Mapping the Australian Political Blogosphere

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The role of blogs and bloggers in the political process has received a great deal of attention in recent years; perhaps especially so in the context of the rise and fall of the first mainstream blogger-candidate for U.S. President, Howard Dean, and the subsequent scramble of other political players in the United States to establish blogs of their (or more frequently, their staffers') own. U.S.-based blogs have also been seen as important in driving political issues from the demise of Trent Lott to the growing opposition to the Iraq war. The role of blogs in the political spheres of other countries is less well understood, however; indeed, for other Western countries it is often assumed that blogs will operate there in much the same way as they do in the U.S., though perhaps somewhat lagging behind the leader due to delays in adopting the technology or achieving critical mass.

In order to move beyond such generic assumptions, in this chapter we explore the political blogosphere in Australia. As an English-speaking nation of comparable living standards, with similar culture, and (at the time of writing in late 2007) in a broadly comparable political situation (such as prolonged conservative rule, participation in the 'Coalition of the Willing' which invaded Iraq, and the politicisation of terrorism threats), it may be assumed that its political blogosphere would show some of the same characteristics as that of the U.S. – however, we have found that for historical, social, and cultural reasons Australia has developed a blogging accent of its own.

Some Background

As an affluent and well-educated nation, Australian use of information technology is broadly comparable with other developed nations; at the same time, however, its use of Internet technology has historically lagged behind a number of its North American, Western European,

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and South East Asian counterparts, and has only recently begun to close that gap. This is particularly notable in the area of broadband Internet: here, while the technology for high-speed home broadband services is certainly readily available, cost/speed ratios remain significantly less attractive to consumers than they are in other nations (see e.g. OECD Working Party).

A 2005-06 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) report on Household Use of Information Technology (HUIT) shows that 60% of all Australian households have Internet access; 28% of all Australian households have access to broadband (see Figure 1).
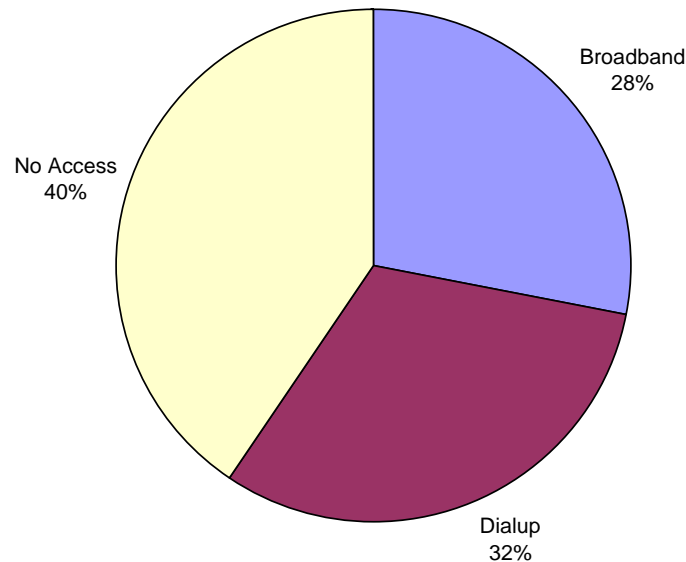

Figure 1: Internet Access Type - All Australian Households

(Australian Bureau of Statistics)

The comparatively high cost of broadband in Australia is due largely to historical factors: on the one hand, commercial cable broadband has as yet failed to recoup infrastructure costs and therefore remains expensive, while DSL broadband offerings use the existing domestic telephone network, which largely remains in the hands of recently-privatised former monopoly telecommunications carrier Telstra (Clarke 37), a company which has little incentive to lower the wholesale network access fees it charges its competitors.. Additionally, while such concerns apply in the handful of Australian metropolises which are home to the vast majority

of the domestic population, telecommunications access in rural and remote areas of the country remains problematic overall, and obtaining reliable broadband access is a particular challenge (see Green & Bruns for further detail on such matters).

Such limited access to affordable high-speed, always-on Internet services affects Australian Net users' overall ability to engage in participatory online culture. Blogging, and political blogging perhaps especially so, operates commonly by drawing together and commenting on news articles, press releases, background information, and commentary from fellow bloggers, and the process of gathering such information and links is severely hindered by limited access and slow loading times; similarly, in the absence of an always-on Web experience would-be bloggers may also comment less frequently on other blogs than they would otherwise prefer to do.

Access limitations and cost considerations may also skew participation in the Australian political blogosphere towards those strata of society better able to afford broadband access[1] or are able to blog and comment from their better connected places of work and study. This, then, would contribute towards an overrepresentation of relatively affluent and better-educated participants, and especially perhaps of white-collar workers and tertiary students (see Figure 2). It may also introduce an imbalance in favour of residents of Australia's major metropolises.

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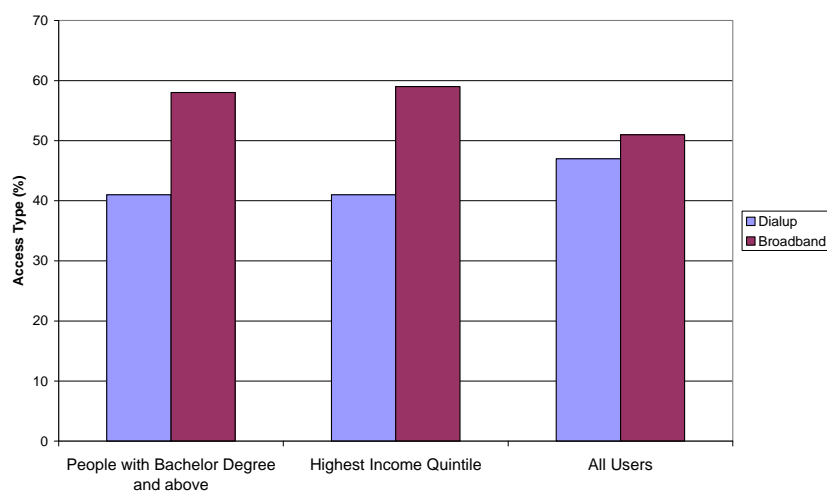
[1] The ABS report shows a higher rate of broadband connection where households have higher income, higher education and have members aged 15 to 24 years (ABS, "Household" 29).

