

Mapping intermedia news flows:

**Topical discussions in
the Australian and French
political blogospheres**

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Abstract

The growth of technologies and tools branded as ‘new media’ or ‘Web 2.0’ has sparked much discussion about the internet and its place in all facets of social life. Such debate includes the potential for blogs and citizen journalism projects to replace or alter journalism and mainstream media practices. However, while the journalism-blog dynamic has attracted the most attention, the actual work of political bloggers, the roles they play in the mediasphere and the resources they use, has been comparatively ignored.

This project will look at political blogging in Australia and France - sites commenting on or promoting political events and ideas, and run by citizens, politicians, and journalists alike. In doing so, the structure of networks formed by bloggers and the nature of communication within political blogospheres will be examined. Previous studies of political blogging around the world have focussed on individual nations, finding that in some cases the networks are divided between different political ideologies. By comparing two countries with different political representation (two-party dominated system vs. a wider political spectrum), this study will determine the structure of these political blogospheres, and correlate these structures with the political environment in which they are situated.

The thesis adapts concepts from communication and media theories, including framing, agenda setting, and opinion leaders, to examine the work of political bloggers and their place within the mediasphere. As well as developing a hybrid theoretical base for research into blogs and other online communication, the project outlines new methodologies for carrying out studies of online activity through the analysis of several topical networks within the wider activity collected for this project. The project draws on hyperlink and textual data collected from a sample of Australian and French blogs between January and August 2009. From this data, the thesis provides an overview of ‘everyday’ political blogging, showing posting patterns over several months of activity, away from national elections and their associated campaigns. However, while other work in this field has looked solely at cumulative networks, treating collected data as a static network, this

project will also look at specific cases to see how the blogospheres change with time and topics of discussion. Three case studies are used within the thesis to examine how blogs cover politics, featuring an international political event (the Obama inauguration), and local political topics (the opposition to the 'Création et Internet', or HADOPI, law in France, the 'Utegate' scandal in Australia).

By using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, the study analyses data collected from a population of sites from both countries, looking at their linking patterns, relationship with mainstream media, and topics of interest. This project will subsequently help to further develop methodologies in this field and provide new and detailed information on both online networks and internet-based political communication in Australia and France.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
AFP	Agence France Presse – press agency
ALP	Australian Labor Party – Australian centre-left political party
APH	website of the parliament of Australia (aph.gov.au – Australian Parliament House)
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
ETS	Emissions-trading scheme
EU	European Union
FN	Front National (National Front) – French right-wing political party
FR	France – French editions of international websites, such as <i>Yahoo! News (FR)</i>
HADOPI	Haute Autorité pour la Diffusion des Œuvres et la Protection des Droits sur Internet (High Authority for the Distribution of Works and the Protection of Rights on the Internet) – bill introduced to the French national parliament in 2008
LHC	Liberté, Humanisme, et Expression Critique (Liberty, Humanism, and Critical Expression – French blog collective <i>Réseau LHC</i>)
IQdN	la Quadrature du Net – French advocacy group
MoDem	Mouvement Démocrate (Democratic Movement) – French centrist political party
NYT	<i>New York Times</i> – U.S. newspaper
PS	Parti socialiste (Socialist Party) – French left-wing political party

RSS	Really Simple Syndication – automated feeds displaying updated content for a given website
RTL	French radio network (part of the European RTL Group, formerly <i>Radio Télévision Luxembourg</i>)
SBS	Special Broadcasting Service
SMH	<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> – Australian newspaper
TF1	<i>Television Française 1</i> – French television network
U.K.	United Kingdom
UMP	Union pour un mouvement populaire (Union for a popular movement) – French centre-right political party
U.S.	United States (of America)
WSJ	<i>Wall Street Journal</i> – U.S. financial newspaper

Statement of original authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Timothy Highfield

Signature

Date

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Introduction

17 January 2009. Australian media academic Margaret Simons writes on her *The Content Makers* blog¹ about an ongoing debate within the Australian blogosphere, asking:

whether it is valid to make comparisons between bloggers and journalists, and what it is reasonable to expect of bloggers and commenters on blogs before they make factual assertions about people. [...] I may have more to say later, but for the moment, don't we need to clarify our terms? Not all blogs are trying to do the same things, as I have pointed out elsewhere. **Australia so far has very few news-based blogs. Those that come closest to journalism mainly concentrate on the commentary part of the job.** And not all of those who wear the tag "journalist" behave in the same way either. And what do we mean by "journalism" in any case? (emphasis added)²

18 March 2009. A post published on Australian political group blog *Larvatus Prodeo*³ responds to a story widely featured in the mainstream media's coverage of the Queensland state election:

I've avoided any commentary on the purported photos of Pauline Hanson⁴ published this week for two reasons. Firstly, **I don't think the media needs yet another excuse to cover trivialities instead of issues** in the current Queensland election campaign. Secondly, I don't believe that the photos – whomever they depict (and Hanson now denies they are of her – with a fair bit of support from forensic experts) – are of sufficient public interest to publish. **However, there are aspects of this tawdry affair which transcend its tackiness** – the whole issue of a potential right to privacy in Australian law. **So I did want to link to a post from Skepticlawyer⁵ which examines that issue comprehensively and well.** (emphasis added)

¹ <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/contentmakers/>

² Unless otherwise noted, blog posts quoted in this thesis are part of the dataset collected specifically for this project. Translations are my own.

³ <http://larvatusprodeo.net/>

⁴ Pauline Hanson is the former leader of the far-right One Nation party, and previously served as a member of the Federal parliament. In March 2009 she was an independent candidate running in the Queensland state election.

⁵ A blog run by two lawyers based in Australia and the U.K. respectively. <http://skepticlawyer.com.au>

6 May 2009. The French political blogger behind *Partageons Mon Avis*⁶ (Share My Opinion) notes that:

125452 political blogs – including my own – have written posts to ‘celebrate’ the anniversary of Nicolas Sarkozy’s election [as French President in 2007]... **Happy birthday to all blogs born on the occasion of this election,** including *pire-racaille*.⁷ Happy birthday too to Luc (*Ma vie en narcisses*)⁸ and to Jacques (*VENDREDI*)⁹. (emphasis added)¹⁰

1 June 2009. Juan, the pseudonymous French blogger running the *Sarkofrance*¹¹ group of blogs writes that reading the latest issue of *VENDREDI*, a (now-defunct) weekly magazine presenting news and comment collected from across the internet, shows ‘how political blogs get upset, impatient, rebellious, and confrontational’ in their coverage, concluding by saying ‘in short, buy *VENDREDI*. **The news is different there.**’ (emphasis added)¹²

Between January and August 2009, several stories became prominent, recurring themes for Australian and French political bloggers and journalists alike, from the global financial crisis to climate change, via the swine flu pandemic and ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. These topics had local as well as international angles to their coverage, such as the French government’s response to economic difficulties or the planned emissions trading scheme (ETS) in Australia. However, these were not the sole subjects featured within either political blogosphere. The four posts quoted above cover different subjects appearing within the seven months of political blogging featured in this thesis, originally referring to vastly different contexts. However, taken together these comments also highlight a

⁶ <http://jegpol.blogspot.com/>

⁷ <http://pire-racaille.blogspot.com/>

⁸ <http://777socrate.blogspot.com/>

⁹ <http://vendredi.info>

¹⁰ *125452 blogs politiques - dont le mien - ont fait des billets pour "fêter" l'anniversaire de l'élection de Nicolas Sarkozy. [...] A propos d'anniversaire : bon anniversaire à tous les blogs qui sont nés à l'occasion de cette élection, dont pire-racaille. Bon anniversaire aussi à Luc et à Jacques.*

¹¹ This post is from <http://sarkofrance.blogspot.com>, while fellow sites are found at <http://sarkofrance.wordpress.com> and <http://sarkofrance.20minutes-blogs.fr>. Throughout this thesis, *Sarkofrance* refers to the .blogspot domain unless otherwise stated.

¹² *À la lecture du dernier numéro de VENDREDI (actuellement en vente), on mesure combien les blogs politiques s'énervent, s'impatientent, se rebellent et polémiquent. [...] Bref, achetez VENDREDI. L'actualité y est différente.*

number of key considerations for this research, which examines the role played within public debate by political bloggers in Australia and France.

As we will see, these comments are at best only tangentially related to the subjects of the three case studies appearing later in this thesis. However, the sentiments expressed and the questions raised in these posts have wider applications than simply commenting isolated news events. The commentary by the four bloggers featured here also highlights interactions between blogs and other media sources, perceptions around the blogger-journalist relationship, and political circumstances which may inspire, and sustain, blogging.¹³ *Larvatus Prodeo*'s initial reluctance to discuss the Hanson story, and promotion of an alternative angle to the coverage, suggest how bloggers might follow or reject agendas established by the mainstream media and reframe debates. The *Sarkofrance* post features explicit promotion of an alternative media source, largely drawn from blog content, where 'the news is different', while *The Content Makers* asks important questions around the work and description of bloggers and journalists. The post published on *Partageons Mon Avis*, though, notes an aspect of political blogging that should not be underestimated, the political rationale which leads citizens to blog in the first place. In the post featured here, the blogs singled out started out in response, and opposition, to Nicolas Sarkozy's election to the presidency. Other blogs featured in this study were started for different reasons and promote other political ideologies, and these views shape bloggers' coverage and interpretation of issues. Although the relationship between blogs and the mainstream media may often be seen as a key concern for research, the political aspects of political blogging are also of interest in examining the work of two blogospheres.

¹³ In this thesis, when referring to blogs, bloggers, blogging, and the blogosphere, I am describing political blogs, political bloggers, political blogging, and the political blogosphere unless otherwise noted.

Research questions

The ideas raised in the four posts quoted above appear within the research questions guiding this thesis. In particular, the analysis carried out within the three case studies is shaped by the following question:

RQ1: What role do blogs play in political debates?

This evaluation of political blogging is positioned within blogs' coverage of specific news events, analysing the methods they use to comment on issues, and the sources they cite. Two supplementary questions arise from this analysis. Through the case studies and final discussion, these questions will be addressed, drawing on the findings from the case studies and referring them back to the conceptual and theoretical frameworks supporting this thesis:

RQ2: How do blogs use mainstream and alternative media sources in their commentary, and how does this use vary in covering different issues and topics?

RQ3: Does topical discussion by political bloggers take different forms in Australia and France, reflecting different network structures, range of blogs contributing, and blog roles, and do the political and media situations of the two countries contribute to this?

In this thesis, I argue that, rather than simply repeating or critiquing the work of the mainstream media, political bloggers have a greater role to play in the formation of opinions and dissemination of information. The nature of this role varies depending on the blog concerned and the topic being discussed, as the individual case studies will show. What is important, though, is not to treat all political bloggers as doing the same thing or covering the same issues as one prominent example, but instead to analyse the potential roles played by bloggers within public debate and the different themes promoted by the blogosphere overall. Individual bloggers put forward opinions that support a particular ideological view or publish their analysis of a specialist subject, which may appear unrelated to another blog's response to an issue. Studying bloggers' views both

individually and as part of a wider network highlights both the unique takes on a subject and any overall consensus being formed. In this way, the potential impact of a political blogger and the political blogosphere as a whole may be noted, through any communal sense-making and deliberation between blogs and their use of a diverse range of sources to understand and respond to an issue. The debate fostered by blogs, and the interaction between bloggers, are to some degree influenced by the domestic media and political situations in Australia and France, although the extent of any effect will again be reliant on the topics being discussed.

To answer these questions, this thesis features three case studies investigating political bloggers' discussions of specific news events. The analysis carried out for these studies draws on blog posts collected from a sample of Australian and French political blogs between 12 January and 10 August 2009. The data used were gathered and initially prepared by research associates Lars Kirchhoff and Thomas Nicolai of Sociomantic Labs.¹⁴ The text of each post and any included hyperlinks were extracted for analysis in the later chapters of the thesis. The methodology introduced in this study is a new contribution to research in this field, combining network and content analysis and data visualisation. These approaches enable the study to track long-term activity and topical snapshots within the collected data. The development of new methods for the analysis of political blogging has implications for further studies of blogs and other online activity. This thesis also aims to provide new information on the work of political blogs in different countries and over time. Building on the methods and findings of previous research in the field, this study aims to produce a clearer picture of the contributions of political bloggers.

The importance of this research is borne out by the at-times confrontational relationship between bloggers and journalists, and between bloggers and politicians, which has led to a number of major episodes of tension in the history of political blogging. The place of blogging in relation to journalism, and by extension of other social media platforms, is still contested by some mainstream media publications. Discussions of political blogging, as will be examined in the following

¹⁴ <http://sociomantic.com/>

chapters, also provide somewhat contradictory interpretations of what bloggers are actually doing and trying to contribute to public debate. This thesis aims to evaluate previous claims about political blogging and its relationship with journalism, before investigating the role played by Australian and French political blogs within public debate.

The findings of this research have implications for the media and political landscapes in Australia and France. Not only can the political blogosphere provide examples of how citizens, politicians, and journalists use new media, but the activity tracked in this project also highlights the status of changing media systems. As we will see in the case studies, the use of traditional sources by bloggers and the adoption of new technologies by the mainstream media are important considerations for research into the contemporary media landscape. Moving away from a mass audience receiving its information from a few major media sources, the media landscapes of Australia and France have been expanded with the creation of alternative media websites, blogs, social media, and content-sharing sites. With debate surrounding how the use of these sites impacts upon political discussion and media coverage of issues and events, this research is ideally placed to provide some answers to these questions.

Thesis structure

The study of political blogging in Australia and France is divided into two sections. The first section provides the conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and contextual foundations for the thesis, while the second section applies the frameworks developed in the earlier chapters to the analysis of activity tracked within the French and Australian political blogospheres.

Chapter One starts by reviewing key events in the history of political blogging, from the precursors of blogs to the role played by U.S. bloggers in the cases of Trent Lott's resignation as Senate Majority Leader, the Howard Dean Presidential campaign, and 'Rathergate'. The discussion then turns to more recent

developments in Australia and France, including the responses to blogging by the mainstream media.

Following the background to this study, the chapter outlines how political blogs may be categorised. Three different schemas are proposed, looking respectively at the practices used by bloggers, the organisation of sites, and the subjects featured within political blogs. These typologies build on previous studies of blogs and political communication, and introduce individual blogs appearing within the case studies of this thesis.

Chapter Two moves from the types of political blog present within this study to discuss earlier research around the relationship between bloggers and journalists. The chapter introduces several conflicting perspectives on how bloggers use journalistic content and cover news in their posts. Aspects of these views are then highlighted within an episode taking place in the Australian political blogosphere in 2010, showing how the place of blogging within the mediasphere is still contested by some mainstream media organisations. These ideas are then linked to the theoretical framework used for this study, introducing the primary communication theories used to answer the research questions: framing, agenda-setting, and opinion leaders. Previous applications of these theories to the study of blogging are also discussed.

The methodology used for this study is outlined in **Chapter Three**. The study is placed within the context of new approaches created within several fields of internet research. The development of topical network analysis, the main methodological innovation from this study, is outlined, along with key conceptual discussions around hyperlinks and network mapping. The second half of the chapter presents the specific methods used for this project, from the creation of the sample to the data collection by research associates from Sociomantic Labs in Berlin, Germany. Finally, the chapter discusses how the analysis carried out in this thesis draws on a mixture of hyperlink and content analysis, and how these approaches are appropriate for the project at hand. Step-by-step processes employed in the data preparation and analysis stages are outlined in Appendix B at the end of this thesis.

Chapter Four provides the final contextual information, introducing the French and Australian political blogospheres by first reviewing previous studies and then presenting the composite overview generated from the project data. The chapter bridges the two sections of the thesis, moving into the data analysis which forms a major part of the subsequent chapters. In the chapter, the networks generated from the overall linking activity are presented, but it is argued that the main benefit of these composite overviews is by highlighting which sites bloggers referenced over the period covered in this study. Further analysis is required to determine why and when these links were made, and this work is carried out in the subsequent case studies.

Chapter Five showcases the first case study, focussing on blog discussions around the inauguration of Barack Obama on 20 January 2009. The case study draws on both French and Australian blog data in comparing how the two blogospheres covered the event, and surrounding themes, in a ten day period centred on the inauguration ceremony. In carrying out this comparison, the chapter examines the applicability of framing theory to the political blogosphere. The resources used by political bloggers from both blogospheres, and the topics featured, in their coverage of the Obama inauguration document whether the event was being repositioned within any discussion of local themes or issues related to the incoming President but tangential to the ceremony itself.

The subsequent chapters then feature two further case studies, one each from the Australian and French political blogospheres. **Chapter Six** tracks French political blogs' response to the proposed 'Création et Internet' law, commonly referred to as HADOPI, between January and August 2009. Part of this debate includes active campaigning by bloggers against the bill, and the analysis carried out here compares the coverage during periods of low activity with posts made immediately after key developments in the campaign. The chapter discusses the HADOPI coverage with regards to agenda-setting theory, arguing that whether bloggers follow any mainstream media agenda is dependent on each individual blogger's interest in the topic at hand. As part of the analysis, the chapter introduces a model describing the flow of discussion between several groups of blogs, each

reflecting different levels of engagement with the campaign or personal interest in subjects featured in the HADOPI coverage.

The final case study is found in **Chapter Seven**, which draws on concepts around opinion leadership in examining the Australian political blogosphere's response to the 'Utegate' scandal in June and August 2009. The discussion returns to the composite citation patterns described in Chapter Four to identify blogs acting as opinion leaders within the Australian political blogosphere. Utegate shows how bloggers responded to coverage of the issue by other sources, and how these actions reflect the formation and spread of opinions and agendas among bloggers. The case study links back to both framing and agenda-setting in examining how political bloggers positioned their coverage of the scandal and responded to the mainstream media's Utegate reporting.

Chapter Eight reviews the findings of the three case studies within the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter Two. In the examination of political blogging in Australia and France, the discussion returns to the research questions introduced at the start of this thesis, evaluating the contribution of blogging to public debate. Building on the specific examples of the inauguration, HADOPI, and Utegate, this chapter also notes how blogs made use of mainstream and alternative media sources, before comparing political blogging as practiced in Australia and France. The discussion then notes limitations to the findings of this study, before highlighting further directions and applications for this research into online activity and uses of social media, including but not restricted to the blogosphere.

Key terms

The discussion in this thesis features a number of key terms that, while familiar, need to be defined for the parameters of this particular project. **Blogs**, once referred to predominantly as 'weblogs', are traditionally seen as websites containing regular updates in the form of blog posts, which are displayed in reverse chronological order and give readers the option to comment on the views presented (Blood, 2002; Schmidt, 2007). As is discussed in Chapter One, though,

over recent years there has been a blurring of the lines between what is and is not a blog, with characteristics of blog sites adopted by other media and institutional websites, allowing their readers to also respond to published content. **Political blogs** are a subcategory of blogs that feature political subjects in their posts. In this study, ‘political’ refers to themes around domestic or international politicians, governments, bills, protests, elections, or policies, although the ways these discussions are framed vary from blog to blog. In addition, politics may not be the sole topic of discussion, and in the following chapter I introduce a typology of political blogs appearing in this research, highlighting the different approaches, organisation, and themes featured by political bloggers.

Together, the total network of blogs makes up the **blogosphere**, with different genres of blog also forming their own blogospheres. Compiègne (2011) finds the blogosphere to be ‘formed by the interactions between blogs, appearing as a territory of exchanges stimulated by the social and communitarian dimensions of blogs’¹⁵ (104). Similarly, Schmidt (2007) describes the blogosphere as ‘a clustered network of interconnected texts’ (1409), with these connections most clearly seen by **hyperlinks** between blogs. In this study, two main link types are used, although as Chapter Three notes, other links may be found on blogs. First, **blogrolls** are a list of links to sites which are of interest to a particular blogger, appearing either in the sidebar of the blog or as a separate page of links. These links are separate from the posts written by bloggers, and are usually updated only infrequently. Blogroll links are usually made to blogs and websites with which a blogger is affiliated or shares interests. **In-post citations**, on the other hand, refer to the links made within blog posts, and usually reference sites or articles relevant to the subject of a blog post.

These links are used in Chapter Four, and in the case studies, to study **networks** of political blogs and related sites, highlighting the interlinkages between these sites based on different link types. **Topical networks**, featured in Chapters Five to Seven, are formed by bloggers discussing a given subject in their posts, and by the sources they cite in these discussions. Sites found to be relevant to the topic at

¹⁵ Blogosphère ‘désigne le monde forme par l’interaction des blogs. Elle apparaît donc comme un territoire d’échanges dynamisé par la dimension sociale et communautaire des blogs.’

hand, rather than general political debate or media coverage, are then designated as topical references.

Studying the contributions of political blogs to public debate accompanies an examination of blogging's place within the mediasphere. Hartley (2002) describes the **mediasphere** as comprised of 'all the output of the mass media, both fictional and factual' (142). In this study, though, this definition is taken further in placing the output of other publications, including *alternative* media sites and blogs, within the mediasphere. In this case, **intermedia** describes not just connections between blogs and the mainstream media, but also links from blogger to blogger, to and from alternative media sites, and across different social media platforms.

Research context: Australia and France

The study at hand compares political blogging in Australia and France. The rationale behind the project design was aided by the acknowledged need within the literature for more research into blogging beyond the U.S. context. As Russell (2009) notes, 'blogging, like digital communication more generally, is being conceptualized differently in distinct cultural contexts' (8). Political blogging is only one approach that people around the globe may use for their blogs, but as this thesis shows, there are also variations between nations in the types of political blog and their engagement in different debates. Australia and France have been chosen to highlight these differences, examining how the coverage of political issues can provoke different reactions and citations from bloggers in Sydney or Lyon.

The two countries were also chosen because of key similarities and differences within their political and media situations. In January 2009, at the start of this study's data collection, the French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd were in their second year of leading their respective countries. Both leaders had been elected in 2007, with their predecessors having been in power since the mid-1990s. The time in office of the current administrations is an anchoring point for the study, with the different party

structures seen in Australia and France then suggesting ways in which political debate online might vary between the two countries. Australia's political landscape is dominated by two parties, occupying centre-left and centre-right positions within the political spectrum. In France, on the other hand, while a trend towards two-party politics may be apparent (Kuhn, 2007a, 334), there is a greater role played by parties from more ideological extreme and moderate positions, as will be seen in the following section. These differences allow this thesis to examine whether ideological barriers are apparent within the blogospheres, and evaluate if any divisions are along liberal/conservative lines, as studied in the U.S. (Ackland, 2005; Adamic & Glance, 2005), or other party affiliations. The media situations also allow for further comparison, examining the use of domestic and international sources, including media written in languages other than the dominant tongue of each blogosphere. In the next sections, I provide a brief overview of the political and media landscapes in Australia and France, outlining the context for this study of political blogging in the two countries.

Australian politics

Australian politics at federal and state levels is dominated by two parties: the centre-left Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the centre-right Liberal Party. After eleven years in opposition, the ALP had taken government under the leadership of Kevin Rudd in November 2007.¹⁶ Previously, the Liberal Party had been in power through a coalition with the National Party, a conservative party representing rural Australians. The ALP and the Coalition have in their current forms provided all of Australia's Prime Ministers since 1941. Following the 2007 election ALP and Coalition members accounted for 148 out of 150 seats in the Federal House of Representatives, and 69 out of 76 in the Senate.¹⁷ No other party has the support or membership to challenge either the ALP or Liberal Party overall. Of the smaller

¹⁶ Rudd was subsequently deposed as Prime Minister by his deputy, Julia Gillard, in June 2010.

¹⁷ The Federal parliament and all Australian state parliaments except Queensland are bicameral. In the Federal parliament, the House of Representatives is the lower house, with members representing electorates containing an equal number of citizens. The Senate is the upper house, with equal numbers of Senators representing each state and territory (12 Senators per state, two per territory). For a bill debated in parliament to become law, it needs to be approved by both houses.

parties, the Australian Greens have become the 'third party' within the Australian political landscape, promoting environmentalism and social justice. Other parties currently with federal or state representation at the start of 2009 included the conservative Family First party, nationalist party One Nation, and the Christian Democrats. Voting is compulsory for federal elections and elections in the state in which a citizen is enrolled. State and federal elections take place independently of each other. The parliamentary elections also determine the identity of the federal Prime Minister and state Premiers, being the leader of the party who can form government either by itself or in coalition with other parties.

French politics

In France, the election of the president takes place, like the U.S. example, through direct vote, separate to the parliamentary election. Elections for both the presidency and the Assemblée Nationale (National Assembly – lower house) involve two rounds of voting. In the case of the presidential vote, in the first round allows all French voters to choose between all eligible candidates, but the second round involves only the two candidates with the most votes in the first round, with the majority winner in the second round becoming president. The voting turnout differs in Australia and France, as voting is not compulsory for French citizens. At the national level, the elections for the Assemblée Nationale follow a similar format, with citizens electing a député from their local electorate. The Sénat (Senate – upper house), on the other hand, contains sénateurs elected indirectly by regional councils and mayors from around France. As with the Australian Federal parliament, approval by both the upper and lower houses is required for a bill to become law in France, with final assent provided by the Conseil Constitutionnel (Constitutional Council). The Conseil verifies that bills passed by the government follow the principles and rights set out in the French constitution, and its members include appointees by the President and leaders of both houses of parliament, as well as former French Presidents.

The current French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, was elected in May 2007, following the twelve-year presidency of Jacques Chirac. Unlike the Australian system's

change from centre-right to centre-left administrations in 2007, both Sarkozy and Chirac maintained centre-right positions. The primary opposition to Sarkozy and the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (Union for a Popular Movement - UMP), and the other candidate in the second round of presidential voting, was Ségolène Royal of the Parti Socialiste (Socialist Party - PS). During the presidential election, a third major candidate was the centrist François Bayrou, now the leader of the Mouvement Démocrate (Democratic Movement - MoDEM) formed from previous centrist parties. Extremist views such as the extreme-right Front National (National Front - FN) of Jean-Marie Le Pen were also represented. In all, of the twelve French presidential candidates in 2007, three were from the extreme left, three from the left, three from the right, one extreme right, one 'anti-globalisation candidate', and one 'hunting/fishing/nature and traditions' candidate (Kuhn, 2007a, 323). Despite the stronger presence of a range of ideologies in France than Australia, including the extreme-right FN, Kuhn believes that the 2007 results, particularly from the parliamentary elections, have 'entrenched two-party politics in France' (334). Following the parliamentary elections in 2007, the mainstream right held 343 seats, led by Sarkozy's UMP with 313 seats. The mainstream left, by contrast, including the Communist Party and les Verts (the Greens), only won 227 seats, with the PS controlling 184 of these constituencies. The MoDEM of Bayrou only won four seats, Le Pen's Front National did not win any, and other parties from outside the mainstream right or left took three seats.

Australian media

Australian mainstream media, including print, television, and radio titles, are dominated by a few companies whose content is rebadged for different regional publications. There are only a few truly 'national' news media, including two newspapers, *The Australian*¹⁸ and *The Australian Financial Review*,¹⁹ and free-to-air radio and television stations run by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)²⁰ and Special Broadcasting Service (SBS).²¹ Other broadcasters provide a mix

¹⁸ <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/>

¹⁹ <http://afr.com/>

²⁰ <http://abc.net.au/>

²¹ <http://sbs.com.au>

of local and national news, with different bulletins prepared for audiences in Sydney and Melbourne, for example. Each state capital has its own newspaper, with the majority being News Limited titles such as the *Adelaide Advertiser*²² or *Brisbane Courier Mail*,²³ although the largest cities, Sydney and Melbourne, have two major newspapers.

The relaxing of cross-media-ownership laws in Australia in 2006 saw international groups and media companies move to increase their share of already concentrated media markets. With the print media in particular dominated by two organisations, Fairfax Media and News Limited, controlling the major national and daily newspapers in most states, the legislation allowing a group to own publications or channels from two of three media formats (from print, television, and radio) in a market could restrict the number of views presented in Australian media (Simons 2007, 450-460). While mainstream media content has been freely available through their websites, the parent companies have been researching how to receive payment from readers accessing their articles. During this study, the mainstream media sites remained free. News Limited finally announced plans in June 2011 to introduce a paywall for content on *The Australian* website from October 2011.

French media

France's larger population and smaller geographical area supports more national news bulletins and publications, including newspapers and weekly news magazines, than Australia, although regional newspapers have greater market share over the national titles beyond Paris (Kuhn, 2011). National titles include *Le Monde*,²⁴ *Libération*,²⁵ *Le Figaro*,²⁶ and the news magazine *Nouvel Observateur*,²⁷ while examples of regional titles are *Ouest-France*²⁸ and *La Voix du Nord*.²⁹ The publication

²² Online content rebranded through News Limited's *AdelaideNow* site:

<http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/>

²³ <http://www.couriermail.com.au/>

²⁴ <http://lemonde.fr/>

²⁵ <http://lefigaro.fr/>

²⁶ <http://liberation.fr/>

²⁷ <http://tempsreels.nouvelobs.com/>

²⁸ <http://www.ouest-france.fr/>

of twenty general and specialised national newspapers and sixty-four regional titles, in addition to laws preventing any one group controlling more than thirty percent of the written press, allows for some diversity of voices (Charon, 2003, 157-160). Current media owners include several major conglomerates from different financial backgrounds, such as Dassault (aviation – owner of *Le Figaro*) and Bouygues (telecommunications and public infrastructure – television network *Télévision Française 1* (TF1)³⁰), which control various French print, television, radio, and internet-based media, although no one group dominates a given media sector (Kuhn, 2011). Television and radio stations are also important players within the mediasphere, with the former in particular considered the primary source of political information. The presence of an audience for each of these formats shows France to be a highly mediatised nation. Print, television, and radio media have also adapted to the internet by extending their news coverage online. Some publications, such as *Le Monde*, have developed models for readers to pay for access to archival and subscriber-only content on their websites, although other competitor sites remain free.

The elite press are seen as agenda-setters for other media and for political and economic decision-makers (Kuhn, 2011, 42). How politicians, and other citizens, are presented in the news media may be changing. Kuhn (2007b) describes a blurring of boundaries between public and private in the French media. While there are laws protecting the private lives of French citizens in the media, and the media has traditionally avoided tabloid-style reporting, Kuhn believes that the distinction between public and private is declining, leading French political communication towards a tabloidised situation similar to that of countries such as the U.S. (199).

Finally, computer-mediated communication has a long history in France. The Minitel communications terminal launched in 1982 was in some ways a precursor to the internet. Although the Minitel became a major part of French life, it did not grow substantially beyond its French base, and its popularity might have initially delayed French use of the internet (Jacobs, 2003).

²⁹ <http://www.lavoixdunord.fr/>

³⁰ <http://www.tf1.fr/>

Given the disparity in population size between France and Australia, and between the United States and France, the development and size of the political blogospheres in these countries would be expected to be different. The population of Australia, for example, means its active blogosphere is considerably smaller than that of either France or the United States. Ward and Cahill (2007) have suggested that Australia's political blogosphere lacks the critical mass to support a system on the same scale as that of the United States. Australian political bloggers might not have the same impact as their U.S. counterparts in terms of readership, acceptance as media commentators, or in breaking news. Regardless of the number of political bloggers from Canberra or Paris, though, in this thesis I argue that there are common traits to political blogging in these countries. Within the global blogosphere is a system of further national and regional political blog networks of varying size, whose populations differ depending on factors such as domestic politics, media situations, and internet access, but which also exhibit some common characteristics and approaches. In this thesis, I examine the types of political blog featured in Australia and France, their approaches and themes discussed, before finally comparing the work and contexts of the two blogospheres.

Previous studies of political blogging

These concepts and definitions have been assembled using earlier research into blogs and online activity. There is now a wealth of political blogging research from around the globe, and this thesis also builds on the methods and themes featured in these studies. Academic projects researching political blogging have changed over time, as blogs became established voices within the mediasphere and as data collecting and processing tools improved. The formative years of blogging as political tool, as alternative reporting, as media watchdogs, saw several prominent, U.S. examples of the power of blogs within media and political affairs, as will be seen in Chapter One. Blogs from both sides of U.S. politics had a part to play in these events, giving greater amplification to messages ignored or unnoticed by the mainstream media. These cases helped give rise to claims of bloggers replacing

journalists, of online communication and politics being changed by the growth of the blogosphere. Regardless of the strength of these claims, blog studies published after 2004 often share a common trait: the prominence of the same examples of blogs changing the system. 2004 acts as a watershed year for political blogging as events in the U.S., including the Presidential election and the 'Rathergate' episode, gave bloggers greater prominence within political and media debates.

Inevitably, as blogs became more popular for both writers and readers, what was new about their uses and interactions with other sites became habitual.

Mainstream media publications incorporated blogs into their websites, candidates in elections around the world adopted blogs as another campaign tool, and leading blogs and bloggers were bought or employed by major media groups. For a brief period, blogs and breaking news went hand in hand, when media and political actors had not yet become accustomed to bloggers' capabilities or audiences. Once blogging became a tolerated addition to the mediasphere, though, the contributions of bloggers started to change, with major scandals and upheavals encouraged by blogs replaced by more awareness of the work of bloggers by journalists and politicians, and vice versa: the watchdog role apparent in these affairs remains a primary function of blogs, but not necessarily with the same results as in 2004.

Within the existing blog literature, there are several waves of research themes, relating to these events and the changing functions of blogs over time. Until 2009, studies of the U.S. political blogosphere focussed on the period 2002-2005 (for example, Carlson, 2007; Johnson, Kaye, Bichard, & Wong, 2008; Vaccari, 2008b; Williams, Trammell, Postelnicu, Landreville, & Martin, 2005), enabling coverage not just of blogs leading to political or media change but also of bloggers during the 2004 Presidential election – indeed, a primary incentive to cover more recent data was the 2008 Presidential election. The first wave of blog research in other countries often followed similar lines, focussing on blogs initially as new channels for online communication, and in particular studying the first election campaigns featuring blogs in a key supporting role (Albrecht, Lübcke, & Hartig-Perschke, 2007; Flew & Wilson, 2008; Stanyer, 2006; Vaccari, 2008a). These early blog studies

examined blogging as an alternative medium, providing a new opportunity for citizens to participate in analysing and commenting on politics and the media.

As will be seen in the following chapter, blogging gradually moved from being an alternative practice to an accepted and regular part of the mainstream media's online presence. Bloggers became recognised contributors to online debate, rather than an unknown group holding some collective power within political campaigns or media coverage. Blogging's shift from alternative to mainstream medium was accompanied by a change in how researchers studied bloggers. Where the first wave of blog research saw studies of isolated cases and election campaigns, newer work examined networks of blogs, reflecting the growth and acceptance of the medium. If the first wave was the domain of social science, political research, and cultural studies, the second wave saw contributions from computer scientists and statisticians, using quantitative methods rooted in social network analysis. Blogging was not only no longer a 'new' medium, but its stability as a platform and its now-established audience meant that longer-term analysis of blog activity could be carried out, using methods and tools designed specifically for this purpose. Hyperlink network analysis became a prominent method within the second wave of blog research, coupled with data visualisation in attempts to map blogospheres.

Arguably the instigators for this second wave were Lada Adamic and Natalie Glance, whose 2005 paper on an ideological divide among U.S. political bloggers during the 2004 Presidential election is often cited in blog network studies. Bridging both the first and second wave, Adamic and Glance's finding of high inter-linking between blogs of the same ideology, but lower numbers of links from conservative to liberal bloggers (or vice versa), has influenced later studies looking at the structures of other blogospheres. As more powerful tools were developed to collect, analyse, and visualise blog data, so the projects became larger in scope. The 2007 French Presidential election and 2008 U.S. Presidential election were both accompanied by visualisations mapping the ideological clusters forming within the respective political blogospheres during the campaigns (linkfluence, 2008; RTGI, 2007). Other studies went beyond the political, mapping national and linguistic blogospheres from data gathered over several months (for example, the studies of

the Arabic and Persian blogospheres by, respectively, Etling, Kelly, Faris, & Palfrey, 2009; Kelly & Etling, 2008). Rather than locating ideological clusters, these studies found groups of sites linking together around shared interests. These ‘attentive clusters’ (Kelly, 2008) referenced their own particular resources, not necessarily the same, traditional media sources, highlighting the variable activities between bloggers and blog groups.

The advantage of these long-term studies into blog activity is their overview of wider networks, going beyond studies of one event or an election campaign. While campaigns are of great interest to political bloggers, the resulting blog activity is not necessarily representative of blogging activity under different circumstances. Looking at the work of bloggers over half a year, on the other hand, provides an insight into the rhythms of the blogosphere, the patterns behind the posts. Identifying clusters around interests or sources over these periods enables further comparison between national or topical blogospheres, testing the presence of different approaches around the world.

However, the long-term studies are not without their own limitations. Advantages also become obstacles. The composite data, presenting several months’ worth of data as one network for example, can highlight the clusters and provide a clear overview of the blogs being studied. The most active blogs during the period, the resources cited most often, can all be inferred from visualising large datasets. What cannot be inferred as easily is *why* these things have happened. In addition, different link types may be treated as the same, despite the different functions and relevance of links made in, for example, blogrolls or blog posts.

Significance of this research

This thesis, then, is builds on the second wave of research into political blogs, aiming to further the work presented by the likes of Kelly and Etling (2008) by showing not just the composite data, but also topical variations and patterns within the overall dataset. A new methodology has been developed, building on approaches used in previous studies, to identify and study topical networks within

the blogosphere. The significance of this method is that it allows research to look not just at long-term, cumulative data, but also at the short-term dynamics of the blogosphere during coverage of different events. Context is important. Individual blogs respond to different issues in a number of ways. Through the analysis of several topical networks, this research is able to identify approaches used by political blogs within different, specific moments of public debate. This approach has applications beyond the blogosphere, too. Similar methods may be used to study other social media platforms, either in isolation or alongside further research into blogging.

Studying discussions around specific issues, supported by network and content analysis, provides important contextual information about the work of political bloggers and their place within the mediasphere. These methods also enable the study to test the applicability of different media theories, first developed for a mass communication situation, to a new, more diverse mediasphere. In the later chapters of this thesis, the discussion turns not only to re-evaluating earlier literature on the relationship between bloggers and journalists, but also revisits these theories, revising relevant concepts in response to the findings of this study. Finally, this thesis provides new findings and comparative analysis of blog data, adding to the previous studies of political blogging around the globe.

Throughout this thesis, I will return to the questions and aims raised in this introduction in examining the work of Australian and French political bloggers in the first eight months of 2009. In the next chapters, I establish the background information and theoretical framework shaping this research, looking at previous perceptions of the blogosphere and introducing the different types of political blog featured within the analysis. These chapters provide the foundations for this thesis by setting the scene for the specific blog activity tracked and examined in the case studies. In this introduction, I have outlined the research questions guiding this thesis. Within the following chapters, I describe the subjects of these questions, explaining *what* is being studied in this thesis.

Chapter 1: Blogging politics

Introduction

To study the contribution of political blogs to public debate, and how these sites make use of other media sources, we first need to decide *which* blogs we mean. The debate around bloggers' relationship with the mainstream media, and the place of blogging within the mediasphere, has been ongoing as blogs developed from individual journals to major sources of alternative opinions. When the relationship between blogs and the mainstream or traditional news media is discussed, the blogs referred to are usually either political or news blogs. Other genres of blog, such as personal diaries, also make use of news content sourced elsewhere on the internet, but attention is often focused on those bloggers who concentrate their analysis on media or political matters, or who contribute original reporting to the blogosphere. In this study, though, political blogs are not necessarily just those blogs that discuss only politics. Instead, the political blogosphere is conceptualised as a more transient space, featuring different contributors over time and in response to different events.

To explore this idea further, this chapter introduces different ways that blogs discuss politics. Under the umbrella concepts of news and political blogs, there is no one way of blogging about a given issue. A wide variety of approaches to voicing opinions can be found among political bloggers, presenting different themes and types of content. In this chapter, I outline three ways of categorising the political blogs featured in the current study. These distinctions are based around blogging practices, organisational models, and the themes featured by bloggers. These categories are not mutually exclusive, with bloggers employing different strategies in covering issues. Each schema for distinguishing between political blog types highlights important aspects of blogging activity. Together, they describe the full diversity of contributors to the political blogospheres appearing in this research. Before looking at the current state of the political blogosphere, though, it is important to see how political blogging has developed from a new, unknown medium, to a somewhat-accepted presence within political and media landscapes.

The history of the political blogosphere

Blogging was once a new medium with no discernible audience or impact, but as the number of blogs has grown, so bloggers have at times attracted criticism from journalists and affected media coverage of politics.³¹ In the following section, some of the major events in the development of political blogging are discussed, highlighting how the relationship between blogs, journalism, and politics has changed as blogs moved from a new medium to an established part of the media landscape. However, as will be seen, the influence of some blogs, commenting on and affecting media coverage without being written by journalists, has not always been well received, with the relationship between the mainstream media and political blogs remaining at times hostile.

Indymedia, citizen journalism, and the rise of political blogging

The potential of blogs to break news ahead of mainstream media, including news with serious political ramifications, was foreshadowed in 1998, when the political gossip and news aggregation site *The Drudge Report*³² published the allegations of an affair between U.S. President Bill Clinton and a White House intern. With the subsequent media storm leading to the impeachment, and acquittal, of the President, the scandal was a major political story, but its importance was not limited to the charges against the sitting President. The role of *The Drudge Report* in breaking the story was seen as the ‘first occasion on which a web-based news outlet set the agenda for the media as a whole’ (McNair, 2006, 119).

A key precursor to citizen journalism was established the next year, when the Independent Media Center set up the first *Indymedia*³³ site to report on anti-World Trade Organisation (WTO) protests in Seattle in November 1999. Volunteers contributed reports on the protests and the subsequent ‘Battle of Seattle’ between protesters and riot police, providing alternative and first-hand coverage of events on the ground. Following the anti-WTO protests, *Indymedia* sites were launched

³¹ Here, and in the following discussion, blogs and bloggers refer to *political* blogs and political bloggers unless otherwise noted.

³² <http://drudgereport.com/>

³³ <http://www.indymedia.org>

around the globe. With the source code for the original *Indymedia* site being made publicly available, localised versions could be created with the same format and ability for volunteers to post to the site. The spread of these sites across continents, providing a space for original reporting and commentary, led to *Indymedia* being hailed as 'a rich alternative to the homogenized information provided by the mainstream' (Reed, 2005, 275-276). Following the example of the events in Seattle, further potential for *Indymedia* sites was seen through the ability to rewrite the coverage of protests and demonstrations (Meikle, 2002, 98-100).

However, despite the example set by sites such as *The Drudge Report* and the ability for anyone to contribute to *Indymedia* sites, political expression was not the first use of the new blogging format which emerged at the same time, with personal diaries forming the majority of early blogs. Even when commentary was not on political topics, though, crises and political events saw blogs used as an additional medium for sourcing and exchanging information. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C. were followed by blogs featuring reports from people directly affected by the attacks, while more explicit political commentary could be seen in the questioning of the reasons for the attacks and discussion of retaliation (Gillmor, 2006, 20-22). Bloggers involved in these latter discussions later contributed to the formation of networks of 'war blogs' following the Bush administration's response of sending troops to Afghanistan and, in 2003, Iraq (Wall, 2006). These networks also reflect a trend developing within the political blogosphere. As political blogging became more widespread, bloggers started to self-organise into thematic groups around shared interests and ideologies. The formation of these groups, both as informal assemblages of blogs and as declared collectives, will be discussed further as part of the typologies of political blog featured later in this chapter.

Lott, Dean, and Rather: the blogosphere's greatest hits (volume one)

The U.S. political blogosphere witnessed several key events during the rise of blogging between 2002 and 2004. By 2002, the U.S. political blogosphere had seen the emergence of several sites from both sides of politics that would become some

of the most widely-read blogs, including *Instapundit*,³⁴ *Daily Kos*,³⁵ *Talking Points Memo*,³⁶ and *Little Green Footballs*.³⁷ Later that year, blogs became key contributors to the U.S. news cycle, as comments by Senate majority leader Trent Lott were found to have more permanence than Lott might have intended. Speaking at the 100th birthday celebrations for retiring Senator Strom Thurmond, Lott remarked on Thurmond's 1948 presidential campaign on a segregationist platform, claiming that the United States would not have had the same problems if Thurmond had won (Gillmor, 2006, 44). This public support for segregation went largely unremarked, though, with Lott's speech overall only briefly appearing in the mainstream media.

When the blogosphere picked up on both the comments and the lack of response from the mainstream media, liberal and conservative bloggers alike posted about Lott's remarks. This groundswell of commentary from the blogosphere meant that the story did not go away, despite dropping off the news broadcasts and pages of the mainstream media. Instead, bloggers helped to spread new information about the story, with historical comments on segregation by Lott being located and posted in the blogosphere. Transforming the story from a celebration of Thurmond's career to Lott's apparent support for segregation, bloggers reframed the debate around the controversial remarks, backed up by previous statements by Lott. With these new angles to the story, the mainstream media picked it up again, with the growing attention leading to Lott resigning as Senate majority leader (Drezner & Farrell, 2008a).

This case, widely cited in political blog research, is one of the major, and first, examples of blogs influencing the media and political agendas. The mainstream media's stories on the new developments surrounding the comments may have led to Lott's resignation, but without bloggers' ongoing research into, and posts about, Lott's views on segregation, Lott's eventual resignation might not have happened. Bloggers had initially found the scandal within comments not investigated by journalists, keeping 'the story of Lott's remarks alive despite the major media's

³⁴ <http://pajamasmedia.com/instapundit/>

³⁵ <http://www.dailykos.com/>

³⁶ <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/>

³⁷ <http://littlegreenfootballs.com/>

early disinterest' (Gillmor, 2006, 44). Previously, blogs had discussed politics, without necessarily influencing policy or breaking news. With Lott's resignation, blogs were seen by some as a new force within the mediasphere, and the debate surrounding blogs and journalism escalated (Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun, & Jeong, 2007).

