

## Life beyond the Public Sphere: Towards a Networked Model for Political Deliberation

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A rare moment of regime change may be ahead in the short history of Australian parliamentary democracy: for the first time in over a decade, a credible leader of the Labor opposition has emerged, and threatens what even Prime Minister John Howard in an unusually candid assessment has acknowledged may be not only the defeat, but the “annihilation” of the ruling conservative Coalition at the upcoming federal election in late 2007 (Coorey 23 May 2007). Even in spite of such critical self-assessment by the government, however, mainstream journalism in the country has continued to act largely as cheerleaders for the incumbents: in the face of months of public opinion polls showing a significant lead for the opposition over the government, and of fluctuations only well within the margin of error, the Canberra press gallery has nonetheless (mis)interpreted each minute and temporary drop in Labor’s figures as “the end of the honeymoon” for Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd. At the time of writing, both in his personal approval ratings and in the public’s voting intentions as reported in the polls, Rudd and his party continue to be well ahead of the government (Roy Morgan Research 2007), even in spite of the delivery of the 2007/8 federal budget, controversy over Rudd’s wife’s company’s treatment of employees, suggestions that Labor was too closely aligned with belligerent workers’ unions, and critical comments by former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating, each of which had been seen by commentators as undermining Rudd’s and Labor’s new-found popularity (see e.g. opinion pieces in *The Australian* by Political Editor Dennis Shanahan, on 11 May, 26 May, 18 June, 10 July).

The fact that such sustained negativity from government and mainstream journalism has so far been unable to affect the polls documents the overall mood for change in the Australian populace, perhaps – but even more crucially, it points to a significant and widening disconnect between the public itself, and the traditional institutions of the public sphere: the mass media acting as an independent, “intermediary system between state and society” (Habermas 2006: 412). Indeed, globally, both independence and intermediacy of the conventional public sphere are now under threat from a variety of factors, but (as the Australian example shows) this does not necessarily undermine the political system itself; instead, it is possible to point to a variety of new spaces which augment and supplement the mass-mediated public sphere by adding new modes and models of public, political interaction.

Australia is only one example for such tendencies, and perhaps a particularly obvious one: for a variety of historical reasons, media ownership concentration is more pronounced here than in most other democratic nations, and the key media of print and television are dominated by a very small number of operators – key state capitals such as Brisbane and

Perth, for example, are each served only by one local newspaper, and there is only one truly national paper, *The Australian* (all owned by News Ltd., the domestic arm and foundation stone of the Murdoch family's NewsCorp empire). Indeed, *The Australian* has become something of a lightning-rod for public criticism of mass media bias in favour of the incumbent government: Australian political blogs and the news commentary site *Crikey*, for example, are currently engaged in an almost daily ritual of highlighting the paper's perceived partisan coverage and systemic misinterpretation of opinion polls, and offering their own, alternative interpretations.

Such bottom-up pressure appears to have had a surprisingly strong effect on the paper's journalists: in its 12 July 2007 editorial, the paper explicitly attacks what it regards as "the one-eyed anti-Howard cheer squad now masquerading as serious online political commentary", and conversely plays up its own political expertise and independence (*The Australian* 12 July 2007), in an extraordinarily thin-skinned and bad-tempered display. The previous evening, on his official blog, the paper's Political Editor Dennis Shanahan, a frequent target for blogger criticism for his often overtly biased commentary and illogical interpretation of poll results, had already fired his own shot at "all of the academic PhD aspirants and armchair journalists" (11 July 2007) who criticise his version of reality, ending his post with grand pathos: "cheers to all those who engage in the great, democratic and political exercise of freedom of speech" (the reader discussion attached to the post was shut down after 16 comments, only three of which supported Shanahan's views).

The one Australian blogger directly named in the editorial (and perhaps alluded to by Shanahan), Peter Brent, reports that "a courtesy call from Editor-in-Chief Chris Mitchell this morning informed me that the paper is going to 'go' [in Australian parlance, personally attack] Charles Richardson (from *Crikey*) and me tomorrow" (Brent 11 July 2007) – a PhD student researching electoral behaviour, Brent has been a consistent source of alternative expert analysis of opinion poll results. At the same time, undermining *The Australian's* claims of impartiality and Shanahan's ode to freedom of speech, a post critiquing the paper's editorial by the one leftist blogger working for the joint News Ltd. site *News.com.au*, Tim Dunlop, was unilaterally removed by its editors (but has been reposted on left-leaning group blog *Larvatus Prodeo*); as Dunlop describes it in a later posting, "yep, the editor here pulled a post yesterday, which I ain't happy about, though of course, in the greater scheme of things editors pulling copy is hardly unusual. Nonetheless, it is something we are discussing" (Dunlop 13 July 2007).