Figure 2: Internet connection type—by selected characteristics

(Adapted from Australian Bureau of Statistics 29)

Beyond the potential effects of the technological environments, social factors influencing Australians' degree of participation in blog-based communication are likely to be comparable to other Anglo-Saxon Western nations—technological literacy is generally well-developed, yet better distributed amongst the younger generations, the more affluent, and the better-educated; the gender gap for technological literacy has largely closed. As an English-speaking nation, Australia is also able to connect very directly with developments in the U.S. and the U.K., avoiding the translation lag which may slow technology adoption in other developed and developing nations. Australians therefore have played a significant role in a variety of participatory culture projects in the past; Australian activist Matthew Arnison developed the software for the first *Indymedia* Website which was used during the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organisation protests, for example (see Meikle; Bruns, *Gatewatching*).

Political Situation

Political blogging in Australia has emerged from such activist traditions at least in part; as we discuss below, a significant portion of the Australian political blogosphere continues to champion activist, progressive causes largely aligned with the left of the domestic and international political scene. This significant leftist leaning may date back to the advent of the Internet (and especially the World Wide Web) as a mainstream medium in the mid-90s: since that time, Australian federal politics has been dominated by the conservative Coalition government (combining the Liberal and National parties, and elected to power in 1996), with relatively consistent support also from most mainstream commercial media outlets in print and broadcast. New Internet media have provided a key space for the expression and discussion of both marginalised and oppositional viewpoints and the organisation of activist events opposing federal government policy.[2]

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[2] The potential for Internet media to attempt to balance the power and dominance of traditional media is of special importance in Australia, given its high levels of ownership concentration in such traditional media. While many democratic societies around the world

Present-day Australian politics presents a somewhat more nuanced picture, however—the conservative federal government of Prime Minister John Howard now faces Labor premiers or chief ministers in all eight states and territories, and for the first time in some years, a popular leader of the federal opposition emerged in 2006 with a realistic chance of winning the general election in late November 2007[3]. Political opinion remains divided across a number of key issues: while the economy has performed strongly over the past decade, enabling the government to deliver nine consecutive budget surpluses since the 1998-1999 financial year, much of this success is attributed to the current resources boom and driven especially by the growing Chinese economy's demand for coal and other primary resources. Detractors therefore argue that economic success has been largely determined by environmental factors rather than government policy. The federal government also introduced a radical reform to industrial relations law in 2006, removing a significant amount of workers' protections against unfair dismissal and significantly reducing the ability of workers' unions to act on behalf of their members in collective contract negotiations. The workplace and industrial relations policy was initially marketed to the Australian public as 'WorkChoices' at a cost of $55 million, but has proven so widely unpopular with workers that the government recently rebranded the policy as the Workplace Relations System in the hope of gaining wider public acceptance. However, this action ignited new controversy for the government, which has been attacked for spending up to A$1m of taxpayers' money per day on perceived party-political advertising in the lead-up to the federal election.

Further debate is driven by Australia's continued participation in the highly unpopular Iraq war, and by the government's strong support for the Bush administration in that war and the wider 'war on terror'; such support has also led to increasingly fraught relations between the government and domestic Muslim and civil rights organisations.

Overall, then, there is a growing sense of disenchantment with federal government policy; the government overall, and Prime Minister Howard specifically, are regarded as increasingly autocratic and out of touch with constituency sentiment. At 68, Howard's age and

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are experiencing similar problems, Australia has one of the highest levels of media ownership concentration in the world.

[3] At present, voter polling shows the Australian Labor Party (ALP), led by Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd, to have a clear lead in citizen voting intentions over the incumbent government, led by Prime Minister John Howard (see Roy Morgan).

length of tenure as Prime Minister have also become an increasingly prominent issue; having intimated during the 2001 and 2004 election campaigns that if re-elected he may stand aside mid-term in favour of Treasurer Peter Costello, he remains committed to fighting the 2007 election against 49-year-old opposition leader Kevin Rudd (with a renewed pledge to step aside for Costello during the next term, if re-elected). Rudd's consistently favourable results in recent opinion polls are attributed largely to his presentation as a more responsive, younger, and more honest, alternative to Howard (whom critics frequently portray as a cynical manipulator of public sentiment).

At the same time, large sections of Australia's mainstream commercial media remain firmly supportive of Howard. Australian news is dominated by a small number of organisations: between them, News Corporation and Fairfax Media operate the majority of national and state newspapers, including News Limited papers such as the *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane) and *The Western Australian* (Perth) which are the only local newspapers in these key state capitals. Television news is led by the nightly news bulletins of Network Seven and the Nine Network, while drive-time radio talk-back shows are a very significant factor in broadcast commentary on current affairs, and are dominated by right-wing hosts such as Alan Jones and John Laws (Flew 232; Pearson & Brand 97). Against these, the radio, television, and online services of the public national Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) provide a more balanced view (but are frequently accused of Labor bias by Coalition politicians, even though independent studies have found little evidence of systemic bias; see e.g. Posetti for a discussion of this controversy).

