DIGITIZING DEMOCRACY
NEW COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY AND THE 2004 FEDERAL ELECTION
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Given the unstoppable juggernaut of information technology in all realms of our culture, a look at its impact in the socio-political sphere during election time was bound to be a rich exercise.

HERE IN AUSTRALIA, computer mediated information produced an active public sphere, drove political party websites, generated new ways of learning about constituents, enabled online polling, changed the way television and radio produced their programs and changed campaign tactics. This article looks at some of these processes in detail. With all this information and engagement, was democracy the winner?

The six-week campaign leading to the 2004 Federal election was widely considered long and tedious, especially as for months before the official kick-off, Labor’s new leader Mark Latham was in full flight, busy making friends with the Australian electorate. Voters seemed to warm to his widely publicized visit to Tasmania’s old growth forests. His outspoken views on parliamentar-supernannuation and judicial pensions had the Government re-jigging its policy. He wrong-footed Prime Minister Howard by pushing such ‘soft’ issues as pre-school literacy and obesity into a parliamentary domain dominated by finance and defence. Presenting himself as an unusual mix of working class hero and unconventional thinker, Latham’s popularity surged. As the election drew near, the professional pundits – pollsters and political commentators alike – predicted a photo finish. Newspoll said the outcome was too close to call. And Roy Morgan Research predicted 49–51 per cent of the two-party preferred vote for the ALP:1 The Herald’s veteran political commentator Alan Ramsey proclaimed that ‘At the very least Labor will eat into the Government’s majority’.2

But on polling day the speculation came to an abrupt end. By 7.15pm, only an hour and a half after polling closed, Senator Robert Ray as a commentator on the Nine Network called a victory for the Coalition. By 7.25pm, Anthony Green on the ABC had come to the same conclusion.3 An historic fourth term had been handed to the Government. In the following weeks, counting would confirm a two-party preferred swing to the Government of 1.79 per cent,4 and a Liberal–National Party majority in the Senate.

What went wrong for Labor and what went right for the Liberals is currently being scrutinized with the necessary bloodletting in the ranks of the Opposition, with an assured ‘steady as she goes’ message coming from the Coalition. Here I take a narrow view of the election, looking not at the policies themselves but at the impact of new media on their dissemination and acknowledgment.

Given the election outcome, it is clear that the Coalition had a superior handle on the use of technology. An aggressive telemarketing campaign, combined with a strategy of bypassing the normal media filtering of the Canberra press gallery, gave the Howard camp an advantage. The technology itself enabled this approach, with digital feeds of policy releases and immediate responses being pinged across the country. As well, they were assisted by the powerful established media, whose interests were better served by the return of the Coalition, with its promise to take a second look at Australia’s cross-ownership media laws. This promise was reflected in the editorials urging readers to vote for the Coalition.

In considering the impact of the new media, it is instructive to look at recent US elections, for there are notable parallels. On 9 October, with our election outcome decided, the US presidential campaigns were in full flight with still a month to go. Millions of Americans were choosing to vote for the first time, reportedly spurred on by the Florida punch card debacle of 2000, which demonstrated to Americans that their vote could actually count. Ohio alone had 600,000 new registrations.5 In California 1.8 million were added to the state rolls. Many of these recruits to the rolls were under 29,6 and were expected to boost the Democrat vote. On the other side, the Republican campaign had targeted the Evangelical Right. The Evangelical turnout (a figure of four million was suggested by Allen Gregg of the polling and research firm The Strategic Counsel)7 offset the newly enrolled Democrats.

Could this surge in numbers of voters have had anything to do with the array of new media and communication devices we now take for granted in the day-to-day running of our lives? The pervasive use of the Internet, with its many-to-many capacity; the swarming capabilities of new media in which SMS messaging and email campaigning make direct contact with targeted communities; bloggers pumping out unmediated responses to national events; websites that bypass mainstream media and offer alternative views; data mining which pinpoints special interest groups – all have contributed to the way election campaigns play out in advanced democratic societies.

However, increased voter turnout does not necessarily mean a deeper understanding of politics. The belief of ‘fresh start’ theorists (Kapor, Negroponte, Katz) that the Internet can thrust us all into a new realm of enlightenment in which discourse flows freely among politically astute citizens, was sorely tested. The liberal-pessimist view that ‘more information doesn’t actually mean more understanding or greater wisdom’8 appears to me to be a better fit.

