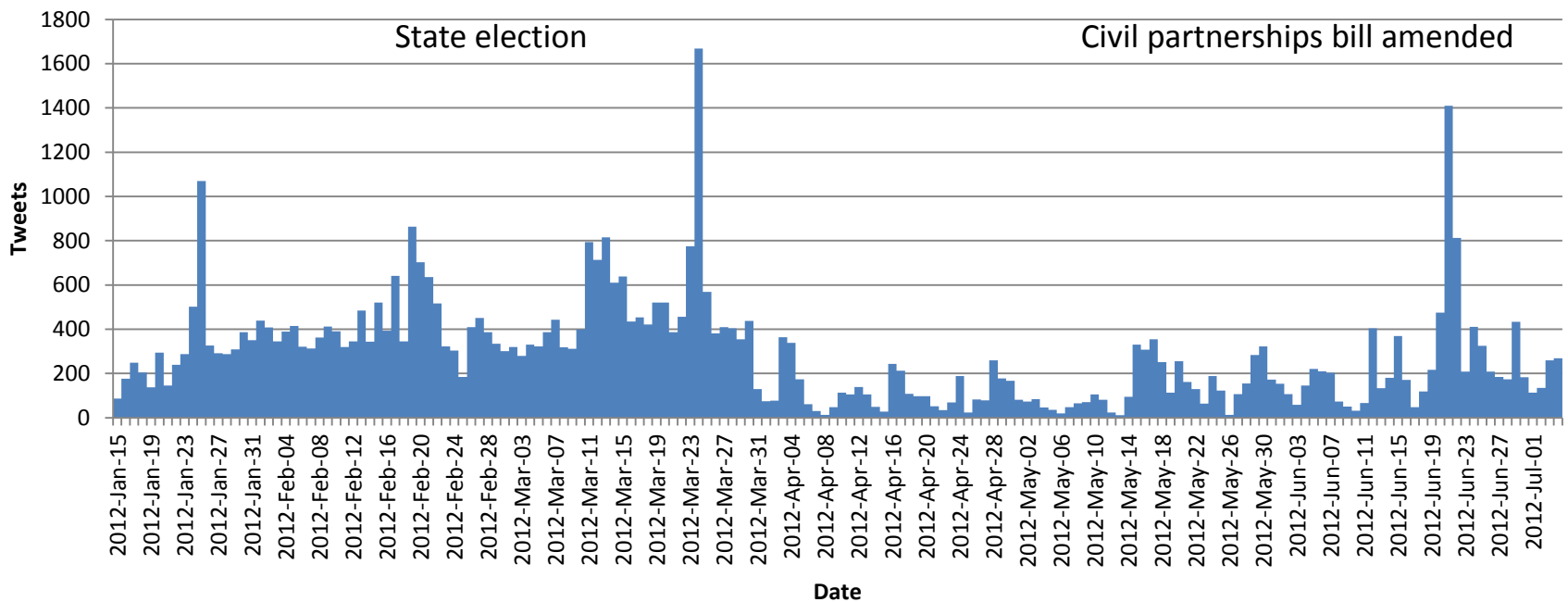
#AUSPOL

- 1,002,451 tweets (15/01-04/07), 50,622 users
- 19.8 tweets per user, 5,828 tweets per day