The Australian Political Blogosphere

Perceived pro-Howard bias in the commercial mainstream media in Australia may well act as a significant driver for participation in the Australian political blogosphere by left-of-centre bloggers (as, indeed, may perceptions of leftist bias in the ABC drive right-wing blogging); such use of blogging as a corrective to apparent media shortcomings is consistent with phenomena in news blogging and other forms of collaborative online news production as they

have been observed in other countries (see e.g. Bruns, *Gatewatching*; Bruns, "Practice"; Singer).

In order to examine more closely the make-up and structure of the Australian political blogosphere, we used the IssueCrawler Website network mapping tool (www.issuecrawler.net) to explore the networks connecting Australian bloggers on political topics. Our methodology here follows in part the methodological approach explored in previous work by Bruns ("Methodologies"); additionally, we undertook further in-depth case studies using different and complementary methodological approaches (outlined below). We analysed the resultant network maps for notable patterns, as well as further examining the key sites which were identified in the crawl.

In the first place, this process produces momentary snapshots of current patterns of interlinkage between Australian blogs, weighted according to the frequency and reciprocity of interlinking. Since, for bloggers, linking to their peers and to other sources of information constitutes an act of constructing a distributed discussion across Websites, such snapshots of link patterns indicate the sites around which political debate on specific issues currently centre, and (when compared over time) can also indicate how the focus and locus of political debate shifts in response to new news reports, press releases, political statements, and other published information. Abstracted from individual political issues, repeated over time, the process also points to the overall leaders of political discussion and commentary in the Australian Web, to their interconnection with the online presence of traditional Australian media organisations, parties, advocacy groups, and government bodies, and may perhaps even indicate the traction which specific political issues and campaigns are able to gain in the wider electorate.

Finding 1: Considerable Left-Wing Inclination, Strong Polarisation on Specific Issues

Two initial case studies conducted in February and March 2007 both point to a recurring finding in each of the subsequent explorations we have undertaken: participation in the Australian blogosphere currently appears to strongly favour the left wing of politics. Leftist political blogs exist in larger numbers and are more central to political discussion virtually

across all issues we have examined. This is notable both in the case of the discussion of the fate of Australian-born Guantanamo Bay detainee David Hicks (examined in Bruns, "Methodologies") and in the blog-based discussion of the controversy surrounding disgraced Western Australian political powerbroker Brian Burke during March 2007. While a leftist leaning for the former case—portrayed largely as an issue of human rights—is perhaps unsurprising, the latter case is more complex: Burke, a former Labor state premier of Western Australia, had been a successful lobbyist after his exit from politics, but had been exposed for corrupt dealings and undue behind-the-scenes influence on state government ministers, leading to the resignations of several such state ministers. The federal government also attempted to use Burke's tenuous connections to federal Labor opposition leader Kevin Rudd to arrest Rudd's rising popularity, but such attempts backfired when newly-revealed connections between Burke and conservative federal minister Ian Campbell forced Campbell's resignation instead. In the Burke case, therefore, both sides of politics could be expected to be equally represented in blog-based discussions of allegations and counter-allegations, and Labor- as well as Coalition-aligned bloggers had considerable material for comment and debate.

In spite of the bipartisan nature of the Burke controversy, however, our results clearly show a significantly stronger representation of leftist and non-partisan political bloggers in this case, and this trend is continued in virtually all other cases examined. While the balance between left- and right-wing participation in the political blogosphere is certainly likely to depend crucially on the issues being debated, it is therefore unlikely that our choice of sample topics was the main factor determining our observation of a majority pro-Labor stance. Instead, these findings may be more indicative of a current political climate in which the ruling Coalition has found it difficult to gain political traction even from apparently fairly clear-cut issues favouring their side of politics; a pro-Labor bias in the blogosphere at present may merely reflect the pro-Labor bias in the wider electorate which polls have indicated since the beginning of the year (but may also point to a more fundamental leftist stance amongst the majority of Australian political bloggers, independent of current political events and determined instead for example by socio-economic factors affecting online participation).

Further, we see some evidence for the gradual formation of polarised blog clusters around leading blogs on either side of politics: such clusters are made up in the main of blogs characterised by a shared political direction which exchange frequent links amongst one another, but only link to oppositional views at a more infrequent rate. The Burke case suggests that such polarisation may increase over time, as discussion moves away from the specific news reports which triggered initial debate, and returns to the topical heartland of the blog cluster (see Figures 3 & 4): repeating the same crawl one week later, we saw a marked contraction of blog-based discussion to a handful of key blogs, which now linked strongly only to blogs carrying similar ideological viewpoints within their own cluster. (Such polarisation is also consistent with similar patterns observed internationally—see, for example, Adamic & Glance; Hargittai.)

Figure 3: blogs discussing Brian Burke controversy (19 March 2007)—small cluster of right-wing blogs in top left quadrant, remainder of core group is left-wing or non-partisan

Figure 4: blogs discussing Brian Burke controversy (25 March 2007)—clear polarisation between larger left-wing cluster (left) and smaller right-wing cluster (right), with few intermediaries

It is possible for such contraction to be reversed again, too: this can take place for example when new news reports or other information restart or shift debate on an existing issue. We have observed such tendencies in longer-term studies of the government's 'WorkChoices'

industrial relations reforms, for example (discussed below). Here, the network of blog discussion of the WorkChoices legislation expanded and contracted parallel to increases and decreases in the level of coverage of the WorkChoices debate in the mainstream media.