Such developments go well beyond the day-to-day cut and thrust of mass media politics. Much as months of poor opinion polls have created continuing rumours of last-ditch leadership challenges in the Coalition, in an attempt to avoid annihilation at the ballot box by replacing Howard with a more appealing candidate, so have months of persistent efforts by bloggers and citizen journalists in Australia to neutralise and counteract news media industry spin in political reporting left the leaders of the journalism industry in an uneasy, jittery mood (veteran political journalist Glenn Milne even physically attacked *Crikey* founder Stephen

Mayne in a drunken outburst at the November 2006 Walkley Awards for journalism; see Welch, 4 Dec. 2006). What emerges here is a consistent pattern which transcends the daily news cycle: even though, by comparison with the U.S. benchmark, Australian news bloggers and citizen journalists still remain a relatively small (if vocal) societal group, the news establishment is clearly beginning to feel the threat of losing its role as opinion leaders, as orchestrators and moderators of political debate and discussion on what Habermas (2006) describes as the “virtual stage” of the mass-mediated public sphere. The threat here is not so much the emergence of news bloggers and citizen journalists as an alternative group of moderators, however, but rather the decline and reconfiguration of the conventional public sphere itself: the slow, casual collapse (*Trendwatching* 2005) of the one-to-many mass media of the industrial age, and their replacement with the many-to-many, user-led media of the networked age whose systemic features necessitate the development of vastly different models for the mediation of political processes.

Many other Western nations are experiencing a similar decline of the mass-mediated public sphere as an accurate representation of public opinion, and a conduit for connecting state and society: in such countries, too, a variety of factors ranging from the faltering revenue of print newspapers, increasing concentration in ownership, cuts in staff numbers and the subsequent amalgamation of newsrooms with commercial sections in the organisation, have led to a marked and continuing decline in journalistic standards for some time now (see e.g. Fallows, 1997; Downie Jr. and Kaiser, 2002). This is further exacerbated by overt political pressure by proprietors and politicians, as well as journalistic self-censorship in anticipation of such pressure, as they have been evident for example in the systemic failure of mainstream journalism in many nations to question the reasons for the invasion of Iraq (see e.g. Bennett *et al.*, 2007), and to provide independent coverage of its aftermath. (Veteran New York Times journalist John F. Burns openly admitted that “we failed the American public by being insufficiently critical about elements of the administration's plan to go to war”, for example; see e.g. Rich, 2004.) Such developments remain somewhat less pronounced in a number of European countries where journalism has traditionally operated in the presence of a strong public service broadcasting ethos, but (as the Hutton enquiry into the BBC has shown) even here, persistent political interference has increasingly served to undermine citizens' trust in the independence of the mediated public sphere (see e.g. Jempson, 2005). As a result, many such nations have seen the emergence of “a debate about the reinvention of representative democracy for an age in which the cultural norms of deference, distance and distrust are in decline”, as Coleman notes. “The extent to which that decline is reversible depends to a considerable extent upon the capacity of e-democracy to nourish a more inclusive, connected, and collaborative democratic sphere” – with e-democracy therefore understood here in its widest possible sense, not simply as a shift to providing e-government services (Coleman 2003: 137).

It is no accident that this challenge to the continued existence of the public sphere as an independent, intermediary system between state and society has emerged precisely at a

time that the fundamental framework for mass-mediated communication itself is tested and undermined by the arrival of networked, many-to-many media as an alternative to the traditional mass media model of the industrial age. The state → public sphere → society model maps immediately on the producer → distributor → consumer model of the industrial economy, best formulated in the context of political mass media perhaps as politicians → journalists → citizens; in keeping with the dominant media structures of the industrial age, none of these models provide for strong mechanisms allowing feedback from the consumers or end users in the chain back to its starting points – communication remains largely unidirectional except for an occasional, limited opportunity for consumers and citizens to express their preferences through their purchasing (or voting) decisions.

Conventional political systems of the mass media age, then, by necessity embrace a model in which “mediated political communication is carried on by an elite” (Habermas 2006: 416) on the “virtual stage” provided by journalism, acted out in front of an audience of largely passive spectators whose own views are represented on the virtual stage only to the extent that journalists make the effort to seek them out. Traditionally, the privilege of forming part of the ‘Fourth Estate’ (especially where it is coupled with access to scarce public resources, such as the broadcast spectra of radio and television) has compelled and obliged journalists to act in the citizenry’s best interests by seeking out public opinion – as noted earlier, recent experience suggests, however, that for a variety of commercial, institutional, and ideological reasons such efforts to fairly and comprehensively represent society on the virtual stage are in decline. Instead, mass media journalism in many Western nations now forms an increasingly closed system – an echo chamber for the views of politicians, journalists, and pundits that operates at a growing distance from public opinion itself, or which at best carefully orchestrates the presentation of citizen views in radio call-in shows and televised ‘town hall’ meetings to support conventional journalistic clichés of public opinion (in the Australian context, see e.g. Turner, 2005; Masters, 2006). The public, meanwhile, are rapidly developing their own, alternative media – citizen journalism sites, news blogs, and other spaces for user-led content creation (see Bruns, 2005, 2006) – within which they conduct engaged and lively political discussion and deliberation away from the perceived spin of journalism’s punditariat.