The rise of the blogosphere had other implications for political communication, beyond its relationship with the mainstream media. The growing importance of blogs, and other forms of online communication, to politics was underlined during the campaigns leading up to the 2004 U.S. Presidential election. Most notably, the strategy employed by Democrat candidate Howard Dean in 2003, prior to the primary votes, was the first campaign using the internet as a key fundraising source. The Dean campaign appealed to grassroots voters, encouraging small donations through the campaign's website and the creation of supporter blogs (Hindman, 2009).

Before the first Democratic Party primary vote, in Iowa in January 2004, the Dean campaign was confident of a good result, particularly given the continued financial support provided by online donations. However, Dean came third in the vote, behind both the eventual presidential candidate John Kerry, and John Edwards. When Dean attempted to reinvigorate his supporters with an enthusiastic concession speech, the results were not as he intended: rather than a stirring message of defiance, the speech came across as a loud, hoarse rant, culminating in a drawn-out cry of 'yeah' that became mocked as the 'Dean scream'. Footage of the speech featured heavily in news coverage following the Iowa vote. Coupled with other factors around Dean's electability, the campaign lost momentum and quickly fell away, with Dean withdrawing officially a month later (Hindman, 2009, 20). However, although the collapse of the Dean campaign led to some disparaging of online communication, platforms such as blogging and social media became increasingly widespread and unavoidable for campaign strategists, to the point that during the next U.S. Presidential election, four years later, 'the question was no longer *whether* to employ so-called new media (which aren't new to anyone in their 30s and under) but *how* to do so' (Perlmutter, 2008, 160).

In addition to the blogosphere's use for campaigning and fundraising, the 2004 Presidential election showed bloggers to be occasionally treated like journalists and recognised as political commentators, with several political bloggers given press passes to the 2004 Democratic Party convention. A slightly different view of bloggers by representatives of the mainstream media was also made public during the campaign, in response to a media controversy referred to variously as 'Rathergate' or 'Memogate'.

In September 2004, two months before the Presidential election itself, CBS current affairs programme *60 Minutes Wednesday* ran a story based on documents the network had received, critical of President George W. Bush's Air National Guard service. The documents dated from 1972 and 1973, and were shown in the story, which went to air during Bush's campaign for re-election. However, despite *60 Minutes* reporter Dan Rather assuring viewers that CBS had confirmed the documents were genuine, the U.S. political blogosphere was not convinced, expressing scepticism about the story's accuracy after the broadcast. Believing the documents to be forged, bloggers analysed the text and formatting of the memos, finding several possible inaccuracies which put doubt on the documents' authenticity. CBS reiterated its belief that the documents were legitimate, despite the blogosphere's analysis leading to other media questioning the story. CBS Executive Vice President Jonathon Klein went so far as to say that

You couldn't have a starker contrast between the multiple layers of check and balances [on *60 Minutes*] and a guy sitting in his living room in his pajamas writing (in Munger, 2008, 127).

Unfortunately for Klein and Rather, the doubts over the documents did not disappear, with experts used by CBS prior to airing the original story expressing their own concerns about whether the documents were authentic or not. A fortnight after *60 Minutes* featured the documents, CBS announced that the documents could not be proved to be genuine, and the original story should not have used them as sources (Munger, 2008).

From alternative to mainstream

'Rathergate', and especially the response by bloggers and Jonathon Klein, is seen by Munger (2008) as the 'incident that ended the beginning of political blogging' (126). If political blogs had previously still been establishing themselves within the mediasphere, 'Rathergate' is the moment when the watchdog role of bloggers in particular became inescapable (Hindman, 2009, 111). 'Rathergate' can also be seen as one of the last major 'us vs. them' disputes between the mainstream media and political bloggers in the U.S. Although blogs are not universally acknowledged or accepted as such, as will be examined later in this chapter, following 'Rathergate' in particular they became an established part of the media ecology, not just independently but through the adoption of the platform by journalists and editors.

As the buzz about blogs grew, mainstream media sites moved to not just run their own blogs, but also to hire already established bloggers. In Australia, the *Webdiary* blog³⁸ run by journalist Margo Kingston for *The Sydney Morning Herald*³⁹ launched in 2000 was an early, and for a time the sole, example of mainstream media blogging (Kingston, 2005). Within a few years, though, independent bloggers were being employed by the sites they had previously been criticising. In 2006, Tim Dunlop, of the left-leaning Australian political blog *Road to Surfdom*,⁴⁰ started writing *Blogocracy*⁴¹ for News Limited's *news.com.au* site, alongside that organisation's right-wing bloggers and columnists Tim Blair⁴² and Andrew Bolt.⁴³ In France, *Le Monde* set up its own blog hosting system on its website, enabling subscribers to set up their own blogs with a *.lemonde.fr* domain name.⁴⁴ These were hosted in addition to *Le Monde*'s own, official blogs, creating a network of reader-created blogs on the newspaper's website. Blogging functionality also started to creep into other sections of news websites, as part of news media adapting to 'Web 2.0' concepts. In particular, articles, not just blog posts or op-ed pieces, had comment options, with

³⁸ <http://webdiary.com.au/>

³⁹ <http://www.smh.com.au/>

⁴⁰ <http://roadtosurfdom.com/>

⁴¹ <http://blogs.news.com.au/news/blogocracy/>

⁴² <http://blogs.news.com.au/dailytelegraph/timblair/>

⁴³ <http://blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/andrewbolt/>

⁴⁴ Would-be bloggers first had to be subscribers to *lemonde.fr* and then agree to the terms and conditions set out by *Le Monde interactif* before being able to create their own blog. http://www.lemonde.fr/services-aux-internautes/article/2004/12/03/la-charte-des-blogs-et-les-regles-de-conduite-sur-lemonde-fr_389436_3388.html

readers able to respond to the article and potentially generate further debate (following moderation).

As increasingly popular media watchdogs and political commentators, some bloggers became additional sources for the online audience, the mainstream media, and politicians alike. Blogs might not have been breaking the news, but opinions and trends within the blogosphere became important signifiers for public concerns (Woodly, 2008). Mainstream media sources treat blogs as representing ‘a finger on the pulse of the people’, and blogs by journalists and amateurs act to lead readers to further media coverage of an issue (Papacharissi, 2010, 237-238). The medium’s campaigning potential too meant that blogs attracted coverage in national elections around the globe following the example of the 2004 U.S. Presidential election (for example, Albrecht, Lübcke, & Hartig-Perschke, 2007; Stanyer, 2006). While the work of non-U.S. political bloggers might not have had the same impact, either in political terms or in academic research, as the major U.S. examples featured in the previous section, a similar trend has occurred where bloggers move from new voices to somewhat accepted contributors to the mediasphere. At the same time, the functions and aims of blogs have changed. The novelty of blogging meant that it could give a candidate an advantage in a campaign or end careers. As politicians and the mainstream media adapted the medium for their own purposes, giving the format acceptance within the mediasphere even if individual voices were not viewed positively, bloggers diversified in their approaches to commentary and analysis. Bloggers are fulfilling other, various roles than they were in 2004, for example, and the work of political bloggers will be examined further later in this chapter.

The general trajectory for bloggers, moving from independent commentators to mainstream media employees, was not one-way. Professional journalists began to blog for their employees, and also set up their own, personal blogs. In some cases, journalists lost their jobs for blogging and criticising their parent organisations (Singer, 2006). A number of former journalists set up their own alternative media sites, creating online rivals to their former employees. In France, *Rue89*,⁴⁵ one of the major French media websites, was created in 2007 by four ex-journalists, formerly

⁴⁵ <http://rue89.com/>

employed by *Libération*. Australia's online media landscape was altered by the launch of *Crikey*⁴⁶ in 2000. Although providing mostly subscriber-content, initially through a newsletter and then also on its site, *Crikey* highlighted the presence of an audience for alternative reporting and commentary. Australian political bloggers numbered among the contributors to both *Crikey* and *New Matilda*,⁴⁷ an independent opinion site launched in 2004.

The rise of blogging had followed the development of independent, citizen journalism, led by the *Indymedia* group of sites, with the result that blogs, participatory journalism and alternative media sites gave non-professionals a wealth of options for contributing to public debate online. In response, mainstream media outlets eventually moved to create their own sites operating along similar lines. Several prominent Australian examples have been developed. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) launched *Unleashed*⁴⁸ in 2007, before incorporating it in late 2009 into new site *The Drum*, while News Limited's *The Punch*⁴⁹ and Fairfax's *National Times*⁵⁰ opinion sites also appeared in 2009. All three sites feature contributions from writers outside of the main editorial team, positioned as separate from their parent organisation's news content, with the formatting of *The Punch* in particular suggesting it could also be categorised as a group blog.

Some of the mainstream media blogs have amounted to little more than a rebranding of print opinion columns. Although these blogs give readers the opportunity to comment on the columns, these responses rarely garner replies from the original authors (Bruns & Wilson, 2010). However, this is not true of all mainstream media blogs, with Garden (2010) finding that several of these blogs attracted more responses from readers, and replies by the bloggers themselves, than alternative Australian political blogs such as *The Poll Bludger*⁵¹ or *The Catallaxy Files*.⁵² Some mainstream media blogs also become key sources for the Australian

⁴⁶ <http://crikey.com.au/>

⁴⁷ <http://newmatilda.com/>

⁴⁸ <http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/>

⁴⁹ <http://www.thepunch.com.au>

⁵⁰ <http://www.nationaltimes.com.au/>

⁵¹ <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/pollbludger>

⁵² <http://catallaxyfiles.com/>

political blogosphere. In particular, the blogs run by Malcolm Farr⁵³ (*The Daily Telegraph*⁵⁴), George Megalogenis⁵⁵ (*The Australian*), Andrew Bolt (*The Herald Sun*⁵⁶) and Antony Green⁵⁷ (the ABC) all attracting a significant number of citations from political bloggers in this study. Although these citations do not always reflect support for the original views published, these connections do show that the wider blogosphere is paying attention to, and at times combating, the opinion being put forward on mainstream media blogs.

Although blogs and similar platforms have been adopted by the mainstream media in addition to becoming a means for citizens to post their own commentary, perceptions of their work vary among journalists who blog. Rather than participating within the wider blogosphere, journalists blogging for their employer may limit their linking or external discussion to their peers: Jean Quatremer, the journalist behind *Libération*'s European politics blog *Coulisses de Bruxelles*,⁵⁸ for example, was found to link to media and institutional sites around European politics, as opposed to other French political blogs (de Maeyer, 2010). *Coulisses de Bruxelles* is a highly visible component of the French political blogosphere, being the highest-ranked political blog in the Wikio.fr rankings in September 2008.⁵⁹ However, de Maeyer's study suggests that despite his blog's position within the blogosphere, Quatremer 'does not really *take part*' in the political blogosphere's conversation, but is instead involved in a separate, if related, discussion among journalists and politicians. While bloggers and journalists may cover the same issues, their debates at times take place in different spheres. Bloggers respond to commentary from a wide range of sources, including fellow bloggers, journalists, and politicians. However, for some blogging journalists, the debate is located

⁵³ Malcolm Farr is a journalist covering Australian politics from the Federal Parliament Press Gallery in Canberra, writing for News Limited publications including the *Daily Telegraph*. His blog is found at <http://blogs.news.com.au/dailytelegraph>

⁵⁴ Sydney-based News Limited newspaper. <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/>

⁵⁵ George Megalogenis is a political journalist, writing for *The Australian*. His blog is found at <http://blogs.theaustralian.news.com.au/meganomics/>

⁵⁶ Melbourne-based News Limited newspaper. <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/>

⁵⁷ Antony Green is an election analyst for the ABC. His blog is found at <http://blogs.abc.net.au/antonygreen/>

⁵⁸ <http://bruxelles.blogs.liberation.fr/>

⁵⁹ Wikio is a news aggregator and search engine which releases monthly rankings of blogs, based on an algorithm taking into account the links made and received by each blog and the relative prominence of the other sites being linked. Rankings are provided for the blogosphere overall and for particular categories of blog, including political, sports, and technology blogs. The political blog rankings are found at <http://wikio.fr/blogs/top/politique>

within their professional sphere, involving other journalists in the discussion but not commentators from alternative media or independent blogs.

The varying scope of discussions involving political bloggers and journalists highlights a difference in how debate takes place within the blogosphere. Further distinctions can be made between individual bloggers, examining the themes they cover, the approaches they use in their posts, and their connections to other blogs and media sites. In the following section, I outline the different types of political blog found in this study. Examples from the Australian and French political blogospheres are introduced to further examine how blogging is carried out in these networks.

An overview of political blogging

Why blog?

The motivations for blogging vary from person to person, and will change over time. Ekdale, Namkoong, Fung, and Perlmutter (2010) asked leading U.S. political bloggers about their reasons for blogging. The study found that, for the most part, bloggers started their sites for intrinsic reasons, such as using the blog for cathartic purposes. However, the motivations changed as bloggers continued posting, with bloggers using their sites to share information and promote alternative views, with later rewards for this seen as influencing media coverage and public opinion through blogging (226-227). Political blogs are used to give voice to perspectives and ideologies that may differ to, or be absent from, those presented in mainstream political discussion and media coverage. Ekdale *et al.* note that their study only looks at leading bloggers, who have successfully found an audience for their posts, and the majority of blogs may experience different motivations. Papacharissi (2010) argues that, even for these leading blogs, bloggers will blog 'because they simply want to' (238). Intrinsic motivations, such as using blogs as another means of organising notes and thoughts or for improving writing practices, may well be the primary motivation for many bloggers, and not just for

those running political blogs. Initially, attracting an audience or directly impacting upon public opinion might not be the primary objectives of bloggers. Over time, though, these aims change, with extrinsic factors also contributing to why bloggers keep posting.

The change of motivations for blogging is reflected in the dominant activities within the political blogosphere. McKenna and Pole (2008) find the locating and sharing of information to be the main function of political bloggers, ahead of acting as media watchdogs. Informing the blogosphere may be as simple as linking to noteworthy articles, or be accompanied by lengthy commentary on a given issue. Even if a post features only a brief comment on an issue, though, this does not mean that the coverage of that topic is finished. Blogs can be seen as spaces for discussion, where a post acts to establish the initial topics for conversation among readers within its comments thread. Different blog types will provide different kinds of information, from link and filter blogs only posting links to specialist or topical blogs writing around their own subject of interest. These blog types are outlined in the following section, from individual blogs to blog networks and collectives. While the subjects of these blogs may have little, if anything in common, the practices employed by the bloggers are common across the blogosphere. Taken together, their commentary and practices also help to shape the movement of opinion and debate among political bloggers.

Political blogging practices

This thesis concerns the contribution of blogs to public debate, and the use of mainstream and other media sources in the discussion of political topics. With regards to how blogs cover news, Lovink (2008) has claimed that:

To blog a news report doesn't mean that the bloggers sits down and thoroughly analyses the discourse and circumstances, let alone checks the facts. To blog merely means to quickly point to news facts through a link and a few sentences that explain why the blogger found this or that factoid interesting or remarkable or is in disagreement with it. (7)

However, this only describes one response by bloggers to news events and media

coverage. Although some blogs will feature only a minimal amount of personal commentary in their posts, others provide in-depth analysis on, for example, how the typeface in a memo allegedly from the 1970s shows that the document was more likely created on a computer in 2004. Blood (2002) notes that by ‘highlighting articles that may easily be passed over by the typical Web [...] by searching out articles from lesser-known sources, and by providing additional facts, alternative views, and thoughtful commentary,’ bloggers will also reinterpret and distribute the news coverage of issues (9). In this study, the blogs included represent a range of blogging practices, ranging from the simplistic and brief coverage described by Lovink to Blood’s more active participants, including the aggregation of deeper analysis from a group of bloggers.

Link blogs

Link blogs, or filter blogs, and their associated posts are perhaps political blogging in its simplest form. Rather than providing original commentary or context for each issue, these blogs instead link to relevant articles found elsewhere in the mediasphere. These blogs often fall into the gap between news and political blogs, sourcing material from mainstream media sources on political issues, but without the op-ed accompaniment. Informing others within the blogosphere by sharing links of interest can lead to further commentary by bloggers following these references. While filter and link blogs might not explicitly feature the blogger’s own views on an issue to the same extent as other blogs, by providing lists of links of interest they have their own role to play in political debate online. Citing mainstream media content almost exclusively, for example, may demonstrate a blogger following, or responding to, the agenda set by these sources. Referencing patterns can also help to show the flow of information within the blogosphere, with link blogs ideally placed to highlight key sources in collecting citations of interest.

Link blogs may use a number of approaches to presenting links. While links may be published unembellished by bloggers, others may add several sentences summarising the article’s content or providing a short commentary. Some bloggers may choose to cite a number of articles in one post, without differentiating

between issues by publishing multiple posts. Other bloggers may be linking to articles with minimal accompaniment, but only post one or two links per post. The French political blogs *Le Mammouth Manchois Enervé*⁶⁰ and *Les Cahiers*⁶¹ are examples of link blogs appearing in this study. Posts on the former blog contain long lists of links, occasionally accompanied by a comment from the blogger, while *Les Cahiers* often sees posts containing a solitary sentence and link to an external source. Link blog practices may also draw on automated services from social bookmarking sites such as delicious. In this case, blogs often post a mixture of commentary or opinion pieces and link posts. The Australian academic blogger Tama Leaver,⁶² for example, publishes an automated series of 'Digital Media links of interest', featuring articles saved to social bookmarking site *del.icio.us*,⁶³ among longer posts on specific subjects on his eponymous blog.⁶⁴

Commentators

While link blogging is not an uncommon practice, the majority of individual political bloggers in Australia and France would publish, more often than not, political commentary within their posts. Again, within the 'commentary' category, bloggers may make use of a variety of approaches, some of which would overlap with other practices outlined here. Generally, though, blog posts of this type are akin to op-ed pieces within the mainstream media, mixing analysis with personal opinion and anecdotes. Bloggers respond to political issues, events, or actors, making use of other media sources, government sites, and other relevant references (or none at all) in making their position known. The commentators referred to here are the bloggers themselves, therefore, not the contributors to the comment threads following blog posts. This study looks only at the views published by bloggers in their posts, examining their commentary on specific

⁶⁰ Referred to in this thesis as *Le Mammouth...* : <http://lemammouth.over-blog.com/>

⁶¹ <http://lescahiers.over-blog.com/>

⁶² <http://tamaleaver.net/>

⁶³ <http://www.delicious.com/> (and <http://del.icio.us>)

⁶⁴ Link blogging practices can also be found in spam blogs, sometimes referred to as 'splogs'. Content on spam blogs can appear as long lists of links within repetitive passages of text. Unlike political link blogs, though, which have various ideological, social, or informational reasons for providing these resources, spam blogs are created simply for the purpose of increasing the visibility of advertisements or generating more visitor traffic, with links often directed at one single site (Li & Walejko, 2008).

issues. Most political bloggers may be seen as providing commentary in their posts. Commentators may cover most political discussions, as seen in the posts on Australian group blog *Larvatus Prodeo*, or focus on specific topics, such as the discussions of European politics by the French blog *Coulisses de Bruxelles*.

Commentary and link blog approaches may be combined for some political bloggers through the creation of sites around specific issues. For example, blogs established to support a particular campaign, or to attack another candidate, may post a mixture of opinion pieces about the issues at hand, and links to posts sharing their views and to activities organised by the bloggers. In 2006, blogs were used as a campaign tool by French students protesting against a proposed youth employment law, and later by other students opposing the tactics of the first group (Crouzillacq, 2006; Fansten, 2006; Hacquemand, 2006). The sites were set up purely as campaign blogs, and were used by both movements to provide information about demonstrations and university occupations around the country. Blogs also published commentary by campaigners and linked to mainstream media coverage of their actions and causes. While the blogs remained active only as long as the law was protested, other blogs have been established and used to support and attack candidates and campaigns, as will be seen later in this chapter.

Gatewatching and news blogs

As part of their commentary on political issues, bloggers may also act as media watchdogs. The nature of the connection between bloggers and journalists is highly contested, as we will see in Chapter Two. In their study of typical political blogging behaviour, McKenna and Pole (2008) found the media watchdog function to be the second most common activity among bloggers, following the provision of information. The watchdog role arises, for McKenna and Pole, because bloggers both rely on the mainstream media as a primary source and 'maintain a high level of distrust' of these sources (102). In such an environment, the critique and reinterpretation of mainstream media material becomes a key contribution of blogging to the mediasphere. Rather than publishing original analysis or

commentary, bloggers acting as watchdogs are instead publicising the work of others, albeit to point out errors or different angles to reports.

Bruns (2005) has introduced the concept of *gatewatching*, which sees bloggers monitoring 'the output gates of news publications and other sources in order to identify important material as it becomes available' (17). Where the mainstream media act as gatekeepers, choosing what to cover and to what extent, blogs become an extra observer for this, querying editorial decisions and journalistic reporting. The information shared and interpreted by political bloggers is not solely news content, but also political debates, government announcements, and analysis by research groups. Political blogs practice gatewatching by critiquing the media coverage, or non-coverage, of a given issue. Lovink (2008) describes bloggers as important components of the media landscape through demystifying the work of the journalists, highlighting and reducing the presence of spin in news coverage (197). A number of the key events in the history of political blogs have involved a mix of gatewatching and original analysis and reporting. In Chapter Seven of this thesis, critiquing the work of the mainstream media through gatewatching can be seen as part of the Australian political blogosphere's coverage of the Utegate affair. Blogs may also act as watchdogs for other blogs, or for politicians. The Australian blog *Pure Poison*⁶⁵ primarily covers media issues in its posts, including ongoing tracking of the activity of right-wing commentator Andrew Bolt. In France, as will be discussed later, a collective of blogs was formed through opposition to the newly-elected President Nicolas Sarkozy, with bloggers acting as Sarkozy watchdogs.

Not all blogs practicing gatewatching are political blogs. This approach is also used by news blogs, 'covering the news through blogging – whether by doing original reporting or by providing commentary on the news as it is reported in other news sources' (Bruns, 2006, 11). Although these different types of blog share topics and links, news blogs would not be expected to have the same degree of partisanship or campaigning as political blogging. Similarly, gatewatching does not imply a political aspect to the reporting being discussed, meaning that neither all news blogs, nor all gatewatcher blogs, are political blogs. However, by collecting,

⁶⁵ <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/purepoison/>

analysing, and commenting on the media coverage of political issues, news and political blogs both contribute to discussions within the blogosphere, with their involvement in a given debate varying, depending on the topical context.

Original reporting, original analysis

Where news blogs and political blogs diverge is in the amount of first-hand reporting being carried out. The media watchdog function of news blogs in particular is seen by Bruns (2006) as being complemented by original reporting by the blogger. In this case, blogs would be carrying out citizen or participatory journalism, posting their own reports, photographs, and video taken at events deemed newsworthy. Bloggers make use of citizen journalism sites for information as well as mainstream and alternative media sites. Some French bloggers featured in this study maintain profiles on citizen journalism sites such as *Betapolitique*⁶⁶ and *Le Post*⁶⁷ in addition to running their own blogs. The intersection between these different formats can be seen at events such as protests, when political bloggers attend, record footage, and post promotional material and reports about the demonstration. During crises, too, blogs have played their part in providing information for those caught up in crises and those looking on from a distance, trying to locate loved ones or fathom what was taking place. However, events where bloggers provide original, first-hand reports of news events are not widespread in Australia and France, particularly when compared to nations under dictatorial regimes or at war.⁶⁸

Despite the lack of first-hand coverage of breaking news in the Australian and French political blogospheres, practices such as gatewatching provide a foundation for political bloggers to post their own commentary and analysis of issues. Indeed, original *analysis* is more common than original reporting in the political

⁶⁶ <http://betapolitique.fr/>

⁶⁷ <http://www.lepost.fr/>

⁶⁸ See bloggers such as Salam Pax, whose *Dear Raed* blog (http://dear_raed.blogspot.com/) was adopted by Western readers to understand what was taking place in Baghdad during the U.S.-led military incursion. The *Global Voices* project (<http://globalvoicesonline.org/>) acts in a similar way, giving a platform for people to post news and opinion from countries marred by unrest, war, or communications censorship. By bridging cultural and national barriers, these blogs can provide first-hand reporting or opinion to an international audience (intentionally or not).

blogosphere. This does not just refer to interpretation of issues, debates, or speeches, but also to studies of political datasets. The presence of a group of Australian blogs dedicated to psephology, the analysis of statistics pertaining to opinion polls, surveys, and electoral votes, showcases the individual research of these bloggers. As will be seen later, while these interpretations have not gone unchallenged by the mainstream media, these blogs provide a specialist function within the blogosphere, and an enthusiastic audience has developed around them. The number of responses to individual posts by *The Poll Bludger*, for example, often reaches three figures, showing a demand for lengthy, in-depth analysis of trends within political data.

As is the case with the terms news/political blog, blogging and citizen journalism are terms that are sometimes used interchangeably, but refer to different online phenomena with some overlapping approaches. Not all blogs do work that would be described as citizen journalism, nor indeed do all news blogs provide first-hand reporting. Where citizen journalists post original coverage of events, the writing of bloggers is more often akin to opinion pieces than reporting, bloggers acting as pundits rather than investigative journalists. The production of these opinion pieces leads to bloggers posting their views on other sites than just their own personal blogs. In the previous sections I have outlined a typology of political blogging practices. The following discussion turns to a different way of categorising political blogs along organisational lines. To start with, though, I introduce sites that are not technically blogs themselves, but may feature contributions from political bloggers.

Collected discussions: organisation within the blogosphere

Alternative media and opinion sites

Although alternative media and opinion sites are not blogs themselves, they do make use of some common functions on organisational and presentation levels,

including allowing comments on posts. These sites are popular resources for the blogosphere, and may feature original analysis by political bloggers among their posts. Unlike citizen journalism sites, which typically feature original reporting, alternative media and opinion sites promote original commentary, with individual bloggers and other contributors often posting infrequent or one-off pieces instead of regular articles. Such sites include the Australian *Crikey* and the French *Mediapart*⁶⁹ and *OWNI*.⁷⁰ Not all of these sites will regularly publish citizen contributions. The French site *Rue89*, for example, provides alternative reporting and commentary from a team of contributors which includes former journalists.

In Australia, the dominant alternative media site *Crikey* includes pieces written by political bloggers within its daily newsletter and on its website, in addition to the blogs hosted on the site. Australian political bloggers may also contribute to opinion sites such as *The Drum* or *The Punch*, which are hosted by different mainstream media organisations, and share some blogging functions through the presentation of content and comment options. Although these sites are positioned as spaces for public debate, they would not necessarily be classified as providing entirely alternative or citizen commentary. Instead, they provide centralised locations for different participants within public debate, including journalists, politicians, and citizens, to discuss issues either through contributing posts or responding in comments threads.

Group blogs

Alternative media and opinion sites, as well as citizen journalism projects, feature posts from a wide population of contributors. Group blogs, on the other hand, are built around a smaller set of bloggers who regularly post to the site. There are a number of group blogs present within both the Australian and French political blogospheres, providing commentary from a wider range of perspectives and

⁶⁹ <http://www.mediapart.fr/>

⁷⁰ <http://owni.fr/>

backgrounds. Indeed, some of the more prominent blogs in the Australian political blogosphere are group blogs, such as *Larvatus Prodeo* and *Club Troppo*.⁷¹

The creation of group blogs can be seen as part of the historical trajectory of blogging. Bloggers started posting individually, but as they continued to blog may have found other bloggers with similar interests and started collaborating. A number of topical group blogs have been formed by already-established bloggers to cover a specific theme. These sites showcase the different perspectives and specialities of the individual bloggers around the discussion of a particular topic or event. Running alongside the bloggers' own sites, some topical group blogs may only run for as long as the event in question, but others may develop beyond the initial topic covered. In France, for example, in November 2004 a group of prominent French bloggers, including those behind the blogs *Versac*⁷² and law blog *Journal d'un avocat*,⁷³ launched the European Union (EU) politics blog *Publius*⁷⁴ to discuss the upcoming referendum on the EU constitution. Although activity levels among its contributors waned over time, the blog continued after French voters said 'no' to the constitution in 2005, covering EU politics until October 2009. In Australia, the alternative media site *Crikey* hosted *Pineapple Party Time*,⁷⁵ a blog covering the Queensland state election in March 2009, which featured contributions from the authors of *Pollytics*⁷⁶ and *The Poll Bludger*, and from the founder of *Larvatus Prodeo*. While the Queensland-specific coverage ended with the result of the election, the domain was later resurrected for other election discussions on *Crikey*.

Blog collectives

While not group blogs as such, a number of self-organised blog collectives and networks can also be seen within the political blogosphere. Members of these collectives retain their own blogs, with their sites linked to the main page of the

⁷¹ <http://clubtroppo.com.au/>

⁷² Formerly at <http://vanb.typepad.com/versac/>

⁷³ <http://maitre-eolas.fr/>

⁷⁴ <http://publiusleuropeen.typepad.com/>

⁷⁵ <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/electioncentral/>

⁷⁶ <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/pollytics>

collective itself. In France, several thematic and ideological blog networks can be identified, including the anti-Sarkozy *les vigilants*⁷⁷ to the *Réseau LHC*,⁷⁸ which promotes 'Free Expression, Humanism, and Critical Thinking' (*Liberté d'expression, Humanisme et Esprit Critique*). Posts from member blogs may also be aggregated on the collective's main site, either by republishing the entire post or by showing the latest post titles for each member.

Collectives may include a wide variety of approaches to political commentary. *Les vigilants* was started as Nicolas Sarkozy became the President-elect in May 2007, with the collective not organised around opposition to a party so much as opposition to Sarkozy himself. While some of the more prominent contributors to the collective, and to the French political blogosphere itself, post on practically every move made by Sarkozy, the work of *les vigilants* is carried out by over twenty blogs using different approaches to vigilance. Blogs within the collective are categorised as analysts, militants, topical, activists, and informers, with each site within the collective, as in the blogosphere overall, finding its own niche (Vanbremeersch, 2009).

In Australia, a more corporate approach to a blog collective can be seen through the *Crikey* network of blogs. Rather than being linked by a particular theme or event, the *Crikey* blogs are primarily connected through being hosted on the *Crikey* site. The blogs feature not just the political discussion of *Pollytics* or *The Poll Bludger*, but also the media commentary of *Pure Poison* and *The Content Makers*, environmental debate with *Rooted*,⁷⁹ and aviation discussion through *Plane Talking*,⁸⁰ amongst others. Many of these bloggers previously ran their sites elsewhere before joining the *Crikey* network. While the *Crikey* blogs retain their independence from each other, with each blog's posts appearing on its own dedicated section of the site, the move from individual blog sites to collectives and networks follows the historical development of blogs, with bloggers becoming centrally located alongside their peers. The advantages of blog collectives over group blogs include the ability for each blogger to maintain their own individual

⁷⁷ <http://blogsvigilantsarkozy.blogspot.com/>

⁷⁸ <http://reseau-lhc.blogspot.com/>

⁷⁹ <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/rooted/>

⁸⁰ <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/planetalking/>

site and publish on the topics they would like to, while remaining part of a known association of bloggers. However, some members of the collective may be more visible than others, and indeed have a larger audience than the collective's own site. In this case, membership of a collective may give a blogger affiliation with others, but not necessarily a wider readership. Group blogs, on the other hand, may be more limited in the topical scope featured in their posts, but by centralising their content they may have a clearer identity, and potential impact, than the more distributed approach of the collectives. Membership of a collective does not mean that the views published on one blog are endorsed or shared by another. However, the posts featured on a group blog would be expected to reflect the general views promoted by the site overall, as all published material falls under that blog's name.

Although groups such as *les vigilants* may present aggregated material from its members, collectives consist of several individual blogs who continue to post independently under their own masthead, rather than explicitly for the group's own site. Individual blogs remain the standard, most common blog type within the political blogosphere, appearing within many of the different categories presented in this chapter. The organisational aspects of individual blogs vary from site-to-site, as do the topics covered by bloggers. The subjects discussed by political bloggers lead to a final categorisation between blog types, looking at featured themes in posts and the discussion of 'politics'.

Blogging themes

For many bloggers, covering *all* political topics is simply not possible, given the time available for preparing posts. Instead, political bloggers may cover only a particular political subject, or feature political themes only occasionally within their writing on other topics. The most popular and widely-read sites within the political blogosphere may be the work of 'political junkies', citizens for whom political issues are a major topic of interest (Coleman, 2003). However, in this study I approach the political blogosphere as also featuring contributions from bloggers

more intermittently concerned with politics alongside the central, prominent sites of the ‘political junkies’.

The occasional politics

For the majority of bloggers, politics may be one of a series of themes that features on and off in the posts in their blog archive. These bloggers can be seen as transient members of the political blogosphere, infrequently covering politics rather than it being the primary subject of their posts. Personal bloggers, for example, may discuss topics such as elections or budget announcements among their ongoing life commentary. Even when covering politics, these blogs might not be posting about the political implications of an event or decision, but instead providing humorous asides through cartoons, videos, or irreverent comments. Instead of covering politics explicitly, these sites feature content that bloggers have found interesting or amusing, and which will reflect a number of topics. At times, some of this material will be ‘political’, in that it covers issues or political actors, while other posts will be unrelated to these topics. The Australian blog *The Pen*⁸¹ is an example of a blog featuring, among its many posts, some political material, further discussion of which appears in Chapter Five. Other blogs may cover different subjects, such as technology or news, with the discussion of major themes within these areas at times intersecting with political topics. Regardless of the approach used, though, a sudden development or crisis can lead any blog to suddenly become a major information source. As Shirky (2008) notes, ‘there is no obvious point where a blog... stops functioning like a diary for friends and starts functioning like a media outlet’ (88-89).

Specialist subjects

Many bloggers will focus their discussion around a specific topic. This enables them to comment on most political topics, often within the context of a subject in which they have some research background, personal interest, or which just

⁸¹ <http://mushroomandrooster.net/>

provides the motivation to blog. Topical political blogs also form subsections of the political blogosphere, such as war blogs discussing the U.S.-led 'War on Terror' and incursions in Afghanistan and Iraq (Tremayne, Zheng, J. K. Lee, & Jeong, 2006; Wall, 2005; Wall, 2006). In Australia, a prominent group of sites within the political blogosphere discusses psephology, the study of voting patterns and polling data. Other topics featured by bloggers over the period covered by this study include media issues, environmental concerns, economics, and legal and judicial affairs.

Topic-specific blogs, as this thesis will show, are important contributors to political debates and issue publics. In both the French and Australian political blogospheres, blogs without the high profile of a site like *Larvatus Prodeo* will temporarily become key contributors and sources within topical network as their specialist subject, be it technology, the environment, or international politics, becomes relevant to the discussion at hand. These blogs may be political blogs, but operating in a more limited frame of reference – environmental politics, for example – or they may be blogs discussing a subject that occasionally has political dimensions. In both cases, during relevant topical discussions these blogs become prominent contributors to the debates, as seen in Chapters Five to Seven.

The presence of subject-specific blogs within the political blogosphere has key implications for the study of the networks formed between these sites, both overall and around the discussion of specific topics. As noted previously, some blogs have a higher profile than others, having attracted attention from other sites and developed a large readership. These sites are the leading blogs, covering most political subjects and often being run by 'political junkies'. In the discussion of politics in general, these blogs would be expected to contribute heavily to debates. However, within debates around a specific subject, a site with a related topic as their focus may become a key reference for other blogs, briefly becoming a high profile site within this particular discussion. This idea is explored further over the following chapters, first theoretically in Chapter Two and then within the case studies of Chapters Five to Seven, examining the roles played by specialist blogs to topical discussions.

Politics in general and the 'A-list'

While specialist blogs cover political debates through their own topics of interest blogs, some blogs discuss a wider range of issues. These are often the leading or 'A-list' blogs, the most 'popular publicised blogs' (Papacharissi, 2010, 237) with the highest profile and largest readership within the blogosphere. In some cases the attention given to these blogs has led to financial backing or incorporation into mainstream media sites, providing the time and resources to continue covering *all* political issues. The subjects covered by A-list blogs would include the wealth of topics from the economy and health to religion and the environment, via party politics and international affairs. What helps these sites to provide commentary on a range of issues is often either a combination of resources and funding – where blogging has become a full-time job – or a situation enabled by running a group blog. By featuring contributions from a number of writers with different backgrounds and interests, entries can be published discussing a wider variety of issues than an individual blogger. The place of *Larvatus Prodeo* or *Club Troppo* as A-list political commentary sites in Australia, for example, may be attributed to their coverage of many political topics, which in turn may be enabled by the sites featuring contributions from more than one blogger.

While many blogs featured in the political blogosphere may only cover politics occasionally, the A-list political bloggers themselves do not only discuss political topics. The Australian group blog *Larvatus Prodeo*, for example, makes a point of fostering non-political conversation in its 'Lazy Sunday' posts, introduced by saying 'Since we don't live by politix alone (I sincerely hope)' and featuring accounts of weekend activities by readers in its comments thread. Even among the 'opinion leaders' of the political blogosphere, politics is not a constant theme within *all* blog posts.

The high profile of A-list bloggers can also be attributed to how long their sites, including previous blogs, have been active within the blogosphere. Many of these sites had their origins early in the development of political blogging, and have established both an audience and media awareness over time. By commenting on politics in general, too, these sites can attract a wider audience, even when run by individuals rather than groups.

Partisans and politicians

Categorisations around the *political* content of political blogs also distinguish between analytical and partisan blogs. While some political bloggers take a more discursive approach to their commentary, other blogs promote a specific political viewpoint. Ideology is not always as explicit as campaigning for a candidate or featuring party banners throughout a blog's design. Blogs posting from different political perspectives can be found throughout the blogosphere, often with clear distinctions between ideological groups identifiable through their linking behaviours (see Adamic & Glance, 2005; RTGI, 2007). The tone employed in these blogs' discussion of issues can range from considered analysis to explicitly provocative statements, insulting politicians, their supporters, or other bloggers. The more extreme or inciting the views posted, the more polarised the blogosphere may seem. Sunstein (2008) has warned that, instead of promoting diversity of voices, the blogosphere is a system prone to 'cyberbalkanisation' where bloggers and internet users seek out and link to like-minded others. The resulting formation of clusters of blogs around shared ideologies can bring about more extreme views and make groups even more homogenous. However, it should be noted that not all political blogs are concerned with attacking or separating themselves from bloggers from the other side of politics. Furthermore, despite their opposing views, bloggers pay attention to what others are posting, and will link to posts promoting wildly different opinions to their own, if only to show how incorrect the others may be.

Criticism is not restricted to people or groups holding opposing political views, either: although a blog may appear ideologically aligned with a particular party, the decisions made by that party do not go unquestioned. The practice of gatewatching shows political and news blogs attempting to hold the mainstream media accountable for their coverage, and partisan political blogs will similarly critique their own party's announcements or policies where the bloggers see them as questionable. Some ideologically motivated blogs go so far as to focus solely on their political opponents in their blog coverage. Criticising the government becomes a feature of blog posts when a blogger's party is not in power, but in some cases bloggers go beyond this, moving from critics to watchdogs. Every move by a

politician is tracked, every appearance in other media sources noted, in a display of constant vigilance against an individual. This thesis features blog posts from a prominent example of this approach, the French blog collective *les vigilants* organised around opposition to the French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Other ideological blogs may be promoting specific political actors. Supporter blogs for politicians and parties alike form a substantial part of the political blogosphere. The posts published by these blogs frame their discussion around the politician or party of interest, promoting their particular agenda above other topics. Especially during election campaigns, the coverage of speeches and public events by a candidate becomes the dominant subject.

Partisan political blogs may also be created around campaigns, promoting protests and the organisation of support or opposition movements. These approaches to blogging can be seen throughout election campaigns, with candidate support networks encouraged in both the U.S. and French political blogospheres, for example (Vaccari, 2008a; 2008b). Blog campaigns are not restricted to elections, though, with opposition to proposed laws or political events leading to protest movements organised through channels such as blogs. In France in particular, this form of political blogging has seen numerous uses, from student movements opposing a youth employment law (and further opposition groups against the tactics of these opposition movements) (Crouzillacq, 2006), to the campaign against a proposed 'three strikes' internet rights and piracy law, or HADOPI, throughout 2009 (covered in Chapter Six).

Some politicians themselves run blogs, in addition to supporters providing them with informal publicity. In France, politicians at the national and local level of government maintain blogs, with several prominent national figures blogging at various points over the last decade, including former Prime Ministers Lionel Jospin⁸² and Jean-Pierre Raffarin,⁸³ current Minister Alain Juppé,⁸⁴ and former President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing⁸⁵ (Greffet, 2007). Australian politicians have been less active within the political blogosphere, the main exception being former

⁸² <http://www.lioneljospin.parti-socialiste.fr/> (now defunct)

⁸³ <http://www.carnetjpr.com/>

⁸⁴ <http://www.al1jup.com/>

⁸⁵ <http://vge-europe.eu/>

Australian Democrats senator Andrew Bartlett. Bartlett blogged while a sitting parliamentarian and continued to do so after his term ended in 2008, with both his personal site⁸⁶ and his *Crikey* blog⁸⁷ featured in this study. Current examples of Australian politicians who blog include Andrew Leigh,⁸⁸ an economist who started blogging prior to entering Federal parliament, and conservative Senator Cory Bernardi.⁸⁹ Finally, former Opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull includes both a personal blog⁹⁰ and a blog about his dogs⁹¹ on his official website.

Official politician blogs may use a similar approach to those run by the party faithful, using the blog as a channel for highlighting the parliamentary work, the speeches, contributions to debates, and events in their electorate. The blog becomes a campaign tool, not just during elections but in pushing for debate or legislation around an issue. A number of blogging politicians may use their blogs for more than just self-promotion, analysing and critiquing issues, although for sitting politicians commenting on parliamentary business may not be an encouraged career strategy. Turnbull's blog, for example, features transcripts and audio of speeches alongside commentary on government policies.

While blogs may be part of politicians' communication strategies, their actual use does not always take full advantage of the conversational aspects of blogging. The style of post used, highlighting the individual within the parliamentary process and advertising their work and events, already treats blogs like a reformatted newsletter. This one-way communication may be strengthened further by restricting comments on the blog. Such a move may mean that the blog avoids being swamped by spam or deliberately inflammatory contributions from the politician's ideological opponents, but it can also limit any possible community consultation or discussion through the blog. However, even when comments are allowed, leaving a response to a post on an official individual or departmental blog does not always lead to a reply from politicians or their staff, if the comment is passed by the blog moderators. Regardless of how politicians use blogs, though,

⁸⁶ <http://andrewbartlett.com/>

⁸⁷ <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/bartlett> (now defunct)

⁸⁸ <http://www.andrewleigh.com/blog/>

⁸⁹ <http://www.corybernardi.com/>

⁹⁰ <http://www.malcolmturnbull.com.au/blogs/malcolms-blogs/>

⁹¹ <http://www.malcolmturnbull.com.au/blogs/dog-blogs/>

they still number among the participants in the French, and to a lesser extent the Australian, political blogosphere. As with blogs run by citizens, politician blogs may take one of a number of different approaches to covering political themes or promoting the work of the politician and their party (Lehti, 2011). Divisions along ideological lines may also be apparent between politicians of different parties, as part of any wider partisan split within the blogosphere.

The political blogging practices discussed in this chapter establish three different categorisations between blogs along methods, organisation, and themes. Individual blogs may feature in multiple categories, exhibiting different approaches to posting over time and context. The aim of these typologies is not to restrict political blogs to a left-wing/right-wing dichotomy, for example, but to highlight the range of ways bloggers might discuss politics. In particular, the political blogosphere does not consist of the leading blogs alone, responding to every political issue. Instead, contributions also come from occasional commentators and bloggers focussing on a particular subset of political themes. In the following chapters, I investigate how these different approaches are connected within the blogosphere. Analysing the roles played by blogs within topical discussions, I look beyond the A-list blogs to study the wider debate facilitated by the political blogosphere.

Conclusion

The growth of the political blogosphere has led to the development of different ways of blogging about politics, as the second half of this chapter has shown. Although political blogs may be categorised in different ways, based on their featured subjects or affiliations, the discussions taking place in the blogosphere involve several types of site, interlinking and responding to other comments on an issue. Debate is not limited to the blogosphere, though, with mainstream and alternative media outlets prominent resources for political bloggers. Original analysis on the part of political bloggers may make use of information published in the mainstream media, while commentators may also publish their interpretation of political events on opinion sites. Despite the rise of political blogging, and the

use of blogging functions by other media sites, the blogosphere's presence within the mediasphere has not been accompanied by universal acceptance on the part of the mainstream media, even among journalists who themselves blog. Events such as 'Rathergate' have shown the capacity for blogs to impact upon politics and media coverage, but this does not mean that *all* blogs are shaping public debate, nor that any effect is considered positive.

In the following chapter, I present different perspectives on the work of bloggers and their relationship with the mainstream media. These views show how the contributions made by blogs are perceived variously as inaccurate, unoriginal, complementary, and providing an important democratic function. Elements of these perspectives are visible within previous disputes between the mainstream media and the blogosphere, and I use an episode from the Australian political blogosphere in 2010 to demonstrate continuing arguments about the blogger-journalist dynamic. The discussion then turns to wider ideas about the impact of blogs upon political communication, as I establish the theoretical framework for this thesis.

Chapter 2: Blogging publics

Introduction

In the typology of political blogs introduced in the previous chapter, I noted the overlap between different genres of blogging, including political and news blogs, in sometimes using similar approaches or covering the same topics. Not all political blogs are news blogs, and vice versa. However, as part of the wider conversation fostered by the blogosphere, these sites form part of an extended mediasphere growing beyond the work of the mainstream media alone. While individual bloggers might not be looking to be part of the debate around the ‘future of journalism’, the following chapter shows that the rise of the blogosphere as a whole has led to different interpretations of the aims and work of bloggers by journalists and theorists alike.