Finding 2: Small Number of Core Nodes on Either Side

Such network contraction may well be a common phenomenon outside the Australian political blogosphere, too. While initial blog posts are prompted by the emergence of news stories or other information, and appear across a wide range of blogs, it seems appropriate to assume that subsequent postings on the same topic are more concerned with responding to commentary seen on fellow bloggers' sites; such commenting may take place increasingly on those sites themselves rather than at a distance through new posts on one's own blog. There is, in essence, an instinctive, low-key competition amongst bloggers to attract the focus of debate on any new topic to their own blog, and news and political bloggers often appear to do so by including in their first post on the topic a round-up of what other bloggers and the mainstream media have already said (following a process of gatewatching as described in Bruns, *Gatewatching*). Especially as the network contracts, then, those sites which have performed best at this task, and have attracted the most active subsequent discussion, may emerge as the core nodes in the network, while others diminish in importance.

Our studies indicate that, by and large, a small number of sites regularly perform this core function for their communities—this is likely to contribute to the gradual emergence and continued sustainment of an 'A-list' of Australian political bloggers. Among the core leftist blogs in this context are *Road to Surfdom*, *Club Troppo*, and *Larvatus Prodeo*, as well as *John Quiggin* (especially on economic issues); also frequently connected to this cluster are the libertarian *Catallaxy Files* and the political philosophy blog *Sauer-Thompson*, as well as the site of the only notable federal politician to blog actively, Australian Democrats Senator Andrew Bartlett (the Australian Democrats are a minor, centrist-left party). The right is represented in the main by *Tim Blair*, as well as by the less consistent *RWDB* and *Yobbo*; additionally, the blog-style online opinion columns of political newspaper pundits in the News

Limited and Fairfax press—especially of the controversial *Herald Sun* writer Andrew Bolt— occasionally also emerge as key nodes for right-wing blog debate.

Such sites may be seen in essence as 'keepers of the flame' of political discussion for their respective ideological communities; they continue their coverage and debate of political events on given topics even at times when the overall volume of the main public discussion has decreased. This allows simmering issues to be examined and discussed in greater depth and from a wider range of perspectives. Other, more peripheral sites of group and individual bloggers appear to comment mainly when prompted to do so by coverage in the mainstream media; in the core sites of the political blog networks, on the other hand, discussion appears to be more detached from the day-to-day ebb and flow of political content in the conduits of industrial journalism, and driven more strongly by sustained personal and group interests. Some bloggers in these sites have become leaders rather than followers, in other words, frequently posting new political ideas and analyses of their own rather than responding to and critiquing mainstream journalism's coverage.

Finding 3: Mainstream Media Act as Catalysts, But Not as Participants

In spite of their occasional interconnection with the blogosphere (which in addition to Andrew Bolt also involves the leftist *news.com.au* commentator Tim Dunlop), mainstream media outlets and even some of the public intellectualism Websites in Australia (such as *On Line Opinion*) are conspicuous in our results not quite by their absence, but at least by their generally distant and marginal status. Even where they do offer commentary functionality or include outbound links in their content, such sites remain in use mainly as information sources rather than participating any further in the debate. This is hardly surprising for 'traditional' sources of online news; it is somewhat unexpected, however, for the op-ed, blog-style content now offered for example by News Limited's *blogs.news.com.au*.

Such findings may indicate, then, that the pundit-bloggers employed by the major news organisations continue to operate under a different agenda from the mainstream of Australian political blogs: rather than participating in the wider, distributed political debate which takes place in the blogosphere beyond their sites, such pundit-bloggers are focussed

far more strongly on their local, on-site community of readers, in part perhaps also for commercial reasons of capturing a loyal readership rather than directing readers to alternative news and commentary sources. They appear to link out to other blogs less frequently, and to pay limited attention to what blogs link to them; this also applies to their reader community, who in their comments are talking mainly amongst themselves rather than connecting their discussions to postings seen elsewhere. Such pundit-blogs, therefore, should be seen as constituting a separate environment in itself: separate from the core content of the Websites established by the mainstream Australian news media, but also separate from the mainstream of the Australian political blogosphere, they are a 'safe' space which is populated perhaps by those users who enjoy their new-found ability to comment on columnist writings, but have not yet made the leap to active participation in the uncontrolled blogosphere outside of the imprints of major news organisations.

Finding 4: Limited Reference to Outside Sources

The mainstream media are not alone in being sidelined by Australian political bloggers, however: the same is true also for the Websites of government bodies, Australian politicians and political parties, and other political and advocacy organisations. Indeed, our results appear to indicate that such references are more prominent early on in political discussions conducted in the Australian blogosphere, and recede gradually into the background as the discursive network contracts and focusses more strongly on debates conducted across a handful of key nodes. Such tendencies were especially notable in a six-week study of debates around the 'WorkChoices' industrial relations legislation: here, we conducted weekly crawls on the issue, starting from the first anniversary of the introduction of the 'WorkChoices' legislation on 27 March 2007. During this time, we observed the peak of the debate followed by a gradual contraction and slowing of debate; this was followed by a government campaign against the ALP's proposed overhaul of the legislation if elected to power in 2007, which generally re-intensified discussion of issues related to WorkChoices; beyond this, a gradual shift of focus towards wider economic issues took place in the lead-up to the presentation of

the 2007–8 federal budget on 8 May 2007 (an annual highlight of the Australian political calendar).

While media sources, as well as the sites of the Australian Labor Party, public intellectual debate site *On Line Opinion*, and the Australian Council of Trade Unions' anti-WorkChoices campaign site *Your Rights at Work*, were present as marginal sites in the networks in week one, they disappeared over the following weeks as the debate slowed and contracted to the core sites, and reappeared only briefly as the debate broadened again and shifted towards wider issues; notably, government sites (under the .gov.au top-level domain) were entirely absent throughout. This may point to a number of issues: on the one hand, the strongly partisan mainstream of participants in the Australian political blogosphere may see little reason to link to those political and informational sites which are already implicitly regarded as either allies or opponents; this applies for the larger leftist cluster of bloggers as much as it does for the smaller right-wing group (such tendencies may also point to a general well-developed understanding—and dismissal—by the electorate of the processes of political spin). On the other hand, the limited linking to such sources may also indicate an assumption that participants in the political blogosphere will already be familiar with current news reports and the political arguments presented by either side of politics; political blogging, in other words, is focussed not on reporting political news, but on discussing the implications of current political events, building on the information understood as already having been provided by journalists and politicians. This would seem to support a now well-established understanding of blogging as a discursive activity which complements mainstream journalistic coverage, rather than replacing it altogether (it may well serve as a replacement for mainstream media *punditry*, however).