Buying the message

It seems contradictory – on the one hand acknowledging that more people in the USA were motivated to vote, and on the other, questioning that the motivation came from an ‘informed citizenry’.9 The contradiction stems from the quality of the citizens’ information and the persuasiveness of its impact. A community of like-minded voters can be roused to action, not by their analysis of the issues but by the strength of community ties that bind.
them. Their existing belief systems are reinforced, not challenged.

In what is literally a case of preaching to the converted, the Southern Baptist Convention set up a website, iVoteValues.com, and helped the Colorado-based Focus on the Family create a similar site, iVoteValues.org. Both are Internet-based versions of an older mobilization tool, the ‘voter guides’ distributed for more than a decade by the Washington-based Christian Coalition of America. Tens of thousands of registration forms previously posted out to members were in this election downloaded from the Internet.11

In Australia, the website Defeat Howard (www.defeathoward.com) sent out emails to its subscriber base. It published media releases and excerpts from essays and speeches. It sought opinion on the wording of a newspaper advertisement it wanted to place and the funds to do so.

Both sites tap into an existing base. Defeat Howard’s base is asylum seeker activists brought together by its convenor Rob in Rothfield, a member of Labor4Refugees and Jews for a Just Peace.12

Here in Australia, where voting is compulsory, voters’ engagement with an election is not so easily measured. However, standardized software systems such as email, website navigation and hot links lead to homogenous responses by Internet users, regardless of where they live.

Internet usage in Australia and the US is comparable. The research bureau NeilsenNetRatings gauged that in July 2004, 69 per cent of the US population used the Internet,13 and that Australia’s use in August 2004 was 65.5 per cent. (‘Usage’ is not defined in the report.)

Where Australia varies markedly is in Internet delivery. Telstra beat its drum when in October 2004 it reported that one million (about 7.5 per cent) of our 13,359,821 users were now connected to broadband.14 But the latest US figures show over fifty per cent of users are now connected to broadband.15 This suggests that our Allies are more actively engaged with the Internet in so much as high-speed delivery of online content exposes them to a greater number of websites and kinds of multimedia. Nonetheless, with the penetration of the Internet in Australia only marginally behind that of the US, there has been a profusion of online political activity in Australia too. When Kerry Packer asserts that ‘the Internet is now a genuine mass media’,16 pointing, as evidence, to the trend of mainstream brands to schedule advertising online, we can be sure that, whether selling soap powder or campaigning from a virtual soap box, there is a massive online audience and they are buying.

The Internet provides us with a never-ending stream of data and opinion. The medium is not merely the message. Our ability to form a view is shaped by factors outside the transmission process itself, including our belief systems and personal interests, fixed perceptions and prejudices.17

US political scientist John Zaller says that, ironically, having an informed citizenry does not necessarily make for a stronger democracy. ‘Highly informed citizens have many good democratic virtues, but they also tend to be rigid, moralistic and partisan.’18

The high-tech political campaign

With technology proving to be an unstoppable juggernaut in business and government, it is hardly surprising that in 2004 Australia’s electoral contenders should put funds into online campaigning. Websites for the major parties were already well established, though with varying degrees of sophistication. Interactivity is incorporated into the Greens’ website in the form of an online poll. The standout feature of the Democrats’ site is flash movies that address key issues such as gay marriage and the Iraq war.19 The ALP site has a feedback page with a comments box. An assurance is given that comments will be passed on to ‘appropriate people and areas of the ALP Shadow Ministry’ but with the caveat that it does ‘not have the resources to guarantee further communication’.20 At the time of writing, the Liberal Party has no discernable multi-media content or feedback option on its site. It does have a downloads tab but this leads to three meagre still images: a graphic Protecting, Securing, Building Australia’s Future, a photo of Prime Minister Howard with the Australian flag draped behind him, and the Liberal Party logo.21 But if the site is perfunctory (at the time of writing), there was nothing half-hearted about the Government’s commitment to new communications technology in the campaign itself.

Disseminating information in a decentralized way via a number of unmediated sources; intertwining technologies over converging networks … No, these are not the machinations of the next anti-globalisation protest, they are the election game plan of the Liberal Party. Maybe John Howard, a strong critic of the anti-globalization movement, has more in common tactically with these radicals than he ever thought, for, more than any other party, the Liberals embraced a high-tech campaign strategy.

At odds with the Government’s own anti-spamming laws, the Prime Minister recruited the services of his son’s fledgling IT company Net Harbour to devise a spam-
Cyber-enthusiasts like Gillmor see this as being a positive step for democracy. But disintermediation works for politicians too. New communication technology allows them to avoid the scrutiny of the established media. They can also become their own marketing company. John Howard’s phone campaign may be abhorrent to some, but e-marketers and call centres acknowledge it to be an effective marketing strategy. In assessing the Coalition’s high-tech tactics, we should keep in mind that Andrew Robb, the former national director of the Liberal Party, now the member for Goldstein, was last year chairman of the Australian Direct Marketing Association.

Disintermediation

The term disintermediation is commonly used to describe the way new communication tools bypass old routes, delivering information and services directly to the consumer. In the case of the media, direct communication gives everyone the opportunity to become a newspaper; in the words of the Silicon Valley journalist Dan Gillmor, ‘not just the few who can afford to buy into the multimillion-dollar, tightly controlled big media game, printing presses, launch satellites, or win the government’s permission to squat on the public’s airwaves’. Cyber-enthusiasts like Gillmor see this breakdown of information elites as being a positive step for democracy. But disintermediation works for politicians too. New communication technology allows them to avoid the scrutiny of the established media. They can also become their own marketing company. John Howard’s phone campaign may be abhorrent to some, but e-marketers and call centres acknowledge it to be an effective marketing strategy. In assessing the Coalition’s high-tech tactics, we should keep in mind that Andrew Robb, the former national director of the Liberal Party, now the member for Goldstein, was last year chairman of the Australian Direct Marketing Association.

It is worth noting a recent study by Lee Cox, who conducted an exit poll in three marginal seats during the 2001 Federal election. Cox was able to demonstrate that campaign literature such as letters and pamphlets was the primary source of policy information for forty-one per cent of the sample. Almost ten per cent of those who received these materials changed their voting intention, either for or against. In contrast, television campaigns, though highly visible, have been shown to reinforce opinion rather than change it. Bypassing the mainstream media, Cox suggests, is an effective way of converting voting intention.

New communication technology provides trajectories for direct hits on intended targets. The parallels with letters and pamphlets are clear: email is analogous to one-to-one as old-fashioned door knocking. The efficacy of the Liberals’ phone tactics was measured by trials in the Queensland electorate of Bowman two weeks before the election. Eighty-five per cent of callers kept listening to the Prime Minister until the end of the message.

Though there was disquiet at the time, the privacy issue has died down. An inquiry was undertaken at the request of the Australian Communications Authority (ACA). It found no evidence to suggest the Liberal Party had improperly used data from the Integrated Public Number Database (IPND) in its tele-marketing activities. The inquiry reported that the phone numbers were obtained from publicly available databases. These can include numbers that in the past were listed but have since become unlisted.

We have become a society inured to the invasion of privacy by credit card checks, cookies on websites and databases that do the rounds. The War on Terror has increased our acceptance of surveillance, with extended powers of intelligence agencies and loss of civil liberties seen to be an acceptable price to pay. But how did Net Harbour not only get the names of voters residing in Bennelong and the other electorates, but also match them to email addresses? How did the US telemarketers get Australian silent numbers? Where does their database reside now and what, if any, privacy protection does it have? Can and will it be sold on later?

The answers are being unearthed by Australian researchers Peter van Onselen and Wayne Errington. Their paper ‘Electional Databases: Big Brother or Democracy Unbound?’ lifts the lid on undisclosed electoral databases that both Labor and Liberal use to seek electoral advantage. The Coalition’s Feedback and the ALP’s Electrak compile comprehensive profiles of constituents, which help the parties predict where their preferences will fall come election day. Van Onselen and Errington show how a mention in a community newsletter, a letter to the editor, or phone calls, letters and petitions to parliamentary members are logged locally and stored in a database which can be centrally accessed as required. Voters’ personal details, including family make up, ethnic background, even presumed sexuality, go into some electoral databases. Data is tagged and managed, profiles are created and mail with a specific agenda is sent out.

This little-known aspect of political campaigning is now considered an essential tool of modern political advocacy. It is crucial to influencing swinging voters in marginal seats. Described by one Labor backbencher as a ‘secret weapon’, the databases sourced some 150,000 to 200,000 voters nationwide who would be decisive in the electoral outcome, and though they did not seek it, these voters became the chosen ones for voter inducements. Media commentator and former editor of the Sydney Morning Herald Max Suich concludes that this produced narrow, sectional policies that advantage the swinger to the possible exclusion of the larger electorate – the Government’s
vote buying in marginal seats in this election and the narrow packaging of the offers is unprecedented.\(^{37}\)

In a parliamentary democracy, elected representatives should be in touch with their electors. Electoral databases have the potential to improve the level of interaction between them. There are, however, a number of ethical problems associated with using databases. At what point does bureaucratic efficiency, or concern for the needs of the electorate, turn into unwelcome and intrusive surveillance? Worryingly, though commercial databases are subject to privacy legislation, van Onselen and Errington point out that Labor and the Coalition combined to introduce a late amendment to exclude themselves from its regulation.\(^ {38}\) Also, the information does not flow back and forth between voter and organization: it is tightly held. An individual voter cannot check the accuracy of the data and the political parties are not subject to any Freedom of Information searches. Moreover, acquiring information does not necessarily lead to good policies, particularly when the needs of the general electorate are supplanted by expedient niche concerns of marginal voters.

As John Pilger points out, our society is dominated by Orwellian slogans: War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength.\(^ {39}\) Perhaps the oxymoron ‘Database Democracy’ can be added to the list.

**Democracy reborn?**

In the mid-nineties in Australia, the Internet, though increasingly popular, was still new and emerging. Like a couple with a newborn baby, we had read the books, articles and clippings but were unsure exactly what to do with the baby once we got it home. This was partly because the books told widely different stories. There was the one about the WELL, the counter-cultural push in San Francisco that began playing with email and chat rooms as a social experiment.\(^ {40}\) There was the story about the Cold War Defence Department, which sought to ensure survival of nuclear attack by instituting decentralization. And a third story told of computer programming engineers whose heads were buried in algorithms and patent applications. For the domestic user, it was a bit scary: were we to leave our old lives and start new ones in a virtual community? Were we to stray into no-go zones and carry deep, dark secrets? Might we become nerds in need of patent attorneys? Or was it okay just to be ourselves? One of the problems was not knowing what the Internet could do. On the one hand, it was the framework for content, but on the other it appeared to be content itself. As historian and theorist Mark Poster describes it, ‘the Internet is more like a social space than a thing’.\(^ {41}\)

Grappling with these issues, federal and state governments commissioned research papers to guide us. Opting for the WELL paradigm of the Internet as a new platform for electronic democracy, Paula Williams from the Politics and Public Administration Group wrote in 1998:

> The Internet may have the potential to make an extremely strong contribution to the political process because of the way in which it facilitates reciprocal rather than just one-way communication. Ideally, it could enable billions of people worldwide, enhanced opportunities to speak, publish, assemble, and educate themselves about issues. Through the Internet, citizens can access huge amounts of relatively unfiltered information. This information can be used to formulate opinions, and analyse government actions and decisions. The claims of others can be checked, and sources verified. Through e-mail citizens can receive and send information quickly and cheaply to and from thousands of people. Interactive chat facilities enable citizens to air their views and expose them to the views of others. The population can potentially provide elected officials directly with information about their views, and in turn, elected officials can communicate directly with groups or individuals conveniently and cost-effectively.\(^ {42}\)

Six years is a long time in the politics of the Internet. Williams’ somewhat rosy mission statement reflects a time when there seemed to be greater respect, at least in theory, for the public sphere by those who held power. Today one can justifiably question whether current governments really encourage the Internet’s ‘potential to make an extremely strong contribution to the political process’. Van Onselen and Errington’s investigations into electoral databases indicate that the information flow is largely exploitative and non-reciprocal. Emails to cabinet ministers often go unanswered, indicating that ministers (or their staffers) do not place a high priority on information exchange. The 9/11 terrorist attack has played a part, for the politics of fear is a highly effective means of control. We saw these politics at work in the recent campaign slogans of the US and Australian governments (The Republicans’ ‘safer, stronger’ campaign\(^ {43}\) and the Liberal Party’s ‘Protecting, Securing, Building’). Both Prime Minister Howard and President Bush, using such subterfuges as the ‘evidence’ of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, increased surveillance by the Office of Homeland Security or increased powers for ASIO, and handed out tough love to asylum seekers. Fridge magnets prove the enemy is real, indeed among us.

Howard’s campaign-winning strategy of raising the spectre of interest-rate rises highlighted the importance we as a nation place on personal and financial security. Symbolically, it summed us up: nothing must threaten our right to our cocoons. What is the place in such an atmosphere of the ‘enhanced opportunities to speak, publish, assemble, and educate [our]selves about issues’ that Paula Williams described six years ago?

A despondent former Greens candidate, Iain Lygo, posted the following comments on the Crikey website three days after the election:

> Rather than a celebration of democracy, the 2004 election highlights the continued decline in the democratic process in this country.

Many social commentators point to five key factors required for a healthy democracy. We need a strong opposition, an independent and fearless media, an engaged public, a series of checks and balances on power, and an honest and accountable government. In this election, we have gone backwards in all five categories, and a turn around is unlikely in the near future.\(^ {44}\)

The prospect of an enlivened democracy is limited by the habitual reliance of multitudes of Internet users on the news sites of such dominant media groups as News Limited, ABC and NineMSN, rather than on active engagement with alternative views in online debate. The agenda set by
the old media, with their powerful connections to government and business, is simply relocated in the online realm.

The role played by global media conglomerates in the international dissemination of ideas was tackled head-on in America with the DVD release of Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism (2004). Robert Greenwald’s documentary gave a scathing account of the editorial directives of News Corporation’s Fox News. With Rupert Murdoch’s Republican sentiments well established, Greenwald made the link between Fox television presenters’ jingoism about the Iraq war and news as entertainment. Fox’s claim to be ‘fair and balanced’ is demonstrably hollow, thanks to the statements of its shock-jock Bill O’Reilly, and to memoirs from the top clearly stating the appropriate line on George Bush Jnr and his opponent John Kerry. New media played a hand in the distribution of the film, which could be purchased for less than US $10 from such progressive sites as Disinformation (www.disinfo.com) and MoveOn.org. But the film found a much larger audience on Amazon.com, which sold more copies of Outfoxed online than any other DVD.

Outfoxed, along with Michael Moore’s film Fahrenheit 9/11, added to the dissent that permeated Australia’s left-of-centre activists during the election campaign. However, the ALP mostly ignored the activists, including their opposition to the Iraq war. The complexity of the American alliance proved too challenging for the opposition: the on-again-off-again follow-up to Latham’s ‘troops home by Christmas’ statement showed Labor’s lack of cohesive and well-planned policy on the issue. Social justice issues such as the treatment of boat people and the housing of children of boat people and the housing of children were the old media, with their powerful connections to government and business, is simply relocated in the online realm.

All but two editorials of Australia’s major daily newspapers called for the return of the Howard Government. The News Limited camp, accounting for 60.7 per cent of total print circulation, was unanimous in its pro-Howard stand, although its flagship newspaper, the Australian, did not give Howard fulsome praise. Calling it a ‘grubby, greedy election campaign’, the Australian criticised both the Prime Minister, who had ‘run on a platform of profligacy’, and Mark Latham, who had ‘not been much better’. The paper nonetheless told readers that Mr Howard ‘deserves to be returned tomorrow’, citing low interest rates, a boom economy and low unemployment in the face of the ‘contradictory and largely unknown force’ of Mark Latham.46

Outfoxed

The Australian’s high-circulation tabloid counterpart, the Herald Sun, saw ‘no reason to vote for change tomorrow. The country is in healthy shape and in safe hands’.47

The only dissenters among the print media were the Canberra Times (owned by the Rural Press), which advocated change –

Put bluntly, John Howard has lost an agenda and a purpose, and spent the credit he had put away in the bank. There is no occasion to give him a victory lap. It is time that the other side had a go.50

– and the Fairfax-owned Sydney Morning Herald, which made an historic decision not to back either party, arguing that after 170 years of expressing voting preference it had opted to ‘renew and reassess its claim on independence so that its pursuit of truth is not only free of partisanship and without fear or favour, but is seen to be so’.51

Claiming to be ‘Australia’s leading independent online news service’, Crikey.com took delight in harshly criticizing the dominant media line with an editorial titled ‘Something is rotten in Australia’.52

Unlike most of Australia’s media outlets, we at Crikey are not commercially conflicted, spineless or the subject of special deals with the Howard Government which influence our voting recommendations to subscribers ahead of tomorrow’s vital national election … The Howard years have coincided with the age of the Internet, yet we have not produced an IT company of any note or taken advantage of new technology

to create greater diversity of ownership and choice in media. Our business sector has become an amalgam of gouging cartels, a service sector oligopoly which has delivered for shareholders but not for the nation. Look no further than the way bank profits have more than doubled since 1996 … A Howard victory tomorrow would set the seal on his picture of what the Liberal Party should be: a party hostile to any genuine liberal thought, undemocratic in its principles and its processes, loyaly supporting whatever policy twists the Leader (always with a capital L now – remind you of anything?) deems necessary to secure his re-election.

The strident tone of the Crikey editorial is more in keeping with a web log in which views are (self-) published without fear or favour. The editorials in the established dailies use more measured language, striving for objectivity in the traditional journalistic sense – although neo-Marxists would argue that such objectivity is inherently flawed. It is flawed because content is defined by bureaucratic and hierarchical constraints imposed on newspaper editors to protect the interests of advertisers and powerful organizations.53

The $1 million sale of Crikey to Eric Beecher’s Private Media Partners may be a firm step towards Crikey itself becoming part of the establishment media. Crikey already carries Google advertising banners (but then so do many personal web log sites). Nevertheless, Crikey is an important contributor to media diversity, delivering on its self-appointed aim ‘to take a long thin spike to the bloated egos of political, media and corporate Australia’.54

Crikey’s drawback lies in the current limitations of addressing an online community. The Crikey site quenches the thirst of public-affairs professionals and enthusiasts who seek not only the news, but the news behind the news. Crikey’s audience feels comfortable with the online experience and enjoys Crikey’s tongue-in-cheek references to key players in business, the media, politics and sporting life. Its audience is medially and technologically savvy. Cultural literacy at this level implies, to a large extent, higher education and higher socio-economic status.

Crikey’s editorial, therefore, was likely to reinforce its readership’s view, confirming the observation of American political theorist John Zaller that ‘better informed
citizens see the world in more complex terms than strength of the economy and the hip pocket nerve’.55

Zaller’s observation also helps explain the experience of Channel 9 and the Bulletin, who entered the realm of online polling using the resources of the Australian National University’s Political Science Department. Public response to their online survey suggested a strong lead by the ALP (fifty-five per cent after preferences).56 This proved less accurate than the traditional doorknocking and phoning of other pollsters. Explaining the validity of their results, they wrote that

about one in four Australian voters do not have Internet access, so a sizeable minority of the electorate may be excluded from participating. Similarly, Internet users are heavily biased in age (younger), gender (more male), and socio-economic status (higher incomes and more education).57

Loging the blogosphere

In the blogosphere, the picture is murkier. Cheap, easily set up sites need not conform to any regulations or reader demands. ‘First tier’ sites, comprising thoughtful and carefully sourced opinion, are created by public intellectuals. A ‘second tier’ monitors news groups, subscribes to established media sites and does lots of googling. Bloggers benefit form the extra ‘eyes’ of their respondents, who extend the informational terrain with titbits, rumours and links. Without the resources of a media conglomerate, blogs react to the news of the day rather than provide news themselves. Bloggers don’t go anywhere. Detractors say this under mines the value of blogs as news. But the same criticism can be made of mainstream media. Economic stringency and the rush to meet deadlines mean that front-page news is often reshaped wires from international press agencies. In the worst case, press releases, carefully worded by PR consultants, are simply reprinted.

A ‘third tier’ is characterised by self-promotion, anecdotal stories and reactive or extreme comments given without a source.

Manuel Castells, adapting Jurgen Habermas’ theory of the public sphere58 to the social space occupied by online communities, believes that ‘cyberspace has become a global electronic agora where the diversity of human disaffection explodes in a cacophony of accents’59

However, it appears that opinion in the election-charged Australian blogosphere is not as diverse as the theorists might imagine. My own search came up with: John Howard Lies; 105 Reasons; Not Happy, John!; Vote Howard Out; Truth Overboard; Just Not John; John Howard Blogspot and Howards’ End 04, all anti-Howard sites. Right-wing bloggers were harder to find, but one Tim Blair of timblair.net is prominent in conservative circles. Blair carries the conservative flame by cutting and pasting reports and opinions, and by writing comments on photographs and articles he has found.

Gabrielle Reilly, an Australian now residing in the US, is an intriguing blogger in that she punctuates her campaign text with photographs of herself in bikinis. In a video streamed online for the American election she makes a pouting plea: ‘Thank God for strong leadership … anti-American sentiment is giving rise and vigour to terrorism around the world. Please choose wisely which side you’re on. Lives are depending on it’. In a missive to her Australian visitors, Reilly pleads for ‘unity after the hatred that was aroused leading up to Australia re-electing Prime Minister John Howard over the weekend’, adding that the war on terror can be likened to the Allies fighting the Nazis in the Second World War.60

What Reilly’s soft-sell conservatism lacks in intellectual rigour it makes up for in populist appeal. Reilly has appropriated the format of the Page Three Girl, a tried and true way of selling newspapers, to sustain her virtual presence as measured in hits on the Net.

Reilly is not alone in her interest in net hits. Blogger and academic Ken Parish acknowledged the same interest:

My own blogging experience, when I’ve bothered to measure and take notice of hit counts, has confirmed the suspicion that downmarket populism and courting controversy almost for its own sake are the surest recipes for increasing audience size. It’s hardly an earth-shattering discovery, as any tabloid newspaper editor would attest. Of course, minimal penetration doesn’t necessarily negate the informed citizen ideal, but it’s asking rather a lot of osmosis or intellectual trickle down effects.61

For bloggers, the standout political event in the US election was their decisive role in Howard Dean’s campaign for the presidency. Dean, a Democrat candidate, showed the way future campaigns may be run by mobilising a campaign through Internet subscription. Using Meetup, a web tool for forming social groups, his campaign gathered grassroots momentum with supporters passing on to others their contacts and social networks. He appointed a Director of Internet Outreach and constantly responded to his campaign’s membership. ‘Deaniacs’ started blogs and websites, campaigning in their own way without control by head office. In fact, the convention of local candidates following tightly-controlled policies distributed by party headquarters to the party faithful was replaced by having a candidate directly responsive to his constituents day by day.62 Dean said, ‘Along comes this campaign to take back the country for ordinary human beings, and the best way you can do that is through the Net. We listen. We pay attention. If I give a speech and the blog people don’t like it, next time I change the speech.’63

In our own election campaigns, the Not Happy John blog is the best example of online activism diffusing into the mainstream of politics. Beginning as a critique of the Howard Government by journalist Margo Kingston and contributors to her online web diary in the Sydney Morning Herald, Kingston’s growing dismay at what she saw as the lack of democratic values and accountability of John Howard led to a book titled Not Happy, John! Among those who bought it was John Valder. A former president of the Liberal Party, he was sufficiently outraged by what he saw as Howard’s arrogance that he started a political campaign of the same name, and stood against the Prime Minister in his seat of Bennelong. Sympathisers who bought the book were able to show their support by affixing the sticker that came with it to their cars. A website of the same name continues post-election. It spells out Kingston’s manifesto:

I think it’s time we all started to think about ideas to help revitalise the way our civic system works. We citizens need to get to-
get and use our brains, our hearts and our collective political oomph, and that’s where I hope this online extension of Not Happy, John! might come in.⁶⁴

But just as Michael Moore’s film Farenheit 9/11 was lambasted for preaching to the converted, so too can websites be criticized for merely reflecting the interests of their creators. A blog search is subjective, informed by a network of like-minded contacts and is prone to reinforcing already formed views.⁶⁵

Andrew Ó Baoill, in Weblogs and the Public Sphere,⁶⁶ argues that there are several structural impediments to the way web logs are produced and received that dent the widely-held and optimistic view that there will be an Internet-led rebirth of democracy in the blogosphere. Foremost among the impediments he lists lacks of technological literacy, time commitment and financial resources. ‘While web logs may indicate a new pathway to democracy, the daunting task of keeping up with the job leads to a high drop out rate.’⁶⁷

While blogging is becoming easier with templates and shareware, a successful blog is one whose content is noticed. A-list blogs go a step beyond being merely noticed, and are influential, their considered insights sustained and updated over a significant time. Updating requires commitment, which Ó Baoill points out ‘favours an individual in a vocational or institutional domain’.⁶⁸

Bloggers may have diverse opinions but they share worthy motives. Blogging is often a labour of love, though it can also be an unacknowledged way to work through a book to be published. Indeed many A-list bloggers in Australia come from the academic world, such as Chris Shiel (Back Pages), Tim Dunlop (The Road to Surfdom) and Ken Parish (Troppo Armadillo). All have blogs about blogs, and have published elsewhere about their experience. On the intellectual Left, blogging is an exercise, an experiment in seeing where the boundaries of the concept lie. Practically eventually wins out, leaving the ongoing blogs to compulsive enthusiasts, possibly sustained by the heroic image of David taking a shot at Goliath, the media giant.

But bloggers may leave a legacy inadvertently reversing the freeing up of opinion.

Marvin Kalb of Harvard University⁶⁹ sees the partisan effect of web opinion flowing into the mainstream media. In a post-election analysis on ABC Radio National’s Media Report, Kalb raised the alarm:

There is no doubt that the Blogosphere has intruded into the news process, and with the Blogosphere has come a far more partisan tone to the American press, and you have Fox now and a number of other operations that do their very best to sound slightly, or even more than slightly, pro-Administration. And very conservative in their political outlook.⁷⁰

**Keeping up the engagement**

Former Sydney Morning Herald editor Max Suich noted the demise of the Canberra press gallery’s influence in the lead-up to the 2004 Federal election:

Their most authoritative access to the individual leaders on the road and their front bench colleagues will often be the transcripts of brief doorstep press conferences or undemanding interviews with radio talk hosts, supplemented unsatisfactorily by background briefings from press offices and forests of handouts.⁷¹

According to Suich, the press gallery heavyweights, including Laura Tingle (Financial Review), Peter Harchers (Sydney Morning Herald), Tim Colebatch and Michelle Grattan (both from the Age) — who are Australia’s most knowledgeable and experienced political journalists — were sidelined. They found it difficult to get unfiltered information. Curtailing their access, according to Suich, meant that their ‘propensity to upset the leaders with unfawning questions’ was minimized. Press conferences were cut short with security threats given as the reason. Major policies such as Mark Latham’s Medicare Gold and the Tasmanian forest policies of both Liberal and Labor were released at the eleventh hour, making thorough analysis impossible.

Suich, like former press gallery journalist Margo Kingston, believes the Howard Government has had a deliberate policy of gagging the public service, imposing strict discipline on the cabinet and excluding or outflanking the press gallery by holding out-of-Canberra press conferences or, better still, having morning radio inter-vues with favoured hosts that establish the daily ‘line’.

If these beliefs are well-founded, it doesn’t matter whether we are getting news updates on the hour on our smart watches or posting a blog each day. When our elected representatives withhold information, our views become merely speculative. Opinion will pass for fact. Rumour and innuendo will be rife. Democracy will suffer – but do we care?

*The greatest threat to our government is that the American people are dropping out.*

Mitchell Kapor, October 2004⁷²

We have never had more ways of receiving information, and providers are keen to supply us. Advances in technology led during the election to innovative information pathways such as the ABC’s ‘Election night package’, an SMS service offering seven updates from the ABC newsroom throughout election night.⁷³ Sky News provided election coverage on demand, devoting one of its twelve interactive screens entirely to the event. Subscribers to Fox Digital could access the twenty-four hour coverage by pressing a red button on their remote control.⁷⁴ But as the old saying goes, you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink. We were a nation on a see-saw, with an active public sphere on one end, and an inactive group on the other, who had plainly switched off.

A measure of Australia’s disengagement from politics was demonstrated by the ‘Great Debate’ between the main party leaders. Traditionally a ‘must watch’ on prime time television, it was out-rated by Australian Idol.⁷⁵ How are we to read the response of Treasurer Peter Costello, who agreed with his kids that Australian Idol was a better option on the night?

It got to about ten to eight, and I said to the people I was watching it with, ‘Do you think anyone in Australia is still switched in?’ That was what I thought. I checked with my kids at home as to whether they’d watched the debate or Australian Idol, and Idol was winning hands down (laughs).⁷⁶

Was Costello dumbing down the Australian public, patronizing those trying to be better informed about the election? Was it a clever way of deflecting his leader being beaten on the night by Latham? Or was there a
little bit of Homer Simpson in Costello acknowledging that politics treated in this way is little more than a ratings exercise?

Worry that there is a trend to public alienation from party politics was reinforced by election night coverage: it was outrated by a repeat screening of *Toy Story*.77

Trend-spotting agencies commonly refer to the ‘Simpson generation’,78 young adults who have grown up with the TV series and share its satirical response to power; authority is illegitimate until proven otherwise. It is not so much an activist’s response as a sceptic’s. According to Neer Korn, director of the research firm, Heartbeat Trends, the Simpson generation is disengaged from party politics, sick of spin, sick of stage-managed doorstops, ready for political forces that use the Net in a more geeky way.79

Although Howard Dean ultimately was spectacularly unsuccessful in translating online activism into the votes of the larger public, his campaign galvanized young activists who had turned away from conventional politics. For them, interactivity and online networks are the preferred tool of advocacy and participation in the democratic process.40 The Dean campaign, led from the bottom up, opened the door for localized campaigns and online participation by party faithful in Australia. For the politician’s part, the Howard Dean paradigm may serve as a prototype for campaigns in which dwindling party membership is replaced by an empowered new generation.

By the time the next Federal election takes place, our voting booth may be equipped with a touch screen. In the federal election to follow, we may be voting from our kitchen lap top or our phones. In future decades, we will not need to vote early but we may well need to vote often, as disintermediation may make our elected representatives obsolete. We may find that the approval of new policy is no longer a vote in the Chamber but the passing of our fingertips across a touchpad.

As the formal constructs of journalism collapse, so the unmediated world of bloggers and individual voices grows. But as online activism grasps the public imagination, wider social apathy shrinks it. It’s an intriguing mix. Acknowledging and interpreting these contradictory forces will challenge policy makers, political strategists, and anyone who values democracy. Computer-mediated communication can be used by big government to further entrench its power, or it can provide the bed for grass-roots movements of ethical and imaginative growth.

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Endnotes
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11 Ibid.
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