The development and general accessibility of online news sites, blogging, and social media have contributed to fears for journalism as a profession. These are not the only factors provoking these fears, though, but instead fit into a longer debate around the decline of traditional journalism (individual aspects of this debate are outlined and developed in, for example, Michaud, 2010; Stites, 2008; Harrington, 2008; and a special issue of *Journalism* in 2009⁹²). Commentators worry that investigative journalism is becoming increasingly rare and that the mainstream media are undergoing tabloidization. Rather than covering political or societal concerns, the news media are focussed on celebrity gossip and banalities. Furthermore, the 24 hour news cycle, it is argued, means that media organisations are always under pressure to publish the next big story, before anyone else. In-depth stories taking time to produce are overlooked in favour of focussing on trivial events on a daily basis as these pieces may attract a larger audience. Media publications also have ongoing financial concerns, with newspapers in particular experiencing increasing losses, and content ends up being sourced from press agencies or lightly reworked press releases.

⁹² *Journalism*, 10(3).

At the same time, alternative, online-only news and opinion sites such as *Crikey* and *Rue89*, citizen journalism projects, and blogs have blurred the boundaries between media producers and consumers. The mass audience is able not only to choose its own news content but to contribute to coverage and debate. The growing stature of the leading political blogs within the mediasphere highlights an audience for the perspectives of amateurs and non-journalists. Leading blogs attract readerships rivalling in size those of journalistic titles, and such developments have also been interpreted as positioning bloggers as potential competitors to the mainstream media (Ward & Cahill, 2007). Most Australian and French political bloggers may remain amateur commentators, not looking to overthrow the mainstream media but to provide a further voice contributing to public debate. However, perceptions of the blogosphere have ranged from treating blogs as parasitical on the work of journalists, to acting as a watchdog for the mainstream media. These varying views on the blogger-journalist relationship are outlined in the next sections. Responses to the work of bloggers are also used to establish the theoretical framework for this thesis later in this chapter. Here, I discuss the position of political blogs within public debate and their implications for established communication theories.

Theorising the blogger-journalist relationship

The range of reactions by bloggers and journalists to each other's work has led to further theorising on the place of blogging within the mediasphere and its relationship with mainstream media. Contrasting the work of bloggers with the work of journalists has generated very different responses, with bloggers seen as both carrying out a complementary function to journalists (Singer, 2006) and as spreading rumour and unreliable coverage without any accountability (Keen, 2007). This latter view sees the blogosphere as contributing nothing original to public debate, instead either spreading misinformed gossip or purely using the work of professionals in their posts without any additional reporting on the part of the blogger. On the other hand, the more positive perspectives on blogging describe the watchdog role of bloggers as a key contribution to the mediasphere.

By monitoring, challenging, or promoting the work of the mainstream media, for example, the relationship between bloggers and journalists becomes complementary. As more journalists become bloggers themselves, both for their employees and independently, interactions between representatives of the blogosphere and the mainstream media become more commonplace. Furthermore, with bloggers becoming established voices online, journalists and editors are aware of what is receiving attention in the blogosphere, highlighting a symbiosis between blogs and other media sources. In this thesis, I argue that the work of political blogs is akin to the second-tier media described by Gans (1980), rather than the parasitical relationship suggested by Habermas (2006). Although blogs may appear reliant on mainstream media sources through their linking patterns, the case studies of this thesis show bloggers not as passive, rebroadcasting the messages of journalists without question, but as actively reinterpreting political events and their media coverage, drawing on a variety of mainstream and alternative media sources in doing so.

Bloggers as amateurs

One of the most vocal critics of blogging, and Web 2.0 in general, is Andrew Keen, whose 2007 book decries the 'cult of the amateur'. Bloggers, in general, are not professional journalists. They are not trained in investigative reporting, interviewing, editing, or fact-checking, nor do they have a code of ethics. Furthermore, bloggers only need to be able to publish their posts to publicly comment on an issue, with no prerequisites of political studies or evidence of prior learning necessary (Kamm, 2007). While events such as Rathergate and the Trent Lott resignation saw blogs highlight matters of interest and inaccuracies missed by the mainstream media, there have similarly been occasions when bloggers have published material later proven to be erroneous (Hindman, 2009). One of Keen's (2007) criticisms of the blogging amateur, therefore, is that blogs spread rumour and unreliable reporting, publishing stories that have not necessarily been verified first. When the material is accurate, more often than not it has been sourced from professional outlets. Even the high profile 'A-list' bloggers, those sites attracting the highest links, readers, comments, and attention from other sources, are seen to

do this by Keen, who claims that ‘much of the real news [they] contain has been lifted from (or aggregated from) the very news organizations they aim to replace’ (52). Keen’s claim that the blogosphere sees itself as usurping the mainstream media is not borne out by the views of bloggers themselves, however, some of whom instead see describe the blogosphere as a ‘media accountability’ system (Tomaszeski, Proffitt, & McClung, 2009). However, the criticism of blogs for relying on other sources does raise questions about the originality of what blogs might contribute to public debate. In this study, these queries are evaluated through both the linking patterns of political blogs and their discussion of particular topics, investigating the context for any links to mainstream or alternative media sources.

While publishing inaccurate information is not limited to the blogosphere, a key difference between journalists and bloggers is the respective accountability for their work. Bloggers may receive journalist credentials at times, but the implications of their work are, for the most part, vastly different to that of the mainstream media. Keen (2007) points out that, in the U.S., ‘bloggers are very rarely sued or prosecuted because the government and corporations don’t seem to really care what they write’ (50), whereas journalists may end up in jail as a result of what they publish. At the same time, though, those bloggers who do get prosecuted do not receive journalistic privilege, protecting their sources and confidentiality (Shirky, 2008, 70-74). As can be seen, the accountability of journalists compared to that of bloggers, and the approaches to reporting, continues to fuel debate about the role of bloggers.

Of course, these comments are largely based on the experiences of bloggers and journalists within the U.S. context: bloggers under other political and media regimes, such as in Iran, have been imprisoned for their work (Zuckerman, 2008). Bloggers in France and Australia might not face the same penalties, but it would be incorrect to state that all bloggers are not held accountable for what they write, or that blogging is just another form of ‘vanity press’ for privileged amateurs.

The presentation of truth and accuracy within the blogosphere is rightly queried by Keen (2007). The anonymity of bloggers can mean that any relevant background information, especially conflicts of interest between their work and their blogging, is not revealed to the audience of their posts (77). Dutton (2009) describes the

development of trust in the work of the blogosphere as a process of learning. While the mainstream media have a position of trust built up over years of reporting, and users treating the internet as a source of information for the first time may be sceptical, Dutton sees the internet as an 'experience technology'. As internet use increases and users become more familiar with sites, so they are more able to distinguish between what may be trustworthy or not, and check claims made online, making internet-based sites key information resources, and rendering the internet as a 'space of flows' (6-7).

The accuracy of blog reporting, and the personal opinions in their reporting, have also led Munger (2008), adopting a term from news-satire program *The Colbert Report*,⁹³ to warn against blogs spreading 'truthiness', reflecting those ideas that audiences would like to be true, as opposed to the actual truth (125-126). Among political blogs in particular, the promotion of a particular ideological belief may shape the presentation of opinions and comment. However, the opinions posted by an individual blogger are just one of the many contributions to the blogosphere, which features contributions from journalists and politicians alongside those of citizens, as noted in Chapter One. One blog's posts might reflect 'truthiness' rather than 'the truth', but the overall tenor of the blogosphere is based on the collected views of many bloggers, not just one site. This aggregate truth is based on information and knowledge being shared between bloggers (Singer, 2006, 25; Kelly, 2008). In this thesis, I investigate the interpretation of issues, and the beliefs being published, through a series of case studies, drawing together the views of different bloggers to gauge what are the overall opinions being presented within political debates.

Aspects of the aggregate truth within the blogosphere are found through approaches such as querying the stories broadcast by the mainstream media, as seen with Rathergate. While bloggers may see themselves as keeping the mainstream media honest, for media outlets blogging represents a rival medium (Lowrey, 2006, 492). The process of responding to mainstream media coverage, though, has also led to other critical interpretations of the work of bloggers, including the descriptions of blogging as 'parasitical'.

⁹³ <http://www.colbertnation.com/>

Bloggers as parasites

More than just responding to the work of the mainstream media, blogs are often seen as overly reliant on articles published by these sources. Such dependence has led to some criticism of blogging. Discussing revisions to his public sphere model to take into account the diversification of the mediasphere and online communication, Habermas (2006) believes the contribution of blogs to public debate to be mostly negative. Blogs are 'parasitical', feeding off the work of the mass media and breaking the online audience into 'a huge number of isolated issue publics' rather than a more focussed mass audience (423). It is only outside of the Western context, where blogs can be used to undermine 'the censorship of authoritarian regimes that try to control and repress public opinion' (423) that Habermas sees a worthy function of online communication.

Kamm (2007) is also critical of the contribution of blogs to public debate, using similar language to Habermas in claiming that '...blogs typically do not add to the available stock of commentary: they are purely parasitic on the stories and opinions that traditional media provide.' Kamm's argument is similar to Keen's (2007) criticism that the content of blog posts is mostly taken from the mainstream media, and Kamm believes that bloggers' commentary, shaped by their reliance on the work of journalists, serves to limit, rather than diversify, public debate online. Further studies have found that bloggers depend on the mainstream media for information on chosen topics, and that the subjects featured in blog posts mirror those covered by journalists (Haas, 2005; Lowrey, 2006; Kenix, 2009). Linking patterns have also shown that blogs, including A-list bloggers, 'relied heavily on professional news sites and stories by journalists associated with professional media organizations' as sources and relevant commentary (Reese *et al.*, 2007, 257). However, bloggers being akin to parasites on the work of the mainstream media is not the only interpretation of this behaviour and the blogging-journalism relationship.

Bloggers as gatewatchers

While the linking patterns and content of blogs may show the sites to be reliant on the mainstream media for their posts, this does not necessarily mean that bloggers are not engaging with the material cited – not questioning, analysing, commenting on, or rejecting the ideas presented. In the previous chapter, the political blog types featured in this thesis included those practicing gatewatching, described by Bruns (2005) as monitoring the work of the mainstream media. This practice is one way in which blogs respond to, and reinterpret, articles prepared by journalists and others. Rather than simply reposting articles from mainstream media sources – although certainly that is the approach used by some bloggers – gatewatching implies an analytical and corrective role. Both the Trent Lott resignation and Rathergate highlight gatewatching processes, the former by bloggers following up a story not featured by the mainstream media, the latter by bloggers questioning the veracity of documents used by *60 Minutes*. In this way, blogs can keep stories alive. Moeller (2008) describes this as an ‘invaluable service’ as bloggers ensure that a given issue does not ‘get entirely forgotten after the news cycle in which it appeared’ (175). Similarly, Singer (2006) notes that stories not investigated by journalists may be covered by blogs and, if these stories keep getting featured in the blogosphere, may subsequently eventually return to the media agenda (28). This also works in reverse: there may be an attempt to avoid commenting on a story that, while attracting mainstream media coverage, is seen by bloggers as a distraction from other, more important topics. In Chapter Seven, the Australian political blogosphere’s response to the ‘Utgate’ scandal can be seen to be an example of this blogging activity.

Reasons for gatewatching may vary. Discussing Rathergate, Munger (2008) states that bloggers collectively posted on, and followed up, the apparent errors in the documents used in the story ‘partly out of (nearly universal) innate contrarian impulses and partly out of (widespread, though perhaps not majority) partisan antipathy’ (128). Gatewatching processes also lead Singer (2006) to describe the relationship between news bloggers and journalists as ‘both symbiotic and complementary’ (23). While bloggers are often found to be reliant on journalists for their information, the blogosphere acts both as a corrective force – for Lovink

(2008), a 'feedback channel' for, rather than alternative to, the mainstream media (7) – and as a possible means for reporting and commentary to reach a wider audience (Reese *et al.*, 2007).

Indeed, the flow of links through the blogosphere via blogs acting as watchdogs can be seen as similar to the two-step flow, and the 'opinion leader' role, introduced by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1964). Tremayne *et al.* (2006) have noted that 'the spread of information from the media to the public and vice versa is increasingly affected by bloggers who, if not already serving as opinion leaders, at least provide a window into the process of opinion formation' (291). By highlighting aspects of news coverage, and indeed salient points in material posted by other sources, from government sites to alternative media, bloggers can potentially be seen as acting in this role. The concepts of opinion leaders and the two-step flow are explored further in the theoretical framework for this thesis, introduced later in this chapter.

Blogging as second-tier media

The media watchdog role played by bloggers may also reflect potential media developments discussed decades before the rise of the blogosphere. Writing in 1980, Herbert Gans's study of U.S. television and print news media concluded by outlining a possible tiered system of news media, arising to support and strengthen the work of the contemporary mainstream media. The first-tier media would comprise the existing national news media, the major, central sources of information. Below this, Gans envisaged a second tier of media whose work complemented these sources:

[The second-tier media] would devote themselves primarily to reanalyzing and reinterpreting news gathered by the central media - and the wire services - for their audiences, adding their own commentary and backing these up with as much original reporting, particularly to supply bottom-up, representative, and service news, as would be financially feasible. (1980, 318-319)

Gans saw this model as achieving 'the prime aim of the news: to present and represent more perspectives in the symbolic arena' (319). To some extent, news

and political blogs, as well as citizen journalism and alternative media sites, can be seen as fitting within this second tier. Bruns (2006) builds on Gans's model to describe these sites as 'acting as a corrective and a companion to the traditional news media' (18), placing news bloggers and citizen journalists alike within the second tier. While the amount of original reporting carried out by bloggers in particular may be minimal, the practice of gatewatching counters this, highlighting the reviewing of first-tier media articles by bloggers. Despite the criticisms of blogging by mainstream media representatives such as CBS's Jonathon Klein, and blogs' perceived reliance on the mainstream media for content, bloggers can also be seen to be providing an important service by monitoring and responding to the output of the first-tier media. Furthermore, the ease of accessibility for blogs, in terms of both reading and creating blog posts, theoretically could enable more perspectives to appear within the blogosphere than would otherwise feature in the mainstream media. There may be objections to this view, with potential access not equalling actual access, and this idea also presumes a degree of digital literacy, but the means are present through blogs and other online platforms for publishing alternative voices. However, as McNair (2010) points out, being able to post opinions and comments online does not mean that anyone will listen to these voices. Furthermore, publishing many posts does not necessarily translate to a blog being a prominent voice within the blogosphere. The extent to which a blogger's views reach a wider audience is dependent on the site's readership, which in this study is approximated through citation patterns between blogs.

Blogging as a Fifth Estate

In addition to gatewatching and blogs acting in a manner similar to Gans's second-tier media, the place and functions of blogging within the mediasphere have led to other descriptions of the blogging-journalism dynamic. Traditionally, the press, and subsequently the mainstream media in general, have been seen as the 'Fourth Estate' of democratic societies, and the relationship between blogging and the mainstream media has seen the blogosphere and other internet-based communications labelled as a 'Fifth Estate'. As Dutton (2009) outlines, the initial

three estates of the realm in 'pre-revolutionary France and England were... the clergy, nobility, and commons', with the press becoming the Fourth, and although the first three estates are often updated to reflect the legislative, executive, and judiciary systems in parliamentary democratic societies, the media have remained as the Fourth Estate (1-2). Where the press independently observed and commented on the actions of the other estates, particularly the parliamentary Third Estate, the Fifth Estate would reinforce the accountability and transparency of the Fourth Estate. Both Cooper (2006) and Wallsten (2007) have explicitly described bloggers as a 'fifth estate', brought about by their acting as media watchdogs. Singer (2006) does not go quite so far, instead describing the news blogosphere as 'Estate 4.5', an independent system acting as an extension of the Fourth Estate through its connections to the work of the mainstream media and politics (28).

Dutton (2009) evaluates the emergence of a Fifth Estate by looking at the internet in general as well as the blogosphere. Instead of being an extension to the Fourth Estate, Dutton argues that the internet is instead contributing to 'a new institution... with some characteristics similar to the Fourth Estate, but with sufficiently distinctive and important features to warrant its recognition as a new Fifth Estate' (2). Blogging is not the only form of online communication, nor is it the sole medium for political debate and opinion-sharing on the internet. However, in this study the political blogosphere provides the focus for evaluating not just blogging's use of other media sources, but also the roles bloggers play and the contribution they make to political debate.

'The Oz declares war on bloggers'⁹⁴ (twice)

The interpretations of the blogging-journalism relationship outlined here take very different stances on whether blogs are contributing anything new or worthy to public debate. These views have developed alongside the rise of the blogosphere, and can be seen in shaping several of the key events identified in the history of political blogging. However, tensions between the mainstream media

⁹⁴ The title of an article published in *The Australian* on 28 September 2010, featuring Jay Rosen's comments on the Grogsgate episode described in this section.

and the blogosphere have not been resolved. The debate around the contribution of blogging to the mediasphere, and in particular whether it qualifies as journalism, has led to several instances of mainstream media publications attacking the work of bloggers. In Australia, for example, the relationship between political blogs and the national newspaper *The Australian* has seen several noteworthy incidents that highlight the at times hostile interactions between journalists and bloggers. These episodes also illustrate the different perspectives on the relationship between blogs and the mainstream media featured in the previous section, confirming the continued presence of a contested territory between bloggers and journalists. In addition, they also provide contextual information on political and media debate in Australia.

The first case of *The Australian* antagonising the blogosphere concerned a group of specialist bloggers analysing polling data. The newspaper is owned by News Limited, who also own Newspoll, a research company whose opinion poll results appear in *The Australian*. These polls, along with figures released by other companies, including Roy Morgan and Galaxy, are also used by psephologist blogs in their analysis of voter behaviour and electoral data. In July 2007, prior to that year's federal election being called, an editorial ran in the newspaper decrying the alternative analysis of Newspoll polling figures by psephologist blogs such as *Mumble*.⁹⁵ *The Australian* is considered to favour conservative views, and at the time of this editorial, the conservative Liberal party led by John Howard was still in power. Parts of the blogosphere, on the other hand, were considered to be left-leaning, supporting the opposition Labor Party. Where *The Australian*'s analysis had found an increase in John Howard's rating as preferred Prime Minister, and subsequently concluded on the basis of the polling data that the Australian voting public was likely to support the Coalition in an election, the blogosphere offered a different interpretation. Given the ownership of both the newspaper and the polling data, *The Australian* was not appreciative of these other perspectives being published online, stating that the only accurate interpretation of Newspoll was by its writers. In the resulting dispute, both the mainstream media and the blogosphere accused the other of political bias, with *The Australian*'s editorial

⁹⁵ <http://mumble.com.au/>

naming and attacking an individual blogger as well as suggesting partisanship in the psephologists' analysis:

On almost every issue it is difficult not to conclude that most of the electronic offerings that feed off the work of *The Australian* to create their own content are a waste of time. They contribute only defamatory comments and politically coloured analysis. (The Australian, 2007)

Not all Australian bloggers would fit this description – *The Australian* website had several bloggers writing for it, while its parent company News Limited also ran blogs through its other news websites. Indeed, it had employed Tim Dunlop, author of the left-leaning blog *Road to Surfdom*, to blog on its News.com.au website. Despite some potential ideological clashes, given the apparent conservative leanings of News Limited publications (Tiffen, 2009), Dunlop wrote for the site under the banner of *Blogocracy*. When the editorial disparaging the psephologist bloggers went to press, Dunlop criticised this piece on his blog – only for the post to then be removed from the site by Dunlop's editors (Flew, 2008). This censorship of a blogger, the success of which was limited by the republishing of a cached version of the post on *Larvatus Prodeo*, further highlighted the uneasy relationship between News Limited and part of the political blogosphere, described by *The Australian* as a 'one-eyed anti-Howard cheer squad now masquerading as serious online political commentary.'

If anything, the place of these bloggers within Australian political coverage became stronger after the July 2007 editorial.⁹⁶ Three years later, *The Australian* ran another campaign against blogging, seemingly brought about after another media source acknowledged the importance of blog commentators in shaping their coverage of the 2010 Federal election.⁹⁷ On 30 July 2010, a blogger operating under the pseudonym Grog published a blog entry criticising the mainstream media's campaign coverage and the questioning of policy by journalists, to the point where the post requested that, if journalists were not going to ask about policy, the media should stop following the campaign:

⁹⁶ In addition, in 2010 Peter Brent of *Mumble* started blogging for *The Australian*: <http://blogs.theaustralian.news.com.au/mumble/>

⁹⁷ The Labor party won the 2007 election under the leadership of Kevin Rudd. In June 2010, Rudd was deposed as ALP leader, and Prime Minister, by Julia Gillard, with Gillard calling an election only a few weeks later.

Here's a note to all the news directors around the country: Do you want to save some money? Well then bring home your journalists following Tony Abbott and Julia Gillard, because they are not doing anything of any worth except having a round-the-country twitter and booze tour (Jericho, 2010a).⁹⁸

This post received attention from bloggers and journalists alike, with some subsequent debate taking place on Twitter.⁹⁹ The next week, James Massola, a journalist for *The Australian*, wrote a piece about the debate sparked by Grog's post (Massola, 2010a). Ignoring the actual content of the post, Massola noted how Australians online had participated in the discussion, writing that 'Such a public conversation about journalism was unimaginable five years ago. If for no other reason, the incident demonstrated why Twitter, and blogs, matter.'

So far, so complimentary – and a different view to that published three years earlier, when blogs and *Crikey* were criticised for 'passing endless comment on other people's work [instead of] breaking real stories and adding to society's pool of knowledge' (The Australian, 2007). However, the article also pointed out the difference in readership statistics between the likes of *Grog's Gamut* and the sites of the mainstream media, and how blogs could not compete with the likes of *The Australian* in breaking news. While these criticisms of blogs are not new, and Massola also notes blogging as a 'natural home for discussion, debate, and opinion', when coupled with previous interactions between *The Australian* and bloggers this also suggests that there remains some animosity between the mainstream media and the blogosphere. Meanwhile, in covering the responses to Grog's post rather than its content, the key points about election coverage might have just drifted unheeded into the archives of the blogosphere, with the mainstream media not altering their campaign coverage.

A month later, the game changed. In a speech at the Melbourne Writers' Festival, the ABC's Managing Director, Mark Scott, recognised the importance of comments on blogs and Twitter to the media's shaping of the election campaign:

The contributions of bloggers – the constant feedback and commentary of thousands through the #ausvotes stream on Twitter – were watched and

⁹⁸ The blog itself is *Grog's Gamut*, found at <http://grogsgamut.blogspot.com/>

⁹⁹ <http://twitter.com/>

considered by every mainstream media editor. And we could see – the impact made by some bloggers was every bit as great as that made by other mainstream professional journalists. (Scott, 2010)

The post on *Grog's Gamut* was singled out by Scott, who noted that as a result of this criticism, the ABC rethought its approach to covering the election. While one media outlet was praising the work of bloggers, though, the speech also appears to have been the catalyst for *The Australian's* subsequent actions. Later that month, Massola published a series of articles in *The Australian* revealing Grog's identity. The first article, published on 27 September and entitled 'Controversial political blogger unmasked as a federal public servant' (Massola, 2010b), named Grog as Greg Jericho, and also mentioned his place of employment. In response to this unmasking, Jericho and other Australian political bloggers questioned why, or if, the author of *Grog's Gamut* needed to be named publicly. Massola claimed that the Scott speech meant that Grog needed to be named, in response to which Jericho wrote:

So because the head of the ABC took notice of something I wrote anonymously about journalism, I need to be named. I guess the lesson here is if you want to blog anonymously, don't do it effectively. (Jericho, 2010b)

As Massola's first article was published, a brief piece by *The Australian's* media editor Geoff Elliott (2010a) was also posted, explaining the decision to identify the person behind *Grog's Gamut*. Opening with the question 'If you are a public servant and blogging and tweeting, sometimes airing a partisan political line, do you deserve anonymity? No.', the editorial claimed that the public has a right to know the identity of anyone 'influencing the public debate'.

Despite the initial positivity towards blogging in Massola's August article, the headlines used by *The Australian* throughout the furore highlight how the 'Grogsgate' debate escalated and the general view towards amateurs seemingly encroaching on journalistic territory: 'Hobby writers keep pros on their toes' (Massola, 2010a), 'Blogosphere and Twitter no more than an echo chamber' (Kerr, 2010), 'Salvos lobbed in the great blog war of '10' (*The Australian*, 2010b), and 'As the anonymous walls of Jericho fall, the great blog war of '10 begins' (Jackson,

2010).¹⁰⁰ For their part, the headlines of articles opposing *The Australian's* decision to name Jericho were similarly inflammatory: 'One rule for them, one for us...' (Dunlop, 2010a), 'Bullet by bullet, the bloggers win the war' (Green, 2010), 'How the media poison the well of public debate' (Dunlop, 2010b), and 'The Australian. Think. Again' (Posetti, 2010).¹⁰¹ If 'old' media were going to attack 'new' media, then the latter were going to fight back.

The Grogsgate debate highlights the continued lack of consensus regarding blogging amongst the mainstream media. Bloggers may now be established commentators within the mediasphere, but if their work has more impact than that of professional journalists, or if their blogging constitutes a potential conflict of interest with their employer, retaliatory reporting will follow. The response of *The Australian* is somewhat puzzling, at least within the overall context of blogging's acceptance by the mainstream media as a platform they can also use. *The Australian's* parent company, after all, runs several blogs on each of its various news sites as well as the opinion site *The Punch*, while the website of *The Australian* itself hosts a number of blogs. Furthermore, the author of the 28 September article 'Blogosphere and Twitter no more than an echo chamber', Christian Kerr, had written for the alternative media site *Crikey* prior to joining *The Australian*. Even more than the attack on psephological blogs in 2007, Grogsgate suggests that *The Australian* in particular may have accepted that bloggers will continue to write what they want – but the mainstream media do not have to like it.

Of course, not all mainstream media publications reacted in quite the same way as *The Australian*. As Scott noted in his speech, editors and journalists around the country followed the discussion on blogs and Twitter, and even if election coverage did not change after the *Grog's Gamut* post, the points it raised did spark some internal debate within news organisations in addition to the more public discussion described by Massola. Similar to the ABC, the Fairfax journalists

¹⁰⁰ While the authors of the articles in *The Australian* and in other outlets opposing its actions may not have had any input in the writing of headlines for their pieces, the chosen phrases still serve to highlight how the Grogsgate coverage developed, on both sides of the argument, and the particular stances and metaphorical extremes employed.

¹⁰¹ A month later, the author of this final piece, Julie Posetti, would find herself in the midst of a controversy involving *The Australian* after quoting, on Twitter, defamatory comments by a former journalist, developing into a media debate focused on the #twitdef hashtag (Elliott, 2010b; Holmes, 2010).

reporting for *The Age*¹⁰² and *The Sydney Morning Herald* on the election trail discussed their coverage of policy, with a defence of their approach featuring in *The Age* a week after Scott's comments were publicised (T. Wright, 2010). While Wright commented that the 'super-heated discussion [following the *Grog's Gamut* post]... reveals a disconnection about how modern political campaigns and those who take part in them actually work', the article did not go so far as to actively attack bloggers or publish their identity.

If the place of blogs within the mediasphere is still contested by mainstream media outlets, several years after blogging stopped being the newcomer to public debate, the blogosphere's reaction to the Jericho revelation also shows that bloggers do not have the same expectations of responsibility as journalists – whether unethical or not, the actions of *The Australian* were treated by bloggers and commentators on sites such as *The Drum* as outrageous. Perhaps there is still confusion over what different parties are actually contributing to the mediasphere: bloggers may be posting the equivalent of op-ed pieces, but the mainstream media still (in part) see them as competitors to journalists. For Australian bloggers, too, there is an 'us vs. them' aspect to their coverage of media issues, most obviously highlighted in the title of a post by Tim Dunlop, 'One rule for them, one for us...' (Dunlop, 2010a).¹⁰³ In Australia, the dynamic between bloggers and journalists still features some degree of animosity and opposition.

This contention between journalism and blogging has not been resolved, nor is it restricted to Australia. Despite the blogs run by current and ex-journalists independent to their employers, and the bloggers hired by mainstream media publications, articles criticising any treatment of blogs as journalism keep appearing. In March 2011, four *New York Times*¹⁰⁴ journalists were captured in Libya, reporting from the country as it neared a civil war. One writer commented on this by contrasting the work of the journalists with that of writers for the technology

¹⁰² <http://www.theage.com.au/>

¹⁰³ Dunlop was once again blogging independently at this point, after his News Limited-hosted blog *Blogocracy* was closed down in September 2008.

¹⁰⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/>

and digital culture blog *BoingBoing*,¹⁰⁵ who had at the time been criticising the *New York Times*'s new paywall, restricting access to its content to paying subscribers:

Given all the turmoil around the world, it's an incredibly harrowing time to be [a] journalist. Case in point: Four bloggers from BoingBoing, as you've probably already heard, were captured by pro-government forces while covering the Libyan uprising. BoingBoing, of course, has long been one of the most popular blogs in the world -- the Technorati Top 100 ranking puts it at No. 6, just below TMZ -- and the Libyan situation comes fast on the heels of BoingBoing journalists' heroic on-the-ground coverage of the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis in Japan, not to mention its bloggers' essential coverage from the war zones of Afghanistan, Iraq and beyond.

Oh, wait. Did I say BoingBoing? I'm sorry, I got confused. I meant to say The New York Times. It's actually the Times that deploys journalists around the world at mind-boggling expense -- journalists who literally put their lives on the line every day -- to report from the front lines. (Dumenco, 2011)

This quote highlights an ongoing perception that blogging is not highly regarded by other groups represented within the mediasphere. The criticisms of *BoingBoing* writers for daring to criticise the mainstream media without risking their lives to cover the news is reminiscent of the 'just a guy in pajamas' view of bloggers mentioned in Chapter One. Furthermore, the comparison of *BoingBoing* and *The New York Times* is not necessarily apt. The former was not trying to cover the Libyan uprising, but instead commenting on a media-related topic, the planned paywall, which fell within some of the blog's featured subjects, technology and digital culture. Bloggers are not always trying to do the work of journalists. It is worth remembering too that, although the leading blogs in the U.S. are not at personal risk when writing their posts, there are examples of bloggers around the world who have put their lives on the line when blogging within war zones or dictatorial regimes (Zuckerman, 2008)

Even describing the U.S. media context, where political blogs such as *The Huffington Post*¹⁰⁶ and *The Daily Kos* have developed from small sites to major online sources of political opinion and commentary, the unfavourable comparison of the work of bloggers to that done by journalists confirms that there are still proponents of the competing perspectives outlined in the previous sections. The at times

¹⁰⁵ <http://boingboing.net/>

¹⁰⁶ <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/>

antagonistic relationship between *The Australian* and Australian political bloggers, as seen through Grogsgate, serves as an example of several of the interpretations of the blog-journalism dynamic. While the respective parties in the dispute may argue over the relative worth of political blogging, though, what the episode has also shown is that media organisations and blogs do follow, and will respond to, each other's work. This has clear implications for the formation of public opinion and debate around political topics, for the discussion is not restricted solely to the mainstream media or to the people actively contributing within the blogosphere. Readers of both resources also make use of views aired online, and may contribute themselves within comments threads or on social media. Bloggers also provide their own commentary and analysis, some of which will go unread by all and sundry, but other posts may attract a wide response from readers, other bloggers, and journalists.

Interactions with the mainstream media are a significant aspect of political blogging, with bloggers obtaining information from, critiquing and correcting, and occasionally influencing the work of journalists. However, this dynamic is not the only concern of political blogs, nor are the mainstream media the only sources for bloggers. In the following section, I step back from the explicit relationship between bloggers and journalists to consider how political blogging fits into established understandings of political communication. First, I examine how the blogosphere may serve ideals of the Habermasian public sphere and the development of public opinion. The following discussion then sets up the theoretical framework for this thesis, which moves beyond the public sphere and modifications of the Habermasian model to evaluate the applicability of three further, established communication theories to the work of political bloggers: framing, agenda-setting, and opinion leadership. After providing an overview of previous research into the blogosphere using each of these theories, I outline how this framework informs the analysis of data gathered from the Australian and French political blogospheres, forming the second half of this thesis.

The blogosphere and communication theory

The public sphere and the blogosphere

The relationship between bloggers and journalists has led to numerous interpretations of the place of blogs within the mediasphere, as discussed earlier in this chapter. The development of blogging has also had implications for theories of media and communication. Most obviously, with its links to mainstream media content, public opinion, accessibility, and (relative) freedom of expression, the blogosphere, and the internet as a whole, have been identified and discussed as possible drivers for a reinvigoration of the public sphere (for example, Born, 2006; Thompson, 2003; Ó Baioll, 2004). Building upon the work of Habermas (1989) among other theorists, McKee (2005) defines the public sphere as the 'virtual space' where information and ideas are shared, where issues are examined and engaged with, debate is fostered, and public opinion is developed (4-5). Meanwhile, Dahlgren (2009) idealises the political public sphere 'as comprised of the institutional communicative spaces, universally accessible, that facilitate the formation of discussion and public opinion, via the unfettered flow of relevant information and ideas' (72). As the mass media became the dominant and most visible means for informing a large population, so their importance to the public sphere in spreading information, ideas, debate, and opinion strengthened. The idea of the public sphere subsequently became inexorably linked to the mainstream media, with public opinion and debate carried out within the media (McKee, 2005, 5-6). As Castells (2007) points out, 'politics is dependent on media politics', the mass media providing the arena 'where power is decided' (242). Hartley (2002) goes further, placing the public sphere entirely *within* the mediasphere:

The idea is that the public sphere is not separate from but enclosed within a wider sphere of cultural meaning, which is itself *mediated* as it is communicated back and forth from the cultural to the public domain. (142)

However, despite the importance of the mass media to this concept, the media landscapes within Western democratic nations have not necessarily been seen as ideal for the development of the public sphere. Habermas (2006) sees the contemporary, Western political public sphere as being dominated by media

lacking 'face-to-face interaction between present participants in a shared practice of collective decision making' (414). Public opinion is attained through debate and exchanging views. The one-way, one-to-many broadcast model of the mainstream media, though, did not treat all participants within the public sphere equally. Instead, the relative few informing the wider public attained greater standing, with little chance of 'reciprocity between the roles of speakers and addressees in an egalitarian exchange of claims and opinions' (415). Rather than all citizens contributing to the formation of public opinion, the mass media play a key role in both determining what is being discussed and shaping the interpretation of this subject.

Habermas (2006) lists further requirements for deliberative politics that are also missing to some extent from the current Western situation. The independence and self-regulation of media, for example, clearly differentiating them from government bodies and commercial interests, has been passed over as economic and political interests attempt to influence public opinion (420-1). Furthermore, while the public sphere flourishes when citizens contribute to debate around political issues, the mass media can also reduce the potential for all citizens to be heard, favouring certain elites instead. The nature of media coverage of news and politics may also impact upon citizens' involvement within the public sphere. Media trends such as personalisation of content and the personality-centred and entertainment-based coverage of stories, shaped by political spin, arguably increase political apathy and cynicism among citizens (422). To counter these trends, alternative means of publishing views and generating debate have been investigated as reshaping or revitalising the public sphere. The internet provides platforms for citizens to contribute their own views and responses to issues, without necessarily relying on the work of journalists to disseminate these opinions. Attention from other sites, including mainstream media sources, may help citizens' views to attract a wider audience, but this reflects the movement from a few-to-many mediasphere to a space featuring a greater diversity of voices and complex information flows between them. As Bruns (2007a) describes it, the 'decline of the mass-mediated public sphere as an accurate representation of public opinion' has been followed by its regeneration into a different model reflecting the 'many-to-many, user-led media of the networked age' (67).

The form of a revised public sphere has been the subject of much debate and several alternative models taking into account developments in political communication and technology. Gitlin (1998) suggests that the public sphere, previously encompassing the entire debate and development of public opinion, has 'shattered' into smaller, separate public sphericules, 'distinct communities of information and participation' (170), organised 'around affinity and interest' (173), an idea that may be applied to the ideological clusters found in the political blogosphere. Benkler (2006), adapting the model to online communication, describes a 'networked public sphere' where individuals can disseminate their views among each other without requiring input from, or being controlled by, the mainstream media. Blogging is one platform citizens may make use of in creating new information flows and forming opinions within and across connected groups of individuals. Bruns (2007a) notes that the mainstream media, citizen journalism, blogs, and other communication media, all create public sphericules within an overall, decentralised network, with the networked public sphere removing 'the boundaries limiting participant access to the public sphere' such that it can be 'experienced and enlivened by citizens themselves' (69).

These views, from public sphere to public sphericules, help to shape the conceptualisation of the public sphere in this thesis. For the purposes of this study, I treat the public sphere as a complex system incorporating both the traditional mediasphere of the mainstream media as well as the wider mediasphere introduced at the start of this thesis. Within this 'public sphere', though, we also find several additional public spheres, forming around different groups, of which the 'blogosphere' is one. These spheres can be further subdivided around interests, practices, or language, as seen in this thesis with the Australian and French political blogospheres. Again, these smaller spheres may be made of even more sub-spheres. What is more important than how many spheres may be found, though, is that these spheres overlap and interact. Within the blogosphere, there are many subgenres of blog, from politics and sport to music and technology, and these different spheres of interest are not completely separate from one another.

These spheres are lasting structures around sites and citizens, but the 'public sphere' also contains 'issue publics': more temporary assemblages that again

overlap and feature interactions from members of different spheres. Issue publics focus on particular topics or themes, bringing together different actors in their debate to help foster some degree of public opinion (Bruns, 2007a, 69). The shape of an issue public changes over time and context, as different contributors comment on different topics. Media sources are often critical to the formation of issue publics, as they provide information and opinions used by citizens within subsequent debates. However, Dahlgren (2009) argues that if the mass media provide a potential catalyst for such groups, issue publics ultimately develop ‘only through the processes of engagement with issues and discursive interactions among themselves, either via face-to-face settings or various mediated ones’ (74). Benkler (2006) also notes that debate within the blogosphere is helped by processes of peer review and filtering online, which can avoid problems of information overload and the controlled environment of the mainstream media (12).

Issue publics can also describe the ‘issue networks’ outlined by Marres (2006) and the ‘web spheres’ introduced by Schneider and Foot (2005). Both of these concepts describe the formation of groups of citizens involved in ongoing debate around an issue or event, and the resources that they make use of in their topical discussion. As Marres (2006) notes, though, the formation of a group discussing an issue does not mean that participants agree with each other. Indeed, they may also be involved within an issue public because they hold opposing views on the same issue (8). Public debate overall is carried out by a wide population of voices, and within this group individual debates take place involving a subset of these participants. Each specific issue public may involve different contributors, with varying levels of engagement with the topic at hand. Comparing issue publics then allows an examination of how different debates are carried out around a range of subjects, and how discussions form and decline over time.

The blogosphere, then, become a potentially ideal environment for the analysis of issue publics, with debates among bloggers as well as responses to other media sources being traceable through blog posts and links. Dahlgren (2009) also suggests that the study of issue publics complements the conceptualisation of the more permanent ‘public sphere’ (74). The growth and decline of issue publics, following

their topic of interest, can highlight dynamic communication patterns within the public sphere, and this idea forms the foundation for the methodology used to identify and analyse the case studies appearing later in this thesis.

However, computer-mediated communication has not always been seen as beneficial for the public sphere in its various forms. Habermas's (2006) discussion of a revised public sphere model relegates blogs and other online communication to an endnote, claiming that any democratic potential is only realised when undermining 'the censorship of authoritarian regimes that try to control and repress public opinion' (423). In other contexts, as has been discussed earlier in this chapter, Habermas sees sites such as blogs as 'parasitical', following the work of the mass media and fragmenting the online audience into 'a huge number of isolated issue publics' (423). This may be reflected in topical and ideological grouping among blogs. Thompson (2003), reading 'broadly' across the blogosphere, found 'not a public sphere but a lot of bubbles isolating writers by ideology'. Rather than overlapping spheres, ideology can be a dividing factor leading to distinct groups with opposing views, not interacting with each other. Such a fractured blogosphere is seen by Sunstein (2008) as evidence of cyberbalkanisation, where internet users seek out and respond to only opinions that correlate with their own. Whether these divisions are apparent among political bloggers is contested, though (see, for the U.S. example, Adamic & Glance, 2005). Furthermore, for Benkler (2006), the grouping behaviour of bloggers around 'communities of interest' is crucial to the structure and the success of the networked public sphere. Through interlinking and nesting of thematic or ideological groups of blogs, they help to distribute information through the wider network. Benkler's discussion also reflects this thesis's conceptualisation of the public sphere, and the importance of issue publics to the study. By suggesting ideas around information flows within the blogosphere and its relationship with the mainstream media, Benkler highlights additional ideas that are addressed in the theoretical framework used in this thesis.

Theoretical framework

Debates around the structure of the public sphere, describing the internet or blogosphere either within or as public spheres, can overshadow other patterns of communication between citizens. Dahlgren (2009) notes that:

The public sphere does not begin and end when media content reaches an audience; this is but one step in larger communication and cultural chains that include how the media output is received, discussed, made sense of, re-interpreted, circulated among, and utilized by publics, that is , citizens. (74)

In this thesis, this view leads to the theoretical framework used to study the Australian and French political blogospheres. The public sphere becomes a known concept for this research, a given that in itself does not answer the research questions guiding this study. Instead, the conceptualisation outlined here of overlapping public spheres and issue publics provides the setting for the theoretical framework, which moves *beyond* the ‘public sphere’ idea itself to more thoroughly study communication *within* it. In doing so, I focus on what Dahlgren refers to as ‘the interactional dimension’ of the public sphere (73). This dimension features two kinds of interaction, the sense-making taking place as citizens use the media, and discussion and debate between citizens. These interactions have clear links to the research questions introduced at the start of this thesis, around the role of blogs within public debate and bloggers’ use of media sources.

Focussing on the interactions within the political blogospheres, and between the blogospheres and the mainstream media, provides the opportunity for the work of political bloggers to be re-evaluated within the context of three well-established communication theories: framing, agenda-setting, and opinion leaders within information flows. These theories were originally developed in response to a different media situation to that featured in this thesis. As the media landscape developed to incorporate television, some of these theories became less applicable to contemporary communication, with revised and alternative models describing information flows, for example, proposed instead. However, the rise of the blogosphere, and its position as an alternative and complementary platform to, rather than being just an additional arm of, the mainstream media, allows these older theories to be reassessed for a new media situation.

In the following section, I provide a brief background to each of the three selected theories of media effects. These overviews establish the prevailing concepts for each theory, and identify key ideas that, while developed from observations within the wider media ecology, can be applied to discussions taking place in the blogosphere. Following this background section, I look at blog-specific applications of these concepts in previous research, examining further the main theoretical considerations for this thesis.

Background to the theories

Framing

Framing refers to the process by which journalists, and other commentators, report stories. A frame is used as a contextual setting, within which stories of similar types are presented. In framing a story in a particular way, journalists ‘choose images and words that have the power to influence how audiences interpret and evaluate issues and policies’ (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2008, 17). The way that news events are presented, the themes favoured in coverage, and the perspectives featured, all form part of the framing of the event, with an effect occurring ‘when a phrase, image, or statement suggests a particular meaning or interpretation of an issue’ (20).

Frames are used not just in the presentation of news, but in how an audience understands it (Scheufele, 1999), positioning news within a range of familiar situations to highlight what are seen as the important aspects of a story. The effectiveness of these devices is not just determined by the inclusion of specific ideas within a news story, but by the associations between concepts that have been developed over time and so do not need to be made explicit by journalists (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2008, 19). Several frames have been identified as common to news coverage. These include the conflict frame, portraying issues as conflict between individuals or groups, the economic consequences frame, describing an issue in terms of its economic cost for a particular audience, and the responsibility frame, which positions an issue such that its cause or solution is attributed to a specific group (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Finally, specific ways of framing an

issue, group, or individual can influence how politicians in particular are seen by citizens. Politicians and their parties attempt to construct frames for reporters by presenting a particular image and key messages. By aiming for repeated coverage of these devices, politicians attempt to a specific representation of themselves within the public consciousness, and of their opponents (Craig, 2008). Media coverage might strengthen these images, as seen with the repeated promotion of Republican Vice-Presidential nominee Sarah Palin as a ‘maverick hockey mom’ and ‘frontierswoman’ during the 2008 U.S. Presidential election (Entman, 2010, 402), but alternative frames may also be developed that achieve public resonance. For example, French President Nicolas Sarkozy became caricatured by commentators as ‘le téléprésident’ and ‘Sarkozy l’américain’ for his U.S.-influenced approach of cultivating a constant media profile (Campus, 2010).

Of particular interest to this study is how mainstream media, and other sources, report international news and political events. Gurevitch, Levy, and Roeh (1991) found television news reports to present international events within frames that ‘render these events comprehensible, appealing and “relevant” to domestic audiences’ (206). Events are often positioned within, or as variations on, domestic themes, making foreign affairs accessible to a local audience (Lee, Pan, Chan, & So, 2001). Such approaches include emphasising a domestic connection to an international event – Australian or French involvement, for example – or having the tone used in reporting on a particular nation dictated by current diplomatic status. In this way, Clausen (2004) argues that

news ‘domestication’ is a *universal* phenomenon and [...] global news is *particular* to each country. International news is presented within frames of interpretation of local audiences in each nation, which makes global news particular to each country. (27)

In this thesis, I examine the frames used by bloggers in discussing news events. I focus especially on the reframing potential of political blogging, either by explicitly rejecting the devices used by the mainstream media or by framing discussions around alternative constructs instead of the common examples of conflict or economic consequences. Applications of framing theory to the political blogosphere are featured later in this chapter.