### **Beyond the Public Sphere**

In such spaces, the formation of public opinion(s) continues even in spite of the casual collapse of industrial journalism; as the role of the traditional, society-wide public sphere in enabling citizens to form their views declines, a wide variety of new, conceptually localised public spheres has thus emerged, focussing on specific topics which are of interest to their particular constituencies of users and participants. Such issue publics no longer rely on the presence of specific entities in the journalism industry to provide their information, but are engaged in a communal process of gatewatching in which bloggers and citizen journalists

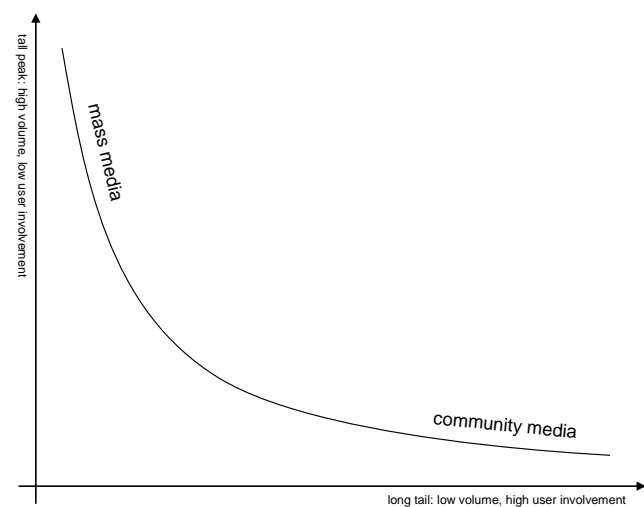
identify and link to or directly cite relevant materials as they become available (see Bruns, 2005). Through such processes, content is reappropriated and reinserted into the public debate beyond the conventional spaces of the virtual, mass media stage; discussion and deliberation are no longer staged by proxies acting in front of a relatively passive audience, but now directly involve citizens as active participants. In such environments, in other words, the virtual stage is altered and even dissolved, and citizens themselves become actors in the play of political engagement; rather than merely watching the struggle between a small number of political positions (in common journalistic practice represented often by no more than the two standard views espoused by the left and right of party politics), they now directly contribute their own opinions and ideas to the debate, alongside politicians, journalists, and pundits, leading to the emergence of a vastly more multiperspectival debate.

In the process, the virtual stage is revealed to be no more than an imperfect workaround designed to enable some degree of public discussion and deliberation to take place even within the unidirectional one-to-many media environments of print and broadcast. While Habermas notes that “the asymmetric actor-audience relation on the virtual stage of mediated communication” is not a dissonant feature *per se*, or a factor “that would deny the applicability of the model of deliberative politics” (2006: 415), the rise of alternatives to such mass-mediated communications models also indicates that the virtual stage of conventional journalism does not provide the only, or even the best, approach to public political discussion and deliberation; indeed, a model of deliberative politics is likely to be significantly more applicable to environments where citizens themselves are active participants in the process of political deliberation than to those where the affordances of the underlying technosocial frameworks of the mass media industry largely rule out such sustained, direct, active participation.

Where in the traditional model, political engagement is centred around a small number of key hubs all existing within the same epi-societal public sphere, then, in the new environment it is diffused, decentralised, distributed across the network itself; it takes place no longer in a distinct intermediary space which lies between but is part of neither the arena of politics and policy development nor of society at large, but in a shifting terrain which dissolves the boundaries of the public sphere and extends public participation from society towards the realms of media and politics to become pan-societal. This incorporation of the traditional spaces of journalism and politics into the wider network takes place whether journalists and politicians sanction it or not: the direct access to information which the networked informational environment makes possible is ultimately irresistible. Rather than serving as institutions clearly at the centre of the public sphere, providing the stage for public deliberation as acted out by journalists and politicians as proxies for citizens themselves, mass media organisations now become little more than clusters or nodes in the wider network; citizens themselves are actively and visibly involved in the processes of public communication and deliberation without a need for intermediaries to act on their behalf.

