

Old and New Media: Blogs in the third age of political communication.

Ian Ward
James Cahill
School of Political Science & International Studies
The University of Queensland
Queensland 4072

Old and New Media: Blogs in the third age of political communication.

Abstract

The Internet offers an unprecedented confluence of low cost production, distribution and marketing in a single publishing platform with minimal barriers to entry. At least in the USA, this distinctive political economy has seen an explosion of bottom-up, grassroots journalism and political discussion without the centralised direction, large-scale funding, and editorial control which are hallmarks of traditional news media. This paper explores the emergence of a 'blogosphere' which threatens to disturb, if it has not already ruptured, what Jay Blumler (2001, 204) describes as the 'straightforwardly top-down' character of mainstream political communication in which issues of the day are 'mainly defined and discussed by politicians, journalists, experts and interest group leaders'. US bloggers have had an impact upon the established news media which extends well beyond driving them to publish their own j-blogs. In effect bloggers now constitute a 'fifth estate', fact-checking and—often obsessively—analysing the output of mainstream news media including its coverage of politics. In some cases bloggers have also shaped the course of political events by publicising issues originally overlooked by traditional news media. Yet in Australia the picture is rather different. In a different institutional setting blogging has not emerged as an important vehicle for political news and debate, nor even taken firm root. This would appear to pose a difficulty for the argument advanced by its champions that, with its particular political economy, the blogosphere is destined to transform political communication.

Introduction

Geoff Craig (2004, viii) has suggested that 'books on politics and the media often sideline the importance of the public in political communication' by treating the public as 'passive onlookers rather than active participants'. This is apparent in the preoccupation of political communication scholars with how mainstream news media might shape political thinking and behaviour. This was defining and quite legitimate concern in an age in which mass circulation newspapers and broadcast television were the principal sources of information, and in which mainstream political communication had a 'straightforwardly top-down' character wherein the issues of the day were 'mainly defined and discussed by politicians, journalists, experts and interest group leaders' (Blumler 2001, 204). But the 'top down' influence of newspapers and broadcast media appears to be waning in the face of an 'explosion' in the amount and types of information available via the Internet (Craig 2004, 88).

Almost a decade ago, Blumler and Kavanagh (1999, 217) discerned an emerging, 'third age of political communication' in which print and broadcasting media would lose their place as the central channels of political communication in a new age of information abundance. Political communication, they argued, was undergoing a qualitative shift: 'the big players of political journalism no longer control the field they once commanded. They are jostled (sometimes even jeered) by many new and less inhibited makers and breakers of news'. When Blumler and Kavanagh (1999, 213) wrote that 'political news, information, and ideas can be circulated by computer', they had in mind the 'Internet Web' and communication technologies with the capacity for a two-way flow of information which allow consumers to seek out specific kinds of news. But they could not have anticipated the phenomenon of blogging which has since burgeoned in the USA as a vehicle for uninhibited political commentary, even for the breaking of political news. In 1999 blogging was in its infancy. Within five years the term 'blog' had come to symbolise 'the difference between old and new media' (Frost 2004) and Gill (2004) could justifiably write that 'blogging and blogging technologies are now mainstream'.

Blogs were originally personal webpage diaries. They often listed favourite websites for others to see. These are still the defining features of blogs. Their distinctive characteristics include reverse chronological journaling, personal 'voice', archived entries, and hyperlinks to other sites and postings (Gill 2004; Wall 2005, 153). They combine to create new medium and to alter a longstanding, one-way relationship between news producers and consumers. The term 'blogosphere' was coined to capture the myriad of interconnections established via blogroll lists, 'hotlinks' to individual posts, trackbacks, and syndications services which all serve to sustain a network structure. Commentators are increasingly understanding blogging, not as an activity involving countless individual bloggers, but as an interconnected, collective enterprise, albeit one without editors and a central coordinating authority. The term 'blogosphere' also echoes the idea of a public sphere) as an arena in which citizens can participate, debate and decide public issues by force of rational argument.

'Bloggers write about topics that matter to them' (Gill 2004). There are now countless blogs. Most attract few readers and have short life spans. The great majority eschew politics. But some are political 'soap boxes' and do cover public affairs and pressing political issues. Some even 'take on the mainline media' by reporting 'news items that

traditional media ignore or suppress' and providing 'a kind of feedback loop for media corrections' (Hachten and Scotton 2007, 57). As Craig (2004, 5) notes that 'media have always been integral to the creation of the public domain'. From the printing press onward, new communication technologies have allowed new forms of political communication. In this tradition, its enthusiasts see the Internet as heralding a new age in which citizens can both generate and consume political news, and in which the big players no longer control political communication from the top down. At first glance this enthusiasm seems entirely reasonable. The blogosphere is emerging as new publishing platform. At a minimum a burgeoning 'blogosphere' must substantially erode both the gate keeping control which mainstream media exercise over political news, and the capacity of governments, parties and interest groups to employ media management strategies to influence political reporting and thus the news to set the public and policy agenda.