Agenda-setting

There is some overlap between framing and agenda-setting, as both theories address direct media effects on how citizens interpret issues. However, where framing effects, and reframing attempts, may be seen on an individual level, agenda-setting concerns wider effects on the general public. Agenda-setting describes how issues treated by media sources as important, either by the amount of coverage or chosen themes, are subsequently accorded similar status by citizens. For example, the initial agenda-setting theory outlined by McCombs and Shaw (1972) compared how campaign issues chosen as warranting attention by the news media were also seen as key concerns by undecided voters (McCombs, 2005).

Two phases of agenda-setting theory have been identified. The first focused on the salience of issues, how topics presented by the news media remained in the public consciousness ahead of other, unmentioned topics (Meraz, 2011). This also returns to the gatekeeping function of the mainstream media, as a story must also be seen to be newsworthy to appear within an agenda. By covering particular subjects prominently or repeatedly, the mainstream media agenda can determine what topics are seen as important by citizens.

The second phase, attribute agenda-setting, affects which aspects of a story become prominent themes both within media coverage and the public's response to the story. Here, the public's interpretation of a story is shaped through news media coverage focussing on specific attributes of the issue (Shah, McLeod, Gotlieb, & N.-J. Lee, 2009). Attribute agenda-setting covers similar ground to framing theory, with the selected attributes providing a central theme for the coverage of a public issue (McCombs, 2005). Through these two approaches to agenda-setting, the mainstream media theoretically have 'the power to influence both what the public thinks about... and how the public thinks about it' (Meraz, 2011, 107).

The presence and effect of a media agenda, focusing attention on certain key issues, on public opinion has since been developed further, with several studies examining specifically at whether the media agenda shapes blogosphere coverage of issues (Thelwall, Byrne, & Goody, 2007; Wallsten, 2007). However, research has also investigated intermedia agenda-setting, by which means different groups and sources influence each other's agendas. With the rise of channels by which citizens

may disseminate their views and the development of issue publics promoting coverage of particular themes, there is scope for the mainstream media agenda to be influenced to feature subjects seen as important by the public. Dayan (2005) argues that ‘the notion of an “osmosis” between certain media and certain publics’ means that, rather than one influencing the other, agendas are instead ‘co-produced’ (72). In this study, I consider the applicability of agenda-setting within the political blogosphere through the references cited by bloggers and how they present their posts in their coverage of a particular issue. The analysis takes into account the two main approaches to agenda-setting theory, salience (through links to media, or other, sources) and attributes (through chosen themes). This research builds on previous studies of agenda-setting effects within, and originating from, the blogosphere, which are discussed later in this chapter.

Opinion leaders/two-step flow

Prior to the formulation of direct media effects theories such as framing and agenda-setting, sociologists proposed that the mainstream media’s reporting was filtered to the general public via certain citizens acting as opinion leaders. Opinion leaders were initially identified within an election context, examining how citizens obtained information and decided for whom to vote. However, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) also noted that ‘in every area and for every public issue there are certain people who are most concerned about the issue as well as most articulate about it’ (49). Opinion leaders occupied a prominent position as intermediaries in the two-step flow of information, which described how ‘ideas, often, seem to flow *from* radio and print *to* opinion leaders and *from* them to the less active sections of the population’ (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1964, 32; Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1948). In this process, information is first disseminated by the mainstream media, presented for a mass audience without necessarily targeting a particular individual or group. Opinion leaders then act as intermediaries, filtering, contextualising, and reinterpreting media messages for other citizens (Bennett & Manheim, 2006, 213). By reframing the information provided by the mainstream media, opinion leaders can shape and influence the messages sent to individual citizens, rather than the media doing this directly.

The two-step flow was formulated before television in particular became a popular source of information and entertainment, accessible to the majority of citizens. As news media became increasingly available to the wider public directly, though, new theories of media effects were developed that removed the opinion leaders from the equation. Instead of receiving information through the intermediary opinion leaders, new theories held that the mainstream media directly and immediately influenced their audience. The changed mediasphere, first in response to television and then with the increasing prevalence and accessibility of online news sources, has led to several alternative models of information flows being created alongside media effects theories such as framing and agenda-setting.

Bennett and Manheim's (2006) one-step flow, for example, responds to trends towards personalisation of media content, also noted by Habermas (2006) in his criticisms of the contemporary Western media situation. For Bennett and Manheim, the mainstream media do not present their work for a mass audience, but instead aim for particular groups of readers, positioning their content around these citizens' beliefs or interests. Tailoring content for a specific message and readership, journalists 'became practicing sociometricians, writing social and political cues into the demographically targeted narratives we call news' (218). Coupled with trends of personalised media content, the decline of mainstream media audiences, and the proliferation of niche media sites, Bennett and Manheim argue that the key interpersonal contributions of opinion leaders for the two-step flow are less applicable to the contemporary media situation. Instead, because information is already targeted towards individuals, opinion leaders are 'increasingly less likely to "lead" because they are more likely to reinforce latent opinions than to reframe them' (213).

Additional ideas about information flows have taken into account further debate around the applicability of direct effects models which imply a passive, rather than active, media audience. The proliferation of online resources may actually strengthen the position of opinion leaders as active consumers and interpreters of news media, and may indeed lead to an increase in the number of people acting as opinion leaders. Shah and Scheufele (2006) note that 'use of the Internet can provide personally pertinent details about issues and ideas encountered in other

contexts, permitting opinion leaders to gather information that enhances their potential influence' (5). With the wealth of sources available online, opinion leaders may be those citizens who draw on the widest range of perspectives presented in the contemporary mediasphere, filtering and repositioning arguments from blogs and alternative media sites as well as the mainstream media. In this setting, the flow of information is less likely to be a solely one- or two-step flow, but a more complex exchange of variable length. The resources available online mean that media content may reach individuals directly or via any number of sites who reinterpret the original material, and such a development has implications not just for opinion leadership but also framing and agenda-setting.

Theoretical applications to the blogosphere

The three theories of framing, agenda-setting, and opinion flows allow the thesis to answer the research questions outlined in the introduction. Together, they are used to examine how bloggers cover political topics, determining their contribution to public debate, and how other sources are used in these discussions. Previous research has applied different aspects of these theories to political blogging, and to blogging in general. In the following sections I review these studies and their findings to establish key ideas for my analysis of political blogging in Australia and France. By building on the findings of other researchers in applying these theories and associated concepts to blogging I outline the framework for the thesis overall. Within the individual case studies of Chapters Five to Seven, I also re-evaluate these theories and their relevance within a new media environment, using my findings to revise the models for the contemporary mediasphere in Chapter Eight.

Framing

The close relationship, be it parasitical or complementary, between political bloggers and journalists covered earlier in this chapter means that the blogosphere is a suitable subject for revisiting media effects theories. The continued interactions between blogs and mainstream media sites provide a useful basis for

identifying shared or diverging frames and agendas. Previous studies have instead found varying interpretations of framing within the political blogosphere. Xenos (2008) argues that, because blogs do not have the same requirements of being objective and fair in their coverage as journalists, bloggers 'may engage in strategic framing of discussions in order to favour their own perspectives' (491). On the other hand, Meraz (2011) has suggested that political blogs may 'struggle to reframe the news of the day for their news-reading web publics' (110), not having the time to position coverage within their specific areas of interest and having decided what to cover based on the items receiving the most media attention.

The political blogosphere has been seen as having the potential to affect the framing of an event, even if individual blogs do not, or cannot, realise this capability. As a group, bloggers have the ability and visibility to construct their own framing of an event which can then influence other media coverage (Drezner & Farrell, 2008b). However, the opportunity to reframe does not always lead to new ways of presenting discussion of a given issue. Wall (2006) investigated how groups of pro- and anti-war bloggers framed coverage of the war in Iraq. While the overall frames used differed between the groups, Wall found blog discussion of the war followed the same frames used in war reporting by other sources. Rather than offering alternative perspectives, blogs discussed the war by a mixture of praising views they agreed with, disputing those of opponents, and presenting content through their own opinions (122), supporting Xenos's (2008) argument that bloggers were not obliged to be objective. Wall's study suggests that how the blogosphere frames topical discussion will not be altogether different to the approaches used by mainstream media sources.

Other discussions within the blogosphere, though, have featured blogs not just framing a topic differently to journalists, but completely changing the story as a result. U.S. Senate Majority leader Trent Lott's comments at Senator Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday celebration in 2002 were presented by the mainstream media as a tribute to a long-serving political figure. Bloggers, on the other hand, noted one particular comment by Lott seemingly supporting segregation, and repositioned their discussion to draw attention to these remarks that had not featured by journalists. As we saw in Chapter One, the change in focus had a

significant outcome in Lott's resignation. This occurred for two reasons. First, political bloggers framed the story not as a speech celebrating a fellow party member but as a controversial political statement. Second, the promotion by bloggers of this new angle to the comments, and the publication of historical material relevant to Lott's comments, returned the story to the mainstream media – an example also of blogs influencing the media agenda, and thus of intermedia agenda-setting – who then gave the story even more attention.

While other examples of blogs reframing topics are unlikely to have the same extreme consequences or high profile, we would expect to find more attempts by Australian and French political bloggers at refocussing stories within the data collected for this study. The creation of alternative frames to those used by journalists is closely linked to several approaches to political blogging, such as gatewatching. We can find reframing attempts in commentary on topics that, despite being heavily promoted by the mainstream media, are viewed by bloggers as distracting or unimportant. In the introduction to this thesis, a quoted post from Australian group blog *Larvatus Prodeo* featured such a view about the mainstream media's coverage of risqué photographs allegedly depicting far-right politician Pauline Hanson. As well as criticising the media coverage, the post also attempts to recast the story as a discussion of Australian rights to privacy, rather than a scandal involving a candidate in a current election campaign.

Hyperlinks can help to examine how bloggers might actively reframe debates. A citation of an earlier news story implies that a blogger is in part responding to the original text, but the themes raised in the blog post may reflect different aspects of the issue or event at hand. The use of alternative frames might not be consistent across the political blogosphere, with different blogs using different frames and some still making use of the same devices as the mainstream media. Nevertheless, the examples mentioned here show that at least some contributors to the political blogosphere will reinterpret and reposition debates where they deem it necessary.

To study how political blogs frame discussions, research can simply use the same common schema identified within mainstream media coverage of topics. However, Meraz (2011) promotes the use of emergent, issue-specific frames instead in tracking how blogs frame events instead. As blog networks 'thrive on conflict,'

positioning discussion of a topic as an ‘us vs. them’ issue, for example, Meraz claims that any analysis using the conflict frame would result in skewed data (114). In this thesis, I use content analysis of blog posts responding to particular events to identify frames employed by bloggers. Looking at keywords and repeated themes presented in individual contributions to topical discussions permits the identification of common frames among blogs. The analysis is supported by looking at the sources cited by bloggers, providing further information about how different members of the political blogosphere cover the same event.

Framing provides the theoretical framework for Chapter Five’s examination of political bloggers’ responses to the inauguration of Barack Obama as U.S. President. For this chapter, I draw on data from both the Australian and French political blogospheres, identifying the themes featured in topical discussions around what was an international news event for both groups. The analysis then returns to theories around framing presented earlier in this chapter, in particular the presentation of international events within local contexts, to determine whether the themes featured by political bloggers reflect the types of sites they reference, or if active reframing is taking place.

Agenda-setting

Any reframing attempt on the part of political bloggers also has implications for blogs’ agenda-setting capabilities. The Lott case shows how political blogs not only took up a new angle to a story that had disappeared from the mainstream media, but also how continued blog coverage led the story back into the mainstream media agenda. In addition to the framing aspect of the Lott case, we can treat this episode as an example of attribute agenda-setting. Examining salience agenda-setting considers *what* is being covered, while attribute agenda-setting looks at *how* a topic is presented. With the Lott case, the prominent attributes changed from the speech by Lott to the specific segregation-related remarks. Framing and agenda-setting are not entirely similar, though. For this study, the differences are highlighted by treating framing as an activity carried out by individual blogs, with common frames showing up within the content analysis. Agenda-setting, on the other hand, is conducted by a collected group of blogs. Any intermedia agenda-

setting originating from the blogosphere is also reliant on the groundswell of coverage dedicated to a particular topic by bloggers.

Attribute agenda-setting has formed the theoretical foundations for a number of studies of the blogosphere, including those by Delwiche (2005) and Meraz (2011). For the latter, the attribute agendas of two groups of politically partisan and more moderate blogs were compared with each other and that of the mainstream media, across three issues in 2007. Meraz found that the strength of the traditional media in setting an agenda is diluted somewhat, at least within strongly connected partisan groups, by the wealth of resources online. Instead, partisan blogs would choose the coverage that reflected their own ideological views, including a mixture of mainstream and alternative media sources (120-121).

Wallsten (2005) found three aspects in which the political blogosphere may be seen as following a media agenda, essentially echoing the coverage of issues published by the mainstream media. Blogs may cover issues in their posts at a similar level to the mainstream media, showing the topic to be particularly salient. Blogs may also use similar stances to topics as journalists, while the framing and justifications used in the media coverage may influence those employed by bloggers (7). These latter considerations return to attribute agenda-setting, and to framing theory, in examining how bloggers cover a given topic. Wallsten also suggests that any influence by a media agenda on the political blogosphere varies between stories and between blogs (22). This claim is supported by Thelwall *et al.* (2007), who find that although topics attracting more news coverage are more likely to be blogged, and have corresponding volumes of blog coverage, the strength of this trend varies between news sources. Not all blogs will respond in the same way. Thelwall *et al.* name political ideology as a factor affecting the extent of agenda-setting effects for individual blogs. Different events and themes would be expected to receive different reactions from politically opposed bloggers. Similarly, the type of political blog concerned may also account for variations. A specialist blogger focussing on economic issues, for example, would respond to continued coverage of a financial affair, but would not be expected to cover a technology bill to the same extent – although, of course, the discussion could be repositioned around the economic consequences of the bill.

Different approaches to news and political blogging apparent within the blogosphere may have some impact on how these sites may appear to follow an agenda set by traditional media. In particular, media watchdog blogs can provide readers with 'cues about the significance of various political issues' (Wallsten 2007, 568). In this case, studies would expect to find that topics given marked coverage by the mainstream media would also receive significant discussion within the blogosphere, although this does not necessarily imply agreement on an issue between bloggers and journalists (Cooper, 2006). Measuring any reverse influence, from the blogosphere to the mainstream media, is a trickier proposition, without conclusive results. Wallsten (2007), tracking the reporting of several topics by blogs and mainstream media, finds evidence of a 'complex, bidirectional relationship between media coverage and blog discussion' instead of one medium setting the agenda of the other (567). Although in some cases, as in traditional agenda-setting theory, mainstream media coverage pre-empted blog discussion of issues, Wallsten also found some instances where blogs featured issues before the media. McCombs (2005) has also suggested that, with journalists being aware of relevant blogs and checking them in addition to the work of other news media, 'if blogs have an agenda-setting role, it is likely to be an influence on the mainstream media' (549).

Although blogs are at times influenced by traditional media coverage and framing of topics, Metzger (2009) also notes that these sites 'have the capacity to cut traditional media out of the agenda setting equation' (568). By responding to work by alternative media sites or citizen journalists, blogs may be following a different agenda. Furthermore, in cases where news or political blogs respond to each other's commentary or opinion pieces through posts of their own, bloggers can be seen to be setting agendas within the blogosphere.

Identifying which sites or publications are setting any agenda is, Delwiche (2005) argues, more straightforward for the blogosphere than tracking offline influence. Mentioning a particular media source in commenting on a topic can demonstrate some degree of salience agenda-setting. The blogosphere's sources can be particularly explicit, as blogs include visible hyperlink citations to relevant material. However, although links show some response on the part of a blogger to

another source, their presence does not necessarily imply agreement or following a set agenda. A blog citing a mainstream media article might be explicitly rejecting any attempts to set an agenda on a given issue, and instead taking an alternative position within the debate. Similarly, the link alone is not the only source of information in evaluating agenda-setting, with several aspects of issue coverage becoming important considerations for researchers. The attributes chosen to frame coverage may differ between the mainstream media and the blogosphere, while the amount of relevant pieces about a topic and the prominence of these articles can also be key points of comparison (McCombs 2005, 550). For these reasons, this study draws on both hyperlink data and the text of blog posts in evaluating any agenda-setting effects within the blogosphere. Links show which sources blogs are citing, which may suggest some salience agenda-setting through common topics of discussion. The blog posts, though, can confirm whether or not any attribute agendas are also being followed, providing the context for the links and why a blogger made these connections.

Based on these previous studies, a key concern for this research project is *who* is setting *what* agenda. The mainstream media's coverage of a range of issues may be replicated within the blogosphere, but the extent of this would be countered by any intermedia agenda-setting involving blogs and other sites. Alternative media sites, for example, may also be promoting topics not present within the mainstream media agenda, with these subjects then appearing in blog posts. Political blogs too may attempt to set different agendas. Individual bloggers, through the topics and frames they choose to cover, attempt to set an agenda for their audience, but its reach might not extend far beyond a blog's readers. Groups of blogs, including collectives and specialists, establish an agenda among fellow blogs by promoting, and sharing, analysis and commentary relating to specific topics. Topics discussed by the most prominent sites within the blogosphere may subsequently appear in other blogs or on other websites. The visibility of the respective agendas reflects the different public spheres and issue publics discussed earlier in this chapter, formed around groups of blogs sharing such features as specialist subject or ideology. Themes promoted heavily by the blogosphere overall, though, may potentially appear within the mainstream media or alternative media. Any mediasphere-wide agenda, then, would be formed from the

combined efforts of the mainstream media, alternative media, and blogosphere in choosing which topics to cover and how.

In Chapter Six, I examine the French political blogosphere's coverage of the proposed HADOPI bill from an agenda-setting perspective. This example is used to show whether the blogosphere may set its own agenda, or whether it follows the lead of other sources. Within the discussion, I return to intermedia agenda-setting in investigating which sources are involved in the creation of any blog agenda. Political bloggers are able to draw on content published on other blogs and alternative media sites as well as in the mainstream media. The citation of, and agenda-setting roles played by, these different types of site is an important question for studies of online political communication. I also examine differences between political blogs in covering a topic, and whether a blogger's level of engagement with a topic can predict the likelihood of a site following a particular agenda.

Opinion leaders in the political blogosphere

In the two-step flow (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1964), opinion leaders acted as conduits for information from the mainstream media to other citizens. However, as we have seen in the previous sections, the indirect media effects of the two-step flow in an age of print and radio news were replaced by direct media effects, such as framing and agenda-setting, in a mass media landscape now containing television. Although opinion leaders were cut out of newer communication models, they may have a place in a more diverse media ecology, a transformation that has been facilitated by the internet.

The first suggestions of opinion leaders within the political blogosphere are found in descriptions of A-list blogs. Trammell and Keshelashviki (2005) see the A-list blogs as the 'new influencers', highlighting what is interesting or important for their readers, while Delwiche (2005) argues that blogs can perform the opinion leader role within the two-step flow, through their collecting and publicising information from media sources. Haas (2005) also notes that by using and responding to mainstream media coverage, bloggers 'serve as intermediaries or...

“opinion leaders,” channeling information from the mainstream news media to the blogosphere at large’ (391). However, these sites are not just drawing on information published by the mainstream media, but also from a stable of resources including other blogs, alternative media sites, and social media. The interactions between these sites, and the chains of communication formed around debates, would be expected not to follow an entirely two-step flow, but instead a more complex multi-step flow.

The prevalence of links to mainstream media sites from A-list political blogs (Adamic & Glance, 2005) and the idea of blogs acting as a ‘fifth estate’, being watchdogs for the media (Cooper, 2006) raises additional questions about information travelling to, from, and within the blogosphere. Information might not necessarily be unchanged as it flows from the mainstream media, with bloggers practicing gatewatching in critiquing and challenging media messages in addition to highlighting articles of interest (Bruns, 2005). If, under a direct media effects model, the mainstream media act as opinion leaders for citizens, then by gatewatching political blogs are positioned to challenge this opinion leadership when taking issue with the work of journalists. Just citing another source in a debate is not necessarily opinion leadership. If a link to a mainstream media article is made without further commentary, then the opinions potentially influencing those of readers are that of the original journalist. Only by engaging with the original content and repositioning it within the blogger’s own argument is any attempt at reshaping opinions made.

The mainstream media do not provide the only sources of information for bloggers, nor does the information flow stop with an individual blog. Wallsten (2007) suggests that information may also flow from less popular or well-known blogs to the A-list blogs, and from there out to the blogs’ audiences and, potentially, to the mainstream media as part of the ‘buzz’ around a particular event or theme. Benkler (2006) proposes that groups of blogs organised around shared interests will spread information and observations by forming an ‘attention backbone’ for the network (12). Where information following the two-step flow went from the mainstream media to opinion leaders, and from there to the public in general, the flow of information within the blogosphere would start within a

group, moving from the original blog to the more highly-linked and visible blogs in that group. From there, the information is more visible to other, linked groups organised around other topics or ideologies, and the pattern continues in this manner until the information reaches the ‘superstar sites’ with the highest visibility and readership, and is from there disseminated to the blogosphere in general (12-13). These overlapping groups of blogs reflect aspects of this thesis’s conceptualisation of the public sphere introduced earlier in this chapter. The groups may be permanent associations of sites, affiliated to a particular collective. However, some of the groups may be more transient, issue publics or issue networks created around a more temporary debate.

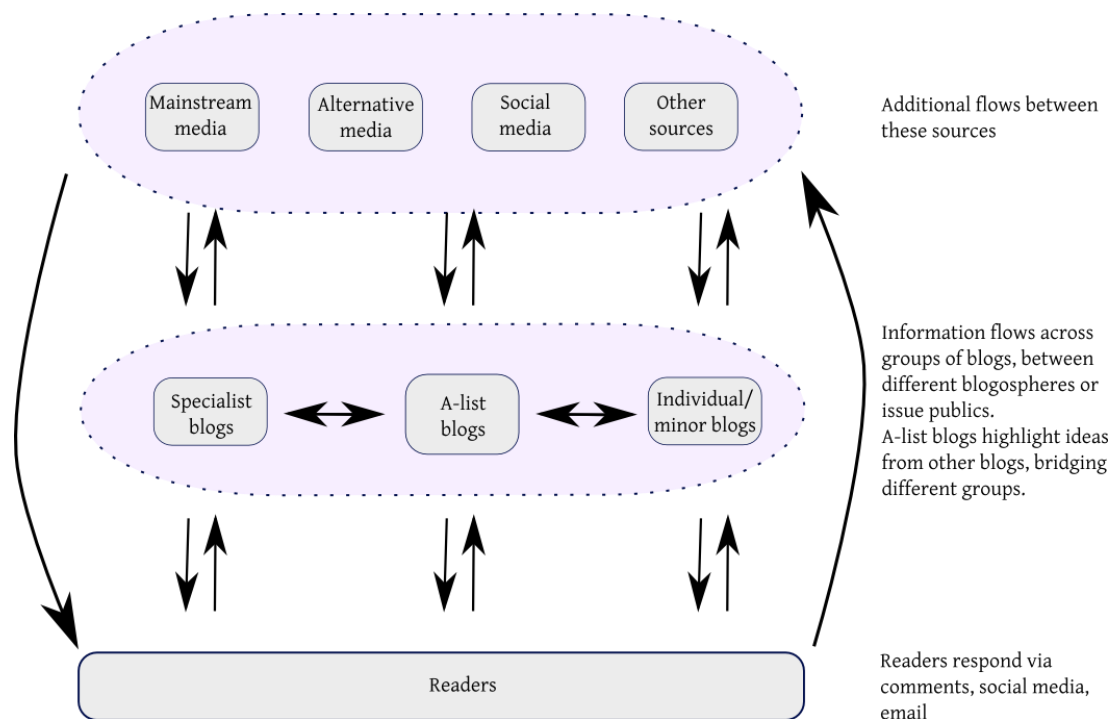


Figure 2.1: Information flows within the blogosphere (and wider mediasphere)

Figure 2.1 shows a number of potential information flows involving the political blogosphere. This model takes into account both the increased number of sources available to citizens with the proliferation of alternative and social media sites, and the flows within the blogosphere suggested by Benkler (2006). The mainstream media are not the only resources used by bloggers, but instead part of a range of sites from which bloggers, and other citizens, may obtain information or opinions. Similarly, journalists themselves at times respond to the work of bloggers, comments on alternative media sites, or discussions on social media platforms.

Information flows in Figure 2.1 do not start or end at a given point in the diagram, nor do they involve every component depicted. Instead, there are a number of different flows which may help to shape debate around an issue, and which may vary over time and contexts. An example flow sees a report in the mainstream media cited by a specialist blogger. This post then receives a link from an A-list blog, making the specialist post – and the original report – more visible within the blogosphere. A reader of the A-list post may then comment on the blog, but also link to the post on Twitter, while the specialist blogger also cited may post a further response. Every link in the chain has the potential to add to the development of the discussion and bring the debate to a new audience. At the same time, though, the mainstream media report may also be read directly by a citizen, without any further mediation, and the information flow ends there. There is no particular *n*-step flow at play here, but instead a number of possibilities, the applicability of which depends on, and can help to determine, the longevity of a news story.

Regardless of the length of the information flow, though, a key consideration for this thesis is not so much how information travels, but what functions are carried out by bloggers. Kelly (2008) suggests that through information flows between blogs, these sites form a network of ‘social knowing’, sharing views within interlinked groups of sites organised around common interests or perspectives. The process of ‘social knowing’ suggests that any attempts to identify opinion leaders *for* the blogosphere are likely to be ineffectual. Political bloggers, particularly those promoting a particular ideology, are unlikely to change each other’s opinions or beliefs directly. Meraz (2011) notes that what could be present instead is ‘opinion sharing’. Here, ideas are sought out and shared between bloggers, with posts building on the commentary put forward in previous discussions. Although bloggers use their peers’ perspectives in their posts, though, their opinions are unlikely to be changed. However, what bloggers can do is act as opinion leaders for their readers.

In this thesis, I evaluate opinion leadership only among the blogs being tracked, based on their posting and citation activity. As neither the visitor traffic for blogs or the amount of comments left on posts are tracked – alternative means by which

a blog's audience, and influence, might be measured – the discussion of opinion leadership is limited to identifying patterns and processes of citation only among a defined group of blogs, rather than for the blogosphere as a whole.

To identify a blogger as a potential opinion leader, I examine both the posts they publish, and the links that they receive. Citations highlight the relationships between different sites, and are used here as a proxy for readership. The total citations received by a blog indicate the size of its readership, especially taking into account the number of unique sites referencing the blog. Posting patterns are then used to support these observations. A blog receiving many citations while publishing a comparatively small number of posts is more likely to be in an opinion leader role than a blog with many posts and a similar total of citations received. Finally, a blogger repeatedly cited over the seven months tracked here, and by a wide range of blogs, is more likely to be acting as an opinion leader in general than a blogger who is cited in response to a single post or event. Using citation and posting patterns as a means of evaluating opinion leadership, I study the impact a site has within the group of blogs featured in this thesis.

Using citation patterns to identify opinion leaders may suppose that the most likely candidates for this role are the A-list blogs, as the most visible and highest profile sites within the blogosphere. The visualisation of information 'infection' by Adar and Adamic (2005), modelling the information flows within a network, would support this expectation. However, the importance of context again suggests some variety among the opinion leaders of the blogosphere. The A-list blogs may be central to the blogosphere overall, but they may be only peripheral contributors to, or not even part of, discussion of a given issue. Returning to the idea of temporary issue publics, the short-term activity within these groups may be led by other, 'smaller' blogs, acting as topical experts or providing some specialist analysis relevant to the issue. In this case, these non-A-list sites may be ideally placed to inform, and shape opinions, around a particular topic.

On the other hand, the central position of the A-list blogs overall, and their comparatively lesser importance to the topical discussion, may actually underline the opinion leadership of these blogs. In the typology of political blogs introduced

in Chapter One, the A-list blogs were generally described as covering ‘politics in general’. Rather than focussing on economic matters or environmental policy, for example, for these blogs their specialist subject is *politics*. These blogs cover a wider range of subjects in their posts than a blog covering the intersection between politics and technology, with posts published during the same period feasibly contributing to multiple issue publics. The A-list blog concerned might be peripheral to each issue public, but it also serves as a bridge across different debates and groups of blogs. Tremayne *et al.* (2006), building on Granovetter’s (1973) research into strong and weak ties, note that ‘ideas are spread most widely not by persons in the middle of a cluster of acquaintances, but by peripheral members who spend time in multiple social circles’ (292). Applying these concepts to the political blogosphere, we would expect that, as information specific to a given issue public reaches an A-list blogger, or any blogger with additional topical interests, the prominence of their blogs enables them to move the debate and shape opinion among a different group of sites and readers. As Benkler (2006) suggests, this flow can then make the debate visible to a wider audience. By acting as bridges, though, the A-list blogs would then also be acting as opinion leaders, highlighting additional angles to the discussion and informing more readers.

The complex information flows involving the political blogosphere depicted in Figure 2.1, and the move from straight opinion leadership to opinion sharing and social knowing, have major implications for this study. On a blog-to-blog basis, what is apparent is opinion sharing rather than opinion leadership, with bloggers using each other’s content but not necessarily changing the views of other bloggers. In this study, I investigate opinion leadership based on how bloggers are referenced by their peers. The use of citation patterns is then supported by examining how bloggers present material for their readers, in terms of post quantities, themes covered, and resources cited. Short of conducting surveys and interviews with readers and bloggers alike, measuring the influence of a blog on its audience is not possible. However, what can be determined is whether a blog is cited within the sample of sites tracked for this study, and this allows patterns of opinion leadership to be identified and discussed for further research. Opinion leaders, among the blogs tracked here, are then the bloggers who receive repeated citations, and who also act to reposition debates for their readers.

In this thesis, the presence of opinion leaders within the blogosphere is examined through the Australian political blogosphere's coverage of the Utegate scandal in June and August 2009, analysed in Chapter Seven. The discussion also draws on findings from the total activity tracked for this thesis and studied in Chapter Four, using citation patterns as a proxy for readership. While we cannot track the actual visitor numbers for each site, this method of studying the framing of debates and the sources cited allows us to identify which blogs are acting as opinion leaders would, and also have the number of incoming links that we would expect opinion leaders to receive.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the theoretical framework for the thesis. Different perspectives on the work of bloggers and their relationship with journalists show how the political blogosphere has not been a universally accepted addition to the mediasphere. Episodes such as Grogsgate show how blogs may both respond to and influence the work of the mainstream media. But critiquing the work of journalists is just one way that political blogs may be contributing to public debate. Bahnisch (2006) notes that:

As much as media and political accountability and sharp analysis are important, interactivity (and the political interest and involvement it fosters) is perhaps the key contribution [political] blogging brings to politics and to society. (146)

In this thesis, I analyse the connections between political blogs in discussing different issues within the Australian and French political blogospheres. By treating the blogs involved in debating around specific topics as forming temporary discussion networks, I build on the concepts of issue publics and issue networks introduced in this chapter to examine how political blogging varies over time and contexts.

Marres (2006) states that the concept of the issue network 'draws attention to the work of issue formation, and more specifically that of *formatting* issues' (6-7), referring to how issues may be framed and presented by contributors to the

network. Topical discussions within the blogosphere, and how issues are presented within them, have clear connections to the three theories guiding this thesis: framing, agenda-setting, and opinion leadership. In the individual case studies of Chapters Five, Six, and Seven, the work of political blogs is analysed through different aspects of the theoretical framework established in this chapter, each referring principally to one of the three theories.

By studying political bloggers' responses to different issues within the case studies, I examine how information is gathered and presented within the blogosphere. These discussions are not limited solely to a mainstream media-blog dynamic, but also involve connections between blogs as well as other, alternative media sources. Levels of political interest and involvement among bloggers may also be gauged through their activity around a given topic.

To study these ideas with regards to the Australian and French political blogospheres, this thesis uses mixed methods developed from previous research into blogging. The methodology includes the identification and analysis of topical discussion networks, looking at the discussion of a particular event or issue within a wider dataset and developed from the concepts of issue publics and issue networks. The study of these topical discussions is supported by content and network analysis. In the following chapter, the methodology for this study is introduced, alongside pertinent conceptual concerns around hyperlinks and network mapping. Following this discussion, the chapter outlines how the study developed from a list of several hundred blogs to seven months of blog post and link data, and how the subsequent chapters analyse these data further to answer the research questions introduced at the start of this thesis.

Chapter 3: Tracking discussions in the blogosphere

Introduction

The previous chapters introduced the contextual background and theoretical framework supporting this study of Australian and French political blogging. These discussions inform the research questions guiding this thesis, investigating the role played by blogs in political debate and the use of media sources in their coverage of different topics. In the following chapter, I introduce the methods used to answer these questions.

The chapter is divided into two sections, with the first half acting as a contextual overview for the research methodology. The study at hand is first positioned within recent approaches to analysing online activity and previous research into blog networks. The development of a new methodology for this project, the identification and analysis of topical networks, is also discussed. Finally, the section concludes with the identification of key conceptual concerns around hyperlinks and network mapping.

In the second half of this chapter, the specific processes used in collecting, preparing, and studying blog data for this thesis are introduced. These cover the preparatory stages of this project, including the rationale behind the creation of a sample of political blogs, and introduce the data collected for this study by Sociomantic Labs. The final section identifies the two key methods employed in the following chapters, network analysis and content analysis, and reflects on their applications within the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter Two. The chapter concludes by identifying how these methods are used to answer the research questions around political blogging in Australia and France.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ The methods used in this project have been developed through the preparation of the following papers: Bruns, Wilson, Saunders, Highfield, Kirchhoff, and Nicolai (2008), Highfield (2009a; 2010a), Highfield, Kirchhoff, and Nicolai (2010; 2011), and Bruns, Burgess, Highfield, Kirchhoff, and Nicolai (2011). Specific methods used for individual case studies are addressed in their respective chapters.

New threads in internet research

This study draws on methods developed within several new streams of research into online activity. Rogers (2009) describes a ‘major shift in the purpose of Internet research in the sense that one is not so much researching the Internet, and its users, as studying culture and society *with the Internet*’ (28). While not without its challenges for both qualitative and quantitative work, cultural research into online activity is becoming well-supported by the rise of new schools of thought within social sciences and humanities research, taking cues from scientific methods for their studies. Hartley (2009) introduces the ‘cultural science’ model, where cultural studies, economics, and research into complex systems collide, and which has clear applications for large-scale research into online activity, in particular in tracking communication dynamics and change. Similarly, Manovich (2008) has promoted ‘cultural analytics’, studying ‘cultural dynamics, flows, and cultural changes’, which not only uses quantitative methods but also looks to study non-textual content, such as images and video – describing culture itself as ‘data... that can be mined or visualized’. Meanwhile, through the application of social network analysis to computer-mediated communication, methods such as hyperlink analysis have been developed, forming part of the webometrics approach to measuring and analysing internet-based activity (Thelwall, 2009). These new streams of research propose using methods beyond textual or discourse analysis, appropriating methods such as (social) network analysis and data visualisation as well as concepts from sociology, mathematics, and economics. In the next section, the previous studies influencing the methods used in this project will be outlined and key concepts introduced. Following this discussion, the specific approach used for data collection, preparation, and analysis in this project will be introduced.

Online networks, tracking social media activity

Attempts to study and map networked aspects of the social web, collaborative sites, and blogs have looked at various phenomena, from interests and connections between university students on Facebook¹⁰⁸ (K. Lewis, Kaufman, Gonzalez, Wimmer, & Christakis, 2008), or the connections between the different language editions of Wikipedia (Petzold & Liao, 2011), to how news spreads along networks of Twitter and Digg¹⁰⁹ users (Lerman & Ghosh, 2010). Large-scale studies of blogospheres, including networks of political blogs, include the work by Kelly and Etling (2008), Etling *et al.* (2009), Adamic and Glance (2005), and Fouetillou (2007). Topical blog discussions are featured in a variety of research projects, including Bruns (2007b), Schiffer (2006), and Macias, Hilyard, and Freimuth (2009). These studies track activity around a specific event or issue, rather than the total output of a group of blogs.

In this study, long-term activity within the French and Australian political blogospheres, tracked over seven months, is compared with topical discussions taking place within the total blog posts collected. In doing so, the formation of topical networks is analysed within different contexts and theoretical frameworks.

Topical networks

The identification and analysis of topical networks is the major methodological innovation of this thesis. Topical networks comprise ‘the collection of sites commenting on a particular event or issue, and the links between them’ (Highfield, Kirchhoff, & Nicolai, 2011), similar to the concept of ‘web spheres’ introduced by Schneider and Foot (2005). Aspects of issue publics (see Dahlgren, 2009, 73-5) and issue networks (Marres, 2006), both discussed in Chapter Two, may also be seen in topical networks, which are transient collections of citizens discussing a particular topic, and which form and decline over time within the more permanent structure of the wider political blogosphere. The three case studies included in this thesis

¹⁰⁸ <http://www.facebook.com/>

¹⁰⁹ <http://www.digg.com/>

each feature blog-mediated discussions of specific themes within the wider dataset. The study of topical networks provides a crucial counterpoint to the analysis of the whole period, composite dataset. The latter analysis, found in Chapter Four, shows the overall linking and posting patterns among the sites included in the data collection. However, the aggregation of seven months of blog data cannot show why a specific blog links to a given site, or how the networks formed change over time or context. Topical networks, on the other hand, provide the opportunity to examine the shape of different discussions within the blogosphere.

The baseline data collected provides important contextual information for the study of the French and Australian political blogospheres, highlighting the most active blogs and which sites are most-referenced overall. However, this analysis is only an introduction to the two blogospheres. Although the overview of the collected data shows the total activity tracked for this study, it cannot distinguish discussions around different issues or events, and does not provide information about the dynamics of political blogging, seen through variations in posting and linking over time. To examine specific activity within the political blogospheres, topical network analysis is used to isolate discussions within the wider dataset, incorporating the study of hyperlinks and blog post content. The subset of bloggers active within the blogosphere varies from topic to topic. Whether a blogger posts in response to an issue will depend on their personal or professional interest in a given theme. The sources cited by political bloggers may also be subject to topical variations. Sites referenced in response to one event might not be cited at all in the discussion of another, unrelated issue, while further sites may consistently receive links regardless of the topics being debated.

In this thesis, topical networks are used to identify the contributions of bloggers to public debate and the roles they play in the movement of information and opinion online. The different contexts for these discussions provide a more diverse overview of these roles, including media commentators and political campaigners. The chosen case studies also enable the comparison of how political blogs cover different domestic and international events. Rather than treating the baseline data as the definitive picture of the political blogosphere, the use of topical networks

questions the sites featured and connections made in the composite network of in-post citations. The total activity can show, for example, how a mainstream media site such as *The Australian* is referenced within the blogosphere, and the topical networks enable us to examine *when* and *why* these citations are made. By studying the variations between different subjects, a prediction of sorts can also be made, evaluating which topics will most likely lead to coverage from which blogs, discussing which themes. In Chapters Five to Seven, these methods are employed in three case studies, each applying a different theory from the framework outlined in Chapter Two, to examine the discussions fostered in the blogosphere and the roles played by bloggers.

Topical network analysis in this thesis draws from two main data sources in the study of political blogging: hyperlinks and blog posts. Hyperlinks are used in the network analysis of both the baseline data and the topical networks, while the blog posts are featured in the content analysis supporting the case studies. Identifying the topical networks for the three case studies in this thesis was carried out by first locating blog posts containing keywords relevant to the topic at hand. These terms are explained further in each chapter, but examples for each case study include Obama and White House for the inauguration, HADOPI and black-out for the HADOPI debate, and OzCar and Grech for Utegate. Searches were carried out in all blog posts published within a specific date range (inauguration) or the wider dataset (HADOPI and Utegate). Posts found to discuss these terms were then isolated from the rest of the dataset. These posts formed the basis for the topical networks. The links made in each post were then extracted for analysis and visualisation. The specific processes used are outlined later in this chapter and in Appendix B. However, prior to introducing the project design, there are additional key methodological concerns in tracking and analysing blog connections. These include definitions for a data source for this project, the hyperlink, and strengths and limits of the network mapping and visualisation approach. In the following sections, these concerns are addressed methodologically and conceptually.

Hyperlinks

Studies of connections and relationships between blogs often focus on the visible hyperlinks between blogs, posts, and comments. As the most visible means of showing connections or associations between bloggers, whether reciprocated or not, Lovink (2008) describes linking as the ‘logic’ underpinning blog networks. Furthermore, Zuckerman (2008) states that ‘links are perhaps the most useful metric for measuring the influence of international blogs and the interconnection of local and global blogospheres’ (51). However, research projects cannot always treat all links featured in the dataset as being the same in function or intent. As Beaulieu (2005) notes, a hyperlink can be ‘a trace of many things, and its functions can be more diverse than the usual “linking of one web page with another”’ (193). Sites may practice what Rogers (2002) describes as ‘hyperlink diplomacy’, seeking out acknowledgement and reciprocal citations from prominent sources, or links might be made to other references in response to particular events (Beaulieu, 2005).

Furthermore, while the hyperlink may have been seen primarily as a citation device, it now serves navigational, organisational, and social roles (Halavais, 2008). For example, I might provide a link for my friends to an interesting video on *YouTube*, showing a social link. If I created a blog post embedding this video, it would appear alongside other link types. The post might be tagged with key words describing its content, and each tag links the post to others featuring the same key word (organisational). The page would also include links to previous posts or to the blog’s front page (navigational). These links have clearly different intentions and origins, despite appearing to be similar. Identifying between different link types and selecting only those which are relevant to the project at hand is subsequently a crucial process for research into blogs and other online activity.

Links do not present *all* connections between people online. Herring, Kouper, Paolillo, Scheidt, Tyworth, Welsch, Wright, and Yu (2005) note that bloggers communicate ‘behind the scenes’ through email or messaging services, which may create different connections than those seen solely through hyperlinks. However, such communication is not necessarily public. As the analysis of blog networks cannot freely take into account all connections, both public and private, between

blogs and bloggers, a study based on hyperlinks found on blogs depicts what may be described as the public face of the blog network.

Bruns, Kirchhoff, Nicolai, Wilson, Saunders, and Highfield (2008) describe four different types of links found within blogs: blogroll, topical, commenter-provided, and generic links. Blogroll links are links appearing in a sidebar on a blog, or on a separate page of links, listing sites that the blogger finds interesting or with which they are affiliated. These links are often directed to the front page of a site, connecting one blogger to another, for example, rather than to a single blog post.

Topical links are citations made in blog posts, and describe the links made by a blogger to support the argument and content presented in individual posts. These links are often to specific articles or pages within a site, such as linking directly to a news article rather than the front page of the hosting mainstream media site. In this study, I refer to in-post citations to describe topical links made within blog posts.

Commenter-provided links are links made in comment threads by readers of a blog post. These links might be to further sites relevant to the discussion at hand, or to sites or profiles pertaining to the reader themselves. Some of these links might be made by the original blogger, in response to reader comments.

Generic links are links unrelated to the content of a blog, appearing outside of blogrolls, posts, and comments. The links are often created without input from the blogger, serving organisational purposes such as connecting pages on the site or promoting the domain hosting the site. On-site advertising also falls under the generic heading. The development of synchronisation between different social media sites has led to blog posts being automatically accompanied in some cases by links inviting readers to, for example, 'share this post' on Facebook. This shows generic links appearing alongside in-post citations. In the research design, appearing later in this chapter, I outline how these links are managed in this study.

Two types of link are included in the analysis carried out over the following chapters. Blogroll links are used to provide an overview of the implied networks formed amongst Australian and French political blogs. In-post citations are then

used to track both the overall activity in the two blogospheres between January and August 2009, and more specific topical discussions around particular themes.

Other projects may classify links even more specifically, making distinctions, for example, between links made by the blogger both within the post itself, and those they may have added in comments. Methods for determining the semantics of a link on a large scale, deciding whether connections are being made as an indication of the author agreeing or not with the site being linked to, are another aspect of blog network research that is still being developed. Although Lovink (2008) claims that bloggers will only link to like-minded individuals, studies such as that by Adamic and Glance (2005) have found some links between bloggers across ideological divides. These connections can demonstrate support or disagreement with the work of other bloggers (Hargittai, Gallo, & Kane, 2008). While accounting for link semantics is well beyond the scope of this thesis, and of available tools for studying blog links at large scale, analysis of these different forms of connection is still an important step for blog research methodologies.

Different types of link provide their own problems for researchers in this field. Although blogrolls, lists of links to sites of interest located separately to blog posts, provide more permanent links than in-post citations, they are not always ideal for analysing blog networks. Adamic and Glance (2005) mention that blogrolls may be left by bloggers and are not updated over time, becoming 'stale' and less reflective of the blogger's interests. Blogrolls do provide a space for bloggers to state their affiliations and associations, linking to the sites with which they would like to be aligned and from where they might source their information. The resulting connections present a network of implied affiliation between blogs. However, as Hargittai, Gallo, and Kane (2008) note, 'it would be too simplistic to rely solely on such information for an understanding of bloggers' reading habits' (85). Using both blogroll and in-post citations instead enables studies to see whether blogs may link to certain sites in their blogrolls but reference a different group of resources in their posts.

Temporal factors may also need to be taken into account when developing the concept of the hyperlink, to determine for how long links remain as ties between sites, as relevant or current indicators of association. Adamic (2008) describes an

in-post citation as both a 'permanent and fleeting connection', demonstrating the deliberate choice of a blogger to cite another site, but with its relevance and visibility fading as more posts are made on the blog. Similarly, reciprocity of links and the number of times a link is made may also be factors used to determine the lifespan and strength of blog ties. Hyperlinks might have a kind of half-life, achieving their highest visibility on a blog at the time of publication, and with their relevance to the chosen topic 'decaying' as more posts are made, moving the post featuring the initial link into the blog's archives. The longevity of in-post citations may be dependent on the general posting activity of a blogger – the more active a blogger is, the shorter the time required for a post to move off the main blog page. Eventually, blog posts on a specific topic will not be as noticeable, with the blog archives becoming the record showing that 'a conversation has taken place, but it has moved out of view' (230).

