

2. Playing possum: Straws in the wind of the blogosphere

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the blog *Possum Pollytics* that became very well regarded by its readers, other bloggers and journalists over the course of the 2007 Australian federal election campaign, and examines it for harbingers of the impact of new media on journalists and their publics. The article commences with an account of the main features of the blog, with special reference to its analysis of the voting trends evident in the pre-election opinion polls. It then discusses two issues with respect to the challenge posed by new media uses to professional journalism: firstly, the way that the anonymity highlights the challenge by some bloggers on behalf of publics to the brandname mastheads and journalistic personalities, particularly in the challenging circumstances of no business model for new media; and secondly, that Habermas' early theorising of the public sphere might re-emerge as a valuable way to understand the current developments.

Keywords: blogging, opinion polls, political journalism, public sphere

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Possum Pollytics (possumcomitatus.wordpress.com) is the name of an Australian blog that emerged in May 2007 as an independent blog, linked initially to the well-known *ozpolitics* blog of Brian Palmer (www.ozpolitics.info/blog/). It rose to prominence during the 2007 federal election campaign, over the course of which Possum Comitatus became recognised as one of the best of the psephological bloggers (those who analyse and interpret political opinion polls)—or ‘psephs’ for short. His charts

and interpretations were picked up and republished in the mainstream media, and he participated in the altercation with *The Australian* newspaper in July and August when the editor-in-chief Chris Mitchell and political editor Dennis Shanahan (*The Australian*, 12 July 2007, p. 15; Shanahan, 2007) reacted to the way bloggers were criticising *The Australian's* interpretation of News Ltd's own opinion poll (Newspoll (www.newspoll.com.au) and particularly what critics saw as the pro-Liberal bias in the interpretation of those polls. Mitchell famously asserted that 'we understand Newspoll because we own it' (*The Australian*, 12 July, 2007: 15). *The Australian* continued to publish occasional critical pieces about the political blogs in the lead-up to the November 24 election (eg. Norington, 2007; Maiden, 2007).

Possum Comitatus is a play on the Latin expression *posse comitatus*, an expression that entered popular culture in the Western film genre where sheriffs would 'round up a posse'—a group of able-bodied people who would rally with a law enforcement officer to pursue a miscreant. *Noms de plume* are common among bloggers, but unusually, Possum strictly protects his anonymity. He does not take calls or divulge his telephone number, he declines regular requests for media interviews and conference appearances, and the only way one can communicate with him is via his blog or email. He says that there are only two journalists who know his name.

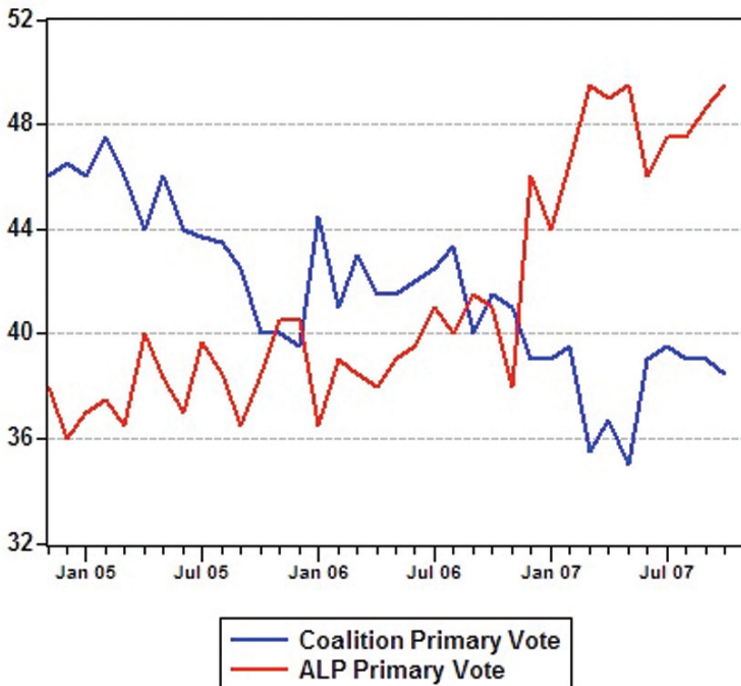
However, a profile of him by Sydney correspondent Jenna Price was published in *The Canberra Times* (*Canberra Times*, 23 November 2007: Playing possum with polls and politics) at the conclusion of the campaign. Price established via email that he was male, 33 years of age, had studied economics and psychology and indeed finished his undergraduate degree only recently (and so was not, as many had speculated, a PhD student); he was born and raised in Wingham, in the rural hinterland of the mid-north coast of New South Wales, attended Wingham Public and Secondary Schools and recalled throwing stones onto the roof of the home of the Federal Member (and until the 2007 election the Leader of the National Party and Deputy Prime Minister in the Coalition Government) Mark Vaile, and then scarpering with his mates; he was living in Queensland in a house in the northern bayside suburbs of Brisbane with his childhood sweetheart and partner of 14 years whom he was due to marry in April 2008; he was currently on home duties although he had been employed as an economist, and that division of labour—she was out earning the family income while he was doing a blog—might have had

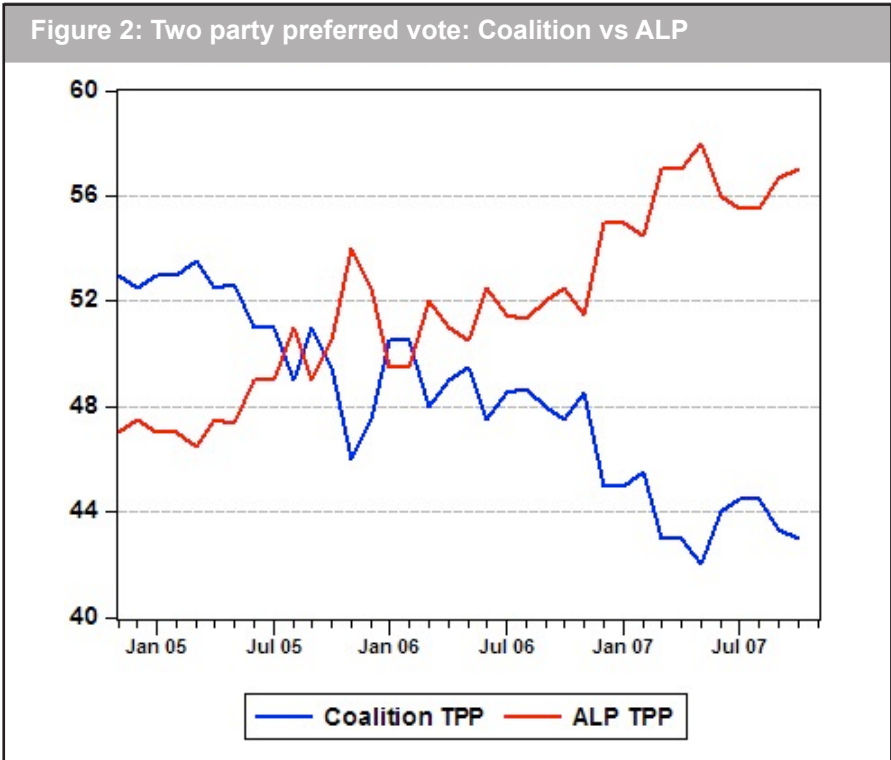
something to do with a comment that he passed in response to a query on his blog about random disaster variables, to which he replied: ‘I need one of them when my better half cooks’.

