

Citizen Journalism as Social Networking: Reporting the 2007 Australian Federal Election

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1. The Australian election (and online public affairs in 2007)

The 2007 Australian Federal Election campaign will be remembered for a number of reasons. It was only the second time that a sitting Prime Minister lost his seat. It was the first time those voters born after 1988 had experienced a change in government, after the Howard Government had been in charge since 1996. It also brought about the Labor Party's domination of all territory, state, and federal parliaments. Beyond this, it also marked beginning of a transformation of the Australian mediasphere, signalling a substantially greater role for online and citizen media. This trend was also observed during the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign, but the 2007 election saw the trend arrive here with its own, uniquely Australian inflection.

Such dramatic changes, of course, do not come out of the blue. Long-established news and commentary blogs – like *Road to Surfdom*, *JohnQuiggin.com*, or *TimBlair.net*, had gained some prominence in Australia already. Public intellectual and citizen journalism sites from *On Line Opinion* to *Crikey* were instrumental in developing an alternative public sphere, and many interested citizens were prepared to seek them out in the years preceding 2007. The potential of online developments had also been well recognised by some key players in the media and journalism industries. *Crikey* was sold to corporate media interests in 2005, *Road to Surfdom's* Tim Dunlop accepted a position in *News.com.au's* line-up of opinion blogs, and Tim Blair combined his blogging with prominent mainstream media work.ⁱ Over at the national broadcaster, *ABC Online* gradually developed a range of experiments in citizen media, including expanded discussion and commentary functions for its readers and a number of blog-style opinion sections involving staff and guest writers.

2007 saw a further broadening of citizen journalism approaches to the coverage of Australian federal politics, however, and it is possible to point to signs of a marked impact on the Australian mediasphere of such extended citizen involvement in political coverage, debate, discussion, and deliberation. This was discernible in a number of ways. Overall, there was an increased audience and attention (not always laudatory) for political bloggers. In particular, specialist bloggers – economists, psephologists and “insider” political gossip sites – came to the notice of media professionals and political junkies. Their credibility was enhanced during the election, and arguably at the expense of paid commentators in the mainstream media (see Bruns, 2008b). Australia's first successful crowdsourced citizen journalism projects were also run during the campaign, including our industry linkage project *Youdecide2007*, run at Queensland University of Technology in collaboration with public broadcaster SBS, *On Line Opinion*, and Cisco Systems. Perhaps most tellingly, the winning party, the ALP, and its successful Prime Ministerial candidate, Kevin Rudd, were themselves seen to embrace social media, online forums and feedback, while the outgoing Liberal Party refused to engage with online campaigning beyond a very limited use of *YouTube*. The remainder of this chapter will examine these manifestations of change in Australia's mediasphere through the prism of the 2007 campaign, and will offer a close account of our citizen journalism project, *Youdecide2007*.

2. The “Oz” versus the blogs

The clearest indication that political bloggers were having an impact on political reporting by 2007 was a negative one: the new preparedness of mainstream media commentators to go after bloggers who had criticized them in the editorial pages of newspapers. There was some provocation: internationally, citizen journalism's first target is often the established mainstream media – and Australian political bloggers and citizen journalists made great sport in the election lead-in of analysing and critiquing mainstream commentary. Under particular scrutiny was the output of Australia's only national daily, *The Australian*, the local flagship of Rupert Murdoch's News Ltd. Throughout 2007, the paper's analysis of the conservative government's standing in the opinion polls had been consistently upbeat, often to the point of stretching the limits of statistical reasoning. For example, a 10 July front-page piece by Dennis Shanahan was headlined “Howard Checks Rudd's March”. The piece described John Howard as ‘drawing level’ with Kevin Rudd in voter sympathy, even though the poll results themselves still showed at least a 1% gap between the two politicians in the ‘Preferred PM’ category, and a massive 12% gap in party voting intentions; notably, the online version of the same article was later retitled “Rudd ‘Relaxed’ about Howard's Poll Comeback” (Shanahan, 10 July 2007; see Ramsey, 2007, for further commentary).