Such developments could be understood as contributing to the increasing fragmentation of society: the traditional public sphere was seen to provide a unified, central arena in which all themes of importance to contemporary society were played out with a high degree of visibility, allowing for the formation of public opinion and the formulation of policy solutions as informed by public opinion. However, the decline and failure of the journalistic system as we have experienced it in the past decades has already undermined this model of an informed democratic society; the formation of a variety of issue publics centred around specific topics and concerns therefore does not contribute so much to the further fragmentation of society beyond recall, but instead to the re-formation of a wider number of specific public spheres comprising self-selected subsets of society, within which the formation of public opinion at least by particular groups of participants and on specific topics through community deliberation is again made possible. Such individual public spheres necessarily overlap and interconnect: many of their participants will have multiple interests and will therefore be involved in a number of such individual communities; and thus, as “a larger number of people tend to take an interest in a larger number of issues, the overlap of issue publics may even serve to counter trends of fragmentation” (Habermas 2006: 422).

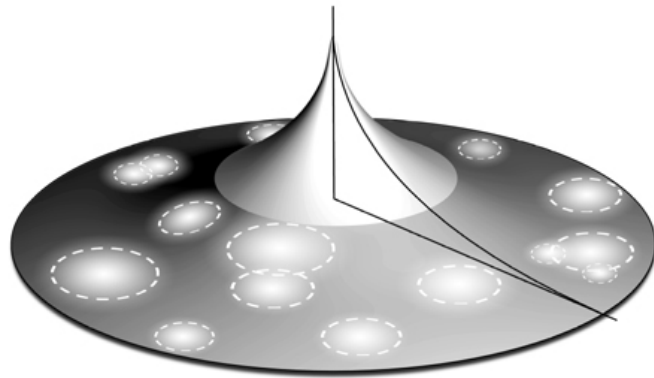
What we see emerging, then, is not simply a fragmented society composed of isolated individuals, but instead a patchwork of overlapping public spheres centred around specific themes and communities which through their overlap nonetheless form a network of issue publics that is able to act as an effective substitute for the conventional, universal public sphere of the mass media age; the remnants of that mass-mediated public sphere itself, indeed, remain as just one among many other such public spheres, if for the moment continuing to be located in a



particularly central position within the overall network. In terms of their size and influence, such individual, overlapping public spheres are located along a “long tail” curve as described by Anderson (2004): some, few, central spaces (including those provided by the traditional mainstream media, as well as the key emerging environments of citizen journalism) are augmented by a vast number of smaller, more specialist, alternative communities, and beyond this by the ever more decentralised, individualised, networked spaces of the blogosphere and other forms of personal expression (which ultimately allow each contributor to set up their own public spherule in the form of a blog or other personal site embedded into the wider network). Where the conventional public sphere encircled only the core elements of this wider communicative ecology and provided very little access to its virtual stage to actors

outside of that boundary, movement into and between the individual public spheres and spherules of the networked model is now considerably more fluid and often requires little more than the operation of comments and hyperlinks to occur; the network has dissolved the boundaries limiting participant access to the public sphere, and turned it from an epi-societal spectacle controlled by mainstream media interests to a pan-societal environment experienced and enlivened by citizens themselves.

The net result is not a simple replacement of mainstream and non-mainstream interests, however – this is no simple reversal of the peaks and troughs on the long tail graph, or an overall flattening of structures so that every voice has equal (or equally limited) impact. Indeed, the long tail graph itself is somewhat misleading, as it



incorporates the many and varied information options existing inside and outside the mainstream of the mass media into a single, one dimensional line. In reality, it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of a gentle slope falling away in all directions from the remaining tall peak of the mass media, surrounding that peak in a 360 degree circle. Different sections of that slope represent different topical interest communities, topically localised public spheres, which have found their home there, and these groups and communities sometimes overlap considerably, and sometimes police their boundaries more strongly; some communities will allow their members to have many other citizenships, some will require a more exclusive commitment only to the one true ideology. At any rate, there is no longer any one publisher, broadcaster, or other media organisation whose message reaches and unites all the inhabitants of that slope as it extends to the horizon – some continue to broadcast from the highest peak in hopes of reaching the largest possible audience, but many have chosen instead to set up community stations in various locations further down the valleys. Over time, it is likely that the landscape will change further, with the remaining high peak of the mass media continuing to erode as industrial journalism's refusal to reform continues to alienate its audiences, and with a corresponding development of new peaks where citizen journalism communities and other issue publics develop sustained, quality public spheres and spherules of their own.

### **The Producership of Policy**

What takes place in any one such environment, then, may be a new form of journalism, a new form of public deliberation, which in the first place invites all participants to be part of the discussion and debate of news and current events, and increasingly also

provides a basis for the formulation of political and policy responses as the ultimate aim of political deliberation. A strong distinction between political action and disinterested journalistic reporting of such action on the one hand, on the virtual stage, and civic discussion and deliberation amongst the citizen-spectators on the other hand, in front of the stage, as it appears to be implied in the public sphere model, no longer operates in a pan-societal, networked model of community engagement with news and current events: here, identifying, analysing, and debating the news, and deliberating implications of and formulating policy responses to the news, necessarily take place closely influenced by and interwoven with one another.