Blogs as a new publishing platform for political news

Although the underlying technologies date to the 1980s, the Internet as a publishing and communication medium took shape with the release of the first commercial web browsers, Mosaic (later renamed Netscape) in 1994, and Microsoft's Internet Explorer in 1995. By 1996 most mainstream print and broadcast news organisations had established complimentary websites (Scott 2005, 93; Garrison 2005, 6) which initially recycled content reformatted but otherwise simply copied from its original source. Next mainstream media were joined by sundry Internet-only news sites such as Salon, Slate and—in Australia—Crikey.com. Just a handful survived the dotcom bust by selling sufficient advertising to cover their production costs (Salwen 2005, 61-62; Scott 2005, 96-97). Initially, notwithstanding added features such as hyperlinks to related content, these online news sites did not alter the formula used by mainstream media – reportage by professional journalists and commentary from columnists and invited experts, all overseen by professional editors.

Initially the creation of complementary on-line platforms by mainstream news outlets had no discernable impact on the long-term trends of concern to media and political communication scholars: namely the increasing concentration of media ownership; the embrace of 'infotainment' at the expense of 'serious' public affairs coverage; and the increasing dominance of relatively small number of elite voices. In short the first wave of digitised news content on the Internet joined previous technology breakthroughs such as portable video cameras and desktop word processing which had been thought likely to revolutionise, but had failed to alter, the gathering and distribution of news (Shafer 2005). None of these new technologies, either alone or together, provided a complete publishing platform encompassing production, distribution and marketing or alleviated the need for very significant capital investment in news production. In this respect the blogosphere is different. Blogs are inexpensive to establish and have all the raw elements of a new publishing platform: 'unlike newspapers or television news, blogging is not capital intensive' (Gill 2004). Publishing no longer requires access to a printing press and retail distribution system, or its broadcasting equivalent. Moreover, unlike online news, blogs have begun to reshape political news.

Blogs are easily produced by anyone with a computer and Internet access. Web publishing did originally require an understanding of FTP and HTML. It was time-

consuming, and carried appreciable maintenance costs (Hiler 2002). Today blogging requires little technical skill. User-friendly weblog software is freely available. Furthermore the ongoing development of Web 2.0 applications has simplified the publication of all types of content. YouTube exemplifies a growing number of software products and services that enable the simple and inexpensive addition of audio and video content to the humblest of blogs. Equally important, the Internet now contains a rich repository of material. Archived news items, government reports, political speeches and news interviews can often be easily retrieved. Bloggers can now directly link their commentaries to these sources. Even a modestly priced digital recorder allows newscasts or parliamentary broadcasts to be recorded so that clips can be inserted into blogs. In short bloggers wishing to provide an authoritative and up-to-date analysis of public affairs have many of the resources they need to do so at their finger tips. Amateurs now have access to information and resources once only available to professional journalists—‘media tools once commandeered by professionals are falling into public hands’ (Rosen 2005a).

Blogs are available to anyone with Internet access. In early 2007, Nielsen/NetRatings (2007) were tracking some 330 million ‘active’ digital media users, each averaging nearly an hour a day using the Internet. The *CIA World Factbook* (2007) estimates that, worldwide, in 2005 over one billion people had Internet access. The Computer Industry Almanac (ClickZ 2007) suggests that by 2010 there will 1.8 billion. Other than ensuring their own reliable access to the Internet, bloggers need not spend much to gain access to this vast and constantly growing audience. The marginal cost to a blogger to reach 100 readers is the same as it would be to reach 100,000. This is key point of difference with the mainstream news media. All other forms of publishing—print, radio and television—require expensive distribution systems to reach a mass audience. As Jay Rosen (2003) observes, nearly all of the capital costs required for blogs ‘have been sunk into the Internet itself, the largest machine in the world’. Yet many blogs still fail because they cannot effectively market themselves. Traditional media deliver news to their audiences but the hallmark of the Internet is that its users must search for information. The mere *potential* to reach a mass audience with little or no marginal cost means nothing if bloggers cannot *attract* readers.

Hyperlinks enable bloggers to build their audiences. These enable simple, quick transfer to other postings and websites and encourage internet users to navigate between blogs. As with other new media forms, the early pioneers of blogs enjoy a significant first-mover advantage. Clay Shirky (2003) hypothesises that the pattern of hyperlinked traffic between blogs (which is a measure of their importance) fits a classic power distribution law. A very small number of ‘A-Listers’ receive a very high proportion of incoming links, a small number of ‘B-Listers’ receive a modest number, while the majority of bloggers work in a very long tail of relative obscurity. However Drezner and Farrell (2004a, 13) note that the networked structure of the blogosphere allows interesting, provocative, or simply well written blog posts from the tail end to rise quickly to the top, thus still allowing many voices beyond just the ‘A-listers’ to be heard. They argue that it is quite possible for exceptional new blogs to rapidly acquire audiences of their own. In this way, even casual readers of blogs benefit from the myriad of critical choices made by the collective ‘hive mind’ of the blogosphere and can find new blogs and posts that may be of interest to them.

Most mainstream news 'brands' have begun to sponsor j-blogs by their own journalists (or A-list bloggers recruited for the purpose) to capitalise on their mastheads and the growing blog readership (see Chang *et al.* 2006). However blogging initially was and still is a largely bottom-up and amateur phenomenon. It remains a fluid, evolving practice. As a result there are many and varied types of blogs across politics, business, education, fashion, entertainment, social causes and so on (Bruns and Jacobs 2006). Even within the relatively narrow segment of political and public affairs there are many different blog types and sub-types. A partial list might include a number of variations of what is commonly thought of as a blog—a periodically updated journal-style commentary by one or more authors. But it would also include blogs that focus upon on a single issue or set of issues such as political corruption or climate change; blogs that provide specialist expertise on a particular, often difficult to understand topics such as constitutional law or the technicality of public opinion polling; blogs that critically analyse the output of mainstream media, often with an ideological slant; blogs that attempt to encourage and coordinate political activity such as volunteering, fund raising or letter writing campaigns; blogs that attempt to build communities of all kinds; blogs that form part of election campaigns; and blogs that focus on the politics of a particular region such as a state or city.