Dubbing *The Australian* the *Government Gazette* (see e.g. Bahnisch, 11 July 2007), bloggers such as the anonymous independent psephologist (or poll specialist) blogging *Possums Pollytics* examined the editorial pages and their online counterparts, finding them wanting on an almost daily basis. Many of the paper's editorial pieces were also published on News Ltd.'s *News.com.au* Website (combining material from *The Australian* and other Murdoch papers around the country) and there featured direct commenting and discussion functions for users. As a result, a significant amount of this criticism also found its way onto the News Website itself, and was displayed immediately alongside *The Australian's* editors' and commentators' opinions.

The prominence of some of these political news and commentary blogs in Australian election coverage can be explained in the context of Australia's broader mediascape. For an affluent industrial nation with a vigorous democratic culture, Australia has a comparatively underdeveloped mediasphere. This is due in part to the unusual distribution of the majority of the Australian population into a handful of geographically remote major centres, separated by sparsely populated countryside. Australia constitutes not one, but perhaps four or five more or less separate media markets. Addressing all of these markets sustainably at a national level is possible only for a very few major commercial media operators. For this reason, then, ownership of Australia's commercial print media is largely concentrated in the hands of only two major corporations: Rupert Murdoch's News Ltd., and John Fairfax Holdings. Most Australian state capitals have access only to one major local newspaper, and Reporters sans Frontières regularly ranks Australia relatively low in its annual Press Freedom Index – the country ranked 28th in the 2007 edition, up from 41st in 2005 (16 Oct. 2007).

The breadth and depth of political reporting in Australia is limited by these structural factors. Anecdotally, there is also evidence that the relatively small band of serious political journalists at national and state levels – aware of their precarious situation – tend to form relatively close working arrangements with long-lived state and federal governments,. Such arrangements sometimes give the appearance of “source capture” – they ensure a steady flow of political information but can inhibit more critical political reporting. Additionally, media proprietors and editors themselves may also pursue specific political agendas, which affect the framing of their staff's work. In a small market, unbalanced reporting by significant players can significantly affect the democratic process. Inadequacies of political coverage are highlighted especially at times of heightened political awareness – most of all, during state and federal elections.

The emergence of blogs and similar citizen journalism and citizen commentary sites as alternative sources of

political information and commentary during the 2007 federal election campaign was motivated to some degree by such deficits. While (as is evident from opinion polls and the eventual election results) a significant majority of the Australian population had already committed to a change of government several months prior to the election date, some news outlets and journalists seemed less enthused. In some newspapers, political allegiances and the depth of personal connections between government sources and many leading commentators combined to generate coverage that actively supported the Howard government. In particular, reporting of opinion polls in *The Australian* was consistently optimistic about the Government's chances of retaining office – much more so than the polling data seemed to warrant; consequentially, the paper served as the lightning rod for blogosphere criticism of media bias.

The persistence and vigour of this grassroots criticism appears to have had a surprisingly strong impact on the news media in general, and on *The Australian* in particular: on 12 July 2007, the paper published an extraordinary article that openly attacked bloggers and other “sheltered academics and failed journalists who would not get a job on a real newspaper” (*The Australian*, 12 July 2007). This was ostensibly for daring to voice their disagreement with *The Australian's* own journalists' and pundits' interpretation of the political mood of the electorate. The piece, understood to have been authored by the paper's editor-in-chief, Chris Mitchell, denounced grassroots online commentators as “out of touch with ordinary views”, and culminated in the remarkable statement that “unlike [daily political email newsletter] Crikey, we understand Newspoll because we own it”.

Such reactions by journalists and commentators may only serve to illustrate veteran blogger-journalist Dan Gillmor's well-known claim that “my readers know more than I do” (2003: vi). On a range of topics – opinion polling and election speculation included – it is now possible to find specialist bloggers and citizen journalists providing deeper insights than is possible for a journalist operating under the pressures of the modern newsroom. While citizen journalists are often depicted as amateurs attempting to do the work of professionals, in this case there was the spectacle of professional journalists (but manifestly amateur psephologists) criticising expert election analysts who happened to share their insights through the medium of blogging. In the end it was the bloggers under attack, rather than *The Australian's* scribes, who called the election result correctly, from a long way out.