Thus, rather than operating along controlled, party-political, hierarchical lines aimed as much at developing policy as they are at being *seen* in the mass media to be consistent, effective, and decisive in the development and deployment of policy initiatives, the populations of the new public spheres are engaged in an open exploration and evaluation of the facts and an unpredetermined search for policy solutions to social and societal problems. Such public sphere communities may be more or less unified in their ideological persuasions, but this does not mean that they adhere only to the tenets of their own beliefs in investigating potential solutions; additionally, of course, the overlap and engagement between communities further drives a wider process of evaluating possible ideas for their applicability. The communities inhabiting these issue-based, networked public spheres (including citizen journalism sites and news blogs, for example), then, operate in a probabilistic fashion from a basis of what Bauwens describes as equipotentiality: a belief “that expertise cannot be located beforehand, and thus general and open participation is the rule” (2005: 3). Equipotentiality assumes that every participant has the potential to make a worthwhile contribution, and that a principle of openness therefore offers the best likelihood that such contributions will be made and identified by the wider community. (The embrace of equipotentiality should not be misunderstood as an idealistic belief in the fundamental *equality* of all views and contributions to political debate, however: equipotentiality “honours the differences between people” (Bauwens in Poynder, 2006: pt. 1) and indeed utilises such differences by harnessing them in its pursuit of broad-based, multiperspectival political deliberation.)

By contrast, owing in good part to its alliance with the mass media as the distributors of political information, the traditional political process has worked for some decades now on the basis of an industrial logic: even in spite of events such as ‘town hall’ meetings and public consultations, policy is developed in the main by a limited set of actors in the party room, behind closed doors, and is offered to the public by way of the mass media as a complete package which it can choose only to accept or reject, to buy or not to buy at elections; feedback from citizens to politicians is limited and takes place only in the abstract form of opinion polls and focus groups, not through direct involvement of citizens in the policy-making process. Much as open source, citizen journalism, and *Wikipedia* have enabled ‘end users’ to become active co-producers of software, news and commentary, and encyclopaedic



knowledge (see Bruns, 2007 a, b), the community spaces for political deliberation in the networked environment offer an alternative through which citizens can again become more actively involved in the development of public policy initiatives; they can turn from mere voters, customers, users of policy into active, productive contributors and co-creators, or what may be described through a hybrid term as *producers* of policy (see Bruns 2007c). Here as well as in other environments which have seen similar moves beyond the stance of customer and end user – chiefly, the closely related field of citizen journalism, which acts as a proto-stage to this public political deliberation and policy development – such produsage is likely to be based on the operation of four key principles:

- open participation in policymaking processes, and communal evaluation of the ideas which emerge from it;
- fluid heterarchy of participants, *ad hoc* emergence of meritocratic leadership structures in the community based on the contributions made by individuals;
- continuing processes of political deliberation, whose artefacts remain continuously unfinished and up for further review and improvement;
- communal ownership of the policy outcomes rather than ascription of results to any one leader, but individual recognition of key contributors.

A produsage-based model of political deliberation and policy development in the issue publics of the network of political spheres, then, proceeds from an open exploration and investigation of facts and possible political responses which build on a broad base of contributors, and institutes a communal process of evaluating their contributions which leads to the highlighting of key ideas as bases for potential policy developments. Such processes are taking place in plain view of a wider public, rather than within the closed groups of party committees, and indeed actively invite public commentary in order to ensure that a wide variety of voices are able to comment and contribute to the process. In this context, membership in specific parties or other groupings is largely irrelevant; what matters is only the quality of ideas, not the political affiliation of contributors. Consistent constructive contributions do affect the standing of participants in the community, however, and enable such contributors to accumulate social capital as members of their issue public; such contributors may even emerge as leaders of their communities, but remain in that position only for as long as their contributions continue to be useful and relevant to the questions at hand.

Where in conventional political systems, individuals are elected to political office on the basis of sometimes very limited evidence of their qualifications as leaders, and instead mainly on the basis of their promises for how they will exercise leadership, in produsage environments ranging from open source to *Wikipedia* leaders become leaders as based on their track record of past contributions of leadership to the shared project. As we translate produsage to the political arena, then, in analogy to Clay Shirky's famous aphorism for online

news that while “the order of things in broadcast is ‘filter, then publish’ ... the order in communities is ‘publish, then filter’” (2002: n.pag.), we might say that in produsage-based political communities as they may emerge from the transformation of the mass-mediated public sphere the order of things is ‘lead, then elect’, rather than ‘elect, then lead’ – in other words, here, positions of leadership would be made more permanent only where individuals have proven their abilities through a long history of constructive contribution. Finally, then, this community-based model of policy deliberation and determination in localised, issue-specific public spheres also prevents leaders from exaggerating the amount of credit they deserve for their contribution to the overall process of political deliberation and policy development: ultimately, ideas developed and solutions found are always the communal property of the political community as a whole, and its leaders are charged only with advocating such policies towards the wider network public, engaging in further deliberation with the leaders and populations of other complementary or competing public spheres within the network, and with the execution of policy initiatives finding widespread support in the process.

What is possible in this framework, then, is the emergence of a new form of society-wide political deliberation and democratic representation which relies neither on the operations of a mass-mediated public sphere (which in turn depends on the presence of quality independent journalism) nor on a neo-Athenian system of direct democracy (which requires universal public participation in political processes). A produsage-based democratic model would instead harness the gentle slope of overlapping issue publics to distribute deliberative processes across the network, enabling those communities whom specific political problems interest or affect the most to take on leadership in deliberative processes (while leaving open for all citizens the invitation to participate). In this sense, it is a model of non-representational democracy, as Bauwens describes it: “non-hierarchical governance represents a third mode of governance, one based on civil society rather than on representational democracy” (Bauwens in Poynder, 2006: pt. 1) – a kind of opt-in democratic process. Where conventional democratic processes at least in practice often only allow for citizens to opt in or opt out of participation mainly at election time, such continuous non-representational democratic processes increase the granularity of participatory choices: they allow an opt-in/opt-out choice in the context of political deliberation and policy development for each individual issue under consideration, rather than only at the global level of choosing between a limited number of political candidates. The non-representational approach is not inherently undemocratic, therefore, but shifts the leadership focus from one cluster of issue publics to the next as required by the questions and context at hand rather than bestowing it, for better or worse, on one political group for a set period of years. In the process, as Lévy writes,

everyone would have a completely unique political identity and role, distinct from any other individual, coupled with the possibility of working with others having similar or complementary positions on any given subject, at any given moment. ... We would no

longer participate in political life as a 'mass,' by adding our weight to that of the party or by conferring increased legitimacy on a spokesperson, but by creating diversity, animating collective thought, and contributing to the elaboration and resolution of shared problems. (1997: 65)

### **Building the Producers Democracy**

Through the emergence of political blogging, citizen journalism, and new forms of activist networks from *MoveOn.org* to *GetUp.org.au*, many post-industrial nations are, at best, at the beginning of a shift towards such a producer-based, networked democratic structure, of course; while the conventional, mass-mediated public sphere is clearly in decline, and while individual issue publics operating on a producer basis can now be identified as emerging to augment, supplement, and replace it, this does not necessarily lead directly to the development and acceptance of the structures we have described here. While industrial journalism has become too compromised by commercial and political interference to continue to serve effectively in its role as the fourth estate, citizen journalism and other community-based alternatives are as yet too frail and fledgling to provide a fully effective substitute; as recent history in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia has shown, this moment of instability and uncertainty also opens the door to increased demagoguery and autocracy.

Nonetheless, the emergence of small and large, local and global news blogs and citizen journalism sites, interest groups and issue publics centred around a variety of causes and operating on the basis of voluntary participation offers a glimpse of the possible future for public engagement in political deliberation. As far as political discussion is concerned, news bloggers and citizen journalists in Australia clearly have matured in their coverage and discussion of political events to a point where both political and journalistic incumbents 'feel the heat' and fear losing their supremacy as political opinion leaders for the wider populace (even if in reality, broader popular engagement with domestic news blogging is as limited as is public attention to the products of Australian industrial journalism). Elsewhere in the world, and especially in the United States, such developments have progressed even further, and blogging and citizen journalism now form a key space for political deliberation, provide key new public spheres overlapping with one another and the mass media sphere.

In terms of policy development, from *MoveOn* (and its Australian counterpart *GetUp*) and *Care2* to alternative globalisation alliances, climate change campaigners, and *Make Poverty History*, and from such national and global actions to smaller, local campaigns on a wide variety of positions on both the left and the right side of politics, citizen groups are beginning to become increasingly active in deliberating on social and societal problems, and in developing and advocating their own suggestions for workable solutions. Politicians and other conventional political actors can no more afford to ignore them than journalists, software developers, and other incumbents can ignore the producer communities challenging the

*status quo* in their industries without running the risk of being seen as increasingly out of touch and disconnected from their public constituencies, and some engagement with citizens and civic movements – ranging from tokenistic gestures to open discussion – is now beginning to take place.

Mere gestures are more likely to reduce than advance politicians' standing in the community, of course; this is the likely outcome for many of the attempts of political actors to join the online community, for example. From the *MySpace* pages of U.S. Democratic Presidential candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton to the *WebCameron* blog of U.K. opposition leader David Cameron, such sites may temporarily generate substantial publicity and constituent enthusiasm, but the true test of engagement will come as the communities of users which form around such sites express a desire to become involved in the policy development process itself. A produsage-political model would require direct engagement between candidates and constituents, and an open approach to the ideas developed and expressed in the process; indeed, beyond this it would rely on the community forming around these sites to manage its own processes from the bottom up (rather than be managed top-down by campaign staff to ensure adherence to the candidate's message), and would need to allow political initiatives to emerge from a process of ongoing communal evaluation and deliberation. Political leaders in this context are only the executors of community ideas.

As Howard Dean's 2003/4 experiment with U.S. Presidential Primary campaign blogging showed, however, this community-driven model of political deliberation is ultimately incompatible with the personality-driven, celebrity-style politics of the late mass media age. "Like the dot-com boom that pre-figured it, the Howard Dean craze made exaggerated claims that were undeliverable. This movement, fueled by unsupervised local initiatives and virally-activated small donors, could not reach far enough beyond its loyal, wired base" (Miller & Stuart, 2007: 1); it certainly could not translate easily to the conventional political arena itself. In what remains of the public sphere, the focus of the political spotlights has narrowed on individual political actors even to the exclusion of their party and campaign machines, and portrays them as individual, independent decision-makers (as U.S. President George W. Bush famously put it, "I am the decider"). Though itself a misrepresentation of the conventional political process, this focus on individual personae makes it easy for incumbents to attack any politician who dares to relinquish the appearance of complete control by working on a more inclusive, even equipotential basis with their constituent community. In the present environment, a translation of blogger-journalist Dan Gillmor's statement "my readers know more than I do" (2003, vi) to the political arena as "my constituents know more than I do" would be likely to invite devastating attacks and ridicule from political enemies, no matter how accurate the statement may be.

In the Australian context, indeed, only one true blogger-politician can be readily identified: Australian Democrats Senator Andrew Bartlett. As a representative of a minor party riven with internal strife in recent years, Bartlett may indeed have more to gain from engaging his constituency in this way than he stands to lose from any opponent attacks he may invite in

the process. The same is unlikely to be true in more high-profile cases: we should expect the blogs and community Websites of major candidates in upcoming U.S. and U.K. elections to be the scene of persistent disruption by opponent operatives, asking probing questions on divisive, hot-button issues such as abortion, stem cell research, the war in Iraq, or global warming, for example. Such interventions – if handled well – *may* provide a useful opportunity for candidates and their communities to conduct an open if controversial dialogue about the appropriate political approach to any such issue; it is more likely, however, that campaign managers will prematurely shut down debate on such topics in order to avoid any exposure to opposition attacks. Where this happens, and where it happens in a highly visible way, it has as much potential to severely undermine a candidate's chances as would a prolonged and controversial debate about the topic; politicians in the conventional system should be warned not to dabble lightly in such forms of direct engagement with their constituents, therefore – in doing so, they expose themselves to what *Trendwatching* has described as the “transparency tyranny” of the networked world (2006).

Such top-down attempts of politicians to engage with their electors are to equipotential political deliberation in online issue publics what the growing number of official journalist and pundit blogs in the mainstream media are to genuine news blogging, then – they mimic the style and appearance of the new community-based, issue-specific public spheres which we have described, but adopt only very few of their functional and procedural features. Indeed, of course, the highly personalised contests for state and national leadership are an unlikely place for the immediate emergence of produsage politics; here, especially, the conventional mass-mediated public sphere still continues to operate most prominently, exerting a chilling effect on any frank, open engagement between opposing camps – the barrier to an embrace of community-driven political deliberation and policy development models therefore remains high. Other areas, especially perhaps those where available political options inherently cannot be narrowed down easily to a simple choice between a small number of candidates, are more likely to see a community-driven model of deliberation emerge. Where complex problems must be addressed through the development of complex solutions, a community-based model of political produsage may indeed be especially useful as it enables decision makers and policy implementers to harness a wide range of perspectives on the issue at hand, and allows for the shaping of solutions from within the community of constituents itself rather than through a mere plebiscitary vote on a number of pre-defined, immutable options which may not fully reflect the lived experience of voters. Such approaches may be most appropriate in the first place at the local and micro-local level, therefore, where they build on town hall-style democratic processes as they have existed for some time, but utilise the asynchronous and diachronous affordances of the online environment to facilitate the development of a deeper, longer-term, continuous deliberative process. If proven to work here, they may also be extended to larger local, national, and international issues, tapping into the variety of network publics which may already exist for any one question and issue.

It should be noted that such approaches do not necessarily undermine the role of policy experts in the political deliberation process; they do increase their accountability to the wider public, however, and require accredited experts to defend their approaches in discursive and deliberative engagement especially with knowledgeable contributors – pro-ams, as Leadbeater & Miller may call them (2004) – in the wider community. Again, in this model the networked, issue public approach removes the boundaries which have traditionally prevented pro-am and unaccredited participants to engage in political deliberation in the public sphere; while the process of communal evaluation of contributions to the deliberative process will serve to eliminate irrelevant contributions to the public debate, it will also serve to highlight those critical challenges which experts can no longer choose to ignore simply because they do not come from traditional players on the mediated virtual stage.

We can see such principles in operation every day in the environments of the blogosphere: critical questions raised by the current leaders in news and political blogging, highlighted by processes of gatowatching which have other bloggers link to and comment on their work, thereby spreading the meme, are now to be ignored only at the journalist's and politician's peril – as the case of *The Australian* and its battle against psephologist bloggers clearly illustrates. The communal evaluation process of the blogosphere has today become highly effective at identifying those key questions for political actors in the mass media which for various institutional, commercial, and political reasons fail to be asked within the conventional public sphere itself (Singer, 2006). Indeed, then, instead of undermining the role of experts in political deliberation, the operation of strong issue publics as networked communities has given rise to a new class of topical experts (albeit a class of experts whose exact make-up remains in constant flux as temporary community leadership changes hands) – experts whose knowledge may not be conventionally accredited, but who derive their authority through the community processes from which they have emerged as challengers to the representatives of the *ancien régime*.

The fluid, heterarchical, non-representational, self-selecting model of democratic produsage sketched out here, then, may come close to a realisation of what what Lévy describes as

a shift ... from democracy (from the Greek *démos*, people, and *cratein*, to command) to a state of *demodynamics* (Greek *dunamis*, force, strength). Demodynamics is based on molecular politics. It comes into being from the cycle of listening, expression, evaluation, organization, lateral connection, and emerging vision. It encourages real-time regulation, continuous cooperative apprenticeship, optimal enhancement of human qualities, and the exaltation of singularity. Demodynamics does not imply a sovereign people, one that is reified, fetishized, attached to a territory, identified by soil or blood, but a strong people, one perpetually engaged in the process of self-knowing and self-creation, a people in labor, a people yet to come. (1997, p. 88)

It is difficult, however, to imagine the emergence of such a demodynamic model of politics in the continuing presence of a political system in which politicians and journalists are mutually complicit in perpetuating a politics of celebrity and punditry, of soundbites and spin. Only the continuing demise of that system, its gradual and growing detachment from the lived experience of citizens as political beings, may enable the emergence and acceptance of credible alternative models which offer an opportunity for a political renaissance by harnessing community involvement and developing a network of overlapping public spheres and spherules centred around specific political issues.

Current experience in Australia suggests that this country may now be close to reaching such a point of no return for the conventional system – the detachment of the mainstream media commentariat, and of the government with which it exists in symbiosis, from a large section of the national community indicates a disconnect which opens up space for the emergence of alternative models of public deliberation. As another country in which industrial journalism has failed to continue to exercise its role as a fourth estate, the U.S., too, has already seen the emergence of a range of alternative media from blogs through citizen journalism to *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* which similarly offer alternative perspectives on news and current affairs. In these countries, and in other nations in the developed and developing world where conventional journalism and politics is in decline, it is possible that we may see the emergence of more communally based models of public deliberation and policy formation, of a network of topically localised public spheres, which give rise to the potential of a produsage of politics along lines we have outlined here. Such systems are certainly unlikely to be established over a short period of time; they may grow gradually from a grassroots and local level. They do, however, offer the potential for a profound shift of focus in political processes away from the virtual stage of the conventional public sphere, and towards the real, active engagement of citizens in processes of deliberation and decision-making about issues which affect them. At the same time, if and as such shifts gather pace, it is also important to ensure that they do not simply replace one unrepresentative elite of highly visible media actors (politicians, journalists, lobbyists, pundits) with another (A-list bloggers, citizen journalism leaders, and a new generation of lobbyists and pundits). The strongly community-based nature of produsage makes such tendencies more difficult, but not impossible, and active work by the communities themselves, but also by educational institutions building participatory literacies in current and emerging generations of citizens, will be required to ensure as broad and diverse a produsage-based political culture as possible. Ultimately, of course, conventional journalism is also unlikely to disappear altogether, even in the face of a significant increase in the challenges to its authority. The journalism industry is presented with an important opportunity to reform and reinvigorate its practices for a participatory and collaborative media environment. Political blogging and citizen journalism play an important role in this process – perhaps it is now time, therefore, to

look beyond the present-day models and to envision a future where political engagement has shifted even more substantially towards the networked community of citizens.

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