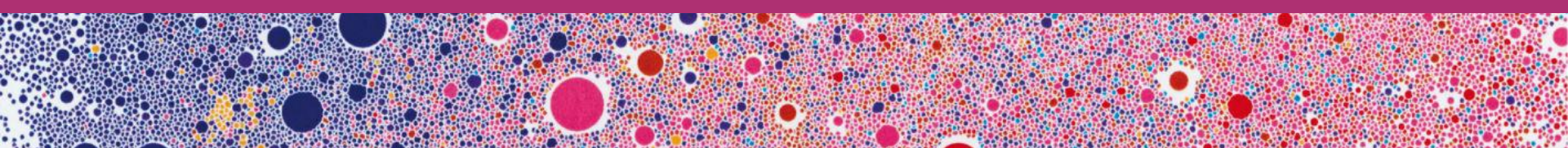
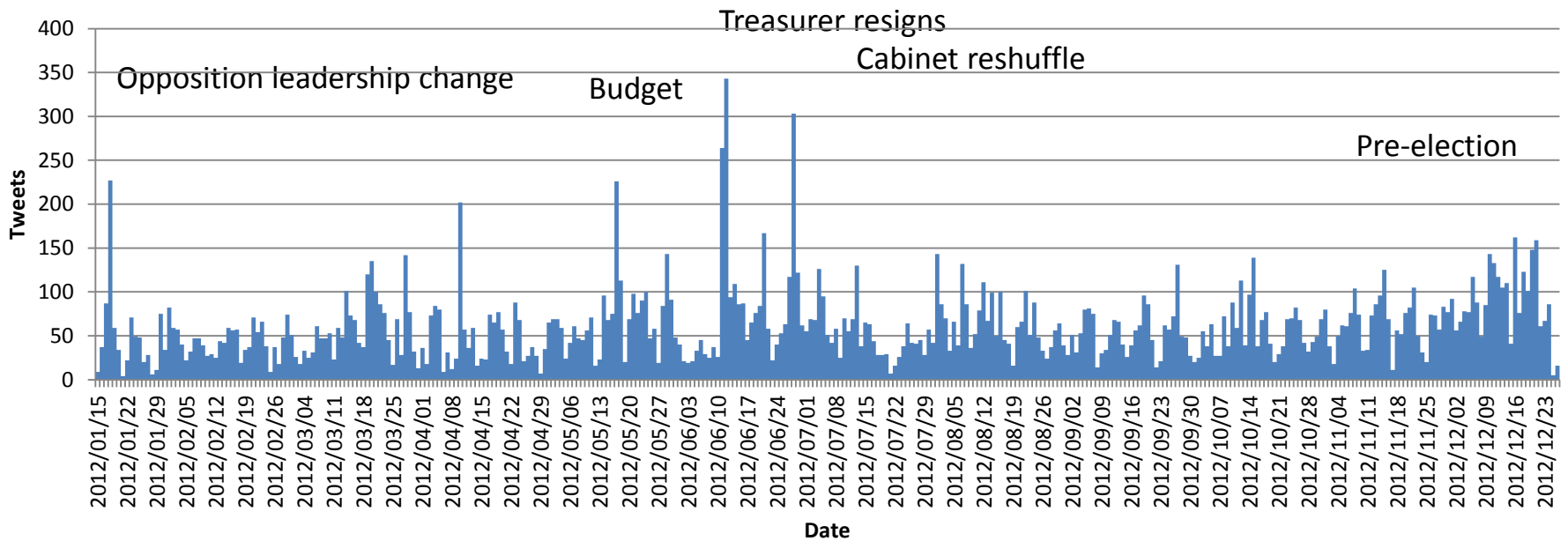
#QLDPOL

- 49,300 tweets (15/01-04/07), 5,668 users
- 8.7 tweets per user, 286.6 tweets per day