3. Hyperlocal citizen reporting – *Youdecide2007*

Incidents such as this one reproduce international experience that suggests that bloggers have no trouble producing political commentary which is at least the equal of their industrial counterparts. From the 2007 campaign forward, it is safe to say that a group of bloggers have been recognized by a politically literate audience (and their mainstream “competition”) as providing a legitimate source of alternative political commentary. Nonetheless, what is often perceived as the Achilles heel of citizen journalism is an inability to conduct investigative or first-hand reporting. A number of projects have recently addressed this problem, with varying success: the U.S.-based *Assignment Zero* was described as “a highly satisfying failure” (Howe 2007), while the German *MyHeimat.de* appears to have been thoroughly successful in attracting strong communities of contributors in many of the geographic areas that it covers, even to the point of being able to generate print versions of its content which are distributed free of charge to households in selected German cities – but it does so by focusing largely on the ‘softer’ areas of feature writing and community content, rather than ‘hard’ news and politics

MyHeimat's strongly locally-based approach may be able to translated to more conventional areas of politics, however – especially in the context of elections and other major events. To that end, *Youdecide2007.org*, a collaboration between researchers at Queensland University of Technology and media practitioners at the public service broadcaster SBS, the public opinion site *On Line Opinion*, and technology company Cisco Systems, was

developed as a dedicated space for a specifically hyperlocal coverage of the 2007 election campaign in each of Australia's 150 electorates from the urban sprawls of Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane to the sparsely populated remote regions of outback Australia.

While Australian news and politics blogs such as *Larvatus Prodeo* and *Possums Pollytics* are constructed around specific intellectual interests and pursuits, *Youdecide2007* (not to be confused with News Ltd.'s election site *You Decide 2007*, or similarly-named sites in the United States covering the presidential primaries) took a very different approach to its attempt to foster Australian citizen journalism. *Youdecide2007* employed a hyperlocal methodology to its election coverage: it provided contributors with the tools and platform to cover their local electoral races for a wider audience. This is particularly appropriate to the Westminster-style Australian electoral system, which (for the lower house) ultimately breaks down into 150 individual contests for local electorates.

YD07 provided training materials for would-be citizen journalists and encouraged them to contribute electorate profiles, interview candidates, and conduct vox-pops with citizens in their local area. The site developed a strong following especially in its home state of Queensland, and its interviewers influenced national public debate by uncovering the sometimes controversial personal views of mainstream and fringe candidates. At the same time, the success of *YD07* was limited by external constraints determined by campaign timing and institutional frameworks. As part of a continuing action research cycle, lessons learnt from *Youdecide2007* were also translated into a further iteration of the project, *QldDecides.com*, which covered local government elections in the Australian state of Queensland in March 2008, and developments subsequent to these elections.

Youdecide2007 contributors were encouraged to interview their local candidates (including but not limited to those of the major parties), conduct vox-pops with local voters, and report on the issues central to their own electorate; these reports were posted on the site in text, audio, and video format. Additional material, some of which transcended individual electorates, was also prepared by *YD07* staffers, who also appeared on a number of state and national radio broadcasts and in a weekly election talk show on Brisbane's community channel *Briz31*. In essence, *Youdecide2007* was therefore a hybrid or 'Pro-Am' citizen journalism project, designed to stimulate grassroots, citizen-generated coverage of the political contest by using institutional backing to put in place a sophisticated framework for citizen-journalistic activity.ⁱⁱ

While *YD07* had a relatively short run-up to the election, it nonetheless managed to attract citizen journalists in roughly one third of all Australian electorates, including many which had been largely overlooked by election coverage in the national press. In fact, the site's most active contributor, Kevin Rennie, reported from the remote Western Australian electorate of Kalgoorlie (which also holds a distinction as being, geographically speaking, the world's largest electorate). This placed it well as a hyperlocal complement to the national coverage of both industrial journalism and topical citizen journalism, and enabled it to cover stories and feature candidates otherwise excluded from journalistic coverage.