A link's lifespan also varies due to the type of link. A blogroll link, for example, can be treated as a more permanent, longer-lasting association from blog A to site B than an in-post citation. However, as blogrolls are more generic in their linking, rather than being relevant to a particular topic, and are rarely updated, they might not reflect a blogger's current interests. While in-post citations are the most apt source for locating topical networks, even the connections made over the course of these discussions are not necessarily evidence of permanent or strong ties between sites. If a link is made from blog A to site B once over a six month period, then although it may have been an important reference for a topic, the link itself does not suggest a long-lasting connection. On the other hand, if blog A links several times to site B over the period, then the connection may be seen as being renewed and support a view that site B is read often by blogger A. For links made as in-post citations to be seen as strong ties, though, there is a need for repeated references over time, for 'although possibly a stronger indication of interest than a blogroll link, citations, unless periodically repeated, will become dated' (Adamic, 2008, 230).

Other studies of blog activity may ignore links altogether. Herring *et al.* (2005), in claiming that the majority of blogs are not connected to other sites, advocate using alternative measures of tracking connections in the blogosphere in stating that discussions between blogs are 'the exception rather than the rule' (2). Some of the

ambiguities in studying hyperlinks may be avoided by looking at other ways of determining association between sites, such as through keywords (Hopkins & Thomas, 2011). However, the importance of the hyperlink in research, in particular as a means of tracking long-term activity online, underlines the need for further development of the concepts surrounding linking. In this study, keywords are used to determine the spread of themes within discussions in the political blogosphere, complementing the hyperlink network analysis also being carried out.

Network mapping and visualisation

In this thesis, the visualisation of blog networks formed around different link types and topics is a key component of the research project, as it provides a clearer overview of what is being studied. Data visualisation, in particular through hyperlink network analysis, is a featured method within several strands of internet research, including cultural analytics and webometrics. Creating a depiction of a blog network serves a number of uses. Mapping the network enables the researcher to gain a greater sense of what is contained within a large dataset, the sites included and the connections between them. This is particularly pertinent for studies of links within online networks, where there is no 'physical world' analogue that also shows the connections between sites. Visualisation can also be used to show the changing networks over time and between different link formats. Previous studies of blogs have used mapping techniques to display aspects of the sites and networks being studied, and these inform the methodological choices made in this study in visualising blog networks.

Although there are several possible approaches to mapping the blogosphere, or the internet in general, based on such properties as geographical origin, network, or platform, any resulting map can be used to make sense of blog-related phenomena and denote the extent of any study-specific blogosphere. Many research projects concerning blogging, this thesis included, deal with sub-sections of the blogosphere, limited by technology and researchers alike. Having a map not only shows the sites included in the study, but also helps to clarify the sites beyond the sample. Other advantages of mapping depend on the nature of the study: different

maps might depict how bloggers interact with each other and with media sites, whether particular areas or demographics are over- or under-represented within a particular blogosphere, or how information flows between blogs.

Drawing a map of an unknown territory such as the blogosphere is an important process for conceptualising the relationships between sites within this space.¹¹⁰ This is particularly true for studies with large datasets, investigating connections between thousands of nodes. Visualising these links provides an overview of the object of study. Valdis Krebs has remarked that ‘in cyberspace, the context of the social space you’re embedded in is missing. A map can help orient you’ (in Abrams, Donath, Hall, Hansen, Krebs, Rogers, Sack, & Susani, 2006, 72). The act of mapping does not just identify features, communities, or the topography of the territory. For van Weelden (2006), maps are ‘interfaces between knowledge and experience’ from which ‘we can extrapolate from what we know to what’s possible, what’s not yet accomplished’ (26). In an environment that may experience rapid change, such as the blogosphere or the internet in general, a map can thus highlight what is already known and what still needs to be further investigated. The importance of the unknown to a map is built upon by van Weelden, who describes a map’s value as ‘its potential to generate a vision for attacking the *terra incognita* it portrays – not just literally, in uncharted white space, but also metaphorically, in an abstract space’ (26). This may alleviate concerns about representing non-physical spaces on a map, for if there is no ‘right’ portrayal of the internet, any approach may be treated as valid. However, it is important to remember that ‘maps are social constructions rather than depictions of an objective reality’ (Etherington, 2007, 1). Any map reflects the purpose or context for which it was intended more than any physical reality, and this remains true for maps of fictional, digital, and virtual places.

The visualisations featured in this study are restricted to mapping the networks of blogs, associated sites, and the links between them. Previous overviews of the blogosphere, though, have treated mapping the included sites as a task best suited to more elaborate pieces of imagined geography. Druaux’s (2007) map of the

¹¹⁰ Rogers (2008) explores in more depth ideas surrounding the creation of ‘spaces’ online, formed and limited by linking choices and patterns.

French blogosphere, for example, is inspired by older cartographic traditions, adding in artistic details in the style of sixteenth-century African maps featuring ‘elephants for want of towns’ (Swift, 1733), while other, comic maps such as that by Munroe (2007; 2010) also attempt to reconcile an imagined geographical representation with digital communities.¹¹¹ However, Packwood (2004) advises that avoiding cartographic conventions may be needed for internet-focussed maps, seeing maps of networks, based on links and traffic, as better ideals for charting the blogosphere. Several previous maps of the internet and blogospheres have used networks as the basis for their depiction (for example, Hurst, 2006; Kelly & Etling, 2008), enabling the studies to highlight the connections, both unique and repeated, between nodes, the groups within which they may be located, and the prominent nodes serving as central connectors for other sites. In this thesis, the network maps are formed through links from a sample of blogs to other sites, but do not track or imply any visitor traffic between sites beyond that of the blogger concerned. These visualisations cover a particular time period, or the discussion around given topics, and serve as a snapshot of activity within the Australian and French political blogospheres, rather than providing definitive overviews of these networks.

The study of political blogging in Australia and France also draws on methods used in large-scale network mapping projects looking at various political blogospheres around the world. This research, such as Kelly and Etling’s (2008) work on the Persian language blogosphere, has tracked large populations of blogs over several months, investigating what sites are referenced across the resulting networks. Often, these long-term studies take place around elections. For the 2007 French Presidential election, the distribution of ideologies across the political blogosphere and how the resulting partisan clusters were interconnected was visualised (RTGI, 2007), while a similar approach was used for the 2008 U.S. Presidential election (linkfluence, 2008).

Blog network mapping enables distinctions between different groups and behaviours to be visualised. As part of research into political blogging around the

¹¹¹ Although Munroe’s maps are ostensibly for humorous purposes, they also serve as snapshots of social media at different points in time, and more importantly depict changing perceptions of various sites and platforms.

2004 U.S. Presidential election, Adamic and Glance (2005) visualised the connections between selected U.S. political blogs, differentiating between liberal and conservative blogs to highlight the divide between the ideologies. This method of coding different ideologies was used in other projects, such as *linkfluence's* 'PresidentialWatch08' (2008). In this new map of the U.S. political blogosphere, sites were coded as 'conservative', 'independent', 'mass media', and 'progressive'. Such coding allows for a wider view of the political landscape, including views excluded from Adamic and Glance's 2005 study.

Studies such as that by Etling *et al.* (2009) on the Arabic blogosphere may cover several months of blog activity, but use a composite view of links and sites in providing a summary of the connections made over the entire period. Tracking the total links produced and received by sites and users within an online social network is one way of gauging the network's level of activity. However, this method does not necessarily explain when or why links were made. The next step for research into networks of sites such as blogs then is the analysis of smaller datasets and topics within an examination of longer periods of online activity.

Hogan (2008) has advocated the study of partial networks, looking thoroughly at a smaller group of sites acting as a microcosm for the overall network. Rather than try to identify every site in the network, which may be near impossible with changes in site architecture, new sites appearing, and old sites leaving the network, Hogan's approach enables patterns to be examined amongst a more manageable sample, from which conclusions about online activity can be extrapolated. Rogers (2009) suggests that the participants within a network 'may also be profiled by examining which particular links they give or receive' (14). This idea has been adapted for this study, focussing on links within particular periods and around specific themes in the identification of topical discussion networks online.

Visualisation has become an important tool within blog studies, with blog mapping featuring prominently in several studies. Approaches to blog mapping range from geolocation, such as Lin and Halavais (2004) matching blogs with their location on a map of the U.S., to network maps, formed by links between blogs (for example, Kelly & Etling 2008), and to maps organised thematically, such as Druaux's (2007)

map of the French blogosphere. Visualisation provides a snapshot of activity at a particular point in time. However, the risks of bloggers abandoning their sites, closing them down, or even just asking to be removed from the ranking lists, means that the population contributing to a network such as the blogosphere is often changing. This highlights how Krebs's suggestion that '... a warning label-DATA IS PARTIAL AND MAY BE OUTDATED – is necessary in most network maps' is particularly valid (Abrams *et al.* 2006, 78). Furthermore, maps of hyperlink networks and their analysis are restricted by the arbitrary boundaries of research projects (de Maeyer, 2010), and visualisations can appear as definitive when the data analysis behind them might not necessarily warrant this status (Abrams *et al.*, 2006). Finally, there is a risk of visualisations becoming 'sciencey', appearing as appealing images but with aesthetics overshadowing any findings or research aims. Although mapping the blogosphere can orient the researcher and the reader within a digital space, visualisation needs to be backed up with further analysis. Not only is it not the territory, but the map is not the study itself.

In this thesis, the visualisation of blog networks is used to provide an overview of the sites featured in the dataset and the connections between them. Given the size of the dataset, these depictions help to contextualise the discussion of the blogospheres and the case studies, showing the sites and links present in the different networks. Beyond the visual cues, though, the main aim of the blog mapping is to support the hyperlink and content analysis being carried out within the case studies. Visualisation can highlight behaviours of interest within the blogosphere, or raise further questions around bloggers and their sources, but it does not answer these queries. Instead, this study uses a mixture of methods, both qualitative and quantitative, in examining Australian and French political blogging, including network and content analysis as well as visualisation.

The methods and studies introduced in the previous sections help to prepare projects for what Rogers (2009) describes as investigating the 'online groundedness' of online activity, where the research follows a particular online medium, to track 'its dynamics, and makes grounded claims about cultural and societal change' (8). To further examine how researchers can study one aspect of

internet-based communication, in the following section I provide a brief overview of the methods used to examine the French and Australian political blogospheres.

Research design

Preparing the study

For the data collection stage of the research, a sample list of blogs was set up in December 2008, containing sites from which the content is to be gathered. The initial list contained blogs found manually through continuing observation of the blogospheres and from the lists of sites included in previous studies of both the Australian and French political blogospheres (Bruns, Wilson, Saunders, Highfield, *et al.*, 2008; Bruns, Wilson, Saunders, Kirchhoff, & Nicolai, 2008; RTGI, 2007). Blog ranking sites and search engines, such as Wikio, Technorati, and blogs.com.au,¹¹² were also used to find relevant blogs. Finally, additional sites were discovered and added to the list after carrying out general blog searches and manually following links from other sites in the sample.

The sites included in the sample did not necessarily discuss just political topics. As we saw in Chapter One, the political blogosphere is not comprised only of sites discussing just politics, all the time. In addition to a number of prominent, A-list blogs which do cover many political subjects in their posts, the political blogosphere also features bloggers for whom politics is only one of many subjects to be discussed. In the aim for inclusivity at the initial stages of the research project, sites were not excluded if they only occasionally featured posts that the bloggers concerned considered as commenting on 'politics'. Sites were included if, based on their most recent activity at the time of the sample list's creation, they featured political commentary in one of the posts on the front page of the blog. This commentary may have included discussion of a specific policy, an individual politician, or a political issue or event, including responding to political discussion

¹¹² <http://wikio.com> [wikio.fr for French language searching]; <http://technorati.com>; <http://blogs.com.au>

in the mainstream media. Sites were also included if they were featured in the blogrolls of multiple blogs already present in the sample. The rationale for including sites that might, ultimately, not cover political themes at all was that, through the use of topical network analysis, if a blog did cover the specific subject of each case study the relevant posts would form part of the analysis. If a blog did not cover that topic, the posts would not be included, and so that site's lack of political commentary would not affect the results of the topical network analysis.

As Hogan (2008) has noted, attempts to collect data from an entire blogosphere is not recommended, as identifying all possible nodes within the network is an exercise in futility. This study uses an alternative approach suggested by Hogan, the analysis of 'partial networks' within the wider blogosphere. Rather than try to identify every French or Australian political blog and include them in the study, this thesis instead draws on data collected from a smaller sample of blogs, with the findings serving as a proxy of blogosphere-wide patterns.

Despite the narrowing of the scope from *every* blog, though, the creation of the sample of blogs still raised the question of what is a French, or an Australian, blog, political or not? An 'Australian' blog may be seen as based in Australia, or written by an Australian, or written *about* Australia. 'French' blogs may be even harder to define; does every blog written in the French language qualify as 'French', or should French-language blogs from Belgium, Quebec, Senegal, Switzerland, or other French-speaking regions be excluded? What about blogs written by French people, in France, but about international topics? Again, inclusivity provided the solution. For the French political blogosphere, Belgian sites in particular appeared in the sample, with the backing of the *Wikio.fr* ranking system: if a blog also featured in the top 100 French-language political blogs, it was included regardless of the blogger's location. Similarly, international opinion site *Crooked Timber*¹¹³ was included in the Australian sample as Australian blogger John Quiggin¹¹⁴ is among its contributors. As with the non-political blogs, these sites were included at the initial stage in the knowledge that, if they did not cover the topics featured in the

¹¹³ <http://crookedtimber.org/>

¹¹⁴ <http://johnquiggin.com/>

case studies or did not link to or receive links from the other sites in the networks, they might not appear in the final analysis.

The final sample contained 311 French blogs, and 140 Australian blogs. The final list of sites was prepared manually before sending it to Lars Kirchhoff and Thomas Nicolai from Sociomantic Labs. The data collection was carried out by Sociomantic using the sites specified for this project. This process involved monitoring the RSS feeds of each blog for notifications of new posts, and archiving each post published during the data collection period. Using tools and processes developed over previous projects (Bruns, 2007b; Bruns, Wilson, Saunders, Highfield, et al., 2008; Bruns, Wilson, Saunders, Kirchhoff, & Nicolai, 2008), post data were collected from the specified sites. Each site's template was coded to distinguish between posts and static elements or other content (such as blogrolls, sidebar content, headers, footers, and advertisements), enabling posts and links to be extracted and studied without the presence of static page elements. Comments were not able to be archived using this method, and so were not included in the study. The limitations of blog analysis without also using comments as a data source are addressed in Chapter Eight. However, not having access to comments also means that the analysis draws only on the content chosen by the bloggers themselves for their posts. Rather than having to distinguish between the work of the original blogger and comments and links added to a given post by readers, this study looks solely at the contributions to debates by Australian and French political bloggers.

Sociomantic Labs carried out the crawling, scraping, and data preparation stages of the project, collecting posts published between 12 January and 10 August 2009. The preparation of the data involved taking the raw files gathered and making them available in a format suitable for analysis. Each post was saved as an individual text file, named for the blog and date of publication. A blog's posts were collected in an individual folder for each site. Spreadsheets were also prepared, providing the metadata for each post – when it was published, its URL, and its title – and recording any links made in the post. The archives of text files and spreadsheets were then sent back for the thesis-specific analysis. The procedures involved in studying these data are introduced in this chapter, with step-by-step processes provided in Appendix B.

For the French political blogosphere, 28,855 posts were gathered from 190 active blogs over 211 days. The data successfully collected represents activity from 61 percent of the feeds in the original seed list. For the Australian political blogosphere, 10,530 posts were gathered from 61 active blogs over the same period, representing 44 percent of the original feeds. These sites are listed in Appendix A. Several factors may account for the absence of other blogs from the collected data. Inactivity over the seven months, with bloggers not posting on their sites during this period, is the most straightforward case, while other sites may have changed their address before or during the data collection phase. Technical issues with the RSS feeds used may have limited the successful capture of posts, with the crawlers not notified of, and unable to collect, new posts. This study does not aim to present a complete picture of the Australian and French political blogospheres in 2009. Instead, I examine the discussion of specific events among a group of blogs as a guide to how political communication takes place online. While the absence of some sites from this study is not ideal, I use the partial network approach mentioned by Hogan (2008) to generalise patterns within the political blogospheres in light of gaps within the dataset. The findings from this study then provide a starting point for further research into larger populations of blogs, and other online media, discussed in greater depth in Chapter Eight.

To carry out the analysis, additional data preparation processes were required to get the Sociomantic-prepared data into appropriate formats for network and concept mapping. The workflow for this project is shown in Figure 3.1. A brief overview of these processes is provided here, with additional step-by-step details included in Appendix B.

First, the link data were reviewed to remove any generic links that appear within posts, in particular automated 'share this' links for social media sites. Links were then truncated to the top-level domain, both for the page being referenced and the original blog post, or to the blog-specific path if multiple blogs are present on one site. For example a link to an article on the *Crikey* website was truncated to crikey.com.au, but links to posts on *Pollytics* or *Pure Poison* were reduced to blogs.crikey.com.au/pollytics and blogs.crikey.com.au/purepoison respectively. Duplicate posts were also identified ahead of the content analysis, with links from

duplicate posts removed before visualising the networks. Any duplicated links within a single post were also removed, with connections appearing in the various citation networks signifying an individual post from one blog referencing another site.

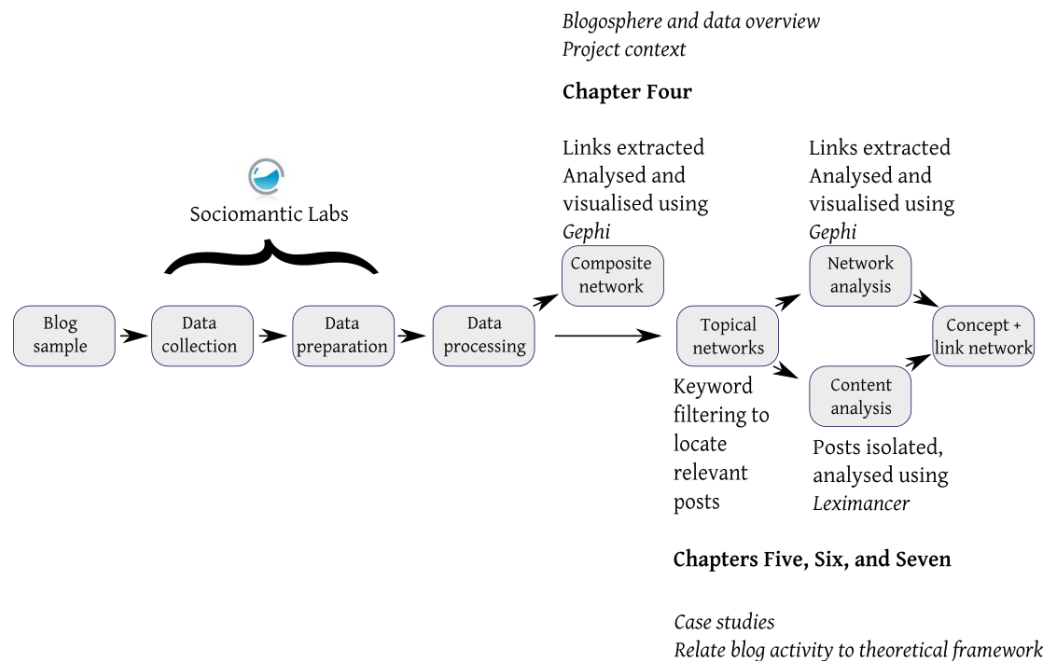


Figure 3.1: Project design and processes

For each network to be studied, a document was created, containing the corresponding top-level links in a two-column matrix showing a link from one domain to another. These matrices were imported into graph visualisation software *Gephi* to map the networks, with each site represented as a node and each link as a directed edge between two nodes. The networks were then organised using the Force Atlas algorithm, a force-directed algorithm developed by the *Gephi* team (Bastian, Heymann, & Jacomy, 2009). Force Atlas was designed to perform similar functions to other force-directed algorithms for laying out networks, such as the Fruchterman-Reingold algorithm (Fruchterman & Reingold, 1991), and also to create clearer, more intuitive graphs for researchers by reducing the number of overlapping edges.

The Force Atlas algorithm arranges nodes by using attraction and repulsion forces based on the connections between nodes. The algorithm is run repeatedly in *Gephi* until the network reaches equilibrium. These forces enable identification of groups

of associated sites, based on their linking patterns, and sites that exhibit different behaviours to the rest of the network. By specifying a higher repulsion than attraction force, when the algorithm was run on the network data any groups unconnected to the majority of nodes were found at a distance to the main network. Similarly, any blogs that were highly interlinked with other sites appeared close to the corresponding nodes in the visualisation. The settings for the visualisations created for this thesis varied depending on the number of nodes in each network. The initial settings for each *Gephi* project are outlined in Appendix B.

The formatting of each network map is based on the citation patterns for each blog. The size of nodes is dependent on the links received: the more times a blog is cited, the larger the node. The colour of nodes, on the other hand, is based on the outgoing links: the more citations made by a blog, the darker the node. This enables the easy identification of sites that were not tracked for this study but act as major resources for the blogs, as they receive many citations but do not make any themselves. These sites then appear as large, white nodes in the network maps. Finally, edges are weighted based on how many times they are made. If one blog repeatedly links to a particular site, the edge connecting the nodes is thicker than if the link were only made once.

Topical network posts were processed in text analytics software *Leximancer* to identify prominent themes, both for the overall topical networks and on a blog-by-blog basis. *Leximancer* is an automated content analysis software that identifies keywords and related concepts within a corpus based on word frequency and co-occurrence (Smith & Humphreys, 2006). The variables for the processes run by *Leximancer* are set by the researcher, enabling different projects to use different stop lists of terms and proximity settings for concept co-occurrence.

After isolating posts for each topical network, the corresponding text files were imported into *Leximancer* for processing. The analysis carried out in this thesis used a text block value of two sentences and a phrase separation value of three: concepts found frequently within three words of each other, within blocks of text two sentences long, were considered by *Leximancer* as similar to phrases. This enabled the analysis to identify related concepts described using particular terms,

and variations on these phrases, such as ‘global financial crisis’ and ‘climate change’. The concept maps generated at the end of each analysis then draw on the most frequently-occurring terms. The organisation of these concepts into thematic groups is based on co-occurrence between terms: the more frequently two terms are found in close proximity within a text, the closer they will appear in the corresponding concept map.

Project methods and aims

The analysis of Australian and French political blogospheres draws on qualitative and quantitative approaches. The two key methods for this thesis, network analysis and content analysis, are used to study different behaviours of political blogs. In combination, these methods enable the data analysis to reflect on the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter Two, and answer the overall research questions guiding this thesis.

First, I examine the composite structures of the two blogospheres, studying the overall activity tracked between 12 January and 10 August 2009. This analysis is found in Chapter Four, and builds largely on quantitative methods. The complete dataset is studied to identify the overall patterns of blog activity tracked for this project. The analysis identifies patterns of posting activity across the 211 days featured in this study, the most prolific blogs in terms of posts published, and the sites receiving the most citations from the political blogs in the study. Network analysis is used to provide the context for the case studies, establishing the connections between blogs and other sites based on two types of link. The networks of sites formed by blogroll links are first identified for the sample of Australian and French political blogs. This is followed by mapping the total citations made in blog posts collected for this study. For this analysis, I focus on links at a top-level basis, from domain to domain rather than post to page. For example, a post on *Pire Racaille* may contain a link to an article appearing on the *Le Monde* website, but the connection used in this study is only between the top-level *Pire Racaille* and *Le Monde* addresses.

Second, I examine blogging activities against specific thematic backdrops. These analyses form the case studies of Chapters Five to Seven. In Chapter Five, a case study of Australian and French political blog posts around the Obama inauguration examines the topical network formed over a timeframe of ten days. In Chapters Six and Seven, blog posts discussing HADOPI and Utegate respectively are drawn from the wider dataset following keyword filtering. The analysis of topical networks involves two processes, using qualitative and quantitative approaches. First, network mapping highlights which sites are referenced by political bloggers within different discussions. Content analysis within the topical networks is then used to explain these patterns, looking at what themes bloggers feature within the context of the topics chosen for the three case studies. This method enables the study to evaluate not just how bloggers cover a particular topic, but also what additional concepts become related to this discussion. Finally, further content analysis analyses individual bloggers' discussion of the subject at hand, showing which themes a blogger treats as relevant to the original subject. These findings are then incorporated into a combined hyperlink and concept analysis to demonstrate the spread of themes across the topical network and the resources pertinent to specific discussions.

Network analysis, supported by data visualisation, shows the connections between blogs, and from blogs to other websites. This stage comes before the content analysis in order to guide the latter approach, providing an overview of what data have been collected and what patterns are apparent within the blogospheres, in particular around media use. The study of blog citations links back to the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter Two by examining which sites are referenced by bloggers. These links have implications for framing and agenda-setting as they demonstrate which sources might be influencing a blog's coverage of an issue or which views a blogger chooses to highlight. Linking patterns are also used as a preliminary identifier of opinion leadership. Blog-to-blog citations are an indicator of readership, showing which blogs are widely-referenced within the composite citation networks analysed in Chapter Four. The connections between sites, and thematic or ideological groups of blogs, can also demonstrate information flows within the blogosphere and the wider mediasphere. These ideas are developed further in the following chapters.

Content analysis of blog posts allows the study to identify how bloggers are discussing a given topic. The network analysis can show us that, for example, a blogger might link to several news stories in commenting on a parliamentary debate. However, the content analysis may then find that, instead of repeating the work of journalists, the blogger is actually criticising what has been said in these articles and putting forward an alternative interpretation of the debate. By studying topical blog posts, supported by hyperlink analysis, we can see whether bloggers are reframing debates and following or rejecting agendas set by the mainstream media or other groups. In showing how a blogger is making use of different sources in their discussion, content analysis can also confirm to what degree a blogger might be acting as an opinion leader for their audience. These approaches and concepts are developed further in the case studies of Chapters Five to Seven, following the analysis of the composite activity carried out in the next chapter.

Conclusion

For 211 days between 12 January and 10 August 2009, Sociomantic Labs gathered data from a sample of Australian and French political blogs for this thesis. In this chapter, I outlined how this sample was constructed and the results of the data collection. The total 39,385 posts published over this period and collected by Sociomantic Labs are used throughout the next four chapters to consider different aspects of political blogging. I use hyperlink network analysis and content analysis, as introduced in this chapter, in order to identify patterns of blog activity and the nature of debates around specific issues. These analyses are subsequently drawn together to answer the research questions introduced at the start of this thesis.

The analysis of the political blog data involves several stages, carried out over the following chapters. First, I use the total post and link data collected to establish *what* Australian and French political bloggers did between January and August 2009: when they published their posts, which sites they linked to, and what patterns emerge from these actions. Coupled with an analysis of the blogroll networks formed from the blogs in the sample, this analysis establishes the context

for the research project at hand. In Chapters One and Two, I have illustrated how political blogging has developed over the last decade. In Chapter Four, I depict the state of the two blogospheres featured in this study in 2009.

If the composite data studied in Chapter Four show what political bloggers were doing, the case studies featured in Chapters Five to Seven examine *why*. Topical networks discussing the Obama inauguration (Chapter Five), HADOPI bill (Chapter Six), and Utegate (Chapter Seven) are identified within the wider dataset using the processes outlined in this chapter. These case studies draw on the typologies of political blogs introduced in Chapter One to study the contributions of different blogs in these topical discussions. Over the three chapters, I identify the varying roles of blogs within three political debates, referring in each case study to a different aspect of the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter Two. I examine the coverage of these three separate issues using the methods outlined in this chapter, before drawing the findings together in Chapter Eight and answering questions about political blogging's contribution to public debate.

Chapter 4: Into the blogospheres

Introduction

As we saw in Chapters One and Two, previous writing on blogging can lead to very different views of the blogosphere. If, hypothetically, we were to look for AutoComplete options describing the political blogosphere, we might see something like this:

The political blogosphere is
polarised
an echo chamber
parasitical on the work of journalists
contributing original analysis and commentary
a well-off, white, boys' club
the domain of political junkies
the domain of the new public intellectuals¹¹⁵
the Fifth Estate

These suggestions give us some initial, and opposing, impressions about the political blogosphere in general, but do not reveal anything about the specific blogospheres featured in this thesis. In the following chapter, I demonstrate three different approaches to studying the Australian and French political blogospheres. First, a general overview of previous research into the two systems is provided, identifying prevailing thoughts and the key bloggers within the networks. These historical outlines of the two blogospheres serve as a preamble for the second round of overviews. For this section, I look specifically at the blogs featured in the data analysis for this thesis, visualising the networks created from the blogrolls found on these sites. The blogroll networks created from the blogs in the sample show the affiliations and interests promoted by bloggers. Through this process, we can also see whether the two blogospheres witness any grouping around themes or ideologies. These connections provide contextual information for the blogs featured in this study, although, as noted in Chapter Three, blogroll networks show only affiliations around bloggers' aspirations. Bloggers may link to certain sites in

¹¹⁵ Tim Dunlop, quoted in Bahnisch (2006)

their blogrolls because they share interests or views, but in their posts they might cite completely different references. In this thesis's study of the contributions of political bloggers to public debate, blogrolls provide important information about how the sites see themselves within the blogosphere. However, blogroll data alone cannot tell us what bloggers are actually doing.

The final overview is the most important, as it provides the first insights into the data collected specifically for this thesis. Historical notes and blogroll analysis set the scene for this study, providing the background and motivations for the featured blogs. Following this contextual information, I outline the activity tracked between 12 January and 10 August 2009 and examine any patterns apparent within the Australian and French political blogospheres. The section identifies which blogs contributed the most posts over this period, which ones made and received the greatest number of links, and which sites acted as primary references for the two blogospheres. In doing so, the in-post citations collected from each blog post are used to visualise comprehensive citation networks, providing further insight into the overall activity tracked for this thesis.

This chapter aims to describe the Australian and French political blogospheres featured in this study. From the general historical notes to the new data captured in the current research project, the chapter moves from what the two blogospheres have been seen as previously, to what shape the tracked activity suggests them to take. In providing an overview of the baseline data used in this thesis, the chapter also establishes the overall blogging patterns ahead of the specific activity analysed in the case studies of Chapters Five to Seven. Finally, by outlining both blogospheres, this chapter responds to the third research question by identifying any differences between French and Australian political blogging, at the blogroll network level and in the total activity tracked. These findings will be returned to in the final chapter of this thesis.

The Australian political blogosphere

In Chapter One, the discussion of political blogging over the last decade noted that the major examples of news stories being broken or led by bloggers mostly occurred in the U.S. between 2002 and 2005, before blogging was widely adopted by the mainstream media. In Australia, though, blogs were not as quick to achieve similar levels of prominence or impact. By the time of the 2007 Federal election, the Australian blogosphere was described as having ‘not yet come of age’, and had not had a ‘real impact’ through influencing politics, media coverage, or public opinion (Simons, 2007. 219). Since then, political blogging in Australia has garnered further attention, with the work of bloggers attracting responses from, and at times the ire of, the mainstream media (Bruns, 2008). Indeed, the primary episode which suggests a coming of age for the Australian political blogosphere is the Grogsgate episode, when the identity and occupation of a pseudonymous blogger who had some impact in reshaping election campaign coverage were revealed by *The Australian* newspaper. Key events surrounding Grogsgate were outlined in Chapter Two.

As with the U.S. political blogosphere, the prominent Australian political blogs are long-established, although some have appeared in various guises over the last decade. Unlike its U.S. counterpart, though, the Australian political blogosphere is not only a smaller space but has also been seen as a less partisan arena. Bahnisch (2006) suggests that the lack of a great divide in Australia along similar lines to the U.S. blogosphere’s Democrat/Republican split may be in part because of the identity of the bloggers concerned. Rather than journalists or activists, some of the prominent Australian political bloggers are instead academics and economists. Bahnisch also notes that there is a general spread of blogs across the main ideological groups present in Australian politics, from the left (ostensibly the preserve of the Australian Labor Party) and Greens, via centrists and libertarians, to the conservative right and Liberal Party (143). However, while blogs may have a declared political affiliation, Simons (2007) describes interactions between blogs of different political views, noting that ‘since bloggers leap fences and comment on each other’s sites, this doesn’t mean that any blog is uniformly left or right’ (221). Similarly, previous claims of the Australian political blogosphere overall favouring

the left side of politics have been both challenged and criticised for focussing on ideological aspects of blogging activity over other phenomena such as interactions through comment threads (in Garden, 2010, 20).

The Australian political blogosphere features representatives of the different types introduced in Chapter One. Among the most prominent sites in the blogosphere are several group blogs, reflecting the stages of development for political blogs from personal comment to group discussions. Simons (2007) finds that ‘most of the interesting blogging activity is done by loose collectives rather than individuals’ (220), including such group blogs and multiple-contributor sites as *Larvatus Prodeo* (LP), *Club Troppo*, *The Catallaxy Files*, and *On Line Opinion*.¹¹⁶ These sites represent different political perspectives, with *Larvatus Prodeo* on the Left/Green side of politics and *Club Troppo* and *Catallaxy* more centrist – the latter being a libertarian blog (Bahnisch, 2006). Three of these blogs are featured in the data collection for this study. As noted in Chapter Three, though, not all blogs in the initial list of sites had posts successfully collected, and *Club Troppo* is present in this study only through links from other blogs.

Specialist blogs are also prominent within the Australian political blogosphere, with a number of different subjects attracting coverage from bloggers. Several thematic groups can be identified around shared topics. Economic blogs, for example, intersect with Australian politics through the work of Joshua Gans and fellow authors on *Core Economics*,¹¹⁷ and John Quiggin on his eponymous blog and additional contributions to *On Line Opinion*. Elsewhere, analysis of polling data and election results is carried out on several political blogs, from the *Crikey*-hosted *Pollytics* and *The Poll Bludger* (and their respective earlier incarnations) to *The Tally Room*,¹¹⁸ *Mumble*, *Antony Green*, and *OzPolitics*.¹¹⁹ The bloggers running these sites may not be covering ‘politics in general’, unless it coincides with opinion polls or approval ratings, but as noted in Chapter Two, psephological blogs have become established, if somewhat controversial, voices within the mediasphere.

¹¹⁶ *On Line Opinion* falls structurally between a blog and an opinion site, but is treated in this study as a blog rather than an alternative media site like *Crikey*. <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au>

¹¹⁷ <http://www.economics.com.au/>

¹¹⁸ <http://www.tallyroom.com.au/>

¹¹⁹ <http://www.ozpolitics.info/>

The controversy stems from the response by *The Australian* newspaper to alternative interpretation of *Newspoll* figures by psephologist bloggers in 2007. Both this episode and the later Grogsgate have shown how for some mainstream media outlets, blogs and other online media are still seen as opponents to be attacked (and the reverse is also apparent). This is not to say, though, that the Australian mainstream media have foregone blogging altogether. One of the first prominent Australian blogs, Margo Kingston's *Webdiary*, had its origins on the website of *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 2000. Later, News Limited established blogs on its *News.com.au* site, featuring previously known bloggers such as Tim Dunlop, and journalists and commentators who blogged independently, including Tim Blair and Andrew Bolt. The News Limited stable of blogs was added to with blogs run through *The Australian* website, such as those by Janet Albrechtsen¹²⁰ and George Megalogenis (*Meganomics*), while the Fairfax sites also set up blogs which later migrated to the *National Times* website (Garden, 2010). Some of the mainstream media blogs have amounted to little more than online reproductions of opinion columns. While readers have the ability to comment on posts published on these blogs, some of these mainstream media bloggers are not in the habit of responding to their audience (Bruns & Wilson, 2010). However, this is not true of all mainstream media-run blogs, and Garden (2010) argues that 'several of the blogs of mainstream journalists outshine their alternative counterparts in terms of blogger-audience interactivity' (29).

Simons (2007) describes the Australian political and news blogospheres as examples of 'gift economy', with bloggers 'giving their best thoughts free or for very little reward' (220). Of the alternative voices within the mediasphere, publishing through blogs or other online platforms, only *Crikey* restricts access to its content to paying subscribers. Even then, the restricted content mostly refers to items within the site's daily newsletter, with the blogs hosted by *Crikey* remaining accessible to non-subscribers. Other sites operate with the help of readers' donations, but do not limit who can read the items published. *Crikey* and *New Matilda* are among the more prominent Australian alternative media sites, established in 2000 and 2004 respectively. In recent years, sites operating with

¹²⁰ Janet Albrechtsen is a columnist for *The Australian*. Her blog is found at <http://blogs.theaustralian.news.com.au/janetalbrechtsen/>

similar approaches, featuring contributions from guest writers and members of the editorial team, have been set up by the ABC (*The Drum / Unleashed*), News Limited (*The Punch*), and Fairfax (*The National Times*). Posts on these sites are open for comment, and highlight the further blurring of boundaries between the functions and format of blog and mainstream media content.

As mentioned in Chapter One, politicians, political parties, and government departments have not taken as willingly to blogging in Australia as they have in other countries. At a federal level, the primary example of a politician blogging was Andrew Bartlett, a Senator from Queensland, who continues to blog having left the Senate in 2008. Going in the opposite direction, in 2010 economics academic and blogger Andrew Leigh was elected to the Federal parliament. Other politicians have launched blogs on their own sites, such as Malcolm Turnbull, or had their print columns repositioned as blogs, such as Lindsay Tanner,¹²¹ but these have not always proved long-lasting or interactive spaces for commentary. The same is true for government-run blogs. A Department of Broadband, Communications, and the Digital Economy (DBCDE) blog¹²² established in 2008 was flooded with comments about the government's plans for a 'cleanfeed' internet filter and a national broadband scheme. Immediate responses to individual comments were not forthcoming, though, instead being covered in bulk in a post published two weeks later (Bruns & Wilson, 2010). For the most part, then, the Australian political blogosphere responds to, but does not feature contributions from, Australian politicians. Instead, its main protagonists are academics and economists, journalists and mainstream media commentators, group blogs and subject-specific analysts. Rather than the liberal/conservative divide witnessed in the U.S. political blogosphere, opposition within the Australian political blogosphere is more often a disagreement between 'official' and 'unofficial' commentators. Representatives of blogs and alternative media sites challenge, and are criticised by, the mainstream media, reflecting aspects of the blogger-journalist dynamic discussed in Chapter Two.

¹²¹ Lindsay Tanner was Finance Minister in the Rudd government, before quitting politics ahead of the 2010 federal election. His blog posts featured at <http://blogs.theage.com.au/business/lindsaytanner/>

¹²² Archived at http://www.archive.dbcde.gov.au/2009/july/future_directions_blog/

The French political blogosphere

The French were seen as ‘early adopters’ of blogging, taking to the platform in great numbers. By the end of 2006, a report by market research group Forrester Research (2006) gave the population of the French blogosphere to be at around one million bloggers, while Vedel (2008) estimates over eight million French blogs have been created across several platforms, many of which have since become abandoned or deleted. Politics was not the only subject discussed by French bloggers, although it was, and remains, a prominent subgenre. A 2007 map of the French ‘blogarchie’, based on the most active French language blogs, is organised thematically to highlight the various topics featured, from technology and politics to poetry and photography (Druaux, 2007). Similarly, a 2009 network visualisation of the top-ranked blogs listed by *Wikio.fr* showed the sizeable populations of, and interlinking between, clusters of blogs discussing topics such as politics, sport, and science (Wikio Labs, 2009). While this study looks specifically at political blogging, some overlap with and linking to blogs ostensibly belonging to other thematic clusters, such as media and law blogs, would be expected based on these previous studies. Further detail about any subgroups within the political blogosphere, though, is not as forthcoming in these maps: although Druaux’s visualisation, for example, includes blogs from the left and right of French politics, the organisation does not show whether or not the bloggers concerned link to each other, or are even aware of each other’s presence.

Unlike the Australian political blogosphere, ideology plays a more important role in the views promoted and sites linked to within the French political blogosphere. Here, blogs have previously been found to promote views from across the political spectrum, ranging from supporters of the Communist Party to the extreme right-wing Front National (FN) (Fouetillou, 2006a). A snapshot of the French political blogosphere during the 2007 Presidential election (RTGI, 2007) shows large groups of sites supporting the major parties, the PS, centre-right Union pour un mouvement populaire (UMP), and centrist Union pour la démocratie française (UDF, soon to be repositioned within the Mouvement démocrate or MoDem). Alongside these groups, though, there is significant representation of parties such

as les Verts (the Greens) and FN, as well as minor parties including the right-wing Mouvement pour la France (MPF) and centrist Cap21.

The snapshot of the French political blogosphere at a moment of national interest, the Presidential election in 2007, provides a useful introduction to the range of perspectives presented by these bloggers. While not all of the sites included in RTGI's Blogopole (2007) study would be expected to be active in 2009, let alone in 2011, the distribution of blogs across the major and minor political parties gives some indication of the dominant ideologies supported in the blogosphere. Blogs supporting a given party are not always run by citizens, though. Unlike the Australian case, French political parties and politicians have taken to blogging as an additional information platform as well as a channel for commenting on events and issues. Politicians at the local and federal levels alike have run, or continue to run, their own blogs, including former President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, former centre-right Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, former PS Finance Minister and National Secretary Dominique Strauss-Kahn (who blogged while an active parliamentarian),¹²³ and current UMP Minister within the Sarkozy government Alain Juppé. Official party sites also incorporated blogs as a means of publishing announcements, including both the PS¹²⁴ and the UMP.¹²⁵ While some of these blogs may act solely as hosts for press releases and politicians' public schedules, though, French politicians also use their sites for other intentions, such as commenting on political events and causes. A study of politician blogs has found French parliamentarians to feature a mix of methods in blogging, from diary and link blogs to opinion and campaign-focused sites (Lehti, 2011).

The French political blogosphere also features contributions from journalists, both posting for mainstream media employers and blogging independently. Mainstream media blogs are among the prominent nodes of the political blogosphere, particularly those discussing specialist subjects. *Libération's* European politics blog, *Coulisses de Bruxelles*, for example, is a central reference for blogs commenting on

¹²³ Strauss-Kahn closed his blog – <http://www.blogdsk.net/dsk/> – in August 2007, nearly four years before his term as Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund ended amid allegations of sexual assault in May 2011.

¹²⁴ Formerly at <http://hebdo.partisocialiste.fr>

¹²⁵ Formerly at <http://blog-ump.typepad.fr/blog> – both the PS and UMP have folded the blogs into the informational and interactive aspects of their websites.

that subject, while the blog itself was ranked the top French political blog by *Wikio.fr* in September 2008. Other mainstream media initiatives have taken different approaches to incorporating aspects of blogging and citizen journalism. *Le Post*, for example, is an alternative media site allowing citizens to contribute and distribute commentary, but which is owned by *Le Monde*. Other alternative media sites are more independent, such as citizen journalism site *AgoraVox*¹²⁶ and the news and opinion site *Rue89*, which was set up by former journalists for *Libération*. A further site, *Mediapart*, mixes the two forms, providing journalistic content alongside contributions from internet users. French political bloggers may have accounts on several of these sites, contributing to *AgoraVox* for example as well as posting to their own blog. While French political blogs may be promoting a particular ideology, they are also referencing and responding to the work of mainstream and alternative media sites.

The ability of French bloggers to report news stories, and to critique the work of journalists, was noted in late 2005 in the wake of riots and protests in Parisian suburbs, and later throughout France following the deaths of two teenagers after a police chase. Blog posts responded to apparent self-censorship by the mainstream media by downplaying the extent of social unrest (Russell, 2007, 293), while first-hand reports and gossip were spread by bloggers on the scene and around the world (291). The accuracy of the messages being pushed through the blogosphere varied, with different views on the political and racial aspects to the unrest being published. Three bloggers using the *Skyblog* platform¹²⁷ were arrested on suspicion of upsetting public order by inciting violence with their posts (Allard & Blondeau, 2006, 207; Russell, 2007). Blogs were also used by the mainstream media in their coverage of the riots. For example, the Swiss magazine *L'Hebdo*¹²⁸ established *BondyBlog*,¹²⁹ reporting from the Paris suburb of Bondy and incorporating comments from locals. After the riots, the blog became a citizen journalism platform for Bondy residents (Echchaibi, 2009).

¹²⁶ <http://www.agoravox.fr/>

¹²⁷ <http://www.skyrock.com/blog/>

¹²⁸ <http://www.hebdo.ch/>

¹²⁹ During this study, *Bondy Blog* had moved to a 20 minutes-hosted blog, but has since moved again: <http://yahoo.bondyblog.fr/>

Blogs were also used in protest movements. Students campaigning against a proposed youth employment law in 2006 organised their activities in part through the blogosphere (Crouzillacq, 2006). Later that year, blogs, including video blogs, became key components of pre-election campaigns as politicians sought their party's nomination as Presidential candidates (Yanoshevsky, 2009). In particular, the Parti Socialiste candidate Ségolène Royal promoted 'SégoLand', a network of blogs supporting her candidacy, and encouraged citizen perspectives to be contributed to her campaign (Fouetillou, 2006b; Vaccari, 2008a).

The 2007 Presidential election had a noticeable impact on French political blogging. The election was seen as the first in which the internet 'played a major role' in France (Kuhn, 2007a, 324), in particular through the citizen consultation and online promotion of Royal and her *Desirs d'Avenir* campaign. Although Royal lost to the UMP candidate Nicolas Sarkozy in the second round of voting, the use of the internet in campaigning underlined the importance of online platforms to candidates. The result of the election had a further, lasting impact on the French political blogosphere, with Nicolas Sarkozy's success leading several bloggers to set up anti-Sarkozy blogs, some of which grew to become major nodes within the French political blogosphere.