To the extent that the government, party, and advocacy group Websites are provided in an attempt to bypass the reinterpretation and political spin of the mainstream news media, and are addressed directly at citizens themselves, however, our findings appear to indicate that such efforts have as yet been largely unsuccessful—if bloggers *are* consulting such Websites directly to gather information for their commentary of political events, they are at the very least not linking to them at any significant frequency. It appears that bloggers respond in their commentary not to the news releases of original political sources, but to the reporting of

such news in the mainstream media; this also means that the views provided by Australian political bloggers may therefore be commentary on the news media's coverage of politics as much as they are commentary on political events themselves.

Finding 5: News Media and Politicians Can Participate

Our investigations did point to a (small) number of cases where news media and politicians did actively and constructively engage with the Australian political blogosphere, however. Australian Democrats Senator Andrew Bartlett is the most visible (and possibly, the only) federal politician to have developed an active and persistent presence in the blogosphere, and his *The Bartlett Diaries* Website regularly appears in a prominent position near the centre of leftist blog discussion clusters we have encountered; on the site, Bartlett discusses freely and openly the key political issues of the day and engages, sometimes controversially, with commenters; contrary to many other politicians' and media blogs around the world, he also frequently links to other sites of political debate. Similarly, *news.com.au* pundit-bloggers Andrew Bolt and Tim Dunlop occasionally do appear in more central positions in the network, again also because both (Dunlop more so than Bolt) sometimes also link out to other bloggers and thereby further embed themselves in the distributed debate traced through such links.

To become a regular feature of the Australian political blogosphere, however, requires a significant amount of persistence; something which Bartlett has demonstrated, but others have not. For politicians as well as pundits, it means a notable shift away from a largely lecture-based style of delivery, and towards a more discursive engagement with fellow bloggers. At the same time, such a repositioning also opens the way for increased peer criticism of one's own views and positions, and may well be exploited by political enemies, a factor which likely discourages many other pundits and politicians to follow suit. Bartlett, as a member of a relatively minor party struggling in recent years with high-profile defections and internal strife, may have more to gain from opening up to the electorate through blogging than he has to lose; the same is unlikely to be true of more prominent political leaders.

Further Analysis

In order to establish further detail about blogging and blog commenting practices, we now turn our attention from such broad examinations of the Australian political blogosphere to a series of more fine-grained studies. These focus on bloggers' coverage of specific issues and investigate more closely the processes of interaction and interlinking which take place on specific sites. Such studies depart from the overall methodology outlined above (and in Bruns, "Methodologies"), and add a process of in-depth manual coding of content and links to the IssueCrawler-based identification of overall blog networks.

Commenting on the Water Crisis

Our first case study in early 2007 examined blog-based discussion of the Australian water crisis. With many parts of Australia having experienced a prolonged, ten-year period of severe drought attributed to *El Niño* weather patterns and the overall impact of global warming, and many of its major cities as well as agricultural producers now under severe water use restrictions, the question of water management and the wider debate about responses to global warming have become an important issue in state and federal government politics; for the purposes of our research, the topic was also selected based on its long-term global currency and its connection to wider international debates about climate change. At the time of our examination, however, the water issue had been lying somewhat dormant in the mainstream media, while continuing to simmer in the blogosphere; it was only shortly after our study that the Prime Minister announced a new water initiative which generated broad discussions within both the traditional news media and the Australian political blogosphere. Our analysis describes the linking activity that occurred at various key political blogs and other relevant journalistic and institutional sites immediately before the Prime Minister's announcement; the resultant issue network map is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Water Issue network February 2007

This map displays a number of key characteristics, most notably the presence of two clear (and clearly separate) clusters. One major cluster contains international organisations such as the World Bank, UNICEF, UNDP, IMF, OECD and others, and is located in the top right quadrant. *The Guardian* and the Website of the BBC are also present in this cluster, but serve only as smaller nodes and have very few outlinks—one being from *BBC News Online* to *The Guardian*, indeed. There are a number of outliers: two U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration sites and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (top), and the Australian Departments of Environment and Agriculture, the National Heritage Trust and National Resource Management (top left). Given a different set of seeds and parameters, this cluster could be studied further in isolation, and this would likely also identify other minor sites within the cluster; for our present purposes, however, such in-depth study is not required.

The cluster in the bottom left quadrant, by contrast, contains members of the Australian blogosphere. This cluster is made up of 14 sites: *Stoush*, *Crikey*, *Polemica*, *Sauer-Thompson*, *Larvatus Prodeo* (appearing under two different URLs), *Ampersand Duck*, *Anonymous Lefty*, *Pavlov's Cat*, *Club Troppo*, *LAN Downunder*, *Road to Surfdom*, *William Burroughs' Baboon*, and *John Quiggin*. In the primary analysis, clustering in this map

indicates that the core Australian political blogs (most of them also identified as central to the blogosphere through our other crawls) are actively interlinked and occasionally link further outwards; few have their links reciprocated. Within both clusters, the size of nodes indicates their centrality—for example, consistent with our other findings, the left-of-centre *Club Troppo, Larvatus Prodeo*, and *Road to Surfdom* are clearly core sites. Link direction further indicates that some of the outliers, such as political analysis and gossip site *Crikey* and Fairfax newspaper site *The Age*, are often linked to as key sources of information and opinion, but rarely if ever link back.