In a number of cases such reporting became newsworthy on a wider level: perhaps *Youdecide2007*'s best-known story was an interview with the Liberal member for the Queensland seat of Herbert, Peter Lindsay, who blamed young people's "financial illiteracy" for the unaffordability of housing being experienced by many younger voters. "I remember my own case," he claimed. "We sat on milk crates in the lounge room until we could afford chairs. We had makeshift shelves to put ornaments on and so on, but you did that in those days. You waited until you could – you didn't live beyond your means and you didn't try to keep up with the Joneses. Things were more responsible" (Lindsay interviewed by Wilson, 10 Sep. 2007). These comments also became the basis for a question in parliament to PM John Howard by Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd, who asked, "apart from the milk crate solution, what is your plan to deal with Australia's housing affordability crisis or is it simply to blame the states?" (Rudd qtd. in Wilson, 19 Sep. 2007).

Though extraordinary, this incident highlights the potential inherent in hyperlocal and other forms of citizen-journalistic news reporting, especially where citizen journalists are able to build on a solid set of resources and tools for their work. In a political context, it makes elected representatives and rival candidates more directly accountable to reporters who act in a double role as both citizens and journalists – and this similarly applies for fields other than politics as well –, and by relying on a broader community of citizen journalists, it is able to uncover a wider range of stories than is accessible to the limited workforce of the journalism industry; some of these stories, in turn, may prove to be of significance beyond the local environment, but even where they are of interest to locals only, such citizen journalism offers an important addition to the material available from the mainstream press.

Throughout its active life, the site attracted around 2000 registered users, who submitted some 230 stories. We received stories from over one third of Australia's 150 electorates, and citizen journalists submitted print, video, audio and photographic materials. At its peak, the site attracted over 12,000 readers a week, and received more traffic than all but one of the major political parties' sites. It broke stories that were picked up by the national press, and was able to send a correspondent to the National Tally Room on election night. Although ambitions for such services tend to be high, *Youdecide2007* was considered a successful effort as a citizen journalism service, especially in the Australian context, where little has been attempted in this area.

One of the important outcomes of the project was in discovering what the work of facilitating citizen journalism consists in. Given the "limitations of the crowd" (Simons, 2008), and the need for "go-to" people (Howe, 2007) to keep such services on an even keel, it was important to learn more about the role of "professionals" in citizen journalism's "pro-am" equation. Despite the conflict between professional journalists and bloggers noted earlier, by thinking through the work of facilitating a community of news and content makers, it is possible to transcend the stale "pro-am" dichotomy by pointing out ways in which professional practice is changing in order to accommodate citizen-generated content.

We discovered that this new model of journalism – which we might call "journalism as social networking" – takes place in four dimensions. Although these dimensions of practice are distinct from one another, they share one aim – promoting, maintaining and extending an active community of citizen journalists. Firstly, *content work* includes editing citizen content (for quality and legal issues) and producing pro "seed" content to draw in "producers" (users able to and interested in taking on content creation roles; see Bruns, 2008a) to a news service. While publishing amateur, citizen content will be a major part of the rationale for any citizen journalism service, "pro" content can draw in readers, ensure a steady flow of content for the service, and provide "models of practice" for citizen reporters. Though ideals of free speech are often also part of the inspiration for citizen journalism experiments, they do not take place in a legal vacuum. Local publishing laws – which are often complex and uneven – still often apply to online publishing, and not all jurisdictions guarantee free speech in the same way that, say, the United States does. Australia's defamation laws provide an example of legislation which restricts what can be published – amateur journalists are often not fully apprised of the application of such laws, and require guidance for their own protection, and the long-term viability of the service. Users also often welcome editorial input on issues of quality.

Secondly, *networking* involves both making and maintaining contacts in the mainstream and independent media, and procuring and republishing content across the networked news environment. Although false dichotomies between mainstream and citizen journalism are often posed, the best way to attract a community to citizen journalism services is to promote the services in the mainstream media – any media appearances attract more users and contributions. Being able to syndicate material in other online forums also helps to draw people to services, and means that contributors get more readers or viewers and more value from their participation. Appropriate licensing models are important here, and Creative Commons licensing allows extensive republication. Most important of all, though, is a

willingness to go beyond the idea that citizen and mainstream journalism are opposed to one another, and instead to consider them as elements of an ecology of “networked journalism”, where a range of professional and amateur contributors and industrial and independent outlets together form the diverse totality of contemporary news production.