The launch of these anti-Sarkozy blogs also saw the creation of the collective *les vigilants*, a group of bloggers opposing the new President. As the name would suggest, some of the bloggers concerned promoted surveillance of Sarkozy's actions and decisions. The *Sarkofrance* series of blogs, for example, which appear on multiple platforms, acts as a Sarkozy watchdog. Shared ideological views also led to the creation of the *Leftblogs* group.¹³⁰ Other prominent collectives in the French political blogosphere, though, are not focussed on a single political person or party, and reflect shared beliefs or interests rather than a common ideology. The *Réseau LHC*, for example, is made up of blogs with like-minded values of liberty, humanism, and critical expression, while *les kiwis* are a group of bloggers favouring original and independent analysis and debate.¹³¹ A further collective, *les freemen*,¹³²

¹³⁰ <http://leftblogs.info/>

¹³¹ <http://kiwisphere.blogspot.com/> The name *kiwi* was chosen because, like the 'curious' bird, members were encouraged to be original in their discourse. In the introduction to the collective's charter, the comparison is elaborated further in the statement that, like the kiwi, maybe bloggers

was established by bloggers discussing the problem of climate change and its ecological, political, and economic consequences (Cardon & Delaunay-Teterel, 2006, 60). While not group blogs in themselves, these collectives follow the typology introduced in Chapter One, where bloggers move from posting individually to joining the discussion of a particular topic and may, eventually, form a group around this subject. The creation of blog ‘communities’ is also fostered by events such as ‘*la République des blogs*’, face-to-face gatherings of bloggers, and the discussion of blog rankings released by *Wikio.fr*. By following the monthly rankings, bloggers may become more aware of other voices in the blogosphere, and of the subjects they are discussing.

The creation of several collectives has not only served to connect voices from across the blogosphere and from different regions of France. Aggregating the perspectives put forward in the member blogs of the collective arguably presents a more visible and identifiable authority on a given theme, such as climate change, than would be found when looking at each blog in isolation (Cardon & Delaunay-Teterel, 2006, 60). Group visibility is achieved not just through the presence of central sites collecting the posts made by members. Contributing bloggers also promote the posts published by others within the collective. This may be by linking to posts for further opinion or analysis, or through including automatically updating widgets displaying the latest posts from members of *Leftblogs* in a sidebar on a blog. The presence of collectives also suggests that French blogs will interact with each other, linking and responding to each other’s work to draw attention to the views published by a blogger’s peers. Mainstream and alternative media sources may still be common resources for the French political blogosphere, but these bloggers would also be expected to link to other blogs in their discussions, including but not restricted to fellow members of the collective. Later in this chapter, the creation of networks from links in blogrolls and blog posts is accompanied by identification of any clustering between members of these collectives, and among shared ideologies.

favours originality are also at risk of extinction. (<http://kiwisphere.blogspot.com/2008/11/la-charte.html>)

¹³² <http://blpwebzine.blogs.com/champg/>

The blogospheres in this study

The blogospheres featured in this thesis are not the same as those described in the preceding sections. Technical restrictions and sampling limits mean that this study is not able to study the entire French or Australian political blogospheres. Instead, this thesis examines the activity and themes covered within a subset of the two systems. The sites featured here together act as representatives of the overall systems, allowing this thesis to identify patterns and processes among bloggers that can then be applied to the wider blogosphere and mediasphere. In this study, the Australian blog analysis draws on 10,529 posts from 61 blogs, while the French blogosphere draws on 28,855 posts from 190 blogs.¹³³

As discussed in Chapter Three, data were not collected successfully from all of the major sites in the overall political blogospheres, despite these sites being in the initial blog list created for this study. These sites still appear within the case studies and the final dataset, but in the role of references cited by other blogs, not through their own posts. For the Australian political blogosphere, this means that blogs such as *Club Troppo*, Andrew Bolt, and Tim Blair, are not represented through their own posts or links to other sites, while absent French blogs include *Coulistes de Bruxelles*, *Ma vie en narcisses*, and *Peuples.net*.¹³⁴ Their presence within the overall and topical networks is due to how they are seen by other bloggers tracked here.

This study does not claim to show how every site within the Australian or French political blogospheres covers politics, but instead uses a partial network approach (Hogan, 2008) to identify patterns of blog activity in different contexts. Hogan describes the partial network approach as a realistic compromise between attempting to study a large system, such as the blogosphere, and the barriers to collecting all activity from every relevant site. Analysing a partial network allows researchers to identify patterns and relationships between sites, generalisations which may then be applied to the wider system. The absence of several leading blogs from the study at hand, as noted in Chapter Three, does mean that the specific networks of blogs featured here need to be introduced.

¹³³ The individual blogs from which data were collected are listed in Appendix A.

¹³⁴ <http://peuples.net/>

In the following sections, the blogs from which data were collected, and the networks connecting them, are depicted in two ways. First, the blogroll networks formed by static links in blogroll lists on each blog are visualised, showing the network of affiliations among the blogs in the sample. This network shows the implied connections and associations between blogs, and the sites that bloggers find interesting or pertinent. However these links might not necessarily be borne out in the citations bloggers make in their posts. Therefore, a second network maps the total in-post citations created during the data collection, presenting the overall activity tracked over the seven months featured in this study.

The two stages of visualisation serve a number of purposes. Mapping the blogroll networks enables the study to locate the network of affiliation among the blogs in the sample. This is the network made of the connections bloggers choose to display permanently, links to sites with which they are affiliated, sites they find interesting, or with which they would like to be associated. The blogroll networks in this study show the featured bloggers and their peers. The blogroll, more than the links in a blog's posts, enables the blogger to construct how they see themselves in relation to the rest of the blogosphere. Through these connections, groups of blogs organised around themes or popular resources, and collectives of affiliated blogs, can be identified. This is an important process, as it provides the first look at the subsections of the French and Australian political blogospheres featured in this study, highlighting which sites appear as central to the blogroll network, as well as the presence of any groups within it. These findings are then compared with the linking activity of the same blogs in posts published between January and August 2009.

Mapping the aggregated in-post linking activity over the seven months of data collection highlights the primary references cited during this study, the popular resources for both French and Australian political bloggers. This allows for a comparison between the network of affiliations, drawing on permanent but static blogroll links (many of which predate January 2009), with the composite citation network created from links made in the blog posts collected for this study. The composite data also accompany an overview of the total activity tracked between January and August 2009, the most active blogs and the most repeated links.

Blogroll networks

The initial context for this thesis's analysis of Australian and French political blogs is provided through the blogroll networks for each group of sites. Blogrolls are an ideal data source for identifying affiliations between blogs and how bloggers position themselves within the blogosphere, as the lists of links are independent of the content of blog posts and the links within these posts.

Blogroll data were collected by visiting each site represented in the final data collection and manually recording the links found in blogrolls. For this thesis, a blogroll was treated as a semi-permanent section of a blog containing a list of links, be it a list in a sidebar on the main blog page or on a separate page clearly linked from the main page of the blog. The inclusion of lists on separate pages allowed for a more comprehensive view of the semi-permanent connections between the sites in the sample, especially as some blogs highlight a selection of links from the overall blogroll on the main page, but only show the full list on a separate page. Some blogs in the sample did not feature blogrolls in either format, while a few used automated widgets, operated from a third-party, which highlighted only some of their blogroll links or the latest posts from a group of sites. As it was not possible to successfully collect all links appearing in these third-party widgets, no links of this type were included within the blogroll dataset. Blogroll links were obtained from 54 of the 61 Australian blogs (88.5%), and 177 of 190 French blogs (93.2%), included in this study.

As noted in Chapter Three, blogroll links are often described as comparatively 'static' connections due to their semi-permanence on a blog, in comparison to the dynamic, fleeting existence of in-post citations (Kelly, 2008; Zuckerman, 2008). Their importance lies in helping bloggers to construct an image of how they are connected to the rest of the blogosphere, and to other sites of interest. Kelly (2008) describes blogrolls as representing 'a collective picture of bloggers' perceptions of the blogosphere and their own positions within it' (5). Park and Kluver (2009) argue that, while in-post citations are useful for tracking the coverage of a particular issue by blogs, the links made in blogrolls are 'a reliable indicator for interpersonal networks among bloggers [... as they] better represent social

relationships among bloggers' (508). While blogrolls do not automatically translate into readership of blogs, and certainly do not imply reciprocal linking, the links 'serve as a way for the blogger to identify with his or her friends, community, and interests' (Adamic, 2008, 230).¹³⁵

To visualise these connections, blogrolls were identified, where possible, for each blog from which data were successfully collected. The links for each blog were then listed in a spreadsheet for the respective blogosphere, noting both the original blog and the site being cited. The total links were then run through *Gephi* to generate the network maps. Each blog and site included in a blogroll appears as a node in the network, while each link between sites forms an edge between the corresponding nodes.

Two visualisations of the French and Australian political blogroll networks are presented here. First, each network was reduced to include only those nodes with a degree range of two or more, removing those sites sending or receiving less than two links in total. With some blogs linking to over 200 sites in their blogrolls, reducing the number of nodes visible is crucial for making sense of the overall network. As with the other filtering processes in *Gephi* carried out for this thesis, the degree range being filtered is not weighted. The network is then laid out using the Force Atlas algorithm, as explained in Appendix B.

Nodes are formatted based on the number of in-links received and out-links made by each blog. The largest nodes are those receiving the most citations, and the blogs with the most out-links have the darker colour in the network. A large white node, then, would be a site referenced in several blogrolls, but which does not provide a blogroll of its own or is not present in the sample. A small, dark blue node, on the other hand, is a blog not appearing in other blogrolls, but with a long blogroll of its own. The second stage uses the same processes, but highlights the

¹³⁵ Another form of blogroll is that studied by Koop and Jansen (2009) in their research into Canadian blogs. In their study, 'blogrolls' describe centrally located, thematically organised sites, with bloggers becoming members of a particular blogroll. These are like the blog collectives seen in the French political blogosphere, where each collective has its own site where the posts of its affiliated bloggers are aggregated. This form of blogroll, becoming more like blog communities than a list of links, is not as common in Australia, and in this study 'blogrolls' refer specifically to static lists of links.

Feminists and female bloggers

- 1. Barista
- 2. ...Cast Iron Balcony
- 3. crazybrave
- 4. Hoyden about Town

Economists

- 11. John Quiggin
- 12. Andrew Leigh
- 13. Core Economics

Psephologists

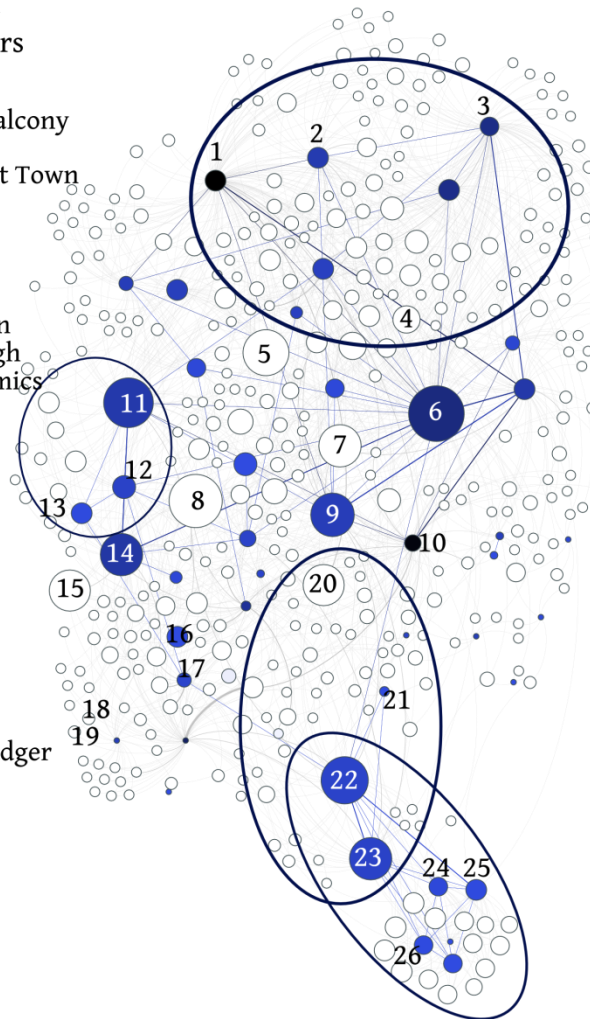
- 20. OzPolitics
- 21. Tally Room
- 22. Pollytics
- 23. The Poll Bludger

- 5. Road to Surfdom
- 6. Larvatus Prodeo
- 7. An Onymous Lefty
- 8. Club Troppo
- 9. Andrew Bartlett

- 10. Antony Loewenstein
- 14. The Catallaxy Files
- 15. Andrew Norton
- 16. On Line Opinion
- 17. Peter Martin
- 18. Andrew Bolt
- 19. Tim Blair

Crikey blogs

- 22. Pollytics
- 23. The Poll Bludger
- 24. Rooted
- 25. Pure Poison
- 26. Content Makers



443 nodes, 1514 edges (filtered from 2369 nodes, 3440 edges)

Node size: Incoming citations (larger node, more citations received)

Node colour: Outgoing citations (darker node, more citations made)

Straight edge: Mutual link

Curved edge: Single direction link

Edge weight: Number of times link repeated (thicker edge, link made more frequently)

Figure 4.1: Australian political blogosphere, blogroll network. Mutual links are highlighted.

mutual links between blogs in the sample. These are shown as straight lines, while non-reciprocal links are the lighter, curved lines. Focussing on the mutual links, particularly for blogroll networks, enables some identification of densely interlinked groups of blogs.

The Australian political blogosphere: blogroll network

The blogrolls of all 61 Australian political blogs appearing in this study lead to a network containing 2369 nodes and 3440 edges. After filtering the network to include only those nodes with a degree range greater than or equal to two, the final system features 443 nodes and 1514 edges. The visualised network can be seen in Figure 4.1.

With no requirements or guidelines on how many sites to include in a blogroll, the length of the blogrolls featured here varies significantly. 54 of the 61 blogs included blogrolls. The longest contains 352 out-links, while eight further bloggers link to more than 100 sites in their blogrolls. The largest blogrolls are listed in Table 4.1. The size of blogrolls varies drastically. The mean blogroll contained 65 links, while the median was 44 links. The length of the blogrolls featured by the blogs in the sample follows a long-tail distribution, seen in Figure 4.2. This distribution shows that a few blogs contain very long blogrolls, while the majority of blogs feature much shorter lists of links.

Unsurprisingly, given the blogroll link's primary function as a connection to other blogs, the prominent nodes within the Australian political blogosphere's blogroll network are blogs. These include several of the major players previously noted, such as *Larvatus Prodeo*, *Club Troppo*, *John Quiggin*, and *Pollytics*, alongside other political and non-political blogs. The sites receiving the most citations from blogrolls are listed in Table 4.2. Having an extensive blogroll is not a means of predicting whether or not a blog will be a major node in the network, as only six of the blogs featured in Table 4.1 also appear in Table 4.2.

Blog	Total sites in blogroll
<i>Barista</i> ¹³⁶	352
<i>Antony Loewenstein</i> ¹³⁷	331
<i>Kev Gillett</i> ¹³⁸	205
<i>Larvatus Prodeo</i>	165
<i>crazybrave</i> ¹³⁹	154
<i>Sarsaparilla</i> ¹⁴⁰	150
<i>Balneus</i> ¹⁴¹	128
<i>The Catallaxy Files</i>	110
<i>machine-gun-keyboard</i> ¹⁴²	102
<i>John Quiggin</i>	99
<i>Blogger on the Cast Iron Balcony</i> ¹⁴³	92
<i>Andrew Bartlett (personal site)</i>	80
<i>Knotted Paths</i> ¹⁴⁴	80
<i>Iain Hall</i> ¹⁴⁵	78
<i>Tama Leaver</i>	76
<i>Red Rag</i> ¹⁴⁶	69
<i>Penguin Unearthed</i> ¹⁴⁷	68
<i>bjd.au.com</i> ¹⁴⁸	61
<i>Andrew Leigh</i>	58
<i>The Poll Bludger</i>	58

Table 4.1: Australian political blogs with largest blogrolls

The overview of connections between Australian political blogs provided by Figure 4.1 raises some points of interest for the citation network featured later in this chapter, and also for the thesis's case studies. A number of loose groupings of blogs are visible in the blogroll network, organised not solely along ideological lines but around shared themes. Key concerns for different parts of the Australian political blogosphere, the blogroll network suggests, include psephology (including *OzPolitics*, *Pollytics*, and *The Poll Bludger*) and economics (*John Quiggin*, *Core Economics*,

¹³⁶ <http://barista.media2.org/>

¹³⁷ <http://www.antonyloewenstein.com/>

¹³⁸ <http://kevgillett.net/>

¹³⁹ <http://www.crazybrave.net/>

¹⁴⁰ <http://sarsaparillablog.net/>

¹⁴¹ <http://balneus.wordpress.com/>

¹⁴² <http://www.machinegunkeyboard.com/>

¹⁴³ <http://castironbalcony.media2.org/>

¹⁴⁴ <http://deggles.csoft.net/>

¹⁴⁵ <http://iainhall.wordpress.com/>

¹⁴⁶ <http://redrag.net/>

¹⁴⁷ <http://penguinunearthed.wordpress.com/>

¹⁴⁸ <http://bjd.au.com/>

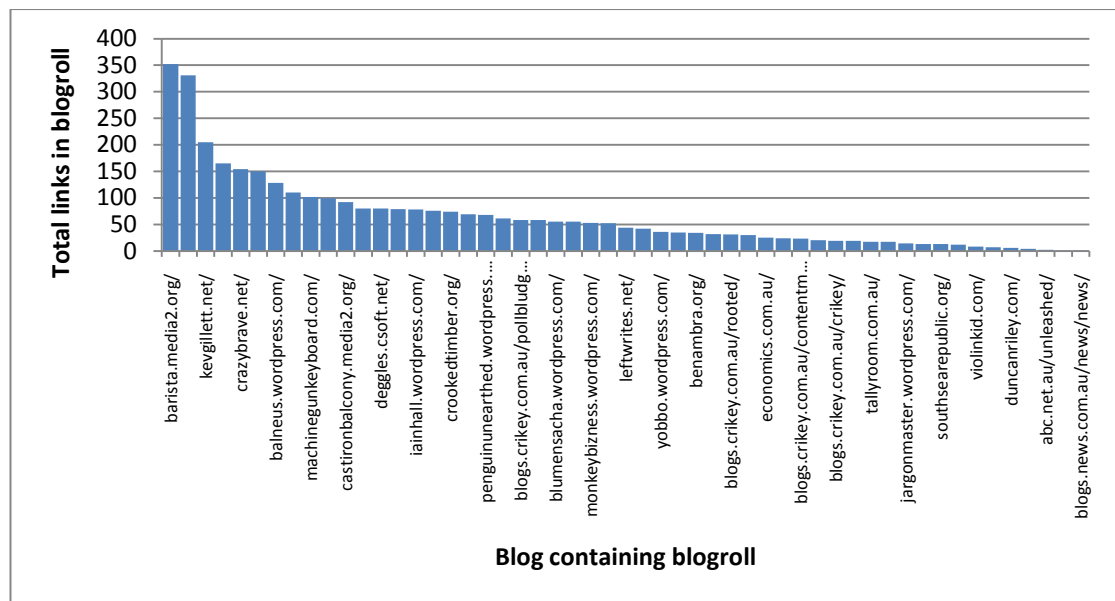


Figure 4.2: Distribution of blogroll length, Australian political blogs

Andrew Leigh). A further group is formed not around a specialist subject as such, but through common backgrounds and views, promoting feminist perspectives and female bloggers (*Hoyden about Town*, *crazybrave*, *Blogger on the Cast Iron Balcony*).

Each of these three groups within the political blogosphere may extend beyond this space, as the discussion of politics gives way to other topics. This is most notable with the group of female bloggers, where members may variously promote politics, literature, or local events, and where the style of blogging ranges from opinion pieces to personal diaries. What Figure 4.1 shows for this group is part of the intersection between the Australian political blogosphere and feminist blogospheres. In Chapter Two, I discussed the idea of the public sphere being made up of different spheres of interest and affiliation. Figure 4.1 highlights several of these spheres which together contribute to the political blogosphere. The visualisation itself may be limited to the sites featured in blogrolls on the more or less *political* blogs represented in this study, but the different thematic spaces stretch beyond the edges of Figure 4.1. In this way, a site such as *Hoyden about Town*, which receives several blogroll citations from political blogs but which also includes in its own blogroll many blogs from the wider feminist blogosphere outside of ‘politics’ in a narrow sense, acts as a bridge between thematic blogospheres. The blog itself features discussions which reflect the interests of

different groups of blogs, and through its content and links, the political and feminist blogospheres, for example, may be connected.

Site	Total blogs linking to site	% blogs linking to site
<i>Larvatus Prodeo</i>	23	43.4%
<i>Club Troppo</i>	21	39.6%
<i>John Quiggin</i>	18	34.0%
<i>Pollytics</i>	16	30.2%
<i>Road to Surfdom</i>	15	28.3%
<i>Andrew Bartlett (personal site)</i>	13	24.5%
<i>The Catallaxy Files</i>	12	22.6%
<i>An Onymous Lefty</i> ¹⁴⁹	12	22.6%
<i>The Poll Bludger</i>	12	22.6%
<i>OzPolitics</i>	11	20.8%
<i>Andrew Norton</i> ¹⁵⁰	11	20.8%
<i>Daily Flute</i> ¹⁵¹	10	18.9%
<i>Hoyden about Town</i> ¹⁵²	10	18.9%
<i>Public Opinion</i> ¹⁵³	9	17.0%
<i>Blogocracy</i>	9	17.0%
<i>Deltoid</i> ¹⁵⁴	8	15.1%
<i>Andrew Leigh</i>	8	15.1%
<i>South Sea Republic</i> ¹⁵⁵	8	15.1%
<i>Ampersand Duck</i> ¹⁵⁶	8	15.1%
<i>There aint no sanity clause</i> ¹⁵⁷ (sic)	8	15.1%

Table 4.2: Sites linked to from the most Australian political blog (blogroll links)

Reversing this flow, we can also see that there is a group of central blogs within the blogroll network who act as connectors for the thematic groups. These connectors include *Larvatus Prodeo*, *Club Troppo*, and *Road to Surfdom*, which each receive citations from over a quarter of the blogrolls used to create Figure 4.1. If the other groups discussed so far within Figure 4.1 represent specialist blogs (in Chapter One's typology), then these central blogs can be seen as the 'politics in general' sites, and potentially as the Australian political blogosphere's A-list sites. They may cover other topics too, but politics is arguably their specialist subject. Within the

¹⁴⁹ <http://anonymouslefty.wordpress.com/>

¹⁵⁰ <http://andrewnorton.info/>

¹⁵¹ <http://dailyflute.com/> (now defunct)

¹⁵² <http://viv.id.au/>

¹⁵³ <http://www.sauer-thompson.com/>

¹⁵⁴ <http://scienceblogs.com/deltoid/>

¹⁵⁵ <http://southsearepublic.org/>

¹⁵⁶ <http://ampersandduck.blogspot.com/>

¹⁵⁷ http://governor_general.blogspot.com/

blogroll network, they appear to bridge the groups of psephologists, economists, and feminists. Later in this thesis, we will see whether the same is true for the in-post citations tracked from this sample of Australian political blogs. The effect of bridging may also be seen in the distribution of sites within Figure 4.1. While not all blogs link to these central sites, their connections across multiple groups help to anchor the network. Links within, and beyond, thematic groups and through these blogs then help to bring the sites featured here closer together, reducing the number of completely isolated groups. The small sample of blogs featured in this study may also affect this, but what Figure 4.1 suggests is that different Australian political bloggers would be aware of many of the other contributors to the blogosphere, either individually or on a thematic level.

Ideologies may have some impact on the layout of Figure 4.1 too, with groupings of libertarian, including *The Catallaxy Files*, and left-wing/green bloggers, around *Larvatus Prodeo*, respectively found within the blogroll network. These groups overlap with the different theme-oriented associations, suggesting shared interests between blogs promoting specialist analysis and those offering partisan comment. The groups identified are not mutually exclusive. Not all blogs discussing economic themes would be economists, for example, although the most visible blogs within the group are. In addition to finding blogs within multiple groups, we would also expect some interlinking between them, and this idea will also be examined further later in this chapter.

The French political blogosphere: blogroll network

The blogrolls of the initial 190 French political blogs in the sample form a network of 5362 nodes and 8687 edges. As with the Australian blogroll network, this was filtered to include only nodes with a degree range greater than or equal to two, with the resulting visualisation containing 1359 nodes and 4802 edges. This network can be seen in Figure 4.3.

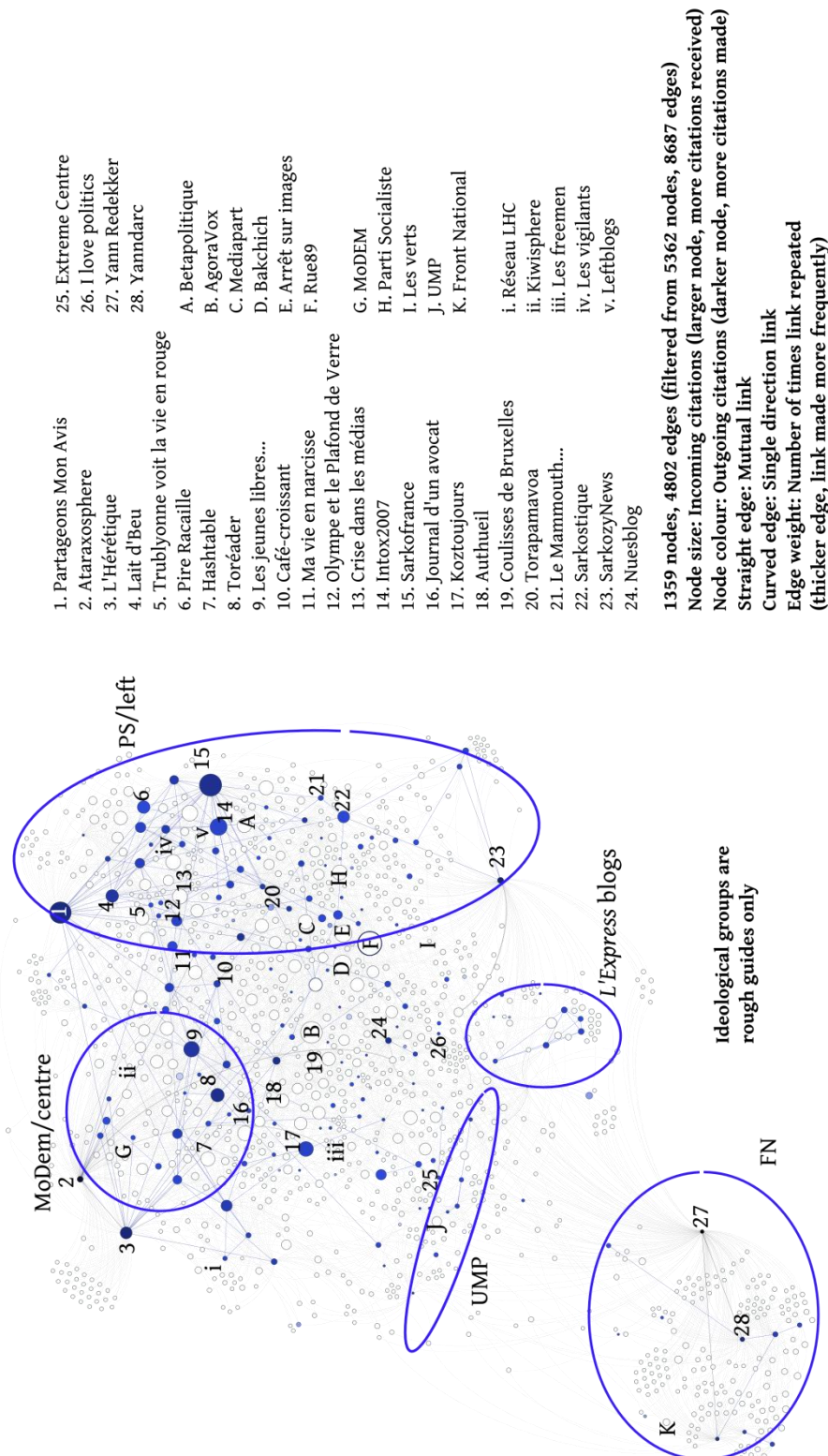


Figure 4.3: French political blogosphere, blogroll network. Mutual links are highlighted.

Blog	Total sites in blogroll
<i>Yann Redekker</i>	512
<i>ataraxosphere</i>	387
<i>Sarkozy News</i> ¹⁵⁸	251
<i>Nuesblog</i> ¹⁵⁹	223
<i>Synthèse Nationale</i> ¹⁶⁰	186
<i>Partageons Mon avis</i>	186
<i>L'Hérétique</i> ¹⁶¹	185
<i>Stephane Poncet</i> ¹⁶²	180
<i>Des jeunes libres de s'engager</i> ¹⁶³	174
<i>Abadinte</i> ¹⁶⁴	169
<i>Lait d'Beu</i> ¹⁶⁵	141
<i>Jean-Luc Romero</i> ¹⁶⁶	135
<i>Polluxe</i> ¹⁶⁷	135
<i>coming ouSt</i> ¹⁶⁸	126
<i>UMP journal de la 8ème</i> ¹⁶⁹	126
<i>Irene Delse</i> ¹⁷⁰	122
<i>Sarkofrance</i>	117
<i>Paulo-Serge Lopes</i> ¹⁷¹	114
<i>I love politics</i> ¹⁷²	110
<i>Christian Bois</i> ¹⁷³	102

Table 4.3: French political blogs with largest blogrolls

The length of blogrolls varies substantially between French political bloggers. Twenty of the blogs featured here maintain blogrolls with over 100 out-links. Of these, one blog, the far-right *Yann Redekker*,¹⁷⁴ links to 512 individual sites in its blogroll, followed by blogs supporting PS, UMP, and Mouvement Democrate. Lengthy blogrolls, it would appear, are not the sole preserve of any single ideology. The mean blogroll contained 50.4 out-links, with a median of 35. This suggests that,

¹⁵⁸ <http://sarkozynews.canalblog.com/>

¹⁵⁹ <http://www.nuesblog.com/>

¹⁶⁰ <http://synthesenationale.hautetfort.com/>

¹⁶¹ <http://heresie.hautetfort.com/>

¹⁶² <http://fnvilleurbanne.hautetfort.com/>

¹⁶³ <http://lesjeuneslibres.hautetfort.com/>

¹⁶⁴ <http://abadinte.canalblog.com/>

¹⁶⁵ <http://kamizole.blog.lemonde.fr/>

¹⁶⁶ <http://romero2008.hautetfort.com/>

¹⁶⁷ <http://polluxe.wordpress.com/>

¹⁶⁸ <http://comingoust.canalblog.com/>

¹⁶⁹ <http://ump9208.typepad.fr/>

¹⁷⁰ <http://www.iredelse.com/>

¹⁷¹ <http://paulosergelopes.hautetfort.com/>

¹⁷² <http://ilovepolitics.info/>

¹⁷³ <http://www.blog-bois.com/>

¹⁷⁴ <http://voxfnredekker.canalblog.com/>

in addition to the extremely long blogrolls of *Yann Redekker* and *Ataraxosphere*¹⁷⁵ there are many blogs with considerably smaller blogrolls, following a similar long tail distribution to the blogrolls in the Australian political blogosphere. The blogs contributing the most out-links to the blogroll network are found in Table 4.3.

While the largest nodes in the Australian blogroll network were predominantly blogs, French political bloggers include a wider range of sites in their blogrolls. Blogs such as *Sarkofrance*, *Partageons Mon Avis*, and *Intox2007*¹⁷⁶ are found alongside alternative and citizen media sites *Rue89* and *AgoraVox*, the website for the media watchdog *Arrêt sur images*,¹⁷⁷ and the official site of the Parti Socialiste. The sites receiving the most citations from French blogroll links are listed in Table 4.4. As with the Australian political blogosphere, linking to more sites does not mean that a blog will receive more links themselves. Only two of the blogs in Table 4.3 also appear in the list of common blogroll links in Table 4.4: *Partageons Mon Avis* and *Sarkofrance*.

Table 4.4 shows that while the French political blogosphere's blogroll network contains some shared resources, these sites are not as central as the major blogs within the Australian political blogosphere. *Larvatus Prodeo* received citations from over 40% of the blogrolls from Australian political blogs, and four further sites were included in over a quarter of the blogrolls. Among French blogs, though, alternative media site *Rue89* has the highest percentage of citations from blogrolls with 16.9%. This would suggest that while the Australian political blogosphere contains a few prominent blogs which bridge different groups, the same behaviour is not seen in the French system. Instead, some sites act as central resources for a group of blogs, but they are not common to *all* the groups seen in Figure 4.3.

Unlike the Australian political blogosphere, where mutual linking meant that completely isolated groups of blogs were rare, there are several such cases in Figure 4.3's visualisation of the French blogroll network. One group of sites contains supporters of, and official sites for, the Front National (FN), an extreme-right political party. Not only do FN bloggers link to local sections of the party,

¹⁷⁵ <http://ataraxosphere.canalblog.com/>

¹⁷⁶ <http://intox2007.info/>

¹⁷⁷ <http://www.arretsurimages.net/>

they also include international far-right political groups in their blogrolls, including the British National Party and the Belgian party Vlaams Belang ('Flemish Interest'). Rather than being connected to French politics, the blogroll network places the FN blogs as connected to far-right politics around the world, a few degrees of separation from the rest of the French political blogosphere. Instead of promoting French nationalism exclusively, this international far-right group promotes shared agendas featured throughout Europe, including racist and anti-Islamic views, which are featured further in issue-specific sites within the far-right group in Figure 4.3.

Site	Total blogs linking to site	Percentage blogs linking to site
<i>Rue89</i>	30	16.9%
<i>Sarkofrance</i>	27	15.3%
<i>AgoraVox</i>	26	14.7%
<i>Partageons Mon Avis</i>	26	14.7%
<i>Bakchich</i> ¹⁷⁸	21	11.9%
<i>Arrêt sur images</i>	20	11.3%
<i>Intox2007</i>	20	11.3%
<i>Peuples.net</i>	18	10.2%
<i>Toréador</i> ¹⁷⁹	18	10.2%
<i>Parti Socialiste</i> (official site)	17	9.6%
<i>Marc Vasseur</i> ¹⁸⁰	17	9.6%
<i>Crise dans les médias</i> ¹⁸¹	17	9.6%
<i>ruminances</i> ¹⁸²	17	9.6%
<i>Journal d'un avocat</i>	17	9.6%
<i>Koztours</i> ¹⁸³	17	9.6%
<i>Mediapart</i>	16	9.0%
<i>SLOVAR</i> ¹⁸⁴	16	9.0%
<i>Betapolitique</i>	16	9.0%
<i>Hashtable</i> ¹⁸⁵	16	9.0%

Table 4.4: Sites linked to from the most French political blog (blogroll links)

¹⁷⁸ <http://www.bakchich.info/>

¹⁷⁹ <http://toreador.fr/>

¹⁸⁰ <http://marcvasseur.info/>

¹⁸¹ <http://crisedanslesmedias.hautetfort.com/>

¹⁸² <http://ruminances.unblog.fr/>

¹⁸³ <http://koztoours.fr/>

¹⁸⁴ <http://slovar.blogspot.com/>

¹⁸⁵ <http://h16.free.fr/>

Ideology has a greater effect on the shape of the French blogroll network than we saw with the Australian blogs. The group of far-right blogs is an extreme example of this ideological effect, separating bloggers promoting nationalist views from the rest of the blogosphere. Figure 4.3 also shows groups of MoDEM, PS, and UMP-supporting blogs, with interlinking among bloggers sharing the same views, but varying mutual connections to other ideological groups. Centre and left blogs appear not just to dominate the blogroll network but also to link to each other more often than is seen among right-wing bloggers. The densest mutual interlinking patterns can be seen among blogs supporting the Mouvement Démocrate, the Parti Socialiste, and, in particular, opposing Nicolas Sarkozy. Interlinking among UMP blogs, and between other ideological groups, at the blogroll level does not appear to be as common. However, the linking patterns in blogrolls may be very different to the patterns of in-post citations. Later in this chapter, the study will investigate whether these partisan groups can also be seen in the networks generated from the total in-post citations collected from the sample.

Ideology is not the only way that French political blogs organise themselves, though. As noted earlier, the French political blogosphere contains a number of blog collectives, from the anti-Sarkozy *les vigilants* to the *Réseau LHC*. These collectives include different approaches to blogging, and while they may focus on a particular perspective or politician, there is a common theme or interest connecting the members of each group. The formation of blog collectives around shared beliefs rather than partisan views means that membership can cross ideological borders. The *kiwisphere* formed by members of *les kiwis*, for example, starts firmly within the centrist group of blogs, but extends across the blogroll network as its members are more ideologically diverse than found within groups organised around a particular politician or campaign. The anti-Sarkozy collective *les vigilants*, for example, overlaps the group of blogs supporting the PS, the largest opposition party to Sarkozy's UMP. *Les kiwis*, on the other hand, are more weakly aligned with specific political parties, instead connecting blogs sharing particular approaches and beliefs. As with the Australian political blogosphere, blogs may be members of different groups within the network, and indeed belong to multiple collectives. There are also some thematic groups present, including bloggers

discussing European Union politics. However, overall, ideology appears to be a stronger connector, and separator, within the French political blogosphere.

The French political blogosphere's blogroll network is a more distributed structure than the Australian example, featuring not just more blogs but more perspectives and ideologies. The impression garnered from the visualisation is of one large, mostly-connected mass, although blogs in different ideological or thematic clusters are several degrees of mutual link away from other parts of the network. While some blogs do take on prominent, anchoring roles around which other blogs are organised, these are within specific ideological groups and collectives rather than the blogosphere at large.

Rather than the thematic grouping seen in the Australian political blogosphere, the French blogroll network is organised along ideological lines, supported by the greater number of citations for the websites of political parties and individual politicians within blogrolls. Ideology appears to be not only more diverse but also more divisive for French bloggers. This may be because of the extremity of views presented and partisanship – PS bloggers would not be expected to include FN sites in their blogrolls, for example – but may also be due to the greater number of parties within the French political landscape, and the larger blogging population featured here. With more blogs discussing politics, French bloggers may have more liberty to choose which ones to follow and which to ignore, especially when different ideologies are involved, and so groups around like-minded blogs may arise. The presence of a number of blogs promoting the FN, unconnected to the rest of the blogosphere through mutual links, would support this view. The main ideologies promoted within the interlinked body of the blogroll network appear to be along left and centre lines, and this may reflect opposition to the centre-right Sarkozy government – certainly a number of blogs are explicitly anti-Sarkozy. Some of these blogs may also have their origins in party initiatives such as Ségoland, the network of blogs established to support the PS Presidential candidate in 2006 and 2007. Even if the original blogs are no longer active, some bloggers may have carried on with the activity on further sites and discussing other topics. In the following sections of this chapter, we will see what connections these new discussions create among bloggers and other sites within the mediasphere.

The identification and visualisation of the networks formed by blogroll links from blogs featured in this study acts to provide context for the two blogospheres, noting the pre-existing connections between bloggers and other sites, and in particular the presence of ideological and thematic clusters of blogs. What limits the amount of information that can be taken from blogroll analysis on its own, though, is the age of the links. The static blogroll is an advantage in that it is a relatively stable aspect of blogs, providing a semi-permanent network of aspirational affiliations compared to the more fleeting connections made through in-post citations. However, studying blogrolls can also be a disadvantage if trying to ascertain a blogger's current interests. If, in blogrolls, bloggers 'link to what is interesting and cool' (Lovink, 2008, 35), there is no way of determining if bloggers still think a given site is interesting or cool unless they change the blogroll. The links can become stale, remaining on a blog months or years after the blogger last read the site in question, or indeed for months after the linked site was closed down (Adamic & Glance, 2005). Hargittai, Gallo, and Kane (2008) have argued for comparing blogroll links with in-post citations, finding that 'while blogrolls are one indicator of the types of content with which bloggers engage, it would be too simplistic to rely solely on such information for an understanding of bloggers' reading habits' (85).

This study uses both blogroll links and in-post citations in its analysis of blogging activity, not only identifying the sites referenced by bloggers, but also comparing the different networks formed and the ways that bloggers interact with each other and with other media sources. In the following section, the analysis turns to the data collected over seven months between 12 January and 10 August 2009. After introducing the baseline data, posting patterns, and the most active sites in the sample, the total out-links collected are visualised, with the resulting networks studied to identify the primary resources referenced in blog posts, and whether any ideological or thematic grouping is apparent in these networks.

Australian and French political blogging, 12 January-10 August 2009

For 211 days, Sociomantic Labs collected blog posts from sites included in the sample list created at the end of 2008. This period saw several topics appear as prominent stories before fading away. A number of global events and personalities dominated headlines at different times. Major news stories in the first half of 2009 included global medical concerns about a swine flu pandemic, protests by Iranian citizens following that country's Presidential election, devastating bushfires in southern Australia, European parliament elections, and the death of Michael Jackson, in addition to the three events and issues featured as case studies in Chapters Five to Seven. These topics feature alongside national and local political commentary, from budget announcements to state elections, in the posts collected from the Australian and French political blogospheres. In total, Sociomantic Labs archived and prepared for analysis 10,529 posts from 61 Australian political blogs, and 28,855 posts from 190 French political blogs.

Overall patterns – Australian political blogs

On average, Australian political blogs published 50 posts per day (49.9) across the period studied here. This comes to approximately 0.82 posts per blog per day, and 5.73 posts per blog per week. Some days were more likely to see lower post totals than others. The Australian political blogosphere's daily output is seen in Figure 4.4, and immediately, a pattern emerges. For two days every week, the number of posts published is noticeably lower than during the rest of the week. These periods of decreased activity coincide with Saturday and Sunday, supporting findings from around the 2007 Federal election, when the Australian political blogosphere was shown to be less productive, in terms of post counts, on weekends (Kirchhoff, Nicolai, Bruns, & Highfield, 2009). Indeed, 18 months after the period featured in that study, the patterns remain consistent. Kirchhoff *et al.* found the weekend activity to be only 60% of the weekday average post totals. In this study, the blogs tracked between January and August 2009 were also less prolific on Saturday and Sunday, with the average weekend output equalling 58% of the weekday average.

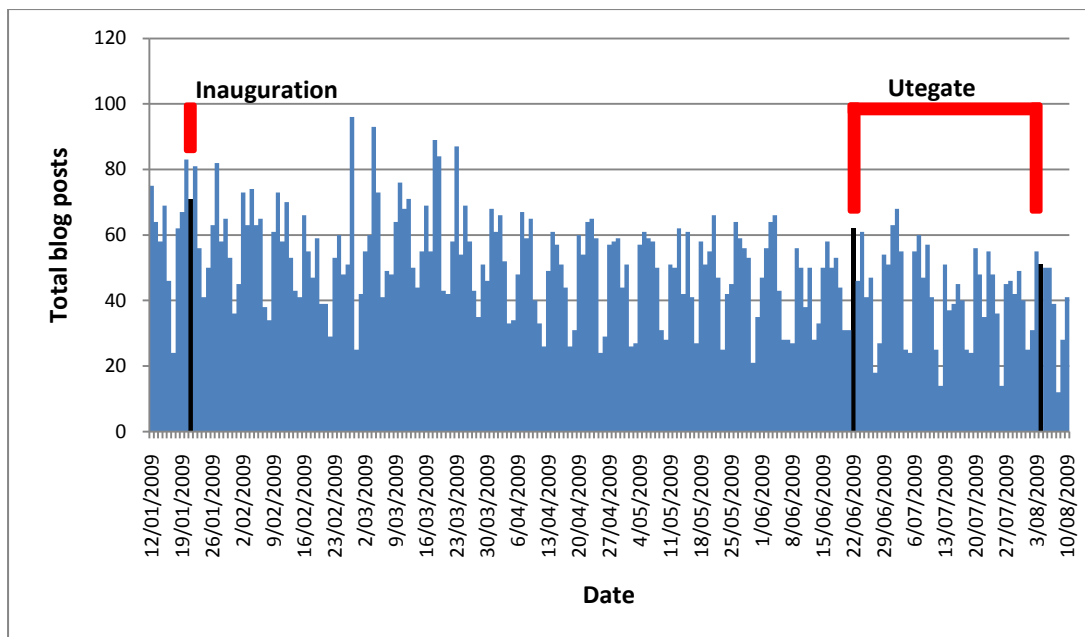


Figure 4.4: Australian political blog activity, January-August 2009

On weekdays, Australian political blogs averaged 56.6 posts per day, while the respective figure for Saturdays and Sundays was 33 (32.95). Individual bloggers posted 0.93 posts per blog per weekday, and 0.54 posts per blog per weekend day – or, as an approximation, once on either Saturday or Sunday. On a day-by-day basis, the highest average was recorded on Thursday (59.3), while Saturday had the lowest average of 31 (30.96) posts. The first four days of the working week, Monday to Thursday, have fairly similar averages, though, falling between 56 and 59 posts per day. Friday, on the other hand, may be seen as signalling the start of the weekend, bridging the weekday peak with the weekend lull. The average post total for Fridays was 50 posts (49.63), a slight decrease from the preceding days. In general, then, the Australian blogs in the study follow a pattern where bloggers post the most content in the middle of the week, with activity decreasing over the weekend, before picking up again on Monday. The link with the working week does not necessarily mean that bloggers are posting at work, and are not as active during their time off – although that is certainly one interpretation of the patterns. It may also be reflective of the news and political cycles in Australia, with weekend totals lower than weekday totals because of fewer developments to which bloggers feel a need to respond.