We further conducted a detailed analysis of the outgoing links from four of the Australian blog sites listed above (see Figure 5). A search was conducted of each site for posts relevant to the issue around the date of the crawl. These posts were then examined for hyperlinks which were coded into four categories: issue related blogs, news sites, reference sites and personal (non-issue-related) blogs. From this, we found that 83% of the outlinks from the four sites selected for analysis were relevant to the issue (see Figure 6).
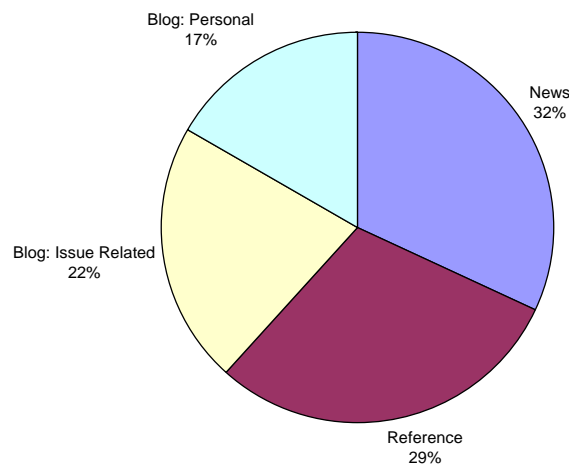

Figure 6: Type of hyperlink from selected sites discussing the water issue

in the Australian blogosphere

The outgoing hyperlinks at each of these blog sites are an indication of the participatory and collaborative nature of blog-based communication; they are key tools for the establishment and maintenance of a distributed discussion across sites. They also show that

participants offer additional information to support or verify their viewpoints, share knowledge and ensure the transparency of conversations—in this way all participants are able to receive instant feedback that allows them to measure their ideas and viewpoints against others.

Of the core sites identified here, then, the political commentary site *Crikey* contributed four stories about different aspects of the water issue. These covered topics such as government action over the water crisis, the cost of water, water consumption, and the effects of water minding in the suburbs. Such stories generated 12 comments, none of which contained hyperlinks to other sites of interest. The story posts themselves contained five hyperlinks—two linked to *Crikey*'s own information while two linked to traditional news media publications, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age,* and one is a signature/username link which points to a high profile intellectual blog but not to an issue related discussion. This indicates that, while occasionally described as a 'blog', *Crikey* falls somewhat outside that category; while more blog-like in its content, in its engagement with other sites on the Web it operates more like a mainstream news site than a blog, and its readers are similarly engaging in ways different from the commenters on core blogs in the cluster.

This is evident from the behaviour of other core sites. For example, the *Sauer-Thompson* blog contains six posts about the issue, and 32 comments. Topics of discussion are the shortage of water in South East Queensland, the notion of climate change as a myth, the question of whether the water shortage is a myth, irrigation rationalisation, the sale of water to farms, and the city of Adelaide's dependency on the River Murray for water. There are 22 hyperlinks throughout the six stories, and four in the comments. These divide into ten hyperlinks to traditional news media; seven hyperlinks to water authorities; four hyperlinks to issue related blogs; and five hyperlinks to blogs that are not specifically related to this issue discussion.

Even more notably, *Larvatus Prodeo* generated a total of 92 comments through its three story posts. These stories are about water restrictions in Sydney and water minding in the suburbs—in particular, neighbours "dobbing"[4] on each other for wasting water. There are seven hyperlinks within the stories, and 31 in the comments; nine of the 31 hyperlinks are to traditional news media sites, 13 comment links are to authoritative sites, 11 link to issue

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[4] An Australian slang term for reporting bad behaviour, similar to 'snitching'.

related blogs and five are signature/username links that do not connect to issue related discussions. While this sample of analysis is necessarily small, it nonetheless indicates that *Larvatus Prodeo* is the central point of discussion in this cluster of blogs at the time of the issue crawl (see Figure 7 for a summary of these findings).
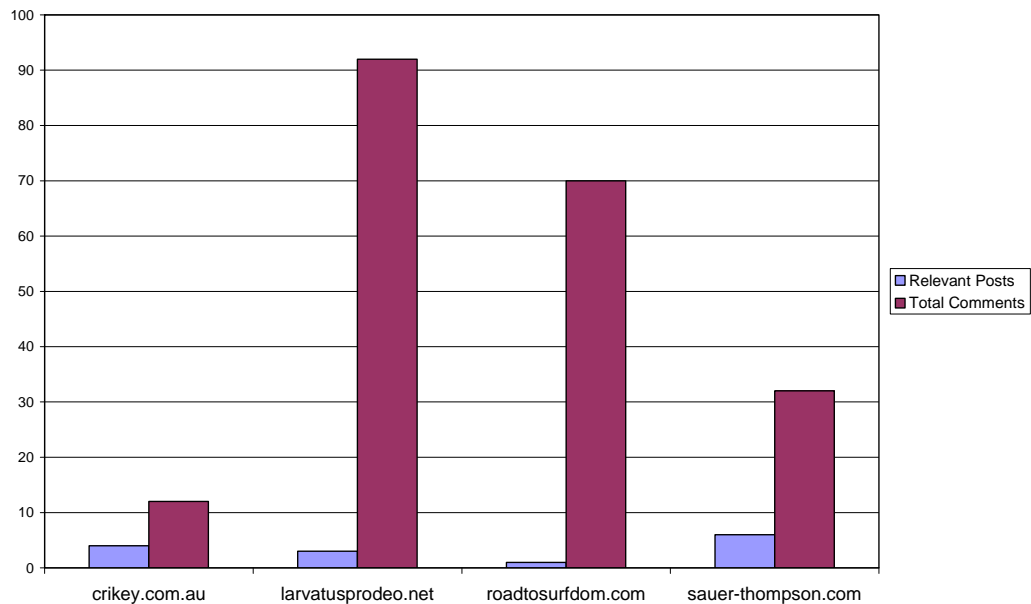

