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Blogging outside the Echo Chamber

By Axel Bruns, Jason Wilson, and Barry Saunders

In the current political climate, it's no surprise that a number of sessions at the recent [Australian Blogging Conference](#) at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane focussed on the potential for blogs and other citizen journalism sites to impact on political news and punditry. [In a previous article](#), we've already noted the continuing skirmishes between psephologist bloggers and the political commentators, whose rather unscientific interpretation of opinion poll results that some bloggers have challenged fervently.

It is tempting to claim that the growing recognition of Australian bloggers and citizen journalists as alternative sources of news and commentary is a sign that they're storming the gates of the mainstream media. Many of the comments on our earlier piece seem to support that view - [as one reader wrote](#), "I believe that Possum [Pollytics] and Bryan at Ozpolitics.info have given me more honest and concise information about this year's political climate than all of the other media websites put together."

How representative are such voices, though? If the journalistic commentariat in the Canberra press gallery is sometimes accused of constituting an echo chamber - talking, writing, broadcasting mainly to itself and the rest of the political class, but with little significant impact on the wider citizenry - then is breaking into those circuits of discourse anything more than a pyrrhic victory; are the bloggers anything more than a bunch of politics nerds gatecrashing a party of fellow nerds? Put simply, do these blogs matter to the rest of the electorate?

Clearly, the paid political pundits themselves seem to think so - otherwise they wouldn't spend so much time variously defending themselves against accusations of bias from the blogosphere, or attacking their "woolly-headed critics" as armchair commentators themselves. (That said, some less adversarially-minded journalists [are now openly drawing on some of the most consistently insightful citizen journalist voices](#).)

But at a time when poll and politics fatigue has well and truly settled in even before the election proper has been called, at a time when neither incessant party advertising, overt pork barrelling, nor egregious mudslinging appear to have had any [discernible impact](#) on the declared voting intentions of the electorate since January, perhaps the question is an even larger one: have electors already switched off from the political contest and made up their minds? Have journalists - professional or otherwise - lost their access to the hearts and minds of the electorate, lost their place as opinion leaders and shapers?

Indicators in Australia and elsewhere provide some support for this view - certainly, in the network age, newspaper readership is dropping especially amongst younger readers, and disconnection from the political process and those who report on it is palpable in many democratic nations (indeed, how many Australians would stay at home on election day if voting wasn't compulsory?).

At the same time, new forms of political engagement - from watching the political satire of [The Daily Show](#) in the U.S. and the [Chaser](#) here through engaging in discussions in the blogosphere to contributing to the independent political activism of [MoveOn](#) and [GetUp](#) - have begun to emerge outside of the conventional political system. What remains unclear, certainly in Australia, is whether especially the more active forms of such involvement are going to be able to attract citizen involvement sizeable enough to make a discernible difference.

Our colleague Professor Stephen Coleman from the University of Leeds has conducted studies in the U.K. which point to the development of a growing divide between what he describes as political junkies (PJs) on the one extreme, and *Big Brother* fans (BBs) on the other. That's not to pick on BBs as such (he probably could have picked *Idol* watchers or the fans of many other similar shows as well), but simply to point out that many BBs are clearly

deeply involved in following the show and voting for their favourite housemates, but nowhere near as committed to their electoral choices in the political contest.

"What is at risk," [Coleman asks](#), "if the uncomfortable chasm between the engaged and the disenchanted is left unreconciled? Democracy is ultimately unsustainable when the demos is estranged from it. The way to liberate political democracy from its current cultural ghetto requires a new conception of two-way accountability; a creative and exciting use of the new technologies of interactivity; and the nurturing of genuine respect between PJs and BBs."

Many bloggers and blog researchers, including some of us, suggest that political blogging and other forms of citizen journalism *may* hold the key to such broader re-engagement with politics; they enable those turned off by the ceaseless formulaic conflict between left and right, between government and opposition, in mainstream political journalism to rediscover a wider range of perspectives and to participate in political deliberation without needing to negotiate party hierarchies.

Citizen journalism may also allow citizens to reengage with the political process by [offering well researched, well argued analysis](#) that dismantles the 'done-deal' journalism that dominates political discourse. Cynicism with politics and the media often springs from a perception of bias and their inability to admit error - citizen journalism is forcing demagogues to admit to their errors and [providing a counter-narrative](#) that often challenges 'common-sense' assumptions.

At the same time, however, do such new forms of engagement really reach out to what Coleman calls the disenchanted, or do they merely marginally expand the PJ demographic? Is the impact of blogs on the political process recognised only because it's a matter of PJs in the mainstream media reporting on PJs outside of the mainstream media?

We've yet to find out. In the U.S., the Pew Center Internet & American Life Project has conducted [large-scale studies tracing the development of blogging](#) and other forms of active content generation amongst citizens for some years now, and is beginning to see signs for longer-term cultural change. No similar studies exist in Australia to date, and we can only draw on more anecdotal evidence to suggest that the role played by bloggers and citizen journalists here in 2007 is similar perhaps to that of their counterparts in the *previous*, 2003/4 U.S. election cycle.

At the same time, as blogger Mark Bahnisch suggests in [a follow-up post to the Australian Blogging Conference](#), any direct comparison between Australia and the U.S. is necessarily complicated by the vastly different make-up of their electoral and political systems, historical trajectories, and domestic citizenries. The rise of bloggers and citizen journalists to political prominence there may not necessarily be repeated here, and the effect of any such developments on the wider populace may be just as different.

What's necessary in Australia, therefore, is for us to study the potential for citizen journalism to reach well beyond the PJs - and our [Youdecide2007](#) project is one amongst a number of projects which aim to do so, in the coming election and well beyond.

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