Some bloggers are in the news business. As Haas (2005, 390) argues, the blogosphere feeds upon, dissects, links to and largely echoes the mainstream news coverage of politics. But there are blogs which act as news aggregators and filters, often with an ideological slant. In the particular area of technological development bloggers have become a primary news source. Even in the area of political reporting and public affairs, in the USA there are bloggers who 'self-identify' as online journalists and who 'are routinely granted the legitimacy of press passes and interviews.' Without the institutional support that political reporters in the mainstream media enjoy, 'these writers can only sell themselves on original content. For this reason, some US bloggers are becoming formidably competitive at sourcing news' (Berg 2007). Blogs also engage in political analysis and commentary which, Quiggin (2006, 486) considers, has hitherto been a defining or 'core feature' of newspapers'. He suggests that in providing commentary and political analysis 'blogs are already competitive' with traditional news media and that this is 'striking evidence of the growth of the medium'.

The promise of political news as conversation

Political blogs are called into existence by the growing gaps and deficiencies in public discourse left by the mainstream media. Faced with competition from new media channels and diminishing audiences, media corporations have down-sized news rooms and pruned or rationalised news and public affairs coverage. They have turned to entertainment programming in a bid to retain listeners and viewers—and turned their news programming into entertainment for the same reason. Political news no longer commands attention. It has had to fight for its place in news schedules and bulletins 'on the basis of its news value or likely audience appeal' (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999, 218). The blame for an increasingly superficial news coverage of politics cannot be entirely laid at the door of a cost-cutting commercial media. The bland, focus-group tested, public relations-driven political communication emanating from parties, governments and interest groups is also a factor. It is designed to

manage or contain rather than engender political debate. The combination of these developments has left gaps in our public discourse, and a standing invitation for enterprising publishers to attempt to fill them.

The confluence of low cost production, distribution and marketing in a single publishing platform with minimal entry barriers is unprecedented. There can be little doubt that, with blogging, 'communications over the Internet have greatly multiplied and amplified the voices, information, exhortations, and diatribes passing through the world news prism' (Hachten and Scotton 2007, 58). There are now blogs without any connection to the established news organisations that are devoted to the serious discussion of political issues and public affairs and which attract sufficient 'hits' to rival the audiences attracted to mainstream news media. This is certainly true in the USA where, in August 2004 during the lead-up to the presidential election, the ten most popular political blogs attracted around 28 million site visits, a total roughly equivalent to the audience for America's three online cable news networks (Kline *et al.* 2005, 7). In August alone the leading liberal blog, DailyKos, had seven million reader-visits, topping the 5.7 million audience for Fox News.

As more people turn to the Internet to 'find out what is happening in the world' (Hachten and Scotton 2007, 58, 56) news organisations accustomed to passive audiences must deal with Internet users able to bypass mainstream news and seek out the specific news and information in which they are interested. Their control of the news agenda is open to challenge by the countless bloggers who are easily able to publish the information and political commentary which they consider relevant. Dan Gillmor (2006, 26) contrasts the one-to-many nature of newspapers, radio and television with the many-to-many nature of blogs, and points to the blurring of the distinction between producers and consumers of information enabled by new read/write formats. Blog readers can now easily—and many do—attach their own comments to news stories. Journalists accustomed to asking the questions can instead 'find themselves being questioned'. Indeed bloggers are able to challenge and—in some cases have even been able to reframe—the storyline presented by the mainstream media'. The blogosphere not only sustains a diversity of opinions, but it 'often also serves as a collective databank [which can be] used to jog the faulty memories of those who write or report for major media' (Gill 2004). In effect bloggers constitute a fifth estate, fact-checking and—often obsessively—analysing the output of mainstream news media (Lasica 2004, 71; Gillmor 2006, 61-65).

Gillmor argues that the blogosphere has disturbed the control hitherto exercised by mainstream news media and begun to transform news from a 'lecture' into 'more of a conversation, or a seminar' (Gillmor 2006, xxiv). When news becomes a conversation, mainstream news organisations (and the politicians and institutional sources on which they substantially rely for information) can lose control of the news agenda. In these ways the blogosphere shifts power away from the centre to the edges of a vast network. However there are clearly centripetal as well as centrifugal forces in play. We have already noted Haas' (2005, 389-390) observation that bloggers rely upon and thus echo the mainstream media coverage of politics. Indeed there is evidence that the great majority of links within blogs produced by amateurs are to the sites of 'elite mainstream news organisations' rather than to alternative sources. It is also true that professional public relations has migrated to the world wide web with

the very same aim of shaping the public discussion of policy issues that preoccupies 'spin doctors' who patrol the mainstream news media.