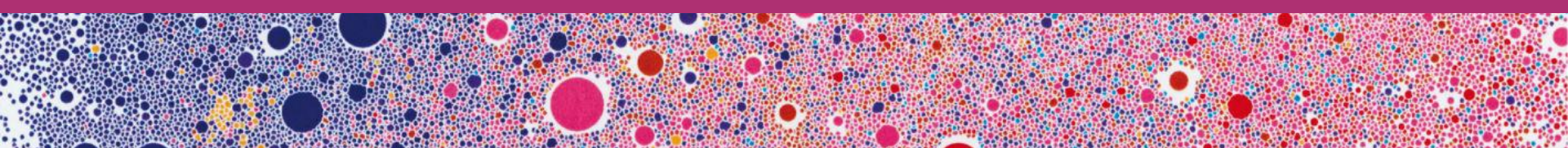
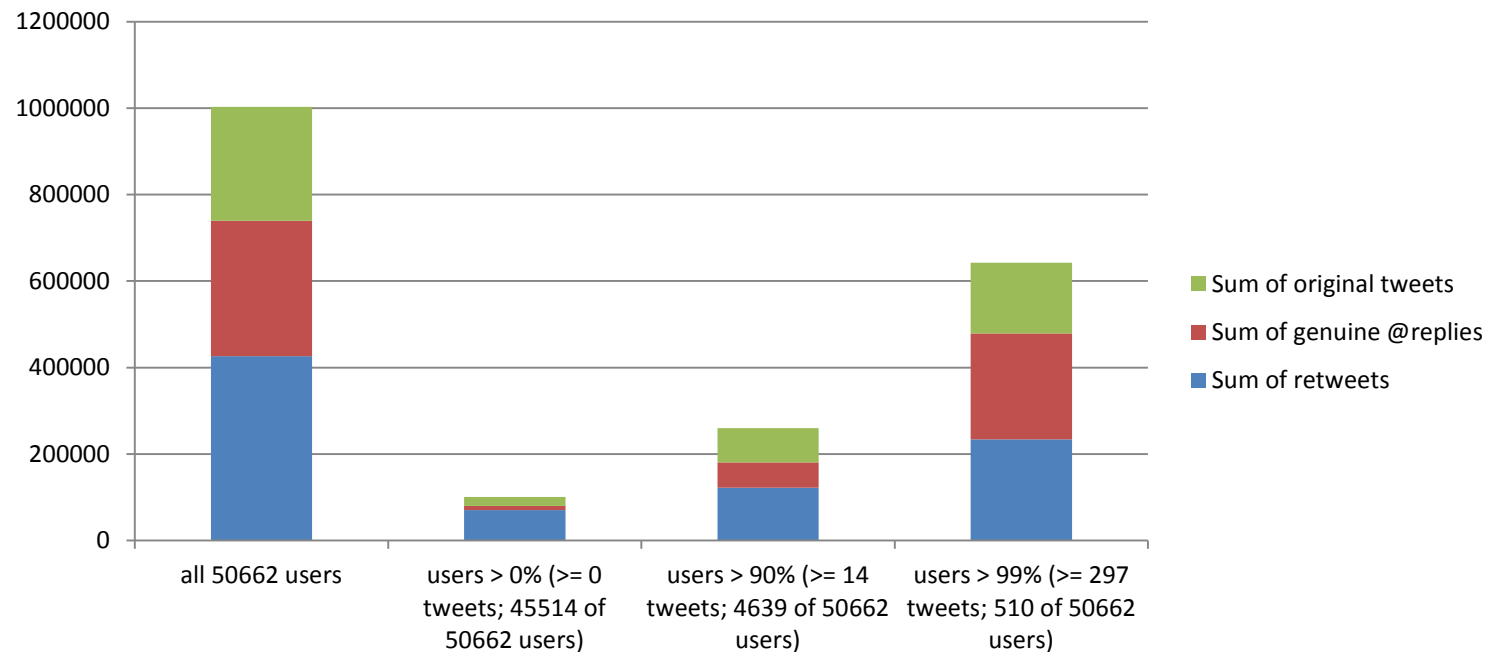
#WAPOL

- 21,261 tweets (15/01-26/12), 2,855 users
- 7.4 tweets per user, 61 tweets per day



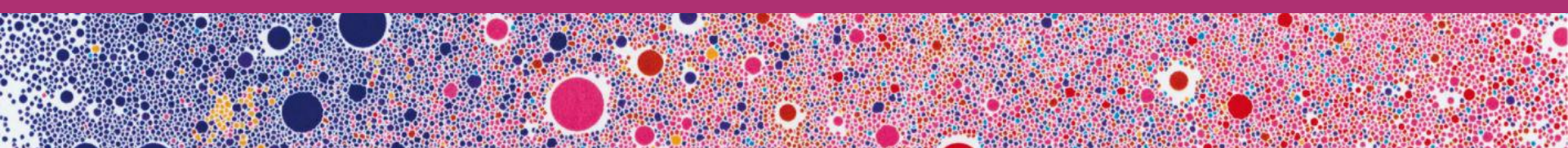
WHO IS TWEETING?

- Highly active group of users within #auspol hashtag:
 - Top 1% users contribute 64% of tweets
 - 6 users responsible for 87,696 tweets