Thirdly, *tech work* involves both running the online services, and using appropriate technologies to syndicate content, communicate with users, and assess the performance of the service. Obviously, citizen journalism itself is often Internet-driven, and necessarily requires the ability to design, use and maintain an online platform for journalism. But those operating citizen journalism services may also be involved in republishing content to services like *Flickr* or *YouTube*, communicating with users via Skype or IM, and obtaining and processing reliable site metrics. In a small team, a wide range of basic technological skills will be required, and this is even more true where the generation of multimedia “pro” content is necessary.

Fourthly, and most important of all, *community work* involves gathering and serving an online newsmaking community. This means not only bringing users to a community, but serving their needs and rewarding their investment of time and skills in a particular service. Users may require guidance in using technology or writing stories, and also communities may require staff to lead or moderate discussion. Successful services will be those that take special care to establish good relations with the relatively small number of users who are regular or prolific contributors – in a very real sense, these ‘super-contributors’ are even more vital to the health of citizen journalism communities than staff are. Given the international trend towards mainstream news organizations harnessing user-generated content, this more community-oriented form of journalism – which we mapped during the Australian election – is likely to become more important in the future. It is our belief that journalism education needs to start taking some of the lessons of citizen journalism projects on board.

In spite of its achievements, *Youdecide2007* cannot be described as an unqualified success; it serves in the first place as a proof of concept for further hyperlocal citizen journalism experiments. This is hardly surprising – most produsage sites and projects in citizen journalism and elsewhere take years to generate a sustainable, committed community with shared values and protocols, while *YD07* operated for just under three months between its launch and the election date. This brief pre-election lifespan left little time for the site to establish a reputation which would have allowed its contributors’ work to be picked up more regularly by mainstream news outlets (including project partner SBS), so that most of the mainstream media coverage of the site occurred through third-party mentions (as in the case of Kevin Rudd’s ‘crate-gate’ question in federal parliament) or through reports which focused on the *Youdecide2007* project itself, rather than on individual political stories published on the site by its citizen journalists.

However, by engaging in original reporting which fills a gap left open by the national news media, hyperlocal citizen journalism sites are able to position themselves outside of conventional ‘citizens vs. journalists’ frameworks altogether: they operate from a third place which is neither necessarily in opposition to nor supportive of the mainstream journalism industry, and neither limits itself to analysis and commentary only nor avoids extended discussions of topics of relevance to its contributors. A well-established network of committed citizen journalists operating across the nation would appear to be able to make a significant contribution to Australian journalism, and it is likely that further phases in the research project that produced *Youdecide2007* will pursue such possibilities.

3. “Kevin 07” – Participatory transformations in political communication

In the long run, perhaps the most significant shift to occur during the 2007 election was a move to new, online, socially-inflected models of political communication. It is notable in this context that the victorious Australian Labor Party dipped more than a toe into the waters of more consultative, two-way models of political communication. By various means –

starting Facebook pages, offering the facility for comments and questions on a central “Kevin07” Website, and direct methods such as targeted emails – the ALP dominated an area of campaigning that Liberal/National Coalition strategists either ignored, or handled poorly.ⁱⁱⁱ Whether or not this new direction in campaigning translates into a more consultative and deliberative approach to governance and policy-formation remains to be seen.

Although the ALP’s embrace of online and social campaigning methods may not have been decisive in the election result, it did help underscore the ALP’s central campaign message of “new leadership”. Significantly, the Internet and ICTs themselves became campaign issues during the election, with the ALP promising laptop computers for every high school student, and more importantly offering to fix the country’s antiquated broadband infrastructure. This raft of twenty-first century issues, along with the promise of generational change, were accented positively by the employment of new modes of political communication.

Charged with implementing the ALP’s online strategy – and the central “Kevin 07” Website – was the online communications consultant Camilla Cooke. She argued in an interview with one of the authors that the Website – with its facility for user comments, extensive multimedia content, and gently self-mocking “Kevin 07” merchandise – worked to “humanise” a sometimes dour candidate. This was especially effective for those younger voters who came out strongly for the ALP at the polls. During the campaign, she said, the ALP were prepared to engage in dialogue with the voters, and were unprepared for the scale of the reaction they received in terms of visitors to the site, and attempts to buy the prominent “Kevin 07” T-shirts. Cooke was able to get agreement from the campaign team that the “risks” involved in online campaigning – of negative comments and a general easing of “message control” – were worthwhile. Especially for already-committed voters under 40, the site “made them excited, and feel like they were part of the campaign”.