Troughs in Australian political blog activity generally coincide with weekends, suggesting a habitual lull rather than any extraordinary period of inactivity for the blogosphere as a whole. While the weekly patterns depicted in Figure 4.4 are consistent across the seven months of data collection, a few spikes appear in the graph. These spikes form a cluster of days with heightened blog activity, starting on 27 February 2009 – with 95 posts, the day with the highest post total in the entire study – and including several days leading up to 23 March 2009. Rather than reflecting isolated events, these spikes correspond to the entirety of the 2009 Queensland state election.

The election was announced on 27 February 2009, the campaign ran for three and a half weeks, and the election itself took place on 21 March 2009. As votes were cast on a Saturday, it is unsurprising that the final spike is on 23 March, being the first Monday after the election. A number of angles to the election were of interest to bloggers and journalists alike, particularly with Anna Bligh becoming the first elected female Premier of an Australian state, while the event also reflected the specialist subjects of psephologist bloggers and directly concerned contributors from Queensland. Indeed, when the election was called, *Crikey* launched a new blog, *Pineapple Party Time*, on its *Election Central* domain, hosting contributions from the psephologists behind *Pollytics* and *The Poll Bludger*, as well as from Mark Bahnisch of *Larvatus Prodeo*. Two of these contributors, Possum and Bahnisch, were also based in Queensland themselves.

The election campaign provoked higher post totals than were seen at other times in the Australian political blogosphere. In Figure 4.4, the black columns correspond to key dates within the Australian case studies featured in Chapters Five and Seven respectively. None of these dates corresponds to a spike. Instead, the inauguration and Utegate both fall within bloggers' usual posting patterns, rather than coinciding with periods of extraordinary activity. Even though the Queensland election was only at the state rather than the federal level, the level of blog coverage from the Australian bloggers in this study reflects previous studies that found elections led to heightened levels of political blog activity. For these same reasons, though, the Queensland election was not chosen as a case study for this thesis. While elections provide an important context for political blogging, online

communication, and public debate, they have been the focus of many previous studies into blogging (for example, Albrecht, Lübcke, & Hartig-Perschke, 2007; Bruns, Wilson, & Saunders, 2009; Carlson, 2007). Instead, in this research I analyse the discussions developing around other political events and themes.

Fourteen of the blogs contributing to the data collection averaged more than one post per day for the entire seven months. The blogs publishing the highest numbers of posts can be seen in Table 4.5. Overall, Australian political blogs published an average of 164.5 posts during this period, with a mean of 67. As with the length of blogrolls, the total posts published by each blog in the sample follows a long tail distribution, with a few blogs creating the most posts and more bloggers only commenting a few times over the period of data collection.

The blogs featured in Table 4.5 represent the different practices introduced in Chapter One's typology of political blogging. Two of the most prolific blogs, *Antony Loewenstein* and *The Pen*, for example, often use a link blog approach, posting short pieces accompanied by only a link, short comment, and an accompanying image or video. By acting as link blogs, these sites may publish several brief posts in quick succession, rather than one longer list of links, inflating the total number of posts collected in this study. While not all of the posts are of this form, the relative brevity of link posts and frequency of publication mean that the presence of link blogs in Table 4.5 is to be expected.

Table 4.5 also includes several blogs featured prominently in the Australian blogroll network, including analysts and opinion sites such as *On Line Opinion* and *Larvatus Prodeo*. As group blogs, these sites would also be expected to be more active than individual blogs, as their content is not reliant on one person. *Crikey* blogs are also represented in the list, which may be accounted for by the *Crikey* affiliation, generating more 'professional' expectations of regular publishing than would be expected for blogs run purely as a hobby. Finally, representatives of different thematic groups within the blogosphere are also present in Table 4.5. These groups include sites covering economics, seen through blogs *Core Economics* and *John Quiggin*, and psephology, examples of which are *Pollytics* and *The Tally Room*.

Blog	Total posts
<i>Antony Loewenstein</i>	1602
<i>On Line Opinion</i>	885
<i>Larvatus Prodeo</i>	606
<i>ABC Unleashed</i>	567
<i>The Pen</i>	534
<i>Core Economics</i>	472
<i>Peter Martin</i> ¹⁸⁶	455
<i>Pure Poison</i>	429
<i>South Sea Republic</i>	391
<i>araquel.livejournal.com</i> ¹⁸⁷	338
<i>The Catallaxy Files</i>	327
<i>Iain Hall</i>	234
<i>Balneus</i>	216
<i>Pollytics</i>	206
<i>Content Makers</i>	196
<i>John Quiggin</i>	190
<i>Webdiary</i>	188
<i>The Tally Room</i>	180
<i>Craig Bellamy</i> ¹⁸⁸	151
<i>lyndahawryluk.livejournal.com</i> ¹⁸⁹	144
<i>Crikey blog</i> ¹⁹⁰	121

Table 4.5: Australian blogs contributing the most posts, January-August 2009

Several sites in Table 4.5, including *Larvatus Prodeo* and *John Quiggin*, were also among the blogs receiving the most citations in the blogroll network of Figure 4.1. Their position in Figure 4.1, and within the blogosphere overall, may reflect their posting output. As particularly active blogs, they may attract a greater, returning audience than if they posted only intermittently, and they may receive more blogroll links accordingly. This may also serve to reinforce the posting activity, if with a larger audience comes greater expectations of posts.

Unlike the blogroll network, blogs are not the most-referenced sites within the day-to-day Australian blog posting activity tracked in this study. Instead, mainstream media sites, both Australian and international, and online resources

¹⁸⁶ <http://petermartin.blogspot.com/>

¹⁸⁷ <http://araquel.livejournal.com/>

¹⁸⁸ <http://www.craigbellamy.net/>

¹⁸⁹ <http://lyndahawryluk.livejournal.com/>

¹⁹⁰ <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/crikey>

such as *Wikipedia*,¹⁹¹ *Flickr*,¹⁹² and *YouTube*,¹⁹³ dominate the blogosphere's citations. Table 4.6 shows the sites receiving the most citations overall, with four of the top five references being Australian mainstream media sites. Of the twenty sites featured in Table 4.6, ten are Australian in origin, with the likes of *The Australian* and *The Age* followed by *Crikey*, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)¹⁹⁴ – cited by psephologists and economists alike – and the sole blog in the list: Andrew Bolt. While his blog only received a few blogroll in-links in Figure 4.1, Bolt received more citations from blog posts than any other Australian blog, including those in the sample. Although Bolt's blog is hosted on a News Limited site, though, the citations received were not from fellow News Limited blogs, as such sites were absent from the sample. However, at the same time Bolt's position as leading blog in terms of citations received is attributable primarily to the *Crikey* blog *Pure Poison*, which acts as a media watchdog focussing on commentators such as Bolt and Tim Blair. Although other blogs in the sample also cited Bolt, the majority of references (80.2%) came from *Pure Poison* alone.

Table 4.6 suggests that Australian political bloggers reference overall a mix of online resources, local and international media. To confirm this, Table 4.7 shows the most widely-cited resources for the blogs in the sample, based not on the total citations but the number of blogs referencing each site. Here, the linking patterns skew even more towards mainstream media content, with Australian media sites among the most popular resources. Fourteen of the twenty sites in Table 4.7 are either Australian or international mainstream media sites. The apparent importance of international references can be seen through the citations for U.K. titles *The Guardian* and *BBC News*, and the U.S.-based *New York Times*, all of which feature in both Table 4.6 and Table 4.7. No blog appears in Table 4.7, and, with only Andrew Bolt included in Table 4.6, this would suggest that fellow bloggers are not the primary resources for the political blogosphere overall. In addition, no particular blog gains the most attention from the blogosphere at large. Instead,

¹⁹¹ When discussing the Australian political blogosphere, references to *Wikipedia* are to the English-language site: en.wikipedia.org/

¹⁹² <http://www.flickr.com/>

¹⁹³ <http://www.youtube.com/>

¹⁹⁴ <http://www.abs.gov.au/>

what links are made to fellow bloggers are distributed among the thematic groups and leading blogs identified earlier in this chapter.

Site	Total citations	Type
<i>Wikipedia</i>	456	Online encyclopaedia
<i>The Australian</i>	420	Mainstream media (national)
<i>The Age</i>	401	Mainstream media (Melbourne)
<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>	352	Mainstream media (Sydney)
<i>ABC</i>	327	Mainstream media (national)
<i>New York Times</i>	264	U.S. mainstream media
<i>The Guardian</i> ¹⁹⁵	257	U.K. mainstream media
<i>Haaretz</i> ¹⁹⁶	229	Israeli mainstream media
<i>ABC News</i> ¹⁹⁷	228	Mainstream media (national)
<i>Flickr</i>	210	Online photo-sharing
<i>YouTube</i>	179	Online video-sharing
<i>Crikey</i>	160	Alternative media (national, online-only)
<i>news.com.au/</i>	134	Mainstream media (national, online-only)
<i>Amazon</i> ¹⁹⁸	127	Online retailer
<i>BBC News</i> ¹⁹⁹	110	U.K. mainstream media
<i>The Courier Mail</i>	96	Mainstream media (Brisbane)
<i>Australian Bureau of Statistics</i>	92	Government agency
<i>Twitter</i>	89	Social media
<i>Andrew Bolt</i>	81	Mainstream media blog
<i>The Independent</i> ²⁰⁰	79	U.K. mainstream media

Table 4.6: Resources receiving most citations from Australian political blogs, January-August 2009

The citation patterns shown here would support the view that political bloggers rely on, or respond to, mainstream media content ahead of other sources. The blogroll network depicted a series of connections mostly between bloggers, but the overall citations would suggest that bloggers are not as well-connected to each other through their posts. Instead, there is a strong connection between the blogosphere and the mainstream media. This does not necessarily mean that Australian political bloggers are reliant on the work of journalists for their content, though. The links made will reflect different intentions, and, as we have seen in Chapter Two, there is a known antagonistic relationship between some

¹⁹⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/>

¹⁹⁶ <http://haaretz.com/>

¹⁹⁷ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/>

¹⁹⁸ <http://www.amazon.com/>

¹⁹⁹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/>

²⁰⁰ <http://www.independent.co.uk/>

bloggers and the mainstream media, in particular involving News Limited publications. In the case studies following this chapter, I investigate the use of media sources by Australian political bloggers, building on these citation patterns and the ideas discussed in Chapter Two. The mediatisation of politics, and political debate, in Australia will be examined further in the final discussion of Chapter Eight. Similar questions will be asked of the French political blogosphere. In the following section, I introduce the initial patterns around posting and citations tracked among the sample of French political blogs.

Site	# blogs referencing	% blogs referencing	Type
<i>Wikipedia</i>	41	67.2%	Online encyclopaedia
<i>The Age</i>	33	54.1%	Mainstream media (Melbourne)
<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>	32	52.5%	Mainstream media (Sydney)
<i>The Australian</i>	31	50.8%	Mainstream media (national)
<i>news.com.au/</i>	30	49.2%	Mainstream media (national, online-only)
<i>ABC News</i>	29	47.5%	Mainstream media (national)
<i>ABC</i>	28	45.9%	Mainstream media (national)
<i>YouTube</i>	28	45.9%	Online video-sharing
<i>New York Times</i>	27	44.3%	U.S. mainstream media
<i>Twitter</i>	26	42.6%	Social media
<i>BBC News</i>	25	41.0%	U.K. mainstream media
<i>Crikey</i>	24	39.3%	Alternative media (national, online-only)
<i>Flickr</i>	23	37.7%	Online photo-sharing
<i>The Guardian</i>	23	37.7%	U.K. mainstream media
<i>The Courier Mail</i>	22	36.1%	Mainstream media (Brisbane)
<i>The Herald Sun</i>	22	36.1%	Mainstream media (Melbourne)
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	20	32.8%	Mainstream media (Sydney)
<i>The Times</i> ²⁰¹	18	29.5%	U.K. mainstream media
<i>Brisbane Times</i> ²⁰²	17	27.9%	Mainstream media (Brisbane, online-only)
<i>Amazon</i>	17	27.9%	Online retailer

Table 4.7: Resources most widely-cited by Australian political blogs, January-August 2009

²⁰¹ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/>

²⁰² <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/>

Overall patterns – French political blogs

The French political blogs featured in this study follow similar posting patterns to their Australian counterparts. The total figures are higher, given the greater number of blogs present, with the daily average being 137 posts per day. Daily totals are shown in Figure 4.5. For individual blogs, the averages are slightly lower for the French political blogosphere, with a daily average of 0.72 posts per blog per day, and 5 posts per blog per week. Overall, French political bloggers posted an average of 152 (151.87) times between January and August 2009. The median posts per blog was 65.5, suggesting that, as in the Australian political blogosphere, there is a long-tail distribution apparent, in particular with a relatively small number of blogs showing extremely high levels of activity.

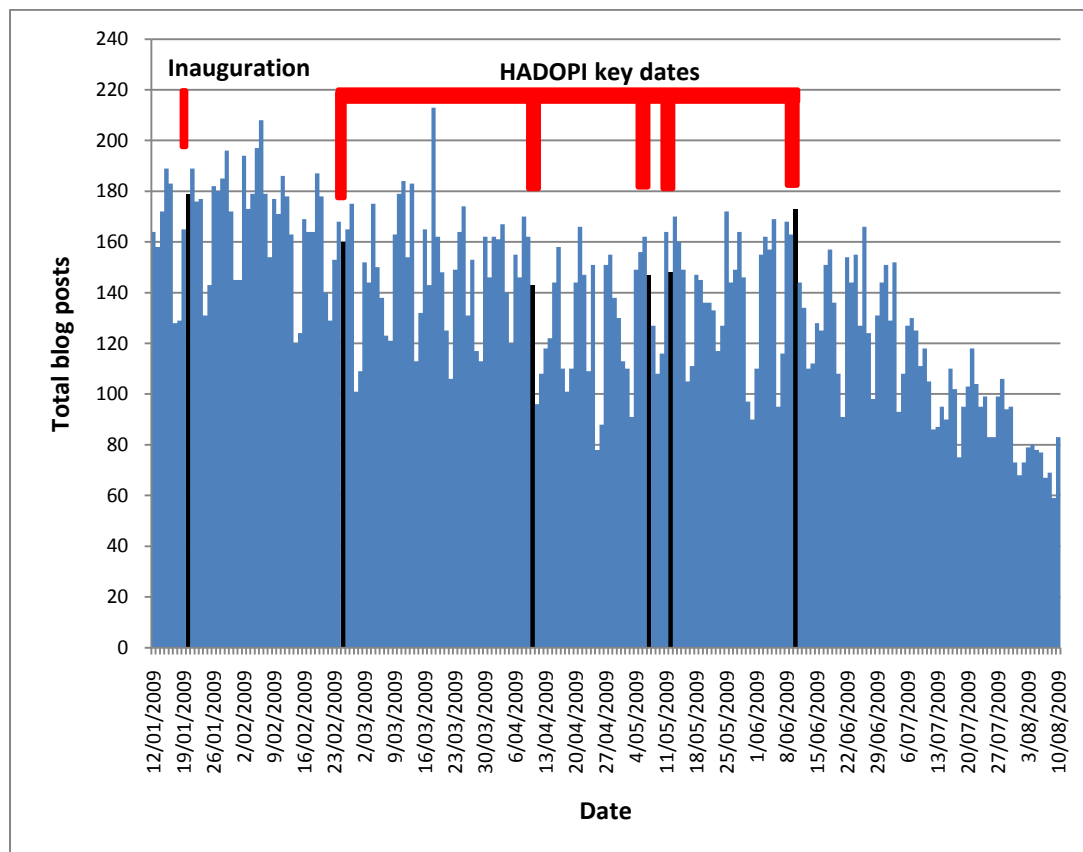


Figure 4.5: French political blog activity, January-August 2009

The weekly rhythm of the Australian political blogosphere, with post totals peaking midweek and decreasing over the weekend, is also replicated among French blogs. Figure 4.5 shows the daily post totals for the French political blogosphere between January and August 2009, with the weekend lulls clearly

visible. The depth of the lull is not as great as with the Australian blogs, with the weekend post average at 75% of the weekday average. Overall, the French political blogosphere formed from the sample contributed, on average, 147 posts per weekday, and 110 posts each on Saturday and Sunday.

The daily variations show the French political blogosphere's most active day to be Wednesday, with an average of 155 posts in the middle of the working week. The weekday pattern is symmetrical, with an increase in posts from Monday to Tuesday, and then again to Wednesday, before decreasing again over Thursday and Friday. In the daily activity depicted in Figure 4.5, troughs in post totals are generally found during weekends. However, there is a noticeable decline in the blogosphere's output at the end of June, decreasing further over July and into August. The decline is to be expected as the French parliament takes a summer recess, with the end of July signalling the end of the 2008/2009 parliamentary year.²⁰³ In addition, for individual bloggers personal reasons may also account for a further decline in posting activity, as the decline roughly corresponds to the summer holidays in France. Several bloggers posted during June and July that they were closing their blog over summer, to return in August and September 2009 (including *Le Mammouth...* on 11 July and *Toréador* on 23 July). While many of the more active bloggers continued to post during July and the first weeks of August, the lower number of posts underlines the personal interest and hobby aspects of blogging for many contributors.

Unlike the Australian political blogosphere during the same period, the French daily post totals of Figure 4.5 do not show many spikes or periods of heightened activity. An exception is found on 18 March 2009, when discussions of protests to come on 19 March against the Sarkozy government's economic plans were a recurring theme. An equivalent of the Queensland state election does not stand out within the French data: although the European parliament elections took place in June 2009 and received ongoing coverage of French political blogs, Figure 4.5 does not suggest any increased posting during the campaign. This is not to say that the European elections were not of interest to French political bloggers, with coverage

²⁰³ The French parliamentary calendar runs opposite to the Australian parliamentary calendar, where the summer recess takes place over December and January.

around the voting days in early June featured ahead of other, local topics, such as the HADOPI bill discussed in Chapter Six. However, the extent of the coverage was not as noticeable as in the Australian political blogosphere's discussion of the Queensland state election. As with Figure 4.4 for the Australian blog activity, Figure 4.5 also features several black columns highlighting key dates for the case studies. The activity around these dates will be examined thoroughly in the corresponding chapters.

Blog	Total posts
<i>Yanndarc</i> ²⁰⁴	2362
<i>Yann Redekker</i>	1367
<i>Prof en campagne</i> ²⁰⁵	1186
<i>Torapamavo</i>	972
<i>Synthèse Nationale</i>	730
<i>Le Pan</i> ²⁰⁶	704
<i>Extreme Centre</i>	680
<i>La Lettre de Jaurès</i> ²⁰⁷	626
<i>I like your style</i> ²⁰⁸	483
<i>L'Hérétique</i>	482
<i>Sarkozy News</i>	480
<i>Sarkofrance</i>	462
<i>Blog Actuality</i> ²⁰⁹	446
<i>Dominik Vallet</i>	391
<i>Bondy Blog</i>	374
<i>Partageons Mon Avis</i>	374
<i>Politique.net</i> ²¹⁰	372
<i>immédias</i> ²¹¹	352
<i>Sarkofrance (20minutes)</i>	344
<i>Le Phare</i> ²¹²	328

Table 4.8: French blogs contributing the most posts, January-August 2009

As with the most out-links in the blogroll network, the blogs contributing the most posts during the data collection period skew towards the far-right Front National. Table 4.8 lists the blogs which published the greatest number of posts between

²⁰⁴ <http://yanndarc.com/>

²⁰⁵ <http://profencampagne.com/>

²⁰⁶ <http://www.lepan.be/> (now defunct)

²⁰⁷ <http://lalettredejaures.over-blog.com/>

²⁰⁸ <http://ilikeyourstyle.net/>

²⁰⁹ <http://toulouse-socialiste.over-blog.org/>

²¹⁰ <http://politique.net/>

²¹¹ <http://blogs.lexpress.fr/media/>

²¹² <http://gklein.blog.lemonde.fr/>

January and August 2009, with three of the top five blogs appearing in the far-right cluster in the blogroll network of Figure 4.3. Another well-represented group is the *les vigilants* collective, with four listed members – *Torapamavao*,²¹³ *Sarkofrance*, *Dominik Vallet*,²¹⁴ and *Partageons Mon Avis* – appearing in the table. Blogs from centrist and democrat backgrounds can be seen with *Extreme Centre*²¹⁵ and *L'Hérétique*. Of the major parties, only the governing UMP and les Verts are unrepresented by blogs in Table 4.8. Mainstream media-supported blogs can also be seen in the table, with the media blog run by *L'Express* and the *20 Minutes*-hosted *Bondy Blog*, originally run by journalists from *L'Hebdo*, also among the most active sites in the data collection.

While the far-right blogs may appear to dominate the discussions being tracked in terms of the number of posts they published, the blogroll network showed these blogs to be outliers to the remainder of sites in the sample. A similar situation appears in the citation network, with the volume of posts not a predictor of references from other blogs. The far-right blogs do not appear among the sites receiving the most citations from blog posts, as shown in Table 4.9. Indeed, only one blog at all is present in the table: *Sarkofrance*. As was seen in the Australian political blogosphere, mainstream media sites and online resources are linked to most often from French political blogs. The video-sharing site *Dailymotion*²¹⁶ dominates the list (the site is generally preferred to *YouTube* in France), receiving nearly three times as many citations as the second-placed *Le Monde*. These sites are followed by the French-language edition of *Wikipedia*,²¹⁷ the 'breaking news' site of *Nouvel Observateur*, *Le Figaro*, and *Libération*. Alternative media sites are represented by *Rue89* and *Le Post*, but unlike the Australian blog resources, international media are not featured in Table 4.9.

Similar sites appear in the list of the most widely-cited resources, seen in Table 4.10. Again, *Dailymotion* tops the list as the most popular resource in terms of the number of blogs linking to it, followed as in Table 4.9 by *Le Monde* and *Wikipedia*.

²¹³ <http://torapamavao.blogspot.com/>

²¹⁴ <http://dominikvallet.over-blog.com/>

²¹⁵ <http://extremecentre.org/>

²¹⁶ <http://www.dailymotion.com/>

²¹⁷ For the analysis of the French political blogosphere, *Wikipedia* refers to the French-language site unless otherwise noted: <http://fr.wikipedia.org/>

While blogs do not appear in Table 4.10, the high placing of alternative media sites *Rue89* and *Le Post* suggests that French political bloggers will cite both mainstream and alternative media sites. Indeed, the linking patterns shown in Table 4.9 and Table 4.10 could describe French bloggers to primarily make use of a mix of mainstream and alternative media and online resources such as *Dailymotion* and *Wikipedia* in their posts. As with the Australian political blogs, fellow blogs do not appear to be primary references for the sites in the sample, based on the overall data collected, despite the presence of collectives and strong mutual interlinking within the blogroll network. As with the Australian political blogosphere, French blogs are not primary, widely-cited sources, nor does any single blog dominate the references. Instead, mainstream media sites are prominent citations.

Site	Total citations	Type
<i>Dailymotion</i>	2654	Online video-sharing
<i>Le Monde</i>	886	Mainstream media (national)
<i>Wikipedia</i>	802	Online encyclopaedia
<i>Nouvel Observateur</i>	722	Mainstream media (national)
<i>Le Figaro</i>	660	Mainstream media (national)
<i>Libération</i>	607	Mainstream media (national)
<i>Rue89</i>	604	Alternative media (national, online-only)
<i>L'Express</i>	374	Mainstream media (national)
<i>Marianne</i> ²¹⁸	335	Mainstream media (national)
<i>Yahoo! News (FR)</i> ²¹⁹	321	Online news
<i>Sarkofrance</i>	301	Blog
<i>Agence France-Presse (Google News)</i> ²²⁰ (AFP)	294	Press agency, online news
<i>Le Point</i> ²²¹	288	Mainstream media (national)
<i>20 minutes</i> ²²²	250	Mainstream media (national)
<i>Le Post</i>	245	Alternative media (online-only)
<i>Twitter</i>	234	Social media
<i>Les Echos</i> ²²³	234	Mainstream media (financial, national)
<i>YouTube</i>	216	Online video-sharing
<i>Flickr</i>	187	Online photo-sharing
<i>Wikio</i>	181	News aggregator

Table 4.9: Resources receiving most citations from French political blogs, January-August 2009

²¹⁸ <http://marianne2.fr/>

²¹⁹ <http://fr.news.yahoo.com/>

²²⁰ <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/>

²²¹ <http://lepoint.fr/>

²²² <http://20minutes.fr/>

²²³ <http://www.lesechos.fr/>

A key difference between the two blogospheres appears at the top of Table 4.9 and Table 4.10, with the widespread linking to *Dailymotion*. More than their Australian counterparts, French political bloggers include video content in their posts, originally from mainstream and alternative sources and hosted on *Dailymotion*. These videos include news reports from mainstream media broadcasts. This may mean that, while the most widely-cited resources in Table 4.10 are mostly from print origins, television news may be underestimated through the presence of their material on *Dailymotion* rather than their own domain. French bloggers include video content, but they appear more likely to cite content provided through *Dailymotion* than on another site. Furthermore, the French mainstream media make their own content available through *Dailymotion* themselves, having their own dedicated channels on the site. On the other hand, Australian media organisations such as the ABC host their video content locally, but as the analysis draws on the links between domains only, links to video content by Australian political bloggers do not appear differently to links to articles or other content on the same domain. However, general trends from the collected posts in this study suggest that the amount of embedded video content within Australian blog posts is noticeably lower than for the French blogosphere. During the case studies, and especially in the final discussion of Chapter Eight, I return to these ideas in comparing the media use by Australian and French political bloggers.

A further difference between the Australian and French political blogospheres is in the local and international media resources cited. The Australian political blogs count several international media sites as widely-cited references, but for French political bloggers local sites, whether mainstream or alternative, are the most popular resources. The English-language sites receiving links from the most blogs, *en.Wikipedia* and *The Guardian*, are each only cited by 24 blogs (13% of the blogs in the sample). These resources then occupy a similar position to many French political blogs in the citation network, based on the number of sites referencing them. They are not prominent nodes within the network, and only attract links from a smaller group of bloggers. The use of international media appears to be fleeting, too: even the most-cited international resource, *The New York Times*, with 62 citations, is only referenced by 22 blogs (12%). Based on seven months of blogging activity, this would suggest that international media are only occasional

resources, referenced by a much smaller group of bloggers than the blogosphere-wide citations for the major local mainstream media sources. Language differences may be partly responsible for these linking patterns, with sources written in French preferred to English-language media. In addition, the presence of more domestic mainstream and alternative media sites in France, compared to Australia, may also account for the relative scarcity of citations for international media. Australian bloggers, already seen to be critical of various mainstream media publications, may feel the need to look beyond their domestic situation in their searches for news and opinion. French bloggers, on the other hand, may find all the information and analysis they require within the French political blogosphere, mainstream and alternative media.

Site	# blogs referencing	% blogs referencing	Type
<i>Dailymotion</i>	112	58.9%	Online video-sharing
<i>Le Monde</i>	87	45.8%	Mainstream media (national)
<i>Wikipedia</i>	81	42.6%	Online encyclopaedia
<i>Le Figaro</i>	76	40.0%	Mainstream media (national)
<i>Libération</i>	67	35.3%	Mainstream media (national)
<i>L'Express</i>	63	33.2%	Mainstream media (national)
<i>Nouvel Observateur</i>	61	32.1%	Mainstream media (national)
<i>Le Point</i>	57	30.0%	Mainstream media (national)
<i>Le Post</i>	54	28.4%	Alternative media (online-only)
<i>Rue89</i>	53	27.9%	Alternative media (online-only)
<i>Facebook</i>	52	27.4%	Social media
<i>YouTube</i>	49	25.8%	Online video-sharing
<i>Marianne</i>	46	24.2%	Mainstream media (national)
<i>Le Journal du dimanche</i> ²²⁴	44	23.2%	Mainstream media (national)
<i>Le Parisien</i>	43	22.6%	Mainstream media (Paris)
<i>Twitter</i>	43	22.6%	Social media
<i>20 minutes</i>	40	21.1%	Mainstream media (national)
<i>Yahoo! News (FR)</i>	36	18.9%	Online news
<i>Mediapart</i>	35	18.4%	Alternative media (online-only)
<i>Europe1</i> ²²⁵	35	18.4%	Mainstream media (national)

Table 4.10: Resources most widely-cited by French political blogs, January-August 2009

To further examine these overall linking patterns, in the following section the in-post links collected are used to visualise the composite citation networks for both Australian and French political blogs. In addition to identifying the primary

²²⁴ <http://www.lejdd.fr/>

²²⁵ <http://europe1.fr/>

resources for both sets of bloggers, this process also shows the extent of inter-blog linking within the collected posts, for comparison with the blogroll networks introduced previously.

Composite citation networks

If the blogroll networks identified earlier in this chapter provide the context for individual blogs appearing in this study, presenting a blogger's affiliations and interests, the links that bloggers include in posts show their contemporary resources. In-post citations may have different intentions, from acknowledging an original source to strongly agreeing or disagreeing with another commentator's views. Regardless of the link's purpose, though, its presence within a post grounds the text temporally and contextually, placing the blogger's comments among other sources discussing an issue. Given the age of blogroll links, there is no guarantee that the presence of a connection between sites means that bloggers still read the sites featured in their list. On the other hand, the presence of an in-post citation implies that 'one can be rather certain that the citing blogger was reading and commenting on the other' (Adamic, 2008, 230).

The next sections feature the networks created from the in-post citations political bloggers made between 12 January and 10 August 2009. As with the blogroll networks, the links from blog posts have been visualised using *Gephi* and laid out using the Force Atlas algorithm. However, due to the larger number of sites referenced by in-post citations, these networks have been filtered to include only nodes with a degree range greater than or equal to ten. This filter includes nodes receiving citations from ten or more blogs and nodes with ten or more out-links, as well as combinations of these ranges. Degree range has been used in place of either in-degree or out-degree alone so that any blogs contributing to the data collection that, for example, do not receive any citations are not excluded at this stage of the analysis. As this process is designed to showcase overall patterns and introduce the data collected, the aim is to reduce clutter and show more clearly the blogs and other sites central to the collected discussions within the Australian and French political blogospheres.

Australian composite citation network

Using the composite link data from the 10,529 Australian blog posts collected over 211 days leads to a citation network containing 927 nodes – reflecting top-level domains rather than individual pages – and 7125 edges connecting these nodes. This network has then been filtered to include only those nodes with a degree range greater than ten, leading to the visualisation in Figure 4.6. The final composite citation network contains 91 nodes and 4721 edges. The reduced number of nodes in particular suggests that the complete citation network featured many sites that are not widely or repeatedly referenced by the blogs in the sample. In visualising the citation network for the entire data collection period, we are initially more interested in locating the most popular resources for Australian political blogs than their occasional references.

As with the blogroll networks, the largest nodes in the citation network are those receiving the most links, while the darker nodes are those creating the most out-links. In Figure 4.6, the largest nodes are white, showing that they are sites from outside the sample as they contribute no out-links. These are the sites featured in Table 4.7, the list of the most widely-cited resources for Australian political blogs. Among the most prominent nodes are Australian mainstream media sites, including *The Australian*, *The Age*, and *ABC News*, local alternative media site *Crikey*, and online resources such as *Wikipedia*. International media are also common references for Australian bloggers, represented by *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*.

To further simplify the connections within the composite network, Figure 4.7 shows the same nodes as Figure 4.6, but with the mutual links between blogs in the sample highlighted. The resulting visualisation also shows which resources are repeatedly cited by a blogger through the weight of the edge – a thicker edge denotes a link that is made several times over the 211 days of this study. This process allows for easier identification of the primary resources within the network, and for determining which blogs, if any, may act in this way for the rest of the blogosphere.

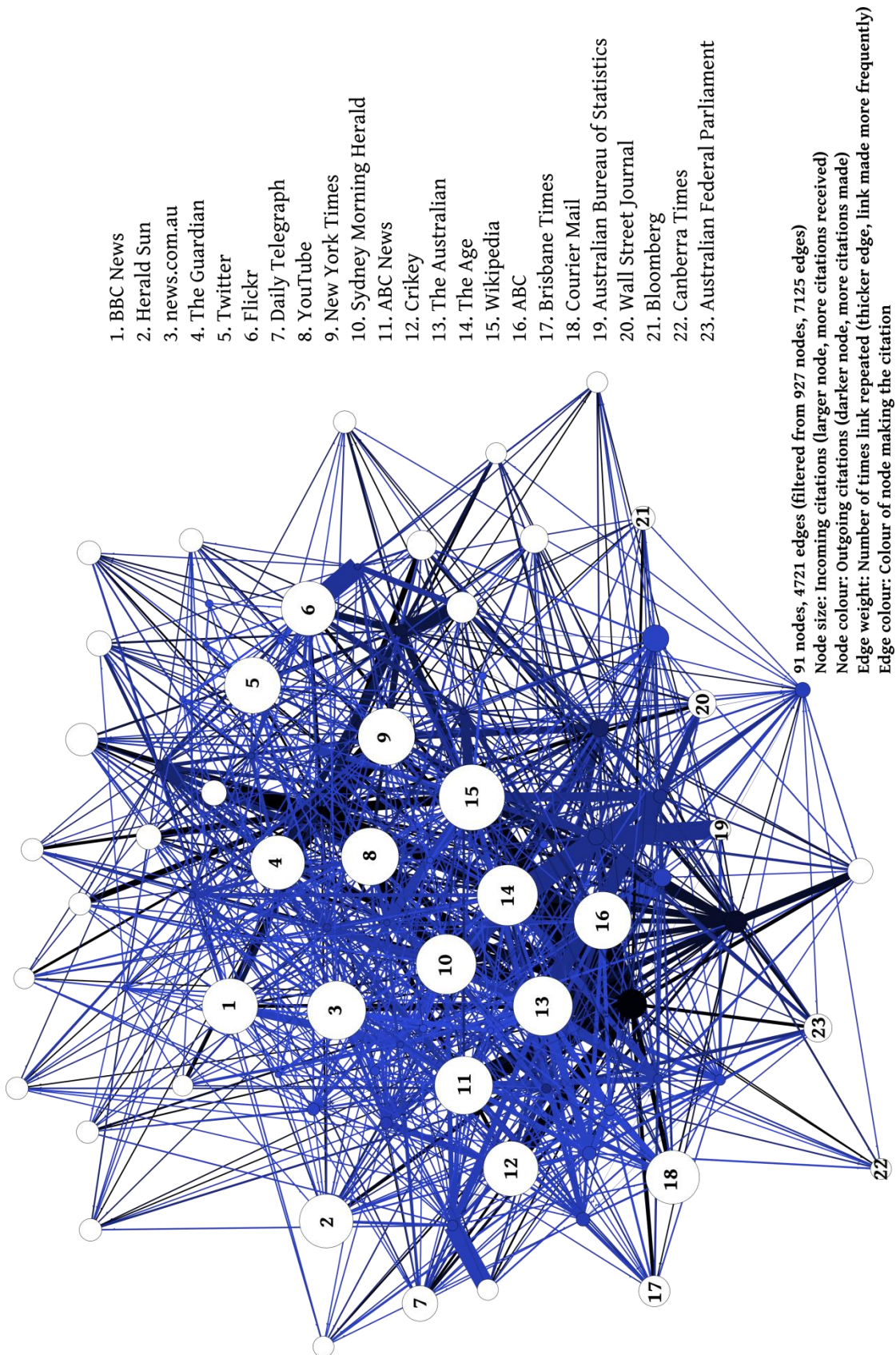


Figure 4.6: Australian political blog citation network, January-August 2009

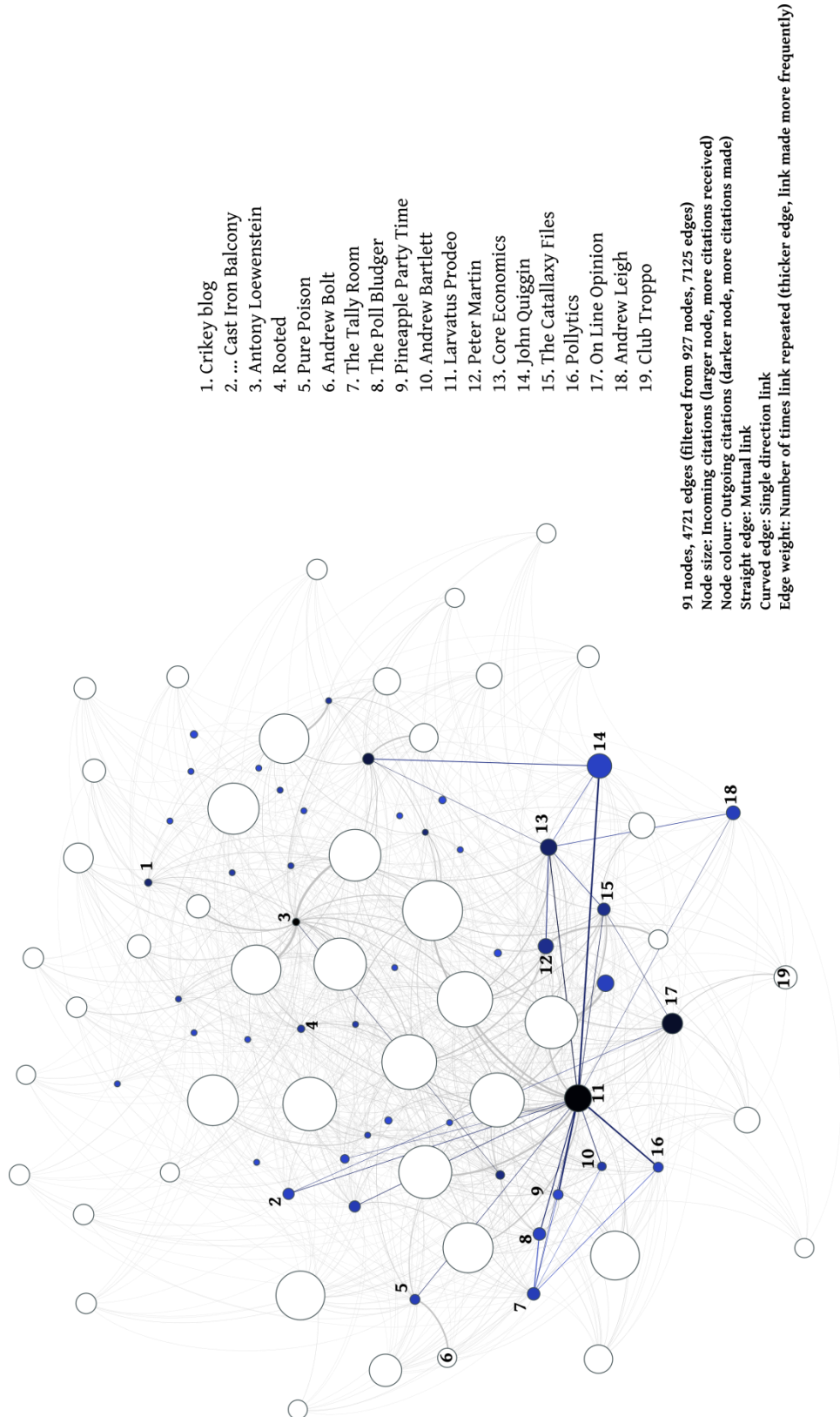


Figure 4.7: Australian political blog citation network, January-August 2009, mutual links highlighted

In all, the composite citation network depicts sixteen major nodes, incorporating Australian mainstream and alternative media, international mainstream media, and online resources. The most central of these are the most widely-cited resources in Table 4.7, highlighting the extent to which a site such as *The Australian* or *The Sydney Morning Herald* is a common reference for Australian political bloggers. The network also shows that, peripheral to these nodes, there is a second group of references, not as widely-cited but still common to several bloggers. These include additional international media, such as *The Times (U.K.)* and *The Wall Street Journal*,²²⁶ Australian mainstream media, including *The West Australian*²²⁷ and SBS, and Australian government sites. Based on these linking patterns, Australian mainstream media in particular can be seen as falling into two categories, primary and secondary resources for Australian political blogs. The primary, widely-cited resources are the flagship sites for both News Limited – *The Australian*, *News.com.au* – and Fairfax – *SMH*, *The Age* – as well as the ABC sites. Other, localised versions of Fairfax and News Limited content, such as *The Brisbane Times* or *The Daily Telegraph*, are not cited by the same range of bloggers, and so appear less centrally. These are accompanied by other state-based media, for example *The West Australian*. The split between primary and secondary local media can be seen in Table 4.11, showing the citations for mainstream and selected alternative media sites from Australian bloggers in this study. Falling in between the two groups in Table 4.11, the position of the News Limited-owned *The Courier Mail* may be attributed to its status as the major Queensland daily newspaper and a major news source during the Queensland state election which took place during the data collection.

Some of the secondary media resources, while not as widely cited as the likes of *The Australian* or *The Age*, do appear as central references for thematic groups within the Australian political blogosphere. *The Financial Times*, for example, features alongside other economics-related resources, including *Bloomberg*,²²⁸ *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Business Week*.²²⁹ As would be expected following the study of the blogroll network, these sites are among the resources cited by a group of blogs including *John Quiggin*, *Core Economics*, and *Andrew Leigh*. These blogs form a

²²⁶ <http://online.wsj.com/>

²²⁷ <http://thewest.com.au>

²²⁸ <http://www.bloomberg.com/>

²²⁹ <http://www.businessweek.com/>

subgroup of economics blogs within the Australian political blogosphere, and while the content of these sites also covers political themes, it is unsurprising that their composite linking activity places them within an economics-themed cluster of nodes.

Site	Total citations	Number sites referencing	Average citations per blog	% blogs referencing	Type
<i>The Australian</i>	420	31	13.55	50.8%	National mainstream
<i>The Age</i>	401	33	12.15	54.1%	Melbourne mainstream
<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>	352	32	11.00	52.5%	Sydney mainstream
ABC	327	28	11.68	45.9%	National mainstream
ABC News	228	29	7.86	47.5%	National mainstream
Crikey	160	24	6.67	39.3%	Alternative, online
news.com.au	134	30	4.47	49.2%	Mainstream, online
<i>The Courier Mail</i>	96	22	4.36	36.1%	Brisbane mainstream
<i>The Herald Sun</i>	62	22	2.82	36.1%	Melbourne mainstream
<i>Club Troppo</i>	62	13	4.77	21.3%	Blog
<i>New Matilda</i>	61	9	6.78	14.8%	Alternative, online
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	50	20	2.50	32.8%	Sydney mainstream
<i>Brisbane Times</i>	45	17	2.65	27.9%	Brisbane mainstream (online)
ABC Unleashed	27	8	3.38	13.1%	Mainstream opinion, online
<i>The Punch</i>	24	7	3.43	11.5%	Mainstream opinion, online
WA Today ²³⁰	18	11	1.64	18.0%	Perth mainstream, online
<i>The West Australian</i>	18	10	1.80	16.4%	Perth mainstream
SBS	17	11	1.55	18.0%	National mainstream
<i>The Canberra Times</i> ²³¹	17	10	1.70	16.4%	Canberra mainstream

²³⁰ <http://www.watoday.com.au>

<i>Quadrant</i> ²³²	15	3	5.00	4.9%	Literary and cultural journal
<i>Adelaide Now</i>	13	7	1.86	11.5%	Adelaide mainstream
<i>nineMSN</i> ²³³	10	6	1.67	9.8%	Online mainstream
<i>The Mercury</i> ²³⁴	6	2	3.00	3.3%	Hobart mainstream
<i>Perth Now</i> ²³⁵	5	5	1.00	8.2%	Perth mainstream, online
<i>Geelong Advertiser</i> ²³⁶	3	2	1.50	3.3%	Geelong mainstream
<i>Northern Territory News</i> ²³⁷	1	1	1.00	1.6%	Darwin mainstream

Table 4.11: Mainstream media (and selected alternative media) citations by Australian political blogs, January-August 2009

Another thematic group of blogs found in the blogroll network, the psephologists, can also be seen within the citation network, grouping together blogs such as *The Tally Room*, *The Poll Bludger*, and *Pollytics*. While the Australian Federal parliament website (APH)²³⁸ features among the resources linked to this group, other shared resources do not immediately appear related to the analysis of polling data. However, the nearby presence of the website for the Queensland-based News Limited publication *The Courier Mail* and its Fairfax online-only competitor *The Brisbane Times* can be explained by another node within the group: the *Crikey* blog *Pineapple Party Time*. With the Queensland state election held during the data collection period, the work of the psephologists appears to have been in part focussed on this case. Even though the campaign only lasted for one month out of the seven featured in this study, the coverage of election-related subjects may account for the Queensland-specific media resources appearing as closely connected to the psephologist blogs in the citation network.

In addition to identifying groups of sites connected by shared themes, Figure 4.7 also highlights some linking behaviours of individual bloggers. *Peter Martin*, for

²³¹ <http://www.canberratimes.com.au>

²³² <http://www.quadrant.org.au/>

²³³ <http://news.ninemsn.com.au/>

²³⁴ <http://www.themercury.com.au/>

²³⁵ <http://www.news.com.au/perthnow/>

²³⁶ <http://www.geelongadvertiser.com.au/>

²³⁷ <http://www.ntnews.com.au/>

²³⁸ <http://www.aph.gov.au/>

example, cites the Australian Bureau of Statistics repeatedly, and the most frequently referenced mainstream media sites are those of *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*. The preference for Fairfax sites over others is not surprising, given Martin's employment as a Fairfax journalist for *The Canberra Times* and later as economics correspondent for *The Age*. Similarly, the repeated links from the Crikey-hosted *Pure Poison* to Andrew Bolt's blog can be attributed to *Pure Poison*'s status as media commentator, and in particular its origins on a previous blog as *BoltWatch*.²³⁹ This site commented specifically on what Bolt was saying on his blog and in other media appearances, and was later expanded to include observations on Tim Blair (*Blair/BoltWatch*)²⁴⁰ and then wider media discussion as *Pure Poison*. The frequency of links from *Pure Poison* to Bolt's blog also accounts for the latter's appearance in Table 4.6 but not in Table 4.7: while Bolt receives many citations, as most of them are from *Pure Poison* the blog does not appear as one of the most widely-cited resources for the Australian political blogosphere.