Figure 7: Number of water crisis-related posts and comments at selected sites

It is important to note again here that this issue did not have significant currency in the mainstream media at this point of time, yet evidently still managed to generate a strong level of reader involvement and feedback on several of the key sites of the Australian blogosphere. Given that the issue crawl was undertaken days *before* the Prime Minister released a new government water initiative which subsequently created wide media coverage, the results of our analysis show a commitment by these blogs to remain involved in longer-term conversations about issues that are of concern to the public, even while such topics are at least temporarily absent from the mainstream. It is also worth noting that coverage of the water issue itself was sometimes closely linked with wider themes of common interest to Australian political bloggers: so, for example, while *Road to Surfdom* did not post any water-related stories at the time of the crawl, during November 2006 the blog linked to a mainstream news media article about the water issue to point to what it perceived as political

bias. This enabled commenters to discuss both the water issue itself, as well as its treatment in the commercial media.

From Blogger to Pundit

In pursuit of the forms of lively social, political and cultural discussion common to blogs, News Limited recruited long-time Australian political blogger Tim Dunlop to create and run a blog-style section called *Blogocracy* on the news.com.au Website. Dunlop is the creator and blogger-in-chief of the popular, left-leaning Australian political blog *Road to Surfdom*, which he founded in 2002. Dunlop's decision to accept News Limited's invitation was widely supported by the regular participants of *Road to Surfdom*; it was claimed that his new role did not place any limitations on the content he wishes to produce on either site, nor does *Blogocracy* impose any registration requirements on users wishing to comment on the site.

Dunlop's first post to *Blogocracy* described the purpose of his new blog as "less about journalism than it is about citizenship, the idea that all of us have a say in how the country is run and that participation is a good thing in its own right." Further, he declared, "I'm not doing journalism here, though it is clearly a journalism related activity," and "this blog is kind of like the forensic team that shows up later and picks over what others have already found." *Blogocracy* is in a somewhat unique position in the context of the Australian mainstream media, in that the chief blogger is ideologically positioned to the left, while the organisation hosting the blog—the domestic component and foundation stone of Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp media empire—is widely seen as a traditional supporter of the right side of Australian politics. Further, in a marked departure from pundit 'blogs' in many mainstream news media Websites, *Blogocracy*, like most 'normal' blogs, features a blogroll listing key bloggers in the political blogosphere—many of whom are also aligned with the political left. *Blogocracy* therefore can be understood as linking the features of traditional with those of new media, and as a point of connection for the politics of the left with those of the right.

In a further case study, we therefore sought to determine whether *Blogocracy* had retained the values and principles that characterise political blogs in Australia. We undertook a detailed analysis of the entire set of posts for a single week, 21-25 May 2007, to determine

the kinds of topics discussed, and the types of outgoing links that appeared in posts and comments. Table 1 provides a summary.

		Post Outlinks				Comment Outlinks	
	Date	Internal	External	Topics	Comments	Internal	External
1	25-May	1	1	Jackie Kelly quits	41	1	1
2	25-May			Open Topic	143	1	21
3	25-May		8	Election Outcome theories	36	1	4
4	25-May	1	3	Advertising Spending	30	1	2
5	24-May	2	4	Voter Intentions	44	2	1
6	24-May		3	Howard/Amnesty Int	20		
7	24-May	3	1	Industrial Relations	98	2	4
8	24-May	8	6	Industrial Relations	23	7	
9	23-May	2	2	Industrial Relations	66	4	
10	23-May	1	1	Leadership Change	86		2
11	23-May		1	Iraq War	95		8
12	22-May	1	1	Industrial Relations	76	4	5
13	22-May	1	2	Future Fund	34	1	2
14	22-May	1	2	Rightwing Writings	20		1
15	22-May	1	2	PM's Dining Room Refit	97	1	4
16	21-May		3	Industrial Relations	24		2
17	21-May	2		Election Strategies	52	3	1
18	21-May	1		David Hicks	59	1	3
19	21-May	2	1	Industrial Relations	48		1
	TOTAL	27	41		1092	29	62

Table 1: Summary of *Blogocracy* activity, 21-25 May 2007

(internal outlinks point to material on the *news.com.au* site;

external outlinks to URLs elsewhere on the wider Web)

From this it is self-evident that *Blogocracy* is a very active site, with five or more posts added each day, on a variety of topics, and a relatively large number of comments for each post (57 per post, on average); *Blogocracy* is notably different in this from other sections of the *news.com.au* site, such as for example the *NewsBlog*, a section where readers are able to post comments that discuss the news of the day but which generated less than one post per day during the same timeframe, and featured no links to external resources. By contrast, our data for *Blogocracy* clearly shows that its posts and comments contain a significant amount of both internal and external hyperlinks; such links point to background and additional

information available both from official and mainstream media sources as well as from the wider blogosphere. Of particular interest here is the large number of hyperlinks to sites such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC): the high rate of linkage to the *Sydney Morning Herald* by Dunlop and his commenters indicates the perception that issues covered at that mainstream media site are not covered by the publications of *news.com.au* itself; so, for example, a *Blogocracy* post by Dunlop on 25 May titled "Between Information and Party Promotion" linked to the *SMH* rather than to internal News Limited articles for additional information. (Indeed, a search of *news.com.au* was unable to find any reference to the topic of Dunlop's post—government spending on an advertising campaign promoting its preferred response to climate change.)