Moreover many blogs contain information of dubious value. Some are purely and simply vehicles for corporate marketing or public advocacy by established lobby groups. Another common complaint is that political blogs are too often diatribes and too rarely opportunities for dialogue between those with different views. Very few blogs can be confused with serious journalism. Many are soap boxes maintained by ideologues, activists or proponents of particular political causes. In this context it is not surprising that the 'largest and best-known national news organisations' are beneficiaries of the trend which is seeing increasing numbers of people turning to the Internet for 'a fast take on the news' (Hachten and Scotton 2007, 58). The websites of 'brand name' news media now attract significant numbers. Iyengar and McGrady (2007, 106) report that, in 2005, 'nearly one in three Internet users read a newspaper online'.

The promise that the blogosphere will transform political reporting from a lecture to a broad conversation also needs to be tempered by a close inspection of the evidence. It is clear that amateur bloggers have been able to influence mainstream news reporting and thus serve as "journalistic outriders" in the development of big political stories' (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999, 218). The Trent Lott story is widely cited as an example. Mainstream US news media initially ignored seemingly racist remarks made in December 2002 by the Senate Majority Leader. But a storm of criticism within the blogosphere forced them to cover what then became a full-blown scandal which culminated in Lott's resignation (Gill 2004; Drezner and Farrell 2004a, 3). A blogger's revelation that documents leaked to *Sixty Minutes*' Dan Rather to discredit George W. Bush during the 2004 election campaign were actually forgeries is also often cited since it forced Rather's resignation (Cornfield *et al.* 2004, 20-29). A more recent example which also suggests that the blogosphere can be a leading edge indicator of the mainstream media's own news agenda (see Delwiche 2005) lies in the awareness shown by bloggers of the Bush administration's political motives for ousting several US district attorneys in December 2006, many weeks before any of the mainstream outlets noticed the story (Rood 2007). However such 'war stories' which demonstrate the ability of bloggers to uncover stories and shape the mainstream news agenda are relatively few. They point to the exception rather than the rule. It is also noteworthy that all of these stories draw upon US politics. As yet there has been no Australian equivalent of Trent Lott or Dan Rather. No major Australian political news story has first appeared as a blog.

Blogs in US and Australian politics

There is a vast and growing Internet audience for news. Bloggers face few start-up costs: 'unlike newspapers or television news, blogging is not capital intensive' (Gill 2004). The ready availability of 'user friendly' software has largely dissolved any remaining technical barriers to blogging. The convergence of all of these factors seemingly favours the flowering of the blogosphere and a third age of political communication. Glen Reynolds (1996) for one insists that this fusion of market forces and technological change must empower ordinary people to 'beat big media [and] big government' and there are many who share his vision and imagine that the publishing platform which blogging provides must open and sustain a new public

sphere. Yet an inconvenient truth is that blogging has established a political importance in the USA which is simply not replicated in Australia.

In the USA blogging is showing many signs of being a nascent publishing industry. For example there are annual industry awards such as the Koufax Award started in 2002 for the best left-of-centre blogs. Blogging has reached a sufficient size to sustain a Media Bloggers Association. The MBA claims more than 1000 members and seeks to encourage bloggers to adhere to a code of conduct requiring standards of honesty, accountability, fairness and transparency. Part of its mission is 'to extend the power of the press, with all the rights and responsibilities that entails, to every citizen' (MBA 2007). The blogosphere now sustains several annual conferences including the MBA's 'We Media Conference' and others such as SOBCon '07 [Successful and Outstanding Bloggers Conference] and the YearlyKos Convention (first held in 2006). More importantly here, in the USA blogs have been increasingly recognised as a legitimate medium in the eyes of government and the law (Glover 2007). In March 2006 the Federal Election Commission extended blogs the same exemptions afforded to newspapers and broadcasters on the grounds they are also forms of news media. Some state courts and legislatures have also granted bloggers the same right given to mainstream journalists to protect their sources. Australian bloggers have no similar legal right.

Bloggers in the USA have been increasingly successful in obtaining press credentials to news events. This extends to recognition by the Whitehouse. Roston (2007) describes how, in the midst of a controversy which surrounded it in mid-2007 and at the urging of various A-list conservative bloggers, the 'White House hosted a blogger conference call to discuss the issues surrounding the Bush administration's use of executive privilege in the probe of the firings of eight federal prosecutors.' In Australia the independent online media service Crikey! does have Press Gallery representation, but it has been repeatedly denied access to the Budget day media 'lock up' which suggests that the Howard Government's spin doctors regard it as inconsequential. More importantly, no Australian amateur bloggers belong to the Press Gallery: bloggers 'don't usually reside in Canberra, attend press conferences and have huge networks of sources' (Bahnisch 2005).

In the US candidates are now treating the Internet as an established publishing platform. When Hilary Clinton launched her bid to win her party's endorsement to run for president and invited Americans to engage in a conversation about America's future via the Internet, she confirmed its importance as a vehicle for political communication. Howard Dean's 2004 nomination bid had already demonstrated its potential. The little-known former Vermont governor used the Internet to emerge as an unlikely, early frontrunner. He raised over US\$45 million in online donations that averaged less than \$100 per contribution (Kline *et al.* 2005, 15). The key to his extraordinary campaign was his popular 'Blog for America' (which attracted 30,000 visits a day in September 2003) and the enthusiastic backing of hundreds of bloggers (Gill 2004, 5). Dean's campaign manager, Joe Trippi, said 'the blogosphere was where we got ideas, feedback, support, money—everything a campaign needs to live' (Kline *et al.* 2005, 26).

Further evidence of the newfound importance of blogging in US politics lies in the efforts of candidates to frame political discussion in the blogosphere by hiring the

contemporary equivalent of press secretaries. In the November 2006 mid-term elections dozens of state and federal campaigns hired bloggers to write blogs on their behalf, or act as consultants on Internet strategy (Glover and Essl 2006). Prominent Democratic and Republican candidates similarly hired bloggers to connect with the blogosphere and advise on their campaign websites for the 2008 election (Schatz, 2007). There clearly is an Internet audience. During the 2006 mid-term US elections, Pew found that the blog use of those going online for information had soared to 20 percent (Rainie and Horrigan 2007, 15). Over half (53%) of Internet users travelled beyond the mainstream news media—to alternative news sites, blogs, campaign webpages, and so on. Another recent study of Internet users found that nearly 40 percent had visited blogs which discuss politics and public affairs, and that almost one-in-ten did so ‘nearly every day’ (Graf 2006).

In Australia there are relatively few blogs other than j-blogs which discuss politics and public affairs. Ironically Australian aficionados of blogging with an interest in politics often look elsewhere: the online research firm Hitwise reports that almost three-quarters of Australian Internet users accessing ‘Lifestyle-Politics’ webpages visit overseas sites (Hanchard 2007). The anonymously written Wikipedia entry on blogging in Australia notes that the few blogs which specialise in political commentary are generally the work of single writers. It adds that ‘they do not have the same notoriety as blogs in the United States for “breaking stories” or potentially ruining the reputations of politicians or journalists’ and, as a consequence, rarely attract mainstream media attention. Blogging has not become a popular forum for the discussion of Australian politics and public affairs. Those bloggers who do dissect public affairs readily agree that there are relatively few Australian-published ‘readable and high-quality independent outlets on public affairs’ (Nguyen 2006, 146). Mark Bahnisch (2006, 143) has identified a handful of blogs canvassing Australian politics. He notes their limited audience and impact, and points to a general lack of that professionalism seen in the US blogosphere. John Quiggin (2006, 486) is a little more generous. He counts ‘at least 20 Australian bloggers who maintain an average standard comparable to that of the opinion pages in the quality dailies’. However he concedes that a number write for mainstream newspapers and appears to agree that political blogging is less well developed in Australia than in the USA where the ‘number of political bloggers is larger, both absolutely and in relation to the population’. Technology commentator Mark Pesce says that Australia has not experienced ‘the kind of intense political blogosphere that we’re familiar with in the United States’ (*Background Briefing*, 20 May 2007).

There may be a number of reasons why blogging has not emerged as an important forum for political debate and analysis in Australia. Most Australians continue to turn to the mainstream media for news. OzTAM data (see *Australian*, 24 May 2007) do show that the audience for free-to-air television news and coverage is falling: the average viewer watched 788 hours in 2002 and 655 in 2006. However news and current affairs remains the most popular genre and attract an appreciably larger audience than the next most watched categories of drama (522 hours in 2006) and light entertainment (496 hours). Australians have also generally shown far less interest in blogging. For example, a study of the geographic location of blogs undertaken in November 2003 ‘identified the location of 272,523 blogs (or about 26% of the total), 191,294 of which were located within the United States’, and just 6173 originated in Australia (Lin and Halavais 2006). The absence of a sizeable Australian

blogosphere does not appear to be the consequence of an inadequate infrastructure. When broadband penetration is weighed, Australia may be the seventeenth ranking developed country. But the USA ranks only twelfth and does not have a significantly greater broadband take-up rate (Telstra 2007). Two-thirds of Australian homes have internet access, and during 2005-06 the number of households with a broadband connection almost doubled to 2.3 million (ABS 2006).

It may be that Australia lacks the critical mass necessary for a blogosphere: Texas (22.9m) alone has a larger population than Australia (20.7m). It is certainly true that one of Australia's best known public affairs blogs, Margo Kingston's Webdiary, failed in 2005 when removed from the umbrella of the *Sydney Morning Herald* because it attracted too few readers to sustain a sufficient revenue stream (Kingston, 2006). However it is also likely that the character of its politics is a reason why Australia has not seen the emergence of a vibrant political blogosphere of the kind which has sprung up around US politics. In part this may be a question of the current political climate. For instance Pesce suggests that anger about the Iraq War was the catalyst for the emergence of the blogosphere in the USA and that in comparison 'Australians aren't really upset about anything' (*Background Briefing*, 20 May 2007). Despite the flirtation with the Internet during the 2007 campaign which has seen both the Labor and Liberal parties post political ads on YouTube, the major parties which dominate Australia's politics have not seriously considered using web-based initiatives to 'promote broader public engagement in policy-making' (Chen, Gibson and Geiselhart 2006, 26). Very few Australian politicians are bloggers—in May 2007 *Background Briefing* reported that just seven of Australia's 225 federal parliamentarians maintained blogs. Chen suggests that Australian politicians have not been tardy in recognising the potential of the Internet. Rather they have made the calculation that Australia has a 'fundamentally different' political system in which that the Internet does not offer the same advantages (*Background Briefing*, 20 May 2007).

Different institutional settings

In describing the emerging 'third age of political communication' of which blogging has become an important element, Blumler and Kavanagh (1999, 219) allowed that there might be variations between Europe and the USA, and cautiously confined their analysis to 'Anglo-American' democracies. Australia's experience suggests that not all political systems will nurture the blogosphere in the same way that the USA has—and that we need distinguish even between different kinds of Anglo-American democracy. For example in the USA the first amendment provides bloggers with a constitutional protection of free speech which is not mirrored in Australia. In a 1992 case the High Court did discern an implied guarantee of free and open political communication within Australia's constitution. But this has not been interpreted in a way which affords bloggers with the robust protection that the US constitution provides those who engage in public debate.

The essential differences between Australia's parliamentary and the US presidential system extend well beyond the constitutional protection of free speech and are well known. 'Unlike parliamentary systems, the United States gives extensive constitutional authority to the legislative branch ...to make policy. This includes the right to veto actions of the executive' (Thomas 2005, 284). The American president is directly elected and appoints her cabinet secretaries. Executive and legislative

powers are constitutionally separated. US administrations have a fixed four year lifespan. Presidents do not require majority support in the Congress to retain control of executive government (although they do need persuade the legislature to adopt their legislative programme.) In Australia the prime minister and cabinet are all drawn from parliament and retain their collective hold on executive government only insofar as they continue to enjoy majority support in the House of Representatives. That majority support is routinely delivered by the disciplined party that the prime minister leads.

In describing the different opportunities for that form of political communication which is lobbying that are available in the Australian and US political systems, Geoff Allen (2005, 340) observes that Australia is still characterised by the ‘unchallenged concentration of political power in the hands of a few top bureaucrats and senior ministers’. Lobbying is thus a ‘relatively direct and simple matter’—there are relatively few key decision makers to be won over. In contrast the USA has ‘multipoint decision making’—policy making is less tightly controlled and there are more opportunities for lobbyists to exert influence (also see Thomas 2005, 286). This is partly an artefact of the US constitutional separation of powers and the system of checks and balances which is intended to ensure that neither the legislative or executive branch of government can alone control law-making. It is also an artefact of a distinctive party system.

The Queensland Senator, Andrew Bartlett, argues that political blogs have not ‘caught on’ in Australia as they have in the USA because the Australian party system is very different in kind. Party discipline in Australia, Bartlett says, is much tighter and the established parties do not encourage parliamentarians to be individuals. ‘In the US, it's much more about an individual candidate, where here it's more about the party brand ...’ (cited in Stafford 2007). This is an important insight. As Australia does, the USA has a bicameral legislature whose members are mostly drawn from two long-established parties. But this outward similarity is misleading. The loss of a vote in the Australian House of Representatives will likely bring a government down. This places a premium upon party discipline not found in the USA where administrations do not depend upon, and often do not have, majority support in Congress. Australian Labor parliamentarians ‘pledge’ to always vote in support of party policy and as their party caucus decides. The Liberal and National parties exert a less formalised but no less real discipline. Party discipline counts for much less in the USA. Individual Republicans and Democrats in either house can—and often do—‘cross the floor’ to vote against their party majority. In short their votes are not predetermined by their party. Rather they are open to persuasion and influence. Members of Australian parties who ‘cross the floor’ risk expulsion and face the prospect of contesting the next election without party support. In a political system where major party endorsement is still crucial to winning a seat in the legislature there is every incentive for parliamentarians to toe the party line. This tends to restrict policy debate to the privacy of the party room or caucus.

In caucus meetings the party leader and cabinet ministers (or their ‘shadows’ in the case of the opposition) usually prevail. The Australian election mantra that a party which ‘can’t govern itself can’t govern the country’ underlines the importance of party unanimity on policy issues. In contrast the US political system invites party leaders to openly champion rival policy positions. The mechanism widely used to endorse candidates ensures this. Primary election campaigns pit Democrats and

Republicans against fellow partisans in contests which encourage them to propose their own, and to openly attack their opponent's, policy positions. Very simply the leadership of Australian parties 'owns' policy debate and the public discussion of issues beyond the confines of the party is far more limited than it is in the US political system where parties have a very different character and place less importance on party solidarity. Party caucuses do operate within the US Congress but are associated with particular sectional interests or policy issues. The best known is the Black Congress. In practice it is closely associated with the Democrats and acts as a lobby within that party. But it is formally bi-partisan and open to Republicans. It is commonplace to see caucus leaders championing their particular cause and challenging their own party.

A simple fact for a Congress member is that the endorsement of the Republican or Democrat party is insufficient to secure their re-election. Candidates contesting Australian elections depend heavily upon not their own efforts, but the campaigns conducted by their central party organisation and leader which promote their party 'brand'. In contrast candidates running for office in US elections need raise their own campaign funds, assemble their own campaign teams, and build their own supporter base. Since their party will not bear the cost of, nor secure their, re-election, there is a particular incentive for members of Congress to heed their constituents and the special interests who will fund their campaign war chests. One consequence is that American politics has an unsavoury side which is seen in the importance of money and the proliferation of political action committees organised to promote particular policy outcomes by channelling donations to candidates. But the other side of this coin is that legislators are not locked into their party's position and are open to persuasion. As a result issues which might be settled behind closed doors in an Australian party room are often argued in the USA in the public arena. American parties do not have the same 'exclusionary control over policy making' (Thomas 2005, 285). There is an added purpose to the public discussion of issues which is missing in Australia.

Just as in Australia a Senate committee system flowered in the period following the expansion of the Senate in 1984 when independents and minor parties were able to secure the balance of power and put the upper house beyond the immediate control of the governing party, in the USA the formal division of power between the executive and legislative branches of government has encouraged the development of a system of powerful Senate committees. These have a significant role in deciding policy. Membership is determined by seniority as well as party allegiance and Senators chairing committees wield considerable power and committees themselves can prevent bills from reaching the floor of the Senate. Thomas (2005, 286) sees this as a further illustration of the 'fragmented nature' which distinguishes the USA from parliamentary systems and which institutionalises policy making that necessarily involves 'compromise and wheeling and dealing' and encourages lobbying. Our suggestion is that the US political system has encouraged discussion and debate in the blogosphere because it has a more fragmented nature, because the party which controls executive government can not have a tight control over policy making, and because there is a prospect that the public discussion of an issue or the mobilisation of public opinion may influence enough legislators to shape a policy outcome. In the USA where legislators are not obliged to vote with their party colleagues, and where Congress and the administration may pull in different directions, there is more scope for the public debate of policy issues. Moreover insofar as it may influence the way

legislators ultimately vote, the public debate of policy has a clear purpose that it does not in the Australian system.

Conclusion

Accounts of the rise of blogging often carry a great deal of optimism and hype. Some of this is warranted. As a form of publication blogging does have significant economic advantages over the traditional media. The development of the Internet has removed almost all of the 'start up' cost barriers which once insulated traditional news media from completion. And the refinement of software over the past decade has not only removed most of the technical barriers to publishing via the Internet, but made possible the easy interlinking of and movement between webpages. Blogging is now both affordable and straightforward and blogs provide a low-cost means of reaching large audiences. It does appear that the mix of technological and commercial forces that gave rise to blogging will continue to encourage a blogosphere in which political ideas and information can be widely exchanged and circulated. Blogging may be emerging as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" which is how Habermas defines the public sphere (Eley, 1992, p. 298). But there is an important caveat.

Not all political systems will foster the blogging in the way that the USA has. The blogosphere has not burgeoned in Australia and this does not appear to be related to cost, take-up, broadband speed or any similar aspect of the access to the Internet. On the basis of a comparison between Australia and the USA, it seems that more fragmented American political system may be more welcoming than are 'Anglo' parliamentary systems. Political blogging may flourish in some but not other institutional settings. The Internet allows its users to search out the information that they want, to question, interact with and ultimately circumvent the established news media. Blogging illustrates its new character. Quite possibly we are witnessing, as Blumler and Kavanagh (1991) foresaw, the emergence of a new 'third age' in which the top down control of political communication is being eroded. But it would be a mistake to see this as the inevitable consequence of an expanding Internet. The emergence of the blogosphere as an important political arena in the USA and its relative unimportance in Australian politics serves to remind that political communication involves *politics* as well as communication technologies, and there are often significant differences in the logic and cultures of political systems.

References.

- ABS (2006) *Household Use of Information Technology, Australia, 2005-06*. Canberra, Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Allen, G. (2005) 'An integrated model: the evolution of public affairs down under'. In P.Harris and C. Fleisher (eds) *The Handbook of Public Affairs*. London,: Sage
- Bahnisch, M. (2005) 'Political Blogs versus Big Media? It's the wrong question to ask' On-line Opinion post, 22 April.
<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=3376>
- Bahnisch, M. (2006) 'The Political Uses of Blogs'. In Bruns, A. & Jacobs, J. (eds.) *Uses of Blogs*. New York; Peter Lang.
- Berg, C. (2007) 'The value of secrets to polities and journos' *Crikey.com*, 16 August.
- Blumler, J. G. (2001) 'The Third Age of Political Communication'. *Journal of Public Affairs* Vol.1 (3): 202-209.
- Blumler J.G. and Dennis Kavanagh (1999) 'The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features'. *Political Communication*, Vol.16, (3): 209 – 230
- Bruns, A. & Jacobs, J. (2006) *Uses of Blogs*. New York, Peter Lang.
- Chang, T., Ocampo, K., Jessing-Butz, K., Krase, A., Galanis, T. & Williams, S. (2006) 'Facts About the State of Blogging at America's 100 Biggest Newspapers'. *Blueplatespecial.net*. 1 March.
- Chen, P., Gibson, R. and Geiselhart (2006) 'Electronic Democracy? The impact of New Communication Technologies on Australian Democracy'. *Report No.6*. Canberra: Democratic Audit of Australia, RISS.
- CIA (2007) *The World Factbook 2007*. Central Intelligence Agency.
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook>
- CLICKZ (2007) *ClickZ Stats: Web Worldwide*. <http://www.clickz.com/>
- Cook, T (2005) 'Up against reality. Blogging and the cost of content' Unpublished paper presented to *Blogtalk Downunder*, Sydney.
<http://trevorcook.typepad.com/weblog/files/btdownunder-1.doc>
- Cornfield, M., Carson, J., Kalis, A. & Simon, E. (2004) *Buzz, Blogs & Beyond: The Internet and the National Discourse in the Fall of 2004*. Pew Internet & American Life Project.
- Craig, G. (2004) *The Media, Politics and Public Life*. Crows Nest, Allen and Unwin.
- Davis, W. (2007) 'Blog Readership Growing for Major Newspapers'. *MediapostPublications. Just an Online Minute....* 17 January. [Weblog]

