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Beyond Gotcha: Blogs as a Space for Debate

By Jason Wilson, Axel Bruns, and Barry Saunders

The mainstream media and critics of Web 2.0's "[cult of the amateur](#)" often suggest that blogs and citizen journalism will never replace their mainstream counterparts because they "don't break stories". Notwithstanding the fundamental furphy – who ever said anything about "replacing" the MSM anyway? – there is some truth in this. It goes without saying that most bloggers don't have the resources, pulling power or proximity to the polities to do much original political reporting: this is something that most sensible public affairs bloggers concede. (Though how often the mainstream media really break stories – as against exploiting deliberate, calculated 'leaks' from party spinsters – is a separate question.)

Still, this distance from the "insiders'" gallery is a strength as much as it is a weakness. That's because the online commentariat aren't so beholden to a cycle driven by the newsroom or the whistle-stop agendas of ministerial press offices. They often have the space to reflect on and analyse a story for some time after it has broken in the deadline-driven MSM. Newspapers often break news in terms of "gotcha" moments, then in the day or two afterward publish some punditry, print some letters and move on to the next phase in the news cycle. Especially at campaign time, there isn't much space for reflection. But bloggers are able to provoke and host discussions about the larger questions arising from such stories over subsequent days and weeks.

As a result, news reporting and discussion becomes [more nuanced, more multiperspectival](#) , [more deliberative](#): something that's been absent from much of the formulaic right-vs.-left mainstream media narrative for some time. We've seen this already – around several issues – in and just before this first official week of the 2007 Federal Election campaign.

When Labor foreign affairs spokesman Robert McClelland offered to enact his Party's policy by organizing a campaign against the death penalty, the mainstream media mainly focused on the politics and timing of the "gaffe", and moved on to further election speculation. In the blogosphere, though, there was reflection on both sides of the debate, and policy discussion by bloggers and commenters.

On one side of the argument, [Tim Blair](#) led with the accusation that Rudd had been inconsistent in censuring McClelland, and some of commenters were supportive of a return of the death penalty, particularly for terrorists.

One commenter on Blair's site argued that "There are some people who are too evil to be allowed to live, for the good of us all.", and another that "It's duff-headed to insist that life is so precious those that do purposefully take it... should be allowed to continue to do so unfettered. It's like arguing something like Vitamin D should be completely prohibited because too much can kill you."

On the other hand, a piece, and commenters at [Larvatus Prodeo](#) also accused Rudd of inconsistency, but made arguments as to why he should have held the line against the "populis" inconsistency of supporting a penalty that Australia doesn't apply to its own criminals.

Suz, LP's initial poster, worried about the impression she had of "a two-tier system of ethics, which could come very close to racism in some instances." Posters suggested different ways that the Labor party could have handled the challenge without abandoning a principled stand. Commenter Wolves Evolve asked, "Why didn't McLelland merely use it as a discussion point instead of policy - why not use the anniversary to ask of the people where they stand on the issue?" Commenter Yeti offered a depressing conclusion: "Unfortunately principled stands do not win votes in Australia - the opposite is true." Overall, there was a wide-ranging discussion on a range of blogs concerning how Australia should deal with this issue, at home and abroad, and in the context of an election.

A few days later, when the PM announced his intention to make a place for Indigenous Australians in the constitution, there was more debate about the rights and wrongs of such a move, the PM's motivations, and how it should be assessed in the context of an election campaign. Again, there was much more diversity of opinion, and more extended discussion in the blogosphere than in the mainstream media.

At Possum's Pollytics, it was suggested that it was a "firewall strategy" to safeguard Liberal heartland seats: "While non-core seats held by the Liberals are getting hammered by Workchoices, housing affordability, childcare... the core Liberal heartland seats are bleeding for a different set of reasons... the general 11 year rejection by the government of anything resembling small "L" liberal values". Many commenters made the point that Possum's engaging style and analysis was what they felt they were lacking from MSM analysis, but never got. One was cutting: "It's not a 'preamble' we want from Howard; it's a 'postscript'!"

Senator Andrew Bartlett said on his [blog](#) that he didn't care about the motivations, or the possible cynicism, but that anyone concerned about the issue should reach out for this opportunity to recognize indigenous people. His commenters didn't all agree: Wizman said that "It just looks like another political wedge: disagree and you hate Aboriginals, agree and you are stuck with a (possibly) tainted outcome."

In each of these cases, extended analysis or prolonged conversation has occurred around policy issues, in ways that the MSM is not structurally able to accommodate. Word limits, the nature of the traditional media's communication models, and competition over scoops and deadlines mean that for the MSM, the show must go on. But in "Ozblogistan", pundits and punters can take a more considered approach to the key issues.

This is one important reason why the blogosphere and the Internet are becoming such important vectors of news, opinion and debate this election. Their readers don't want them to break stories, but to reflect on them, and enlarge the debate. That has to be good for democracy.

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