Other external links from *Blogocracy* cover a broad range of sites, including the Office of the Prime Minister, the Reserve Bank, and international news media, but almost half of the external links from Dunlop's own posts are to Australian political blog sites. Overall, this shows that Dunlop has retained a freedom to generate and engage with conversations about issues that fall outside of News Limited's coverage or underlying ideological framework; indeed, he is in a position to connect the networks of conversation in the blogosphere with traditional news media networks.

	Unique	Outgoing Hyperlinks		
Type of Site	**Sites**	**Posts**	**Comments**	**Total**
Alternate News	2		2	2
Blog	15	18	14	32
Charity	1		1	1
Commercial	3		3	3
Commercial News	7	11	20	31
Corporation	2		2	2
Government	3	7	6	13
Organisation	4	1	3	4
Politician	2	1	1	2
Public News	1	3	7	10
Reference	1		1	1
University	1		1	1
Video Reference	1		1	1
TOTAL	43	41	62	103

Table 2: External Sites linked to by Type

In Dunlop's post and subsequent reader comments, blog sites account for approximately 30% of all external links. The most linked-to blogs include *Road to Surfdom* and *Peter Martin* (four times by Dunlop), *Polemica* (three times by Dunlop) and *Possum Comitatus* (once by Dunlop and twice in comments). Another 30% of external sites are commercial news sites—in fact, 22 of the 31 links to commercial news sites are to the Fairfax newspaper *Sydney Morning Herald*, while another three are to its sister site, the Melbourne-based *The Age*. The high rate of links to competing Fairfax publications is perhaps a reflection of where *Blogocracy* readers themselves prefer to find the news of the day—16 of the 22 links to the *Sydney Morning Herald* are found in the comments. This would further support our observation of a general leftist leaning in the Australian political blogosphere, or at least is likely to indicate the predominant political preferences of Dunlop's audience, as News Limited is perceived to be positioned clearly to the right of the centre of Australian politics, where Fairfax is generally seen as taking a centrist or even slightly left-of-centre approach. (At the same time, however, it must also be pointed out that outside of Fairfax newspapers and the commercial broadcasters, there essentially *are* no other mainstream commercial news organisations in Australia, creating a severely limited range of linking options for users wishing to point to the coverage of domestic news outside of News Limited.)

Government sites account for only 13 of the 103 external links; these links are mainly provided to source statistical information, or to quote specific government policy documents or press releases. This further supports our general finding of the relative absence of such primary sources from blog-based political discussion in Australia. Finally, the next largest group of external links are to publicly funded news sites, or more specifically, to the online news resources provided by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

This case study provides only a snapshot of the range of topics and external links found at *Blogocracy* within a single, randomly selected week, of course. However, they do clearly match and support the overall tendencies which we have outlined in our general findings about the Australian political blogosphere above; this, then, would appear to indicate that Dunlop's *Blogocracy* site has been able to retain the features of a 'traditional' political

blog even while being hosted by a commercial, mainstream news organisation. At the same time, *Blogocracy*'s relative absence as a core site of blog-based political discussion from the various general issue crawls we have conducted may indicate that Dunlop's move into the mainstream has both opened up a new community of readers and participants, and failed to encourage existing users to make the move from *Road to Surfdom* to *Blogocracy*. This could also be read as a sign of deep distrust for News Limited's online and offline publications amongst the leftist mainstream of Australian political bloggers, even in spite of the company's embrace of Dunlop as a staff blogger-pundit whose politics are significantly at odds with the prevailing political orientation of the corporation itself. [5]

Conclusions

The strong leftist tendencies and notable polarisation of the Australian blogosphere may well be an indication that political blogs in Australia are at present mainly preaching to the already converted on either side of the political divide, rather than playing a particularly active part in public deliberation on political issues and events. At the same time, however, it is also important to note that according to current political polling, the overall sentiment expressed in the blogosphere is broadly in tune with the prevailing mood of the wider electorate, which after eleven years appears to have become disillusioned with the Howard government and is expected to swing significantly towards Labor at the federal elections in late November 2007. Should a change of power occur at the federal level, it will be interesting to examine whether the political focus of the Australian blogosphere remains in step with wider public opinion even at a point where Labor's poll results may begin to fade again, or whether the Australian political blogosphere is fundamentally and persistently pro-Labor (or at least pro-left wing) irrespective of the prevailing political climate in the country. It will be important to examine whether the election of a Labor government (and a possible shift of news media support to the election winner) generate a converse trend of increased blogging

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[5] As it turns out, such distrust may have been justified, indeed: News Limited's promises of editorial freedom for Dunlop were shown to be unreliable by an incident on 12 July 2007, in which a *Blogocracy* post sharply critical of an editorial in News Limited's flagship paper *The Australian* (which had personally attacked prominent bloggers for disagreeing with the paper's political columnists in their interpretation of political polling) was removed from the news.com.au site without explanation (see Bruns, "Life"; Bruns, Wilson, and Saunders).

activity by conservatives, and a decrease of political blogging by Labor supporters; this, then, would point to a use of political blogging as a tool mainly for the expression of views in opposition to the government of the day, and to the mainstream media sentiment.

Clearly, such developments are as yet difficult to predict, and are further influenced also by the changing demographics of active online participation as access to the Australian Internet in general, and high-speed broadband more specifically, becomes more affordable and citizen literacy in participatory online media improves. Our present observations therefore mark only the beginning of what must be an ongoing project of research into political activity in Australia using participatory online media, and must be extended through further research which takes into account the changing political landscape in this country. What is already evident, however, is that especially in the context of a highly concentrated and ideologically homogeneous mainstream of (commercial) Australian news media, political blogs in this country play the crucial role of adding a more diverse and multifaceted range of perspectives.

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