This is a remarkable amount of detail for a person who would not tell us his name, and fleshed out what we might intuit from his writing. In Scarlet Pimpernel mode, he had sharply focused our attention on what he was saying and doing as we speculated on who he might be and what his affinities were.

Possum produced very sophisticated analyses of the opinion polls, using statistical techniques such as regression analyses, cubic and quadratic derivations to identify long-term trends. He mainly worked with Newspoll, and cross-referenced it to the AC Nielsen polls; he had a low regard for the Galaxy poll, and viewed the Roy Morgan polls as erratic. Possum’s basic thesis was that firstly, there had been a long term deterioration in the Coalition

Figure 1: Primary vote: Coalition vs ALP

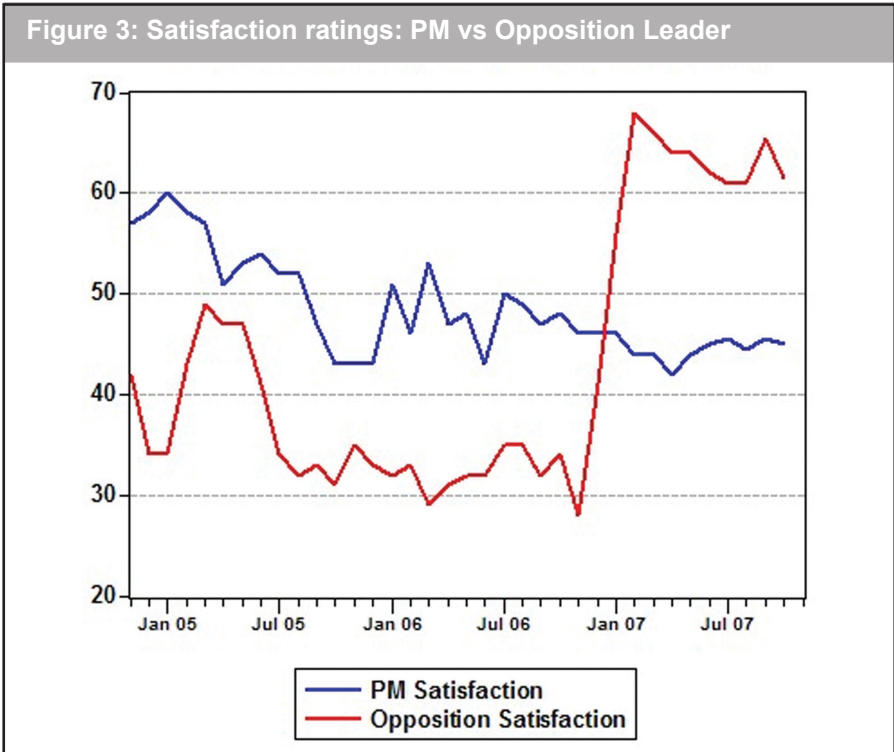




government’s standing in the polls, counterpoised to a sharp improvement in the Labor Opposition’s standing since Kevin Rudd assumed the leadership on 4 December 2006 sufficient to win government; and secondly, that these trends were statistically stable but that journalists and commentators in the mainstream media refused to acknowledge the clear implication: that the government was going to lose the election.

Figure 1 shows the primary votes of the government (Coalition) and opposition (ALP—Australian Labor Party) since January 2005 to the then present (November 2007). From that, Possum identified a long-term deterioration in the Coalition vote and a long-term improvement in the ALP vote. This same trend was apparent in the Two-Party Preferred² vote shown in Figure 2.

Some of his graphs were particularly telling, which was probably one of the reasons for his popularity. For example, Figures 3 and 4 depicted the satisfaction and dissatisfaction ratings of then Prime Minister John Howard



and the Opposition Leader. The blue line for Howard was more or less stable with a slowly negative trend, which as many commentators had noted was quite a good result for a politician who had been in power for more than a decade. The stark change was in the Opposition Leader's rating, which improved drastically once Kevin Rudd assumed the ALP leadership in late 2006 and thereafter was stable at the new level.

Figure 5 depicts the Two Party Preferred (TPP) vote measured in all Newspolls in 2007. It constituted the basis of Possum's argument: that the trend in voting intention had been stable all year, with the split hovering around 55:45 in favour of the ALP—a decisive election winning margin.

Figure 6 depicts the TPP voting intention as measured by AC Nielsen. Possum argued that slight differences between the Newspoll and AC Nielsen could be accounted for by factors such as margin of error and sampling techniques.

On this basis, Possum was sharply critical of the interpretation of the opinion polls by the mainstream media. He argued that the journalists and commentators got distracted by movements within the margin of error (which he identified for each of the different polling methodologies and sample sizes), and by the short-term impact of personnel changes, policy announcements or political events, but that the valid predictive power of the polls lay within the long-term trends. Because these trends were stable and similar across both the major polls, the key political reality that required analysis and interpretation by journalists and commentators was not the minor fluctuations but the remarkable stability in predicted outcome, and the ramifications of that outcome for national politics. Rather than asking questions about inconsequential short-term movements, journalists should have been asking why there was no movement in the long-term trends in the polls.

To minimise the representation of short-term fluctuations and clarify the long-term trends, Possum produced cubic (Figure 7) and quadratic (Figure 8)

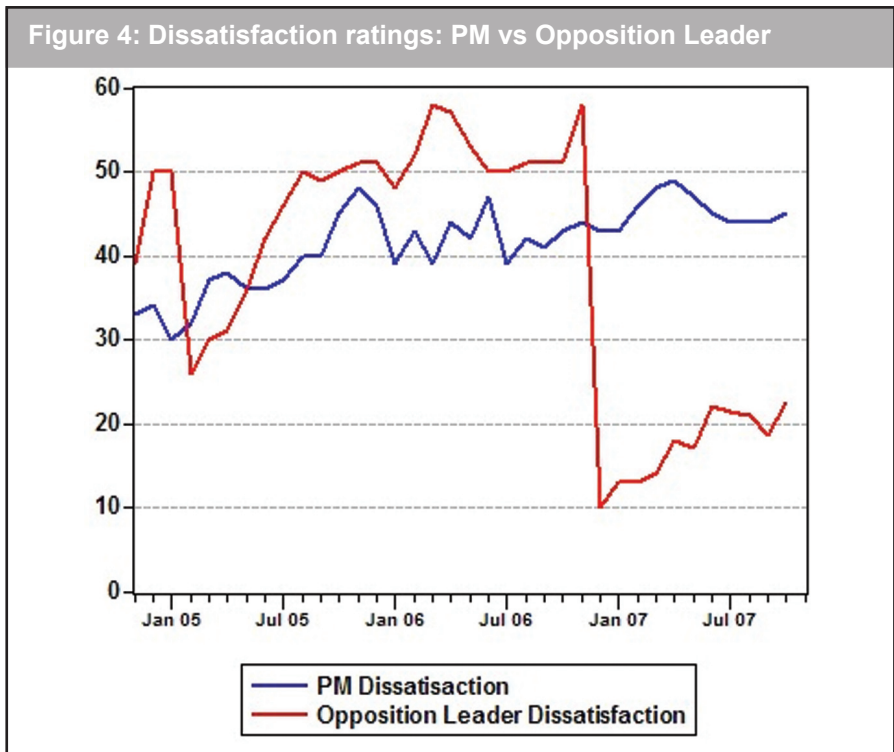


Figure 5: Two party preferred — all Newspolls 2007

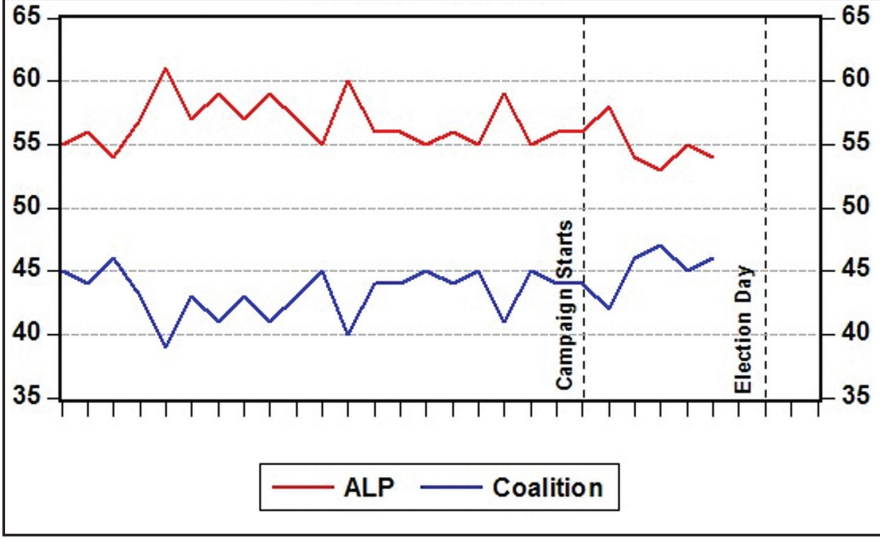
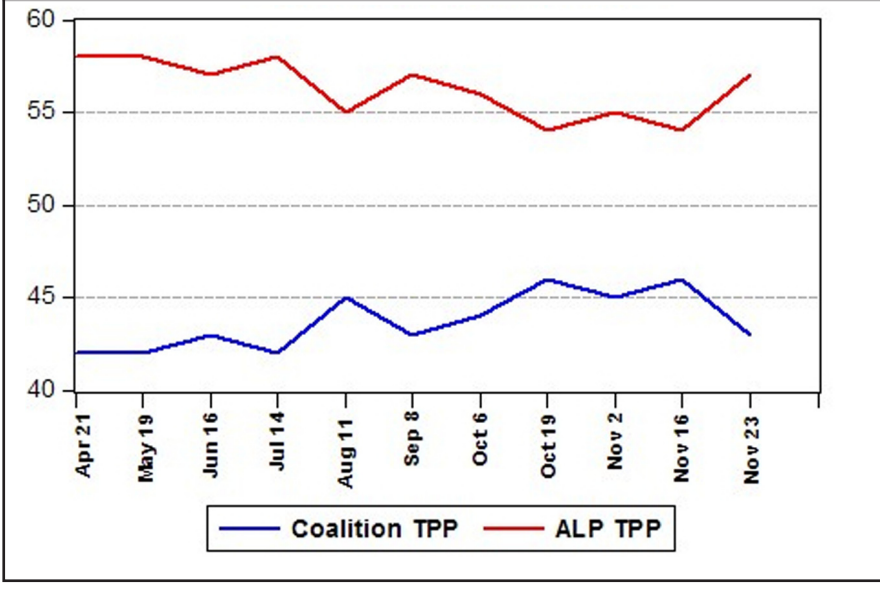


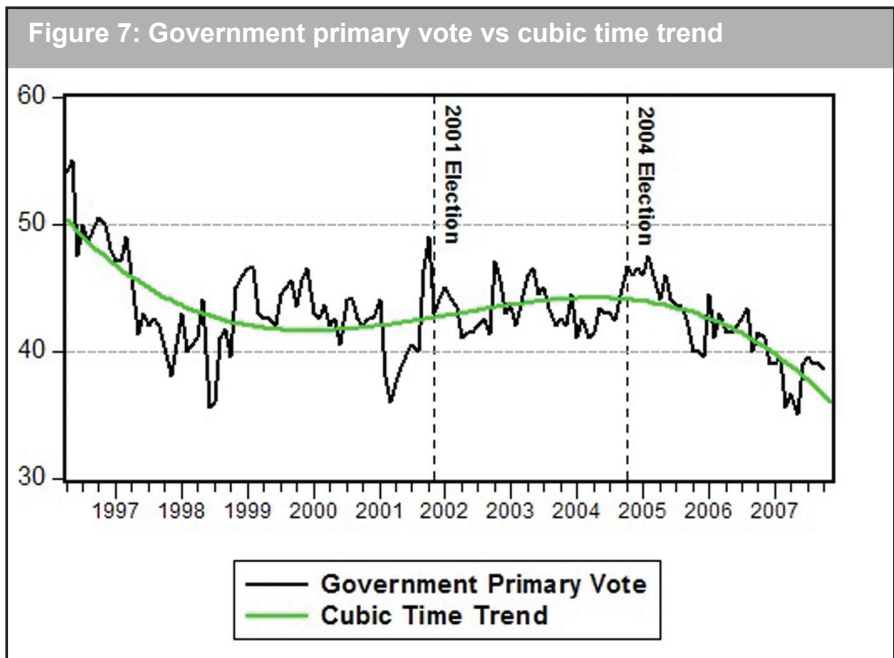
Figure 6: Two party preferred votes

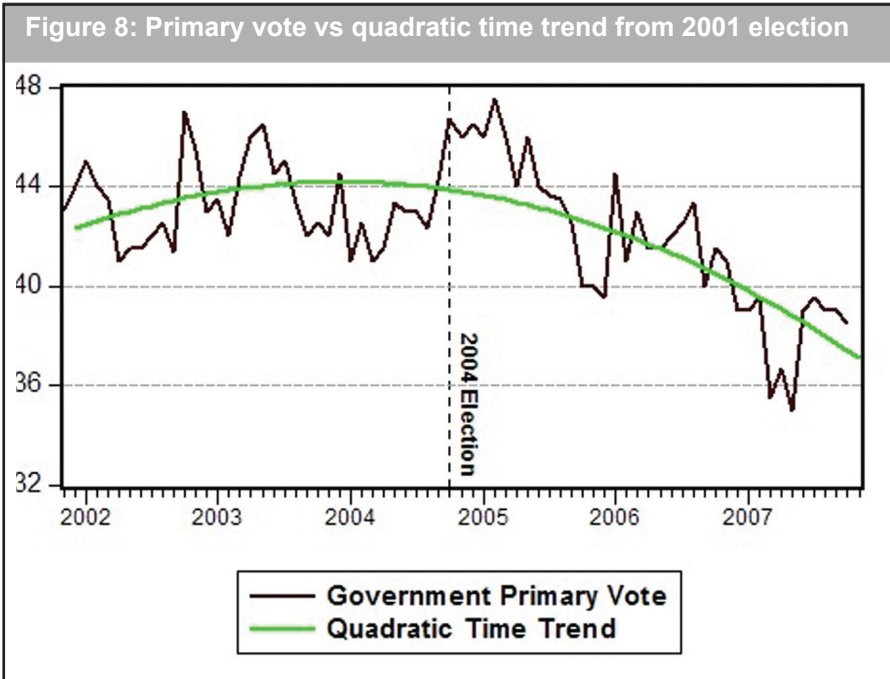


derivations of the longitudinal polling data, and these charts were even more stark in their depictions, though part of their representational impact might have related to the downward direction of the future extension of the trend line, which had no predictive value.

Nonetheless, they did give a strong sense of the long-term trends in electoral support and, for example, suggested how close run the 2004 election was in reality, although the received wisdom is that it was catastrophic for Labor. They also undermine the oft-asserted nostrum that Howard had an unmatched capacity to sense the popular mood and crystallise it in policy prescriptions. Indeed, rather than the unprecedented achievement of government in all states and territories by the ALP after 2001 being presented as it was in the media as an aberration in the face of Howard's uncontested grip on federal power, these graphs suggest that it was Howard's capacity to retain power in the face of a long-term deterioration in his support that required explanation.

It was precisely this reversal of the questions that needed to be asked that constituted Possum's challenge to journalists: he accused them of either failing to understand or else obfuscating the clear trends in the polling.

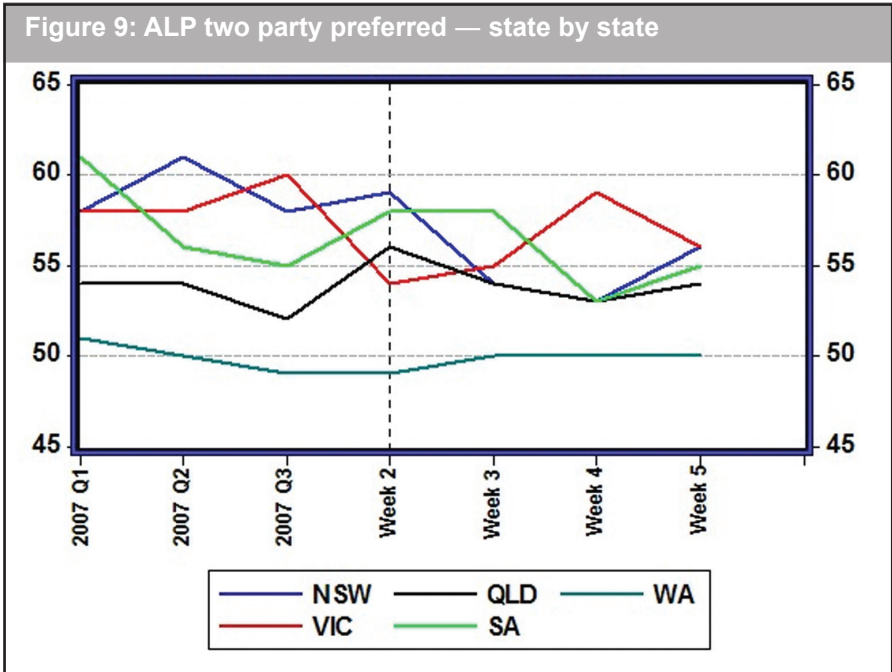




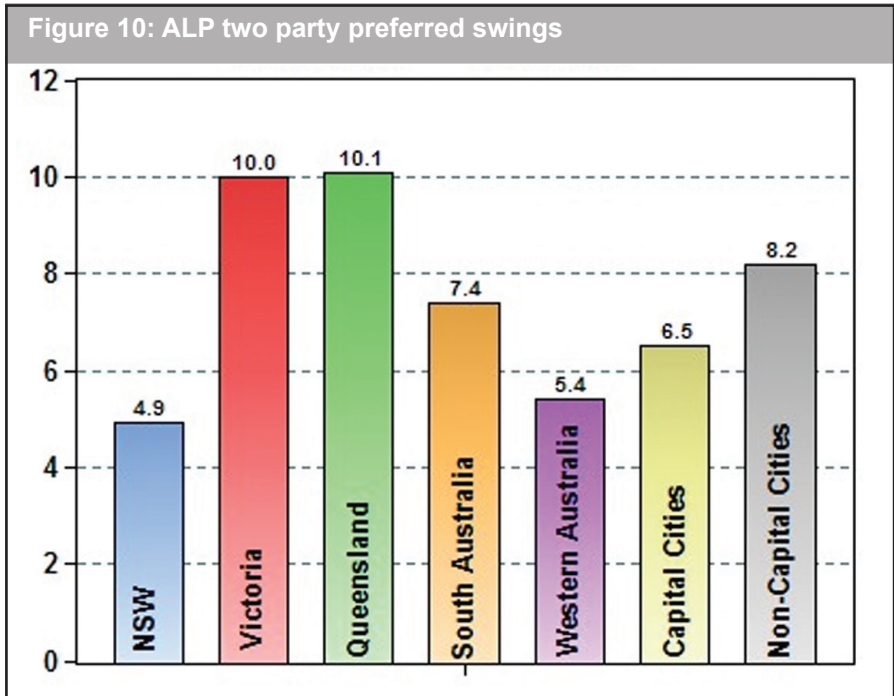
Possum extended the depth of his analysis from the level of a uniform national analysis to a state-based analysis to identify local trends during the campaign (Figure 9) and state-based swings (Figure 10). He also decreased the sampling margin of error by deriving the average prediction of the four polls (Figure 11) and reconciling this with the swings required to win individual seats.

For Possum, the major significance of these charts was the long-term stability of their predictions, and therefore the key question for political analysis was: if the polls meant anything and barring unforeseen events, the result of the 2007 election was a foregone conclusion—why was that so? And why was that not what journalists were reporting and analysing?

Journalistic coverage of an election campaign is of course not restricted to analysis of the opinion polls, and ranges across issues and policies. Part way through the election campaign, a set of strategic analyses prepared by Crosby Textor, the Liberal Party's private polling and strategic consultants, was leaked to the media. They analysed the relevance of particular sets of issues to the

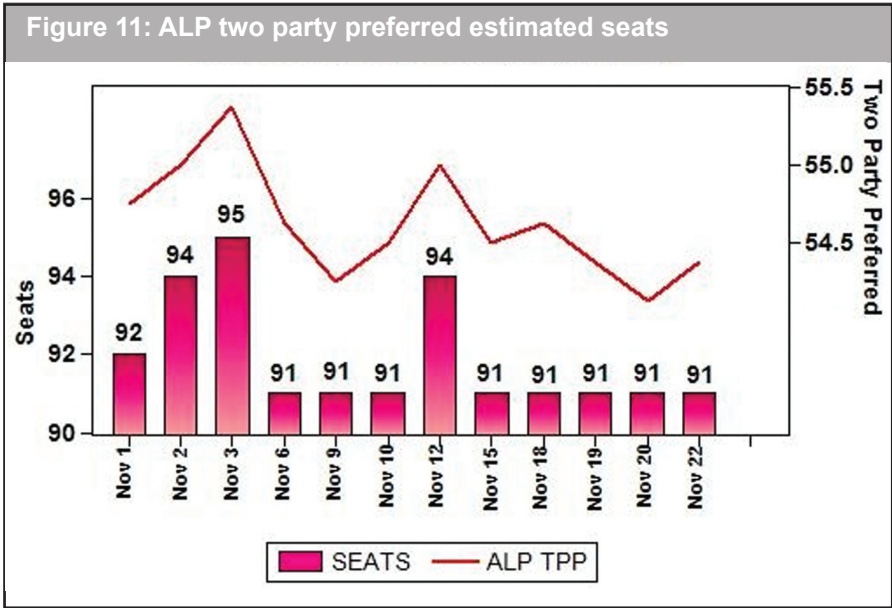


concerns of various social demographics, and the likelihood that particular issues were of vote-changing importance for nominated demographics. Possum produced a series of regression analyses to analyse the relationship between voters’ attitudes to particular issues and their voting intentions. It was his analysis of the relationship between interest rate rises and voting intentions that brought him to mainstream media prominence. It was produced in the middle of the campaign shortly before the Reserve Bank raised interest rates, which was generally anticipated to be a negative factor for the government. It demonstrated that there was a relationship between the movements in interest rates (represented by the cash rate charged to banks by the Reserve Bank of Australia) and voting intentions, but that there was a time lag of about one month between the two and therefore an interest rate rise was unlikely to have an impact on this particular election result. This argument, and the accompanying chart with a Possum’s source credit, was put in an article by *The Australian’s* political reporter George Megalogenis (Figure 12) on November 2, the day after the interest rate rise was announced by the RBA. It was also reproduced on the Channel 10 evening news bulletin that evening.



Possum reported in an email exchange with the author that some journalists were now starting to email him privately to check their interpretations of the polls before reporting. Journalists also picked up on his arguments about the alleged ‘narrowing’ of the gap in the opinion polls between government and opposition during the course of a campaign. He demonstrated that since 1983 on only two occasions had the gap in the polls narrowed during a federal election campaign, and on some occasions the gap had widened, but that mostly the stability of the long-term trends was maintained. Possum viewed the decline over the campaign in discussion of the ‘narrowing’, and indeed the very usage of that term of his to describe the supposed phenomenon, as evidence of journalists’ regard for his analyses.

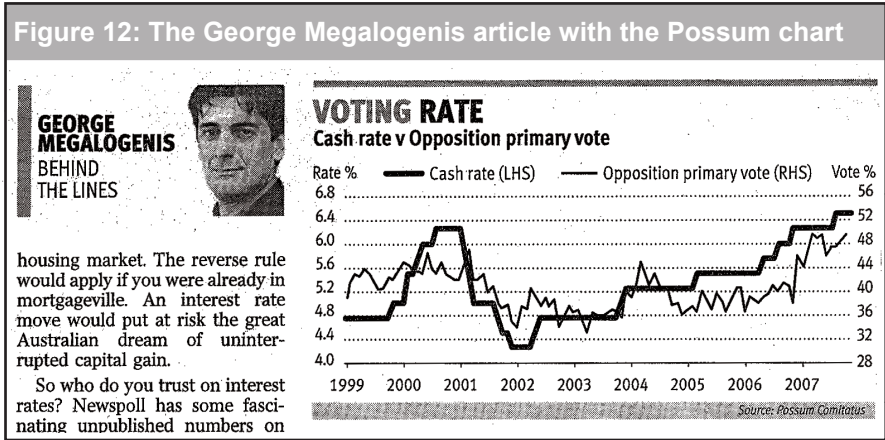
Possum deployed his regression analysis methodology to consider one of the core strategic claims of the government’s re-election campaign: that voters should support the party that they considered to be better economic managers. He established that there was no correlation between voters’ opinion that the Coalition parties are better economic managers and their



preparedness to vote for the ALP, and indeed that the only relation between this issue and the Coalition vote was a negative one, or in other words that they would be prepared to vote against the Coalition if they thought it was a poor economic manager, but not necessarily for it if they thought it was the better economic manager. By the end of the campaign, few journalists were asserting a link between the two variables: a notable exception was the former director of Newspoll, Sol Lebovic, on the ABC’s *7.30 Report* on the last night of election coverage, which perhaps served to confirm the opinions of some psephs that Newspoll and News Ltd newspapers were biased towards the Coalition in their interpretation of their poll.

At this point, about halfway through the campaign, newspapers (apart from the News Ltd mastheads, particularly *The Australian*) started to consider the possibility that the fight was over, and the election result was a foregone conclusion. And even at *The Australian*, it was mainly editor-at-large Paul Kelly, political editor Dennis Shanahan and political correspondent Patricia Karvelas who were still reporting the election as an open contest. However, across all media there was effectively no consideration of the obvious question: if the Coalition parties were facing loss of government federally, and therefore of not holding power in any parliament at either the state or federal level, how

Figure 12: The George Megalogenis article with the Possum chart

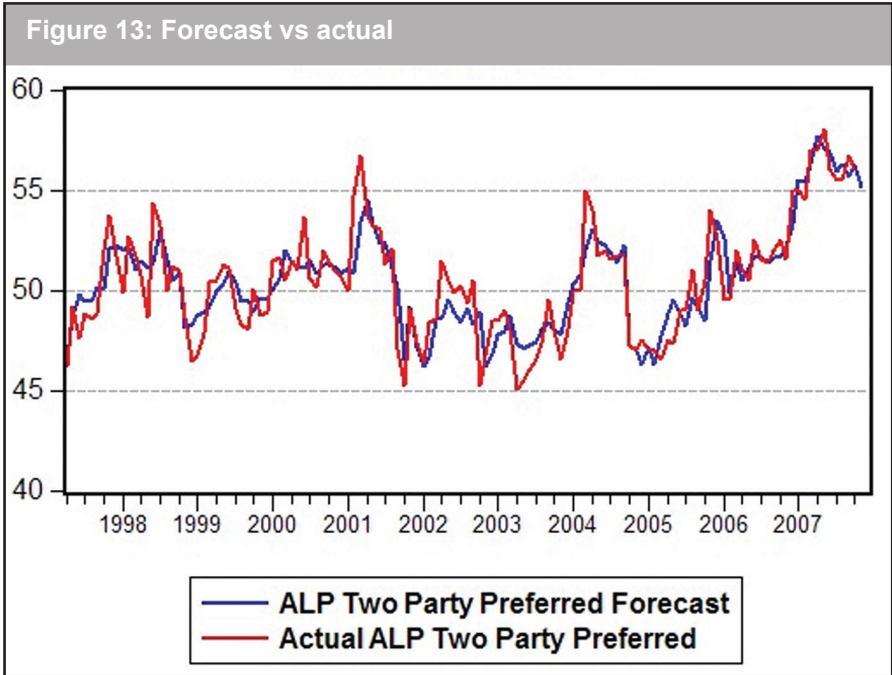


had this unprecedented situation come about and what were its meanings?

In the final week of the campaign, Possum did a calculation to predict the election outcome based around a regression analysis of the Newspolls going back to the 1996 elections (possumcomitatus.wordpress.com/2007/11/16/the-headline-forecast-%e2%80%93-regression-prediction-model). The calculation involved ascribing values to unanticipated factors that he tagged ‘dummy events’, and ultimately involved some non-mathematical evaluations. He retrospectively applied his formula to the ten years of Newspoll results (Figure 13) and previous elections, and achieved predictions within a margin of error of less than 0.1 percent (0.09 percent for 1998, 0.08 percent for 2001 and 0.03 percent for 2004).

On the basis of this retrospective success, he predicted a 2007 poll result of 55.15 percent for the ALP two party preferred vote, with a forecast error of plus or minus 2.8 percent for the ‘soft’ vote, and therefore that the ALP would win government with 91 seats.

In the event, the ALP TPP vote was 52.7 percent, which amounted to a 2.45 percent margin of error on Possum’s final prediction, within his forecast range for the soft vote. The ALP won 83 of 150 seats to take government. Possum, in a subsequent analysis calculated that the most accurate predictor of the final result in this instance had been the average of all four polls, which included the two polls for which he had less respect, Galaxy and Morgan (*Possum Pollytics*: 2 December 2007: possumcomitatus.wordpress.com/2007/12/02/a-jump-in-the-wayback-machine/). This suggests that the



imponderables of individual decision-making in a national election might produce a minimum margin of error of around 2.5 percent that cannot be further reduced by statistical compensation.

Beyond the interest value inherent in predicting the outcome of a hard-fought election campaign, Possum’s activity is instructive with respect to the challenge that the internet poses to mainstream news outlets. Firstly, there is his chosen anonymity, as compared with the brand-name mastheads and bylines of the mainstream media. Possum held a cloak over his identity despite the fact that he clearly enjoyed his rapid rise to prominence and on his blog reported a number of job offers that were made to him during the campaign. Perhaps the Scarlet Pimpernel factor is a dimension in the interest he provoked, and the very absence of a known identity defines his presence as an individual worth watching. But such anonymity is not rare. Indeed Wikipedia, with one of every 200 pages accessed worldwide on the web, is undoubtedly the most successful information site predicated on anonymity. Wikipedia with its legions of contributors might be thought of as *Possum Comitatus* writ large.

Research indicates that Wikipedia's level of accuracy is comparable to those in authoritative encyclopedias such as Encyclopedia Britannica (*Nature* 438, 900-901, 15 December 2005: Special report: Internet encyclopaedias go head to head www.nature.com/nature/journal/v438/n7070/full/438900a.html) and increasingly readers can get more up-to-date and accurate information from Wikipedia than from traditional news media. *The New York Times* reported in April 2007 that during the Virginia Tech massacre, Wikipedia was a more accurate and up-to-date source of information than the electronic news bulletins or what their own journalists were reporting. The local newspaper at Blacksburg Virginia, *The Roanoke Times*, found Wikipedia to be more authoritative than the local police briefings, and began sourcing their information from there (*New York Times*, 23 April 2007: *The Latest on Virginia Tech, From Wikipedia*). During the stranding and release of the ship *Pasha Bulker* on a beach at Newcastle north of Sydney, I casually monitored mainstream media coverage (which was considerable) and compared it to Wikipedia's (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasha_Bulker): apart from the live video coverage on mainstream media websites at the very point of final release, the quality, amount and timeliness of information was consistently better on Wikipedia than on the news sites.

Of course, Wikipedia is a site of contestation in the production of news and information, albeit with its own specific characteristics. On the morning this article was delivered at a conference, which was the day before the elections, the author checked the Wikipedia coverage of a political scandal that had engulfed the Coalition in previous days concerning a retiring Member of Parliament, Jackie Kelly (Wikipedia: Lindsay pamphlet scandal, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lindsay_pamphlet_scandal), and found firstly that the coverage was very full and accurate according to known media reports, but secondly that it was several times and severely culled during the day, although the main elements could still be garnered by reading all the linked news reports in the footnotes of the entry. The archeology of the entry on Jackie Kelly is available on the page, and it would enable an interesting research analysis on the chronology and character of contestation of the 'facts' of a politically sensitive report. This real-time process in the encyclopedic genre in a politically charged environment reduces the account to the maximum that the protagonists can agree on, which clearly is a limitation of the encyclopedic mode compared to more traditional news genres, but that is beside the point

regarding anonymity. And Possum, of course, was in charge of his own blog and could control access.

It might be countered that an encyclopedia is a different genre of information source to a news site: the former expands and consolidates information while the latter updates a restricted range of fresh information, but again that is beside the point concerning anonymity. Traditional news corporations claim that it is their public's brand recognition of their mastheads and prominent individual journalists that constitutes their authority, and yet *Possum* at one extreme and Wikipedia at the other have successfully challenged this claim. Their authority lies within the quality of their product without support from recognition or knowledge of the personalities involved.

Journalists and newspaper publishers have long laid claim to be acting in service of the public right to know, but comfortably have been able to assume a largely passive public. The power of mastheads has been aggregated and measured in commercial terms through circulation and viewing statistics. Anonymous, free reporting and analysis on the internet challenges that comfortable assumption.

The concepts of 'citizen journalism' and 'public journalism' fail to capture the essence or scale of the challenge, because they assume that members of the public are acting as journalists, albeit without the normal professional accountabilities or protections. But Possum and the wiki encyclopedists are not standing in for journalists—they are contributing from their store of expertise or knowledge as members of the public in a non-professionalised manner, asserting a simple concern with truth and accuracy.

Wikipedia with its anonymous 'foot soldiers of truth' are posting, checking and culling information in service to the public right to know, and not sitting passively waiting for journalists and the news media to do it for them. It is a step towards the de-professionalisation of part of the information-gathering and publication process, which should be neither romanticised nor demonized but recognised as a challenge to traditional modes of researching and reporting information, a challenge that is powerful precisely because the anonymity of the contributors focuses the contest with traditional information media not on brand-name credibility but on the quality of the information and analysis.

Newspaper publishers characterise the challenge more acutely when they acknowledge that there is no business model for news on the internet, and in 2007 a classified advertisement for which the print edition of *The Sydney*

Morning Herald could charge \$3.25 was worth only \$1 on the *Herald's* website—a catastrophic cut of 70 percent in the ‘rivers of gold’ which is how the classified income of the Fairfax newspaper were historically described. Professionalised workforces strongly assert that the quality of journalism, and particularly of investigative reports and independent analysis, is under threat because news corporations no longer make the profits that underwrote the time-intensive nature of serious research and reporting, particularly of an investigative nature.

Within the paradigm of news production being the province of large corporations employing well-paid workforces, this may be true, but at the same time we should acknowledge that firstly, the emergence and professionalisation of a journalistic workforce itself is an historically specific phenomenon dating from the mid-nineteenth century (Lloyd, 1985; Carey, 1989, 1996; Schudson, 2001) with specific geographical and cultural characteristics (Aldridge, 1998; Chalaby, 1996; Aldridge & Evetts, 2003), and secondly, the industrialisation of newspaper production took place hand in hand with the growing dependence on advertising to underwrite the journalism (Curran, 1977), which had the effect of destroying in the British instance a huge and vibrant working class press that was of no interest to advertisers because the British working class had levels of income that could not support discretionary expenditure in response to advertising. The cost of production under the factory system far exceeded the possibility of recovery through sale price, and advertising became the revenue source to support newspaper production. Indeed, Curran recounts the stunning experience of the *Daily Herald*, which was forced to cease publication as an independent newspaper in 1921 at the point when it had the largest circulation of any newspaper in Britain and a still growing readership precisely because that readership was of no interest to advertisers (Curran, 1977, p. 221).

The link between advertising income and the viability of large scale distribution of information through news media has been irretrievably severed by internet technology, and in many ways the newspaper publishing situation has returned to the *status quo ante* of the early 19th century when technological entry barriers (paper, simple printing presses) and labour costs were low. In fact, it could be argued that the cost of entry to internet publishing is effectively zero. It doesn't cost anything to become Possum Comitatus. It does not cost anything to post an entry on Wikipedia. As long as Possum's

partner is prepared to earn the cash income while he does the cooking and the blogging, there is no economic factor to prevent publication and unlimited circulation, and as in the early 19th century there is no economic barrier to a massive expansion in the demographics of information receipt. Economic restrictions on freedom of speech in industrialised societies have disappeared, in the same way that they were not present up until about the 1860s. So just as journalism as we know it—an increasingly professionalised category of information work—was linked to a particular political economy of information production, so it is in turn being challenged by a massive shift in that political economy. Possum is an instance of that shift.

Curran points out that advertising as a factor controlling the political power of the press replaced two earlier attempts, licensing and taxation, that foundered because they were effectively unenforceable (Curran, 1977, pp. 198-202). That unenforceability related partly to the size and effectiveness of the policing and revenue-collecting administrations, but that was in large part due to the difficulty of establishing precisely who was doing what and where they were doing it. The surveillance capacities of the internet are intrinsic to its functionality, and have effectively been used by nation states, eg. Singapore and China, and by police forces, for example in pursuing paedophiles. Both private and state monitoring and actions against individual and corporate publishers are now feasible in ways that were not available the last time there were no economic impediments to publishing, ie. in the early 19th century in Europe. An excellent example of this emerged in the election campaign when *The Australian* newspaper reprinted, allegedly out of context, an email about Israel sent when she was a student politician five years earlier by the staff of one candidate in the hotly contested seat of Wentworth with its large Jewish population (*The Australian*, 21 November 2007, p. 1). The story was accompanied by a current photograph of the person, and though she hotly disputed the accuracy and interpretation of the report, the mere fact of publication shortly before polling day was a political intervention. Undoubtedly there are individuals and groups archiving emails, postings on Facebook and other websites for possible future deployment.

There is another resonance with the early 19th century. Habermas's account of the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere (Habermas, 1989) to challenge the power of feudal socio-economic and political relations emphasised the role of what he termed 'audience-oriented privacy' in

constituting a new discursive social space. By this he meant the activity of private individuals articulating points of view and representing their taste and attitudes to others outside the venues or concerns of official state discourse. It was both audience-oriented (social) and private (bypassing the forms and venues of officially sanctioned discourse). Habermas has been criticised (eg. McKee, 2005) for allegedly fetishising the role of particular venues—coffee houses—and particular discursive modes—rational, middle class, male—but that misses his point that the venues for this social activity were geographically and historically contingent, that the participants he was concerned with represented the characteristics of the newly emerging dominant social class, and that these venues and discourses were precisely the location for their mutual development and recognition of common class interests. Far from idealising his analysis, he was thoroughly grounding it in the material specificities of its time and place.

The anonymity of internet communicators such as Possum and Wikipedia is a more refined instance of Habermas's argument about audience-oriented privacy, because while the habitus and socio-cultural capital of 18th century merchants and capitalists in a coffee lounge was immediately obvious to their interlocutors and could be considered a limiting factor to gain access to these new venues, this does not apply to the internet. While language and intellectual concerns are themselves manifestations of habitus and cultural capital, and Possum through his writing has an identifiable if unnamed personality and intellect, the anonymity of participation does privilege the form and content of discourse as dependent on the merits of the argument in the eyes of the readers, as against the personal status and position of the anonymous author. The internet is a venue where new social groupings may come to recognise and develop their mutual concerns outside and ultimately against pre-existing social structures and processes. Such structures may include classifications and divisions of labour such as professions in general and journalism as we know it in particular.

I am not arguing here that the internet constitutes an epochal shift in the class structure of society, as indeed Habermas was not arguing that rational discussion constituted a new social structure, but rather that the mode of communication enables different social groupings to discourse directly with each other in their own chosen mode without the imprimatur—political or economic—of the powers that be in that time and place. In this respect,

Habermas's early theorisations may re-emerge as a powerful tool for analysing the socio-historical specificities of this new discursive medium.

In conclusion, it is quite clear that the nexus between advertising revenue and the economic viability of news producing corporations as we have known them since the late 19th century is being severely challenged. That nexus underpinned the emergence of the profession of journalism as we now know it, and in turn the structure of that profession is similarly being severely challenged, especially at the cost-intensive end of investigative reporting and independent analysis. The conflict between political reporters and the psephs in the run-up to polling day was a straw in the wind, as *Age* journalist Jason Koutsoukis acknowledged four days out from polling day:

Psephologists vs pundits

An interesting divide in this election campaign has been between the psephologists who are all confidently predicting a Labor landslide, and the commentators, most of whom are yet to step off the fence. So why is there such a yawning gap between the two groups, especially when all the objective evidence points to a Labor landslide?

Firstly, the psephologists, whose predictions are helpfully tabulated on Bryan Palmer's excellent OzPolitics website. Their predictions are:

William Bowe of Poll Bludger says the ALP will win 84 seats
Simon Jackman says the ALP will win 88 seats
Malcolm MacKerras says the ALP will win 89 seats
Peter Brent (mumble.com.au) says Labor will win 90 seats
Possums Polytics says Labor will win 94 seats
Geoff Lambert says Labor will win 97 seats
Bryan Palmer says Labor will win 88 seats.

These people are not commentators and have no intimate daily connection with politics like journalists in the Canberra Press Gallery. They are literally just casual observers who prefer to call it as they see it.

Unlike those of us in the Canberra Press Gallery, they most probably don't spend their days talking to politicians, and nor would they spend much time talking to the legions of strategists, spin doctors, and advisers that we spend so many hours a week chatting to.

Yet my prediction is that these casual observers will be a lot closer to the mark than us professionals, which gives me a slightly uncomfortable feeling.

The reason most journalists are not making a prediction is because we live in terror of offending one side or the other and of being cut off 'the drip'. So most of us hedge our bets and don't say what we really think.

(blogs.theage.com.au/koutsoukis/archives/2007/11/psephologists_v.html)

Koutsoukis was highlighting the mutual dependency of routinised source-journalist interactions in the press gallery as the source of the problem, and this may well be true; but the scale of the challenge to industrialised news production as we know it has now surpassed the potential of individual journalists to act in remission. Possum doesn't want to be a journalist, of the usual or citizen variety for that matter, and although he is challenging the way that journalists do their job, the power of the challenge is not so much in the contested intricacies of particular stories and issues, but in the way the form of the challenge undercuts the political economy of journalism's relationship with the public over whose right to know it has claimed suzerainty.

Notes

1. The graphs with this article are reproduced in colour on the *Pacific Journalism Review* website: www.pjreview.info
2. Australian Federal elections use a preferential voting system, in which all valid votes must ultimately flow via preferences to the winning candidate or their leading opponent.

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