It is unlikely that the ALP will have the online area all to themselves in future campaigns, and already the Liberals are moving to improve their online performance. Along with the ALP’s own campaign, progressive online campaigning organizations like GetUp^{iv} worked to organise online, and shift the issues agenda through progressive campaigning. Although making the mistake of believing that GetUp is a “Labor front”, Liberal Senator Eric Abetz recently reflected wisely on the 2007 campaign:

Abetz is forensic while accepting that the failure of the Liberals in 2007 means that the conservative side of politics will have to spend time examining the success of GetUp and its operations with the concomitant “that we on the political Right have to accept the reality of internet campaigning and fully enter this campaign space”. (Milne, 2008)

The “insurgent” left had more use for online campaigning and citizen media up until the 2007 election than the “incumbent” right, and engaged more fully with their possibilities; in the next election campaign in 2010 or 2011, perhaps we will see that the Right in Australia have learned from their experience. Whether or not this happens, it is likely that a number of experiences from the 2007 election will be repeated and extended once again. To begin with, without significant change to Australia’s mediascape, it is likely that the (somewhat counterproductive) conflict between citizen journalists and professional commentators will heat up once again.

While political allegiances on both sides may have changed by 2010/11 (the new Labor-led federal government should rely neither on the continued good will of the Australian political blogosphere nor on the entrenched scepticism of the mainstream commentariat), we would expect that both sides of the Pro/Am divide will once again battle to establish their leadership in interpreting opinion polls and taking the overall political pulse of the nation. Indeed, continuing financial strain for commercial news organisations and growing public recognition of citizen journalism

outlets may combine to shift the advantage in this conflict further towards the bloggers. At the same time, projects such as *Youdecide2007* also indicate that compromise is possible; as we have noted, especially for projects which operate at a larger, nationwide scale and aim to advance beyond commentary to do first-hand reporting. For us, the presence of quasi-journalistic staff, addressing the four dimensions of Pro-Am work which we have identified, appears to be necessary to the success of citizen journalism. Enterprising news organisations in Australia are now making their first steps towards experimenting with such Pro-Am models, and we would expect them to have reached a level of substantial maturity by the time of the next regular federal election.

Ultimately, such developments stand a chance of overcoming some of the structural deficits which have been a long-time feature of the Australian media landscape. By incorporating a greater level of citizen-sourced content, they may be able to increase the diversity of coverage and commentary in Australian political journalism. By providing the tools and infrastructure for journalistic activity, they may be able to generate better reporting especially from the chronically underserved regional and rural areas outside of the major Australian capitals. Perhaps most critically, by injecting citizen participation into political news, they might be able to break up the “echo chamber” effect that limits the variety of perspectives covered by the Canberra press gallery. Journalists and news organisations which seek to delay or insulate themselves from such changes may prove to be increasingly left out of mainstream political debate (and the performance of *The Australian* in this context will be most interesting to track over coming months and years), while those who actively pursue such new opportunities may well turn out to be the opinion (and market) leaders of tomorrow.

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- ⁱ Blair – who has had success as a right-of-centre blogger, drawing an international audience – has an established career in mainstream journalism. After working in the early part of the decade at the (now-defunct) weekly news magazine, *The Bulletin*, Blair progressed to the position of opinion editor at the *Daily Telegraph*, the biggest-selling Sydney daily.
- ⁱⁱ It should also be noted in this context that there was no overt commercial impetus for any of the industry partners to be involved in this project. SBS's and On Line Opinion's participation was driven largely by their respective missions to stimulate diversity and generate quality in Australian political debate, while Cisco Systems participated in the project presumably on the understanding that an increased use of online media for political debate would have beneficial indirect flow-on effects for its sales of networking technology.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Emblematic here was Prime Minister John Howard's ill-fated foray into *YouTube* campaigning, where he notoriously opened an address intended for the always-on, on-demand video sharing platform with the words, "Good morning".
- ^{iv} As at July 2008, and during the writing of this paper, one of the authors, Jason Wilson, became E Democracy Director at GetUp.