The linking patterns of Australian bloggers also draw attention to a group of secondary, international media sources. Two blogs in particular draw extensively on international resources, *Antony Loewenstein* and the *Crikey* blog. Sites such as those for *The Independent*, *The LA Times*,²⁴¹ or the U.K. *Daily Telegraph*²⁴² might not be as widely-cited as *The Guardian* or *The New York Times*, but they are repeated secondary resources for a smaller group of Australian political blogs. Some international media receive citations from even fewer blogs. In Table 4.6, for example, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* appears as one of the sites receiving the most citations, yet it does not appear in Figure 4.6 because the number of blogs referencing it is less than ten. Indeed, nearly all of *Haaretz*'s 229 citations (97%) came solely from *Antony Loewenstein*.

Other blogs in the network cite a wide range of Australian and international media. *Larvatus Prodeo*, for example, links to many of the primary Australian resources, including *Crikey* and the ABC in addition to News Limited and Fairfax sites. Such linking patterns would place *Larvatus Prodeo* not as a specialist blog within the

²³⁹ <http://boltwatch.blogspot.com/>

²⁴⁰ <http://blairboltwatch.wordpress.com/>

²⁴¹ <http://www.latimes.com/>

²⁴² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/>

Australian blogosphere, but as a more general commentator, a description supported by the volume of citations received from other blogs. Within the composite citation network, only a few blogs could be described as prominent nodes, and even then only on the same scale as the secondary mainstream media sources. These blogs include *On Line Opinion*, *John Quiggin*, *Core Economics*, and *Club Troppo* in addition to *Larvatus Prodeo*. While *John Quiggin* and *Core Economics* act as key nodes for the economics blog subgroup in the network, these sites can also be seen as bridging different groups and specialties within the blogosphere. By focussing on politics in general, a site like *Larvatus Prodeo* would not only link to supporting, focussed analysis or topic-specific commentary from *Pollytics* or *John Quiggin*, but the reverse would also hold true, with the specialists drawing on posts on *Larvatus Prodeo* or *Club Troppo*.

What the composite citation network suggests is that Australian political bloggers do not just rely on mainstream media sites as informers, supporting references, or antagonists in their discussion, but that they primarily use a smaller group of major mainstream media sites. These sites are not restricted to one specific owner, but instead represent the national and flagship sites for News Limited, Fairfax, and the ABC. While the reasons for linking to these sites cannot be determined from the composite citations, the recurrence of the connections underlines the importance of the mainstream media to Australian political bloggers, regardless of whether they are repeating or critiquing the work of journalists. Indeed, other political sites, such as parliamentary or party-specific sites, are only secondary to the prominent nodes of the mainstream media, if they even appear in the filtered network of Figure 4.6. These citation patterns would place the Australian political blogosphere as more reliant on, or connected to, politics as covered through the mainstream media than through other sources. There are variations among the topical clusters of the blogosphere in terms of the primary resources cited, but overall the Australian political blogosphere appears to have drawn heavily on the work of the mainstream media between January and August 2009.

Bloggers do not appear to have used other blogs as primary sources over the same period. Interlinking between blogs is predominantly the domain of subject-specific blogs, with the economics and psephology groups identified within the blogroll

network also apparent in the composite citation networks. The largest nodes of the blogroll network, *Larvatus Prodeo*, *John Quiggin*, and *Club Troppo*, also appear in the citation network as connecting the various groups, potentially acting in opinion leader or opinion broker roles. However, for the most part blogs are not reciprocally linked, and do not appear among the primary resources for the composite citation network. Whereas the blogroll network, as would be expected, featured blogs almost exclusively as its most prominent nodes, the in-post citation activity for the same sites places blogs as far more peripheral resources in the day-to-day discussion of Australian politics. Many of the blogs in the sample either did not cite other bloggers in their posts, or links to blogs were not reciprocated. Given the prominence of mainstream media sites in particular within the composite citation network, this would suggest that for many bloggers, blogs are not primary resources, but instead part of a large group of occasional references cited less frequently than *The Australian* or *YouTube*.

To examine the blog-to-blog citation network further, Figure 4.8 was created, which also includes blogs not represented in the data collection. The aim was to garner a wider overview of the citations made between Australian bloggers. Links to alternative media and opinion sites *Crikey*, *New Matilda*, and *The Punch*, as well as citations for all Australian mainstream media blogs, were also included. These links were then organised using the Force Atlas algorithm to depict the blog-to-blog citation network only, rather than using the original layout from the composite citation network. Looking at the links only between blogs in the sample, one blog becomes a central, connecting site for other blogs through reciprocated links: *Larvatus Prodeo*. This suggests not only that *Larvatus Prodeo* responds to other bloggers citing it, but also that it is the most visible site within the wider Australian political blogosphere. Although its position is weighted towards the psephological bloggers in part because of its connections to the group blog *Pineapple Party Time* (in addition to citing the likes of *The Poll Bludger* outside of the Queensland state election), *Larvatus Prodeo* is also linked from, and links to, the group of economics blogs in *John Quiggin*, *Core Economics*, and *Andrew Leigh*. These sites are also mutually linked to other sites, but not to the same extent as *Larvatus Prodeo*. Indeed, the linking among the economics group follows a pattern hinted at in the blogroll network, where there were strong connections between the

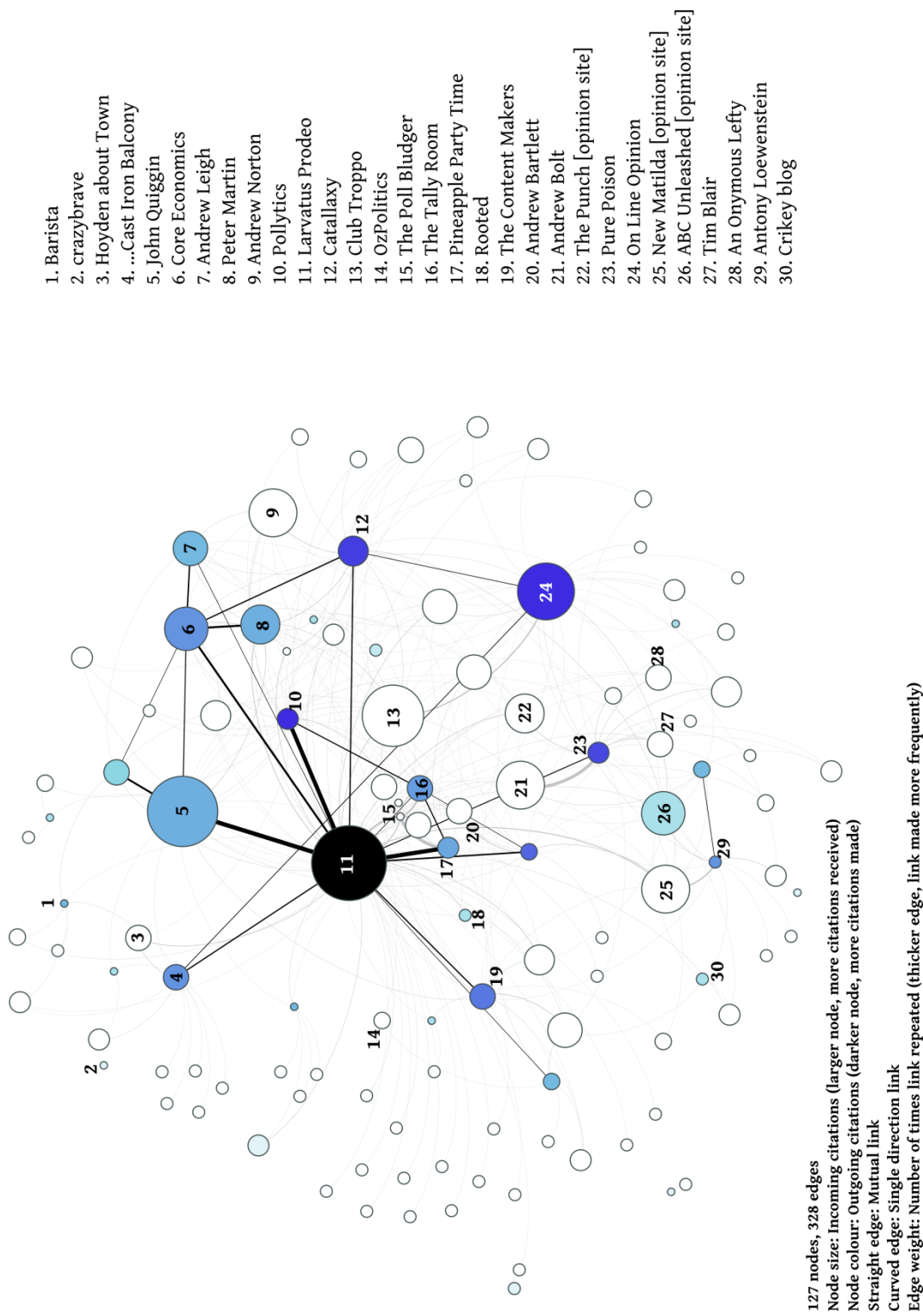


Figure 4.8: Australian political blogosphere, blog-to-blog citation network, including blogs not featured in the data collection

members of a group, but the links to the rest of the blogosphere were directed through central, A-list sites. These citation patterns suggest that *Larvatus Prodeo* in particular acts like a blogosphere barometer, citing discussion and analysis from across the network of blogs. Such a role may be akin to the opinion leaders described by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1964), with *Larvatus Prodeo* locating original commentary of interest and drawing attention to it through links and summaries in blog posts. *Larvatus Prodeo* in this way becomes an opinion leader for its readers, collecting and repositioning material from other blogs and from further media sources, in presenting a particular interpretation of an issue or event.

Between blogs, though, opinion leadership is supplanted by *opinion sharing* (as raised by Meraz, 2011). Figure 4.8 clearly shows the thematic groups of Australian political blogs described earlier in this chapter, including the psephologists, the economists, and the group of female/feminist political bloggers. What is also shown, though, is that in terms of mutual links, there is only one connection between all three groups: *Larvatus Prodeo*. The groups themselves are well-connected internally, but mutual links from group to group are absent from Figure 4.8. *Larvatus Prodeo*, by aggregating views from across the blogosphere, becomes a bridge between thematic groups. Benkler's (2006) description of information flows within the blogosphere suggests that ideas travel across groups, from small sites to the connectors of each group until they reach the most visible sites within the network. Discussions among the leading blogs are visible to the largest readerships of the blogosphere, and enable sites not included in the earlier flow to find the information in question.

In the Australian political blogosphere, for example, the coverage of an issue by economics blogs might not be cited by a psephology blog if there is no shared theme. However, the discussion may then be taken up by *Larvatus Prodeo* as part of its coverage of the wider blogosphere activity, or cited within the context of different aspects to a topic of interest. The different thematic groups in the blogosphere publish their political commentary around their subject of interest, and a leading blog such as *Larvatus Prodeo* repositions this discussion within the various perspectives among bloggers and other commentators. The mutual linking shows that the connection is not one-way, and what may be the case is that the

reverse flow also takes place: having highlighted different opinions or analysis, the commentary by *Larvatus Prodeo* is then cited by members of the thematic groups. Other blogs in the network, such as *Club Troppo*, may also fulfil a similar role, judging by their place in the blog-to-blog network, while a heavily interlinked site such as *Core Economics* may act as an opinion leader within its thematic group. These ideas will be explored further in Chapters Seven and Eight.

French composite citation network

The citation network for the French political blogs in the sample draws on the links made in 22,939 posts, with the total network featuring 4024 nodes and 13,939 edges. Using the same process to filter the citation network as before, the final citation network is made up of 296 nodes with a degree range of ten or more, connected by 8316 edges. The filtered network is visualised in Figure 4.9.

As with the Australian citation network, the links from French political blogs lead to several prominent nodes in Figure 4.9. These represent a number of mainstream media sites – *Le Monde*, *Libération*, *Le Figaro*, *Le Point*, *Nouvel Observateur*, *L'Express*²⁴³ – accompanied by alternative media sites *Rue89* and *Le Post*, and the online resources *Wikipedia*, *Facebook*, and *Dailymotion*. These sites appeared as the most widely-cited resources in Table 4.10, and can be seen as the primary, shared references for French political bloggers.

A secondary group of media resources in particular can be found in the nodes surrounding the primary resources of Figure 4.9. These sites are not quite as widely-cited as the likes of *Le Monde* or *Dailymotion*, but are not isolated nodes in the network either. Among the nodes are web-only news sites (such as *Yahoo! News France*), citizen journalism sites (*AgoraVox*), regional media (*La Voix du Nord*, *Le Parisien*²⁴⁴), and subject-specific media. The latter category of sites include the media-focussed *Libération* offshoot *Écrans*,²⁴⁵ Catholic news site *La Croix*,²⁴⁶ and

²⁴³ <http://www.lexpress.fr/>

²⁴⁴ <http://www.leparisien.fr/>

²⁴⁵ <http://www.ecrans.fr/>

²⁴⁶ <http://www.la-croix.com/>

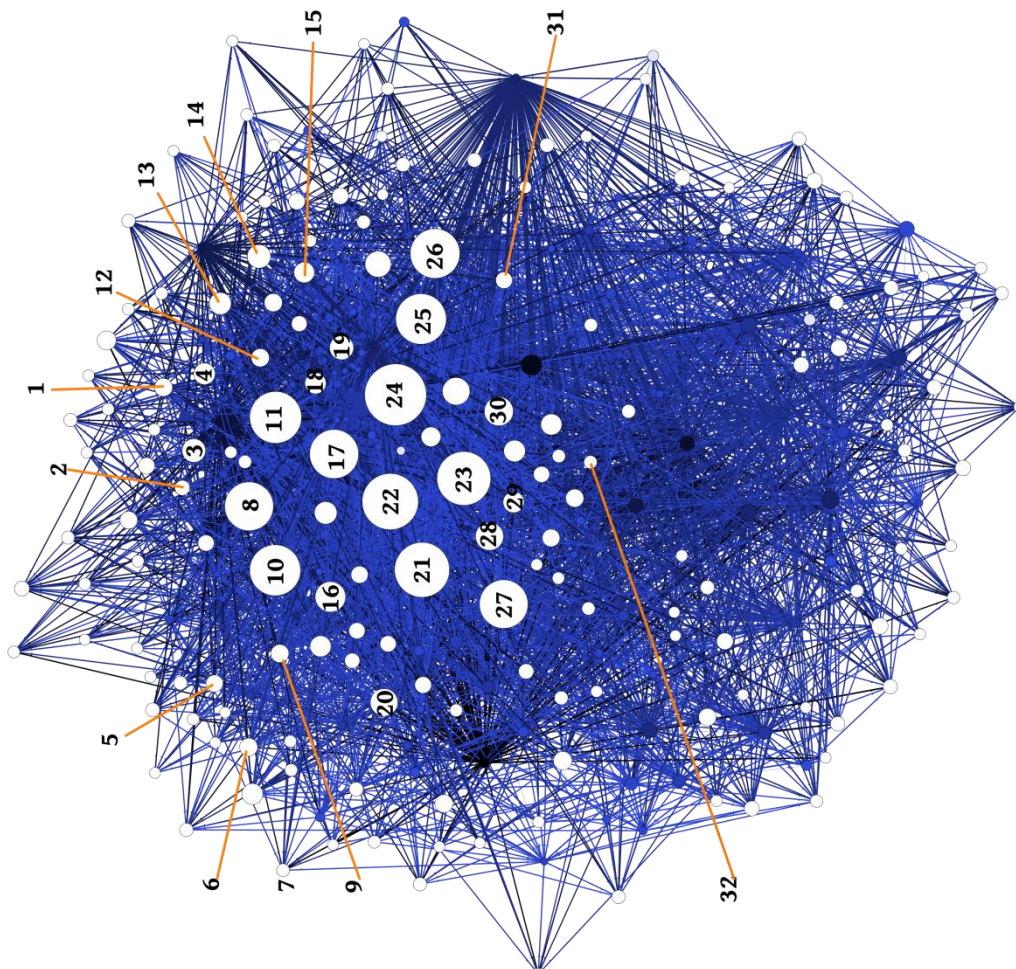
technology site *Numerama*.²⁴⁷ The nodes are a mixture of mainstream media, aggregators, and sites run and contributed to by citizens. Unlike the Australian political blogosphere's references, international media sites do not appear prominently in the French blog citation network, with U.S. and U.K. news websites peripheral to the network. This finding is not unexpected, given that U.S. and U.K. media sites publish their articles in English. For the majority of French political bloggers featured in this study, there is a clear preference to cite articles written in French.

To further simplify the citation network, Figure 4.10 highlights the mutual links between blogs over the 211 days of this study. Linking between blogs appears to be more extensive in the French political blogosphere than its Australian counterpart, with several densely interlinked groups of blogs in Figure 4.10. Like *Larvatus Prodeo* in the Australian political blogosphere, a number of French sites appear to bridge different groups and reference potentially different views and analysis from across the blogosphere within their posts. Based on reciprocal links and the total citations directed to blogs, the sites most fitting this description are *Sarkofrance*, *Partageons Mon Avis*, *Olympe et le Plafond de Verre*,²⁴⁸ *Intox2007*, *L'Hérétique*, *Toréador*, and *Rimbus*,²⁴⁹ and these patterns may place these blogs as opinion leaders for their readers. As in the Australian citation network, though, the nodes receiving the most citations from French political blogs are predominantly mainstream media sites, accompanied by online resources and alternative media sites. However, the secondary resources suggest that for French bloggers, not only are a wider range of media sources used, but links to parliamentary websites and other blogs are more commonplace than for Australian political bloggers. This may simply be reflective of both a larger sample of blogs and the presence of more mainstream and alternative media sites in France. Nevertheless, the citation network of Figure 4.10 also shows that the groups present in the blogroll network are less noticeable through the links bloggers make in their posts.

²⁴⁷ <http://www.numerama.com/>

²⁴⁸ <http://blog.plafonddeverre.fr/>

²⁴⁹ <http://rimbusblog.blogspot.com/>



- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Sénat | 17. Le Post |
| 2. Arrêt sur images | 18. AFP (Google News) |
| 3. Mediapart | 19. Yahoo! News |
| 4. Bakchich | 20. Twitter |
| 5. New York Times | 21. fr.Wikipedia |
| 6. The Guardian | 22. Le Monde |
| 7. BBC News | 23. Le Figaro |
| 8. Rue89 | 24. Dailymotion |
| 9. Écrans | 25. Nouvel Observateur |
| 10. L'Express | 26. Le Point |
| 11. Libération | 27. Facebook |
| 12. L'Humanité | 28. Le Journal du dimanche |
| 13. Radiofrance | 29. Assemblée Nationale |
| 14. Europe1 | 30. Marianne 2 |
| 15. TF1 | 31. AgoraVox |
| 16. YouTube | 32. European Parliament |

296 nodes, 8316 edges (filtered from 4024 nodes, 13939 edges)

Node size: Incoming citations (larger node, more citations received)

Node colour: Outgoing citations (darker node, more citations made)

Edge weight: Number of times link repeated (thicker edge, link made more frequently)

Edge colour: Colour of node making the citation

Figure 4.9: French political blog citation network, January-August 2009

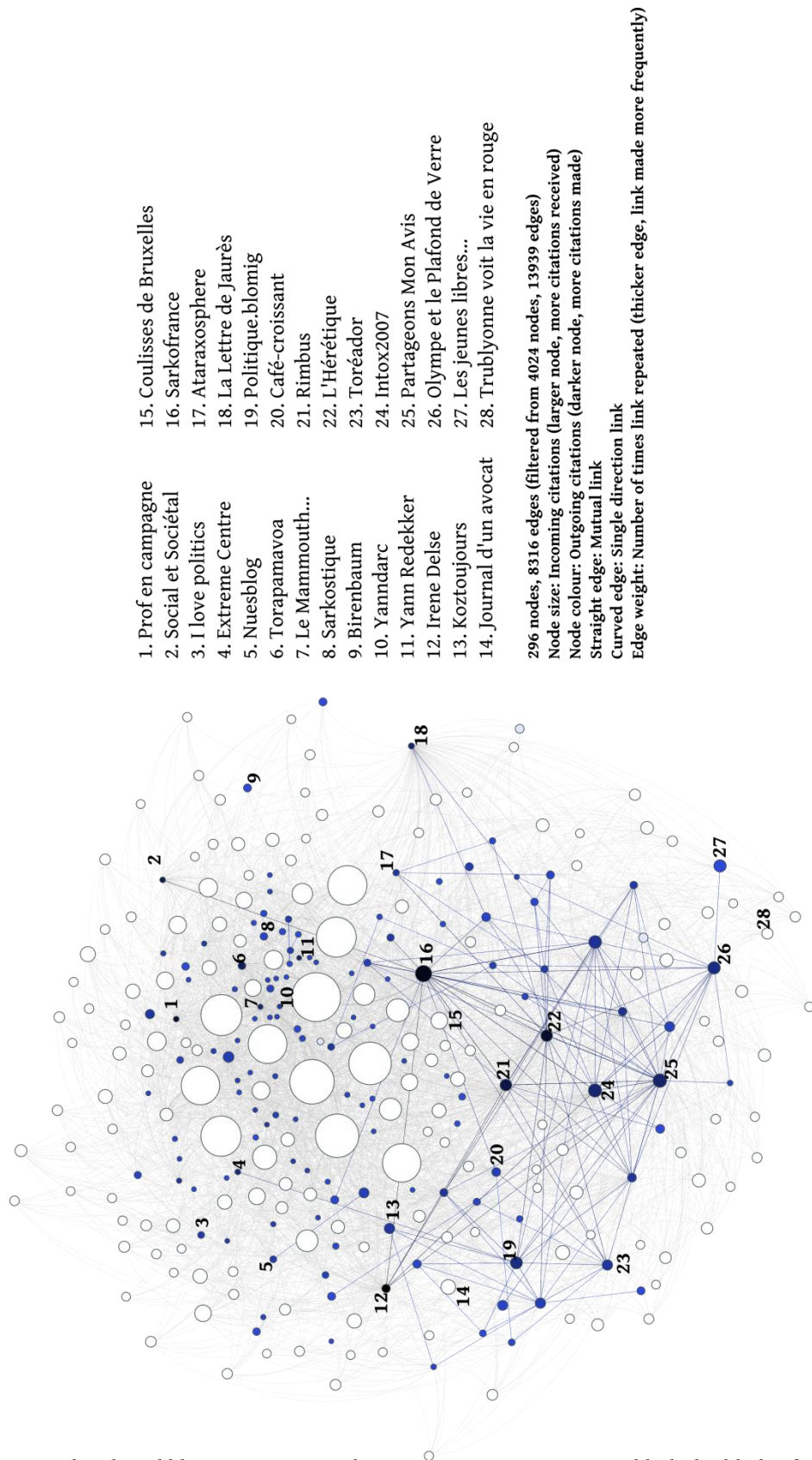


Figure 4.10: French political blog citation network, January-August 2009, mutual links highlighted

Thematic groups are harder to identify in the French composite citation network than in its Australian counterpart. An exception is found among the blogs citing international mainstream media and opinion sites, including *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Huffington Post*, and *The Daily Telegraph* (U.K.). These resources are mainly referenced by the group of blogs covering international politics, including as a specialist subject (*I love politics*, *Nouvel Observateur's Affaires étrangères* blog,²⁵⁰ *L'Express's New York Coste*²⁵¹) or as a recurring theme in its posts (*Extreme Centre*). This would suggest that international themes, or at least non-French media discussion of international themes, are featured only by a small number of blogs within the French political blogosphere, an observation which we will return to in Chapter Five. Elsewhere, though, European and French parliamentary and party sites are distributed throughout the network rather than clustering together, suggesting that coverage of national and European politics is common to more French political blogs than the discussion of other, international topics. While some French political blogs may primarily focus on European affairs, what the citation network also suggests is that the resources they use are also made use of by blogs covering most other political topics. By extension, this implies that European politics can be treated as an aspect of politics in general for many French bloggers, rather than as a specialist subject.

In the blogroll network, three French political blog collectives were identified, with members found to cluster together by linking to each other. To some extent, the same practice is found in the citations collected for this study. In the composite citation network, a relatively densely-interlinked group of blogs features representatives from collectives such as *les vigilants*, *les kiwis*, and *Réseau LHC*, with greater overlap between these groups than was seen in the blogroll network. The linking patterns within the collectives, and the citation network in general, suggests that while blog-to-blog references and discussions are more commonplace in the French political blogosphere than its Australian counterpart, links are not directed to *all* members of the collective. Instead, a small number of blogs attain greater visibility within the blogosphere. The linking between collective members also suggests that a blog's status as a member of *les vigilants*, for

²⁵⁰ <http://globe.blogs.nouvelobs.com/>

²⁵¹ <http://blogs.lexpress.fr/nycoste/>

example, does not translate into automatic citations from its other members. The presence of a centralised aggregator site for the collective's posts may mean that bloggers do not feel obliged to link to all the other affiliated members. However, when tracking the citations made during seven months of blogging, a lack of intra-collective links also suggests that affiliation has different significance for individual bloggers, and perhaps even that the reasons for joining the collective originally are no longer as valid.

Ideology overall appears to play less of a role in determining which sites a blogger may reference in their posts than in their blogrolls. Where members of *les vigilants*, for example, were found at a distance from centrist and democrat blogs in the blogroll network, in the citation network these same blogs are found next to each other, sharing links and resources. The blogroll network separated blogs around affiliations, but the citation network shows that these sites make use of the same sources in their coverage of French politics. They might not necessarily discuss the same topics, but in their posting behaviours different ideologies cite the same references rather than relying on partisan media. The exceptions to this again appear to be the Front National blogs. The citations between these blogs follow the pattern established in the blogroll network. However, by also making use of the same resources as other French political blogs, these sites are no longer depicted as separate from the rest of the blogosphere.

These connections, or lack thereof, are made clearer in Figure 4.11. This map shows the connections only between the blogs in the sample and further blogs not represented in the data collection. Within Figure 4.10, a small number of blogs appeared to have greater visibility than other sites within the blogosphere. This suggests that there are a few blogs within the French political blogosphere which could potentially be described as the 'A-list'. These sites consistently receive citations from across the blogosphere, and will primarily cite each other. However, citations from smaller blogs might not be reciprocated, as debate involving the A-list may be an ongoing discussion between these bloggers. Rather than forming a thematic grouping, the blogs might instead group together based on their visibility, and their political commentary is positioned as part of a wider discussion among these sites. Figure 4.11 highlights this further, with the likes of *Partageons*

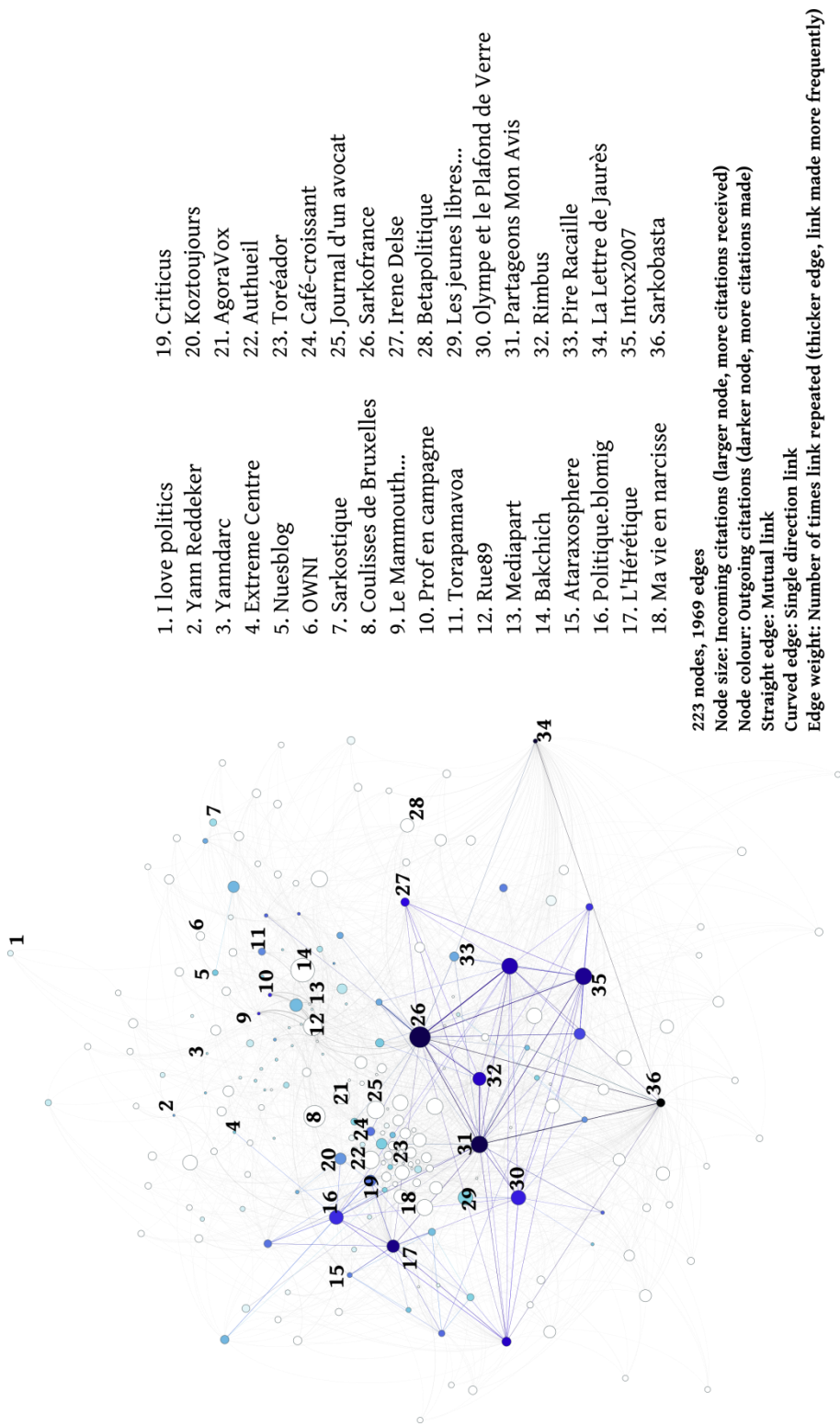


Figure 4.11: French political blogosphere blog-to-blog citation network, including blogs not featured in the data collection.

Mon Avis, *Olympe et le Plafond de Verre*, *L'Hérétique*, *Sarkofrance*, *Koztours*, and *Rimbus* appearing as prominent nodes around a group of nodes citing, or being cited by, several of these blogs. The place of *Partageons Mon Avis* is particularly notable, as it links through mutual connections two subgroups of these blogs.

However, the most interesting aspect of this group of sites is the shared resources found between them. Here, there are not only a number of other political blogs, including *Authueil*,²⁵² *Ma vie en narcisses* and *Peuples.net*, but also the home pages of *les kiwis*, *les vigilants* and *Réseau LHC*. Added to this mix are the law blog *Journal d'un avocat* and a number of mainstream media-run blogs, including *L'Express's* media blog. The interlinking between the blogs in the sample and the resources shared between them gives this section of Figure 4.11 the impression of being at the heart of the French political blogosphere featured in this study. With other parts of the network not as strongly connected by mutual links to other blogs, the grouping around some of the more prominent blogs within the sample is noteworthy. This also seems to support observations from the previous visualisations, with mutual blog-to-blog citations taking place primarily between the 'A-list' blogs. Whereas in the Australian blog-to-blog citation network one blog, *Larvatus Prodeo*, appeared as the anchor for the blogosphere in the sample, Figure 4.11 suggests that more blogs are cited by French political blogs, with the anchoring distributed around a number of blogs.

It also shows that, rather than forming distinct and separate groups, members of the collectives identified in the blogroll network will cite either across borders to other collectives, or at least reference the same resources. Membership of a collective does not mean that a blogger cannot cite an external site, especially not from another collective, especially since a blog such as *Toréador* is a member of both *les vigilants* and *les kiwis*. Given that these collectives are not directly ideologically opposed to each other, the interlinkages found in the citation network would imply shared discussions rather than outright critique of each other's posts. However, the bloggers concerned would also be expected to be citing the common resources for different reasons and from different perspectives. This idea will be explored further in the case studies of this thesis.

²⁵² <http://authueil.org/>

On the other hand, the Australian network featured a number of distinct thematic groups, whereas the French blogs' coverage of politics appears more general and less specialised overall, based on the composite citation networks. One group of strongly interlinked nodes that should be discounted are connected on a thematic basis, but also an organisational one. These blogs all discuss Nicolas Sarkozy, but they are all also different editions of the *Sarkofrance* blogs, hosted on several blogging platforms. Ideological clustering is also less evident in the citation networks than in the blogroll network. Even the extreme-right blogs, although still grouped together, are not as distinct or isolated as previously. *Yann Redekker*, *Synthèse Nationale*, and *Yanndarc* can all be found close to each other in Figure 4.11, along with several other Front National-related sites, but there is less mutual interlinking than in the blogroll network. Whereas in their blogrolls the extreme-right bloggers predominantly focussed on sympathetic sites, the citation network suggests that in their posts these blogs make use of the same resources as bloggers from across the French political landscape. However, despite different political ideologies not appearing to lead to blogs citing different groups of resources, this does not mean that links are made to all blogs in the sample regardless of political leaning. As Figure 4.11 shows, while there is a large group of interlinked blogs, there are also many blogs either uncited or with unreciprocated links in the other half of the network. Although the citation network serves to play down the strength of some conclusions from the blogroll network, it also raises further questions about how French political bloggers cover political subjects and the resources they use. In the France-specific case studies of Chapters Five and Six, these observations will be tested against specific topical discussions about international and local politics.

Conclusion

In this chapter, two types of blog network have been visualised from data collected from the Australian and French political blogospheres: blogroll networks and composite citation networks. Both of these network types have been used in previous studies of blogging activity (for example, Etling *et al.*, 2009; Park &

Thelwall, 2008), enabling researchers to determine the major resources among, and referenced by, a group of bloggers. However, blogrolls and in-post citations reflect different purposes on the part of the blogger making them. Comparing the networks generated from the two link types shows different distributions and identities of the key nodes within each network.

Both the French and Australian blogroll networks place blogs as the major nodes of the networks, as seen in Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.3. It is generally understood that blogroll links reflect a blogger's interests, sites that they read or agree with, friends and acquaintances, or sites with which they are affiliated. This is particularly true of political blogs, where in the case of partisan blogs, blogroll links may be predominantly to supporters of the same ideological or party viewpoint. Through these links, we can get some idea of the network of aspired affiliations constructed from bloggers' membership within associations and collectives, and presenting the sites to which bloggers see themselves, or would like to be seen, as connected. Although it has been argued that blogging etiquette means that blogroll linking, in particular, should be reciprocated, both the Australian and French blogroll networks show that mutual linking is not a given. This is shown by highlighting the reciprocal blogroll links in both networks.

What the blogroll networks show, particularly through the reciprocal link visualisations, is the presence of several clusters of blogs within both the French and Australian political blogospheres, organised variously around ideology and interests. These clusters denote a series of shared interlinkages, and highlight areas of the blogosphere that are densely connected. At the same time, the networks also show which blogs within the sample are weakly tied to other blogs through blogroll links, or indeed are not referenced by other blogs at all. However, it bears repeating that the blogrolls used in forming these visualisations are not always contemporaneous: the links present might not be reflective of current interests and affiliations, depending on when bloggers last updated their blogrolls.

The composite citation networks, on the other hand, do show the 'current' links made by bloggers during the data collection period of this study. Figure 4.8 and Figure 4.11 show the composite networks, and the reciprocal citation patterns between bloggers in the sample, for both the Australian and French political

blogospheres. While blogroll links placed blogs as the central nodes within the resulting networks, the references made in blog posts lead to a different group of sites appearing prominently within the networks. For both blogospheres, mainstream media sources and web-based information and social media sites are the most cited, and most widely-cited, resources, ahead of blogs themselves.

On the other hand, blogs themselves may be over-represented in the blogroll network, when compared to the actual in-post linking activity carried out by these sites. Within the composite citation network, blogs, while still present, are not among the major shared references for the network. Instead, blogs form part of a secondary group of resources not as widely-cited as the likes of *Wikipedia* or mainstream media sites. Even more notably, mutual citations between bloggers within posts are not as common as within blogrolls. In the Australian political blogosphere, while Figure 4.7 may show a number of mutual links, only a few blogs are the subject of more than one of these reciprocal connections. The French political blogosphere has a greater number of mutual citations between blogs, and more leading blogs, but it also has a larger sample of blogs from which the network was constructed. This may mean that there are more established bloggers by whom debate can be started. However, the larger blogosphere may also mean that any two blogs are less likely to link to each other, as there are more voices to choose from. As we saw with the blogroll network, among the larger number of blogs were a few distinct groups separate from the main body of sites. Arguably, Figure 4.11 could be seen as showing even more clustering of French political blogs through their mutual citations, with strong interlinking between half of the blogs in the network, and minimal or no interlinking between the remaining blogs.

However, there may be an ulterior motive for French political bloggers in particular to exchange links. One of the sites used to locate the sample of blogs in this study, *Wikio.fr*, publishes a monthly ranking of the top blogs across a number of genres, including political blogs. The highest ranked blogs are those receiving not just the most citations, but the most citations from higher-ranked blogs, according to the *Wikio* ranking algorithm. Many bloggers display their current ranking on their site, and each month's rankings receive attention from across the blogosphere. Because of the notoriety of the rankings, though, blogs may also

attempt to improve their position by linking to more blogs. Alongside comments about the new rankings, blogs may link to some, or all, of the top 100 blogs, hoping for links in return. This is not to say that all blogs mentioning the rankings are seeking to receive more citations. However, the monthly ritual of rankings publication and subsequent discussion cannot be ignored as a factor for interlinking among blogs in the sample. Even though the links may not be around a particular political discussion, the *Wikio* rankings are a recurring talking point within the French political blogosphere. Any links made within commentary on the rankings have not been removed from the composite citation network, as they reflect an additional practice of French political bloggers and may provoke greater awareness of, and connections between, other contributors to the blogosphere.

What can be ascertained from the composite citation networks is the presence of a group of resources common to each of the two blogospheres. These are the major nodes within the citation networks; the sites referenced both the most overall and receiving links from the greatest number of blogs. The findings of the citation network analysis would seem to support claims that bloggers are reliant on mainstream media sources for their information, as these sites dominate the lists of most widely-cited references for Australian and French political bloggers. These include local and international news media, and include publications from several organisations and perceived political leanings. A smaller number of alternative media sites, and blogs, also appear as prominent resources, but for the most part these linking patterns suggest that the political blogosphere follows the mainstream media in its discussions.

However, this composite view of the links made by political blogs cannot tell us when or why these resources were cited. French blogs linked to *Le Monde* 886 times between 12 January and 10 August 2009, but the composite view would remain the same regardless of whether the links were all made on one day or spread out across the seven month period. Similarly, bloggers may have linked to material of interest, but this may have been critiquing the original content instead of supporting it. The presence of a hyperlink does not necessarily translate into support for a given viewpoint.

To further understand the actions of Australian and French political bloggers, the following chapters draw on three case studies, isolating blog posts and links around specific topics. Instead of answering the research questions through the blogroll or composite citation networks alone, this thesis also makes use of topical networks to analyse blogging activity. By identifying and examining topical networks, this study is able to answer how political blogs contribute to public debate within different thematic contexts and over time.

Contextual variations are particularly important to long-term studies, as active blogs and popular resources may not be the same in January and August, and as different topics become dominant within blog discussions. Blogs and sites which are prominent resources at one point in time may become minor nodes later, as the themes being commented on change. Nahon and Hemsley (2011) describe the blogosphere as 'dynamic and contextual', and argue that it contains *transient elites*: the blogs that are central or popular now will not necessarily be as widely cited in the future. Similarly, the roles of blogs within the network change with time and context, regardless of whether the bloggers concerned are 'top' or 'tail' blogs, members of the A-list or not (27). The connections between blogs change, too, with context and over time; Adamic (2008) notes that 'blog ties that are active in one period, relating to a particular discussion, may be dormant during another period, when the discussion shifts elsewhere' (237).

Nahon and Hemsley (2011) thus highlight two important considerations in studying blog activity that topical networks can address. First, contextual and temporal variations can be identified by comparing multiple topical networks: the discussions around separate issues at different times. Second, the topical networks featured in this thesis include relevant posts from all blogs represented in the data collection. This process then allows the topical network analysis to determine the contributions of each blog, whatever its audience, in the coverage of a particular issue. In this way, the study is able to track the changing roles of blogs within different contexts, rather than solely focussing on the activity of the top, 'A-list' blogs.

The following studies of topical networks enable us to consider more thoroughly the answers to the guiding research questions, concerning the contributions of

blogs to public debate, the relationship between blogs and media sources, and variations in blogging activity and sources used. Each topical network also returns to the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter Two, evaluating the applicability of framing, agenda-setting, and two-step flow and opinion leader theories to the political blogosphere.

In the following chapter, framing theory is assessed within the context of the Australian and French political blogospheres' coverage of the inauguration of Barack Obama as U.S. President on 20 January 2009. How an international event is viewed and commented on by bloggers is investigated, while the global attention directed towards the inauguration enables a comparison between the topical networks created from both the Australian and French political blogospheres. This case study is followed by an examination of two separate topical networks, one each for the Australian and French political blogospheres, analysing local political topics and their resulting blog coverage. These topical networks are formed from discussions around the HADOPI bill in France and the Utegate scandal in Australia, and are respectively examined through agenda-setting and opinion leader theory.

Chapter 5: Inauguration from afar: Framing Obama coverage in France and Australia

Introduction

At midday on 20 January 2009, a crowd assembled at and around the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C. to see Barack Obama inaugurated as the 44th U.S. President. Elected two months earlier on 4 November 2008, Obama had defeated the Republican candidate John McCain in the presidential election, and in doing so became the first Democrat president since 2001. Although the inauguration was already significant by denoting the end of George W. Bush's second term as President, during which the 'War on Terror' had seen continued military involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq by U.S. forces and their allies, other aspects to the event also made the inauguration a topic of global interest. For a start, Obama was the first African-American president, and his background and rise to the presidency received coverage from supporters and opponents alike.

Aspects of the successful presidential campaign strategy also attracted attention. As noted in Chapter One, the 2004 Presidential election had been the first to see blogs as a key source of promotion and punditry (Carlson, 2007). Bloggers received media accreditation to attend party conventions, and the Howard Dean campaign, while ultimately unsuccessful, highlighted how blogs and other online channels could be used to attract support and donations for candidates. The 2008 election saw the internet become a major, and universal, campaign tool. 2004 saw the rise of the blogosphere within elections, but in 2008 social media sites played an important role in the Obama victory (Anderson, 2008; Fraser & Dutta, 2008). The Obama campaign was able to appeal to undecided voters by engaging them online in grassroots movements, passing on messages through sites such as Facebook. Coupled with similar offline strategies, the successful courting of undecided voters played a key role in the election result. The strength of Obama's use of social media compared to John McCain's campaign also led commentators to predict that social

media would be another contested space in future elections as these sites became an established part of campaign strategy (Saunders, 2008).

January 2009 did not provide the most welcoming of circumstances for an incoming President, and further interest in the inauguration concerned Obama's long-term policies and responses to global crises. U.S. troops were leading international armed forces deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq in long-running conflicts. The incursions into these countries dated back to 2001 and 2003 respectively, and even with a new President, there remained no immediate expectation of either success or withdrawal of personnel in either combat. The U.S. economy was also in recession, following crises within the housing, banking, and automotive sectors in 2007 and 2008. Immediate action from Obama upon assuming office was expected, as were environmental policies outlining the administration's response to climate change and a need for alternative energy sources.

The U.S. was not alone in financial turmoil, with international economies struggling in the wake of the crisis and forced to implement new initiatives to avoid further economic strife, nor was it the only country threatened by climate change. Economic and environmental concerns appeared as prominent frames in the coverage of the inauguration by both French and Australian bloggers. The U.S. President has no direct influence over national politics in either country, residing in neither the Palais de l'Élysée nor the Lodge. However, as a political and financial leader, how the U.S. responded to these issues would have some bearing on policies introduced by other nations.

The following chapter compares how Australian and French political bloggers covered the inauguration, an international event not directly relevant to their national politics. The coverage of the inauguration provides an ideal case study as it lends itself to a straight comparison between blogging in the two countries. Local issues are less likely to be the subject of posts from both blogospheres: developments in Canberra might not attract a lot of interest from bloggers in Lyon, while bills introduced in Paris are not always the subject of choice for the likes of *Larvatus Prodeo* or *Core Economics*. In doing so, blog posts about the inauguration are used to examine how coverage of the event was framed by Australian and French

political bloggers, whether local angles or international themes such as the war on terror or global financial crisis provided the context for bloggers' commentary. The ceremony itself received some attention, but the majority of blog posts commenting on Obama becoming President placed the event within contexts more relevant either to the blogger's specialist interests, or to domestic perspectives. The use of different media sources becomes a key indicator of how blogs framed the inauguration. French bloggers used domestic media, and positioned their discussion around French political concerns. Australian bloggers, on the other hand, commented on the inauguration and related issues without linking them to domestic politics, citing U.S.-media ahead of Australian sources. Following an analysis of the themes featured, and sources cited, in the two blogospheres' discussion of the inauguration, the chapter will return to how framing theory can be applied and amended to political or news blogging.²⁵³

Overview

The Obama inauguration is an international political event discussed by Australian and French political bloggers. The framing of global affairs in media coverage is often accompanied by recontextualising events within domestic issues. Gurevitch, Levy, and Roeh's (1991) study of television news reports found stories about international events were positioned in a way that made them accessible to their audience. Such framing devices include treating international news as an extension of a local concern, for example connecting global economic developments to Australