
Theme : The public right to know

1. Political blogging in the 2007 Australian federal election: Beyond citizen journalism and towards civic creativity

ABSTRACT

Much of the discussion of the emergence, role and significance of the political blogosphere in Australia has been marred by boosterism on one hand and tired and stereotyped dichotomies on the other. As with so much of the discourse that developed from the 1990s onwards surrounding the social and informational roles of the internet, boosterism and a constant search for the new 'killer app' have gone hand in hand. Unrealistic expectations are created by those who have made a career out of promoting and 'monetising' blogging, and when those expectations fail to be realised, the ever shifting frontier of social media technologies is invoked in a frenzied search for the 'new blogging'. At the same time, the multifaceted and rich suite of social practices that comprise blogs and blogging are obscured by being viewed through a very narrow lens. This commentary argues that both sets of frames were (mis)applied to the role of blogs in the lead up to the 2007 Australian federal election.

Keywords: blogging, blogosphere, social media technologies, public sphere

MARK BAHNISCH

Queensland University of Technology

MUCH of the discussion of the emergence, role and significance of the political blogosphere in Australia has been marred by boosterism on one hand and tired and stereotyped dichotomies on the other. As with so much of the discourse that developed from the 1990s

onwards surrounding the social and informational roles of the internet, boosterism and a constant search for the new ‘killer app’ have gone hand in hand. Unrealistic expectations are created by those who have made a career out of promoting and ‘monetising’ blogging, and when those expectations fail to be realised, the ever shifting frontier of social media technologies is invoked in a frenzied search for the ‘new blogging’. At the same time, and not coincidentally, the multifaceted and rich suite of social practices that comprise blogs and blogging are obscured by being viewed through a very narrow lens which treats blogging as a supplement to debates about the decline of the media and/or of the public sphere, rather than as a phenomenon worthy of study in its own right.

This commentary argues that both sets of frames were (mis)applied to the role of blogs in the lead up to the 2007 Australian federal election. When it became clear that the ‘netroots’ had arrived in American electoral politics—particularly as a result of Howard Dean’s 2004 campaign—expectations were created that the 2007 election in Australia would provide a test, or a hurdle for the Australian blogosphere to jump over. Implicit here was the implication that if blogs didn’t sway votes, or contribute to the national level public debate, they could be declared as failures and written off. But at the same time, major media organisations—and particularly News Limited—attempted to co-opt the potential reach of political blogs, through rebadging their own columnists as ‘bloggers’ and providing the facility for comments on the websites of the various mastheads, and thus to occupy the public space that may have been potentially available for blogs to operate in. So, if the election was also some sort of race to the finish for competing models of mediated political discussion as well as for the candidates and the parties, the rules of the game had effectively been rigged before the starting gun was fired.

Of course, such a test was artificial in the extreme. The comparison with the United States ignored massive differences in political culture, in the everyday practices of participative citizenship, and of the electoral and party systems—all of which militated against the development of an Australian ‘netroots’ organised around political blogging (Bahnisch, 2006). In addition, the commercial media was in a more powerful position in Australia to defend and extend its ‘ownership’ of public debate (Wilson, 2007). For instance, with the exception of the niche pay broadcaster Sky News, we have never had anything resembling the networks of politicised and opinionated cable television stations, and Australian talk radio is also far less engaged with

questions of electoral and partisan politics *per se* than in America. It could be argued that the fragmentation of media markets so evident in North America was reproduced in the Antipodes on a much smaller scale, and to a much lesser degree. So, in the absence of open and lengthy primary and general elections, and of a culture of engaged citizenship, and in a much more cohesive and smaller media space, it was always going to be relatively straightforward for the institutional and corporate entities which enable the press gallery culture to continue to fence off and defend the borders of acceptable and proprietorial political debate.

Why, then, did the ‘Government Gazette’ wars erupt so spectacularly with a series of remarkable and hyperbolic columns and editorials in *The Australian* in June 2007? If it was, or should have been, relatively easy for the News Limited papers to inoculate themselves against competition from independent bloggers by leveraging their already significant web presence to enable public discussion (even if it often took a form much closer to a bulletin board or forum than to a blog thread), then what was the need for their national flagship to editorialise in such absurd tones against the ‘smug, self assured, delusional swagger’ of ‘sheltered academics and failed journalists who would not get a job on a real newspaper’ (*The Australian*, 12 July 2007)

The short answer to the question is obvious—the barbarians had been knocking at the gates, and the psephological bloggers had consistently demonstrated the ignorance of the press gallery punditariat when it came to the interpretation of polling data. There has been no attempt by *The Australian* to revisit its claims since 24 November 2007—unsurprisingly, because for all its own bluster, the allegedly expert knowledge of the professional pundits proved to be massively wrong. More broadly, it is clear that the provision of expert and aggregated knowledge of politics via blogs was perceived as a massive potential threat to the exclusive license the commercial media affords itself to occupy the centre of public space. Even if the commentary of psephological bloggers such as Peter Brent, William Bowe and Possum Comitatus had a primary audience that was relatively small, it could be refracted beyond the size of the readership of their blogs through citation and publication in *Crikey*—‘that thing on the internet’—which in effect pitched at the same engaged and aware audience that *The Australian* had formerly monopolised, and it could be disseminated through political journalism and analysis elsewhere in the press, as it was.

Much more could be said about this incident, but the language of professionalism is important, and not just for the implication that the political class should have the professional right to circumscribe the borders of acceptable public commentary. Sociologists, in seeking to understand what is new and different about 'late modernity', have pointed to a complex process of de-differentiation, where many of the borders erected around particular areas of knowledge and specialisation become much more porous as lives, media and careers become increasingly 'liquid' (Bauman, 2000, 2005). The media, far from being peripheral to this process, are in fact one of its key nodes (Deuze, 2007; Bruns 2008a). Intriguingly, the ABC and SBS as public broadcasters, and to a lesser degree the proprietors of commercial media in Australia, are way out in front of most columnists and political journalists in appreciating the changed information architecture—and its possibilities for harnessing 'producers' to participate in and shape networks of content creation (Bruns 2008a). At a time when there is less specialisation within journalism, and apparently a much higher degree of reliance on sources rather than independent research and news gathering (Bahnisch, 2008a), pro/am content creators may be better placed to do the work of research and mediation and contextualisation than those who are paid to do it.

As well as the attempted monopolisation of the 'ownership' of political analysis (Wilson, 2007), there is no doubt that classic professional strategies of social closure are at work among the press gallery community. As with most such strategies in a democratised informational age, their success is likely to be at best partial. This analysis, however, is proposed as a partial explanation of why the tired 'bloggers v journalists' narrative was given so much prominence by those who might have—under other circumstances—preferred to ignore the perceived competition altogether, as monopolies often tend to do.

The intrusion of the pro/ams into the hitherto bounded professional space policed by the press gallery illustrates some of the classic virtues of blogs—their power to aggregate distributed knowledge and to challenge accepted 'media narratives'. But it is also significant that the point of most influence of the political blogosphere is one of the points at which the quality of the Australian media debate is so poor—the continual reduction of political reporting to the horse race aspects of electioneering, and the obsession with over-interpreting polls. Blogs are playing a very useful role in knocking this narrative off centre, and aggregating expert but outsider analyses, but to some degree at least are

still talking largely about polls and the horse race. In a sense, if a majority of political journalists are happiest portraying bloggers as adversaries rather than as potential collaborators, the more effective strategy for negating the competition would be to match its strengths. The fact that professional and media cultures are so deeply embedded, however, means that the space for blogs will continue to exist.

All this raises the question of blog influence. Again, the way in which influence is measured—and more importantly, conceptualised—tends to be rather reductive in its dependence on the parameters of discussions about the decline of the mainstream media, which are actually inapplicable or doubtfully applicable, to web 2.0 generally. *The Australian* itself understands that raw numbers are not the metric in question when it comes to shaping a national conversation, and so do bloggers. *Larvatus Prodeo* has demonstrated in 2008 that it is possible to create a business model for blogging, and to continue to increase page views and unique visitors after the stimulus of a national election campaign has passed (Jameson, 2008). Similarly, *On Line Opinion* has shown that a sustainable model for political and public affairs commentary can be established and sustained over the long term without needing to shelter under the wing of an established news media brand.

It has already been argued that ‘shifting votes’, or other aspects of the ‘netroots’ model of the American A-list blogosphere is not an appropriate comparator for the Australian political blogosphere. Research at Queensland University of Technology’s Creative Industries Faculty (Bruns, 2008b), however, has demonstrated that political blogs are central to the discussion of public affairs in the Australian online space. The facilitation of such discussion, the considerable work that goes into it, and the expertise that underpins it (Bahnisch, 2008b) are not best conceptualised as ‘citizen journalism’ and its value exists outside the dichotomy of blogging and journalism.

While the spectre of a unified public sphere mapped on the space of a nation has often haunted and stimulated concerns about the fracturing of media, there may actually be value in a globalised and localised world of the emergence of ‘counter-publics’ (Gregg, 2008) which can be woven together into an alternative public discussion. The experience of the feminist blogosphere is salutary in this regard in showing how particular perspectives and groups can intervene in and influence broader conversations while providing a space for those who might otherwise feel isolated to leverage a collective mass.

It is the art of public and political conversation that I think creates most value for Australian political blogs, and it is a form of conversation that has the potential to migrate beyond the blogging platform itself. To the degree that this civic art is cultivated, I believe that to be an unalloyed good that political blogs have provided, if not one that is easily captured by most of the clichés and the mirrored narratives of boosterism and denigration.

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THE PUBLIC RIGHT TO KNOW

Mark Bahnisch is a sociologist who lectures in the Faculty of Creative Industries at Queensland University of Technology. He founded the blog Larvatus Prodeo, and has published on new media as well as writing for and creating new media. An earlier version of this commentary was presented at the Public Right to Know Conference at the University of Technology, Sydney, on 23 November 2007. The author wishes to acknowledge Professor Chris Nash and Jan McClelland of the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism for the invitation and their hospitality, and colleagues and friends Rachel Hills, Professor Terry Flew, Graham Young, Dr Jason Wilson, Barry Saunders, Tim Watts, Professor Julianne Schultz, Dr Axel Bruns, Margaret Simons and Kim Jameson for conversations which have been extremely helpful in thinking about politics and new media.

mbahnisch@gmail.com

PACIFIC MEDIA CENTRE



The Pacific Media Centre (Te Amokura) is the only media research and community resource centre of its kind in Aotearoa/New Zealand and has a strategic focus on Māori, Pasifika and diversity media and community development. It was established by AUT University's Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies in 2007, having evolved from a cluster of research and community collaborations within the School of Communication Studies.

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www.pmc.aut.ac.nz | pmc@aut.ac.nz