- Delwiche, A. (2005) 'Agenda-setting, Opinion Leadership, and the World of Web Logs'. *First Monday*. 10 November.
- Drezner, D. W. & Farrell, H. (2004a) 'The Power and Politics of Blogs'. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Hilton Chicago and the Palmer House Hilton, Chicago.
- Drezner, D. W. & Farrell, H. (2004b) 'Web of Influence'. *Foreign Policy*, Issue 145, 32-40.
- Eley, G. (1992) 'Nations, publics, and political cultures: Placing Habermas in the nineteenth century'. In *Habermas and the public sphere*, ed. C. Calhoun, 289-339. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Frost, G. (2004) "'Blog" tops U.S. dictionary's words of the year'. *Reuters News* 30 November [News Release]
- Garrison, B. (2005) 'Online Newspapers'. In Salwen, M. B., Garrison, B. & Driscoll, P. D. (eds.) *Online News and the Public*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Gill, K. (2004) 'How can we measure the influence of the blogosphere?', *WWW2004*, May 17-22.
- Gillmor, D. (2006) *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*. Sebastopol: O'Reilly Media, Inc.
- Glover, D. K. (2007) 'Blog Power: The Top 10 Blog Stories of 2006'. *Beltway Blogroll*. 12 January. [Weblog]
- Glover, D. K. & Essl, M. (2006) 'News on the Web: Politics as Usual'. *New York Times*. 3 December.
- Graf, J. (2006) *The Audience for Political Blogs. New Research on Blog Readership*. Washington: Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet, George Washington University.
- Haas, T. (2005) 'From "Public Journalism" to the "Public's Journalism"? Rhetoric and reality in the discourse on weblogs'. I, Vol 6 (3), pp. 387-396
- Hachten, W. and Scotton, J. (2007) *The World News Prism: Global information in a Satellite Age*. 7th edn., Iowa, Iowa University Press.
- Hanchard, S. (2007) Political Campaigns 2.0. *Hitwise*. 14 February. [Web log]
- Iyengar, S., and McGrady, J.A. (2007) *Media Politics. A Citizen's Guide*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Kingston, M. (2006) The Webdiary Story. *Webdiary*. 15 March [Weblog]
- Kline, D., Berger, P., Burstein, D. & De Keijzer, A. J. (2005) *Blog!: How The Newest Media Revolution is Changing Politics, Business, and Culture*. New York, CDS Books.
- Lasica, J. D. (2004) 'Blogs and Journalism Need Each Other'. *Nieman Reports*, Vol.57 (3), 70-74.

Lin, J. and Halavais, A. (2006) 'Geographical Distribution of Blogs in the United States' *Webology*, Vol. 3 (4)

Nguyen, A. (2006) Journalism in the wake of participatory publishing. *Australian Journalism Review*, 28, 143-155.

Quiggin, J. (2006) 'Blogs, wikis and creative innovation', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* Vol. 9(4): 481-496

Rainie, L. & Horrigan, J. (2007) *Election 2006 Online*. Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Regan, T. (2003) 'Weblogs Threaten and Inform Traditional Journalism'. *Nieman Reports*, Vol.57 (3): 68-70.

Reynolds, G. (2006) *An Army of Davids: How Markets and Technology Empower Ordinary People to Beat Big Media, big Government and Other Goliaths*. Nashville: Nelson Current.

Rood, J. (2007) 'Questions, Concerns Swirl around Politics of Prosecutor's Forced Exit'. *Tpmmuckraker.com*. 13 January. [Web log]

Rosen, J. (2003) 'What's Radical About the Weblog Form in Journalism?' *Pressthink*. 16 October. [Weblog]

Rosen, J. (2005a) 'Each Nation has its Own Press' [Extract from 2005 Alfred Deakin Innovation Lecture] *Pressthink* 6 May. [Web log]

Michael Roston 'White House runs conference call on executive privilege for right-wing bloggers' [Weblog] July 27.
http://rawstory.com/news/2007/White_House_runs_conference_call_on_0727.html

Salwen, M. B. (2005) 'Online News Trends'. In Salwen, M. B., Garrison, B. & Driscoll, P. D. (eds.) *Online news and the Public*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Schatz, A. (2007) 'Candidates find a New Stump in the Blogosphere'. *Wall Street Journal*, 14 February.

Scott, B. (2005) 'A Contemporary History of Digital Journalism'. *Television & New Media* Vol. 6 (1): 89-126.

Shafer, J. (2005) 'Blog Overkill: The Danger of Hying a Good Thing into the Ground'. *Slate*. 26 January. [Web log]

Shirky, C. (2003) 'Power Laws, Weblogs, and Inequality'. *Clay Shirky's Writings about the Internet*. [Web log]

Singer, J. B. (2005) 'The political j-blogger: "Normalizing" a new media form to fit old norms and practices'. *Journalism*. Vol.6(2): 173 - 198.

Stafford, A. (2007) 'Our MPS fall through information net', *The Age*, 28 February.

Telstra (2007). *Broadband is a Disgrace*. Melbourne: Tesltra. [Pamphlet]

Thomas, C. (2005) "Lobbying in the United States". In P.Harris and C. Fleisher (eds) *The Handbook of Public Affairs*. London, Sage.