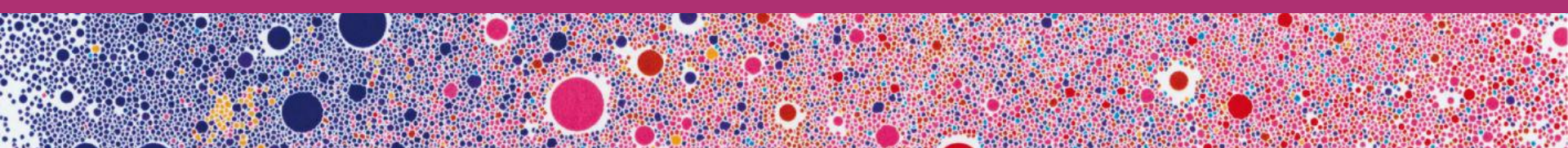
WHO IS TWEETING? #AUSPOL

- Highly active group of users within #auspol hashtag:
 - These especially active users not elected parliamentarians or journalists
 - Instead, politically engaged citizens (or automated accounts)
 - Fit Coleman’s (2006) description of “political junkies”, who treat political issues as major topics of interest and actively seek out relevant news and opinion pieces?
- MPs, journalists, media organisations mentioned often in tweets
 - However, these accounts (especially politicians) do not contribute many tweets to the #auspol discussion



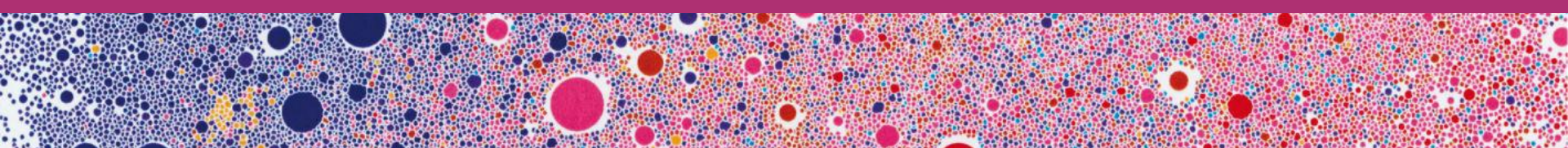
WHO IS TWEETING? #QLDPOL

- Tweeting patterns also show a core group of users contributing the majority of hashtagged tweets
 - Some overlap with the prominent #auspol users.
- The users that are most mentioned are a mixture of these frequent contributors and key state political actors, who do not necessarily participate in these discussions themselves.
 - Limits to this analysis due to election in first half of 2012; user names, and affiliations, changed (including @TheQldPremier)
 - Further analysis required to establish on-going patterns beyond the election context.



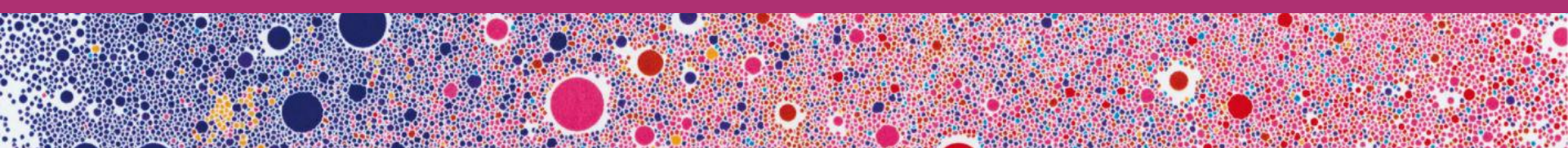
WHO IS TWEETING? #WAPOL

- A lower level of activity, but greater representation amongst most mentioned and also most active accounts by journalists and politicians
 - A more even spread of – and comparable contributions from – citizens (including the “political junkies”), journalists, and politicians alike.
- Changing patterns towards end of year as election campaigns are readied
 - Party strategies regarding social media have some impact on the developing shape of tweeted political debates



WHO IS TWEETING?

- Politicians in particular often mentioned a lot, but rarely contribute to hashtagged debates
 - @mentions as a shorthand for discussing politicians, creating a link to their account, rather than necessarily expecting conversation
- Presence of core group of “political junkies” leading (in volume if not in topic) these discussions
 - Framing of politics around personalities (individual politicians) rather than parties?
 - Tweeting patterns still follow major news stories, debates around party leaders (particularly in hung parliament situation, in build-up to election).



LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER OUTLOOK

- Caveats:
 - Not all voters on Twitter - not representative of entire electorate
 - No requirement to use hashtag/engage with others using it
 - Active choice by user to connect to wider discussion
 - Users replying to hashtagged comments might not include it in their tweets
 - Intentions of hashtags, functions of use
- Future directions
 - Case studies within the different political contexts
 - Replies and retweets, information flows, across party affiliation, between different user groups (journalists, politicians), regions, themes
- Ongoing tracking, comparing non-election and election periods (QLD 2012; WA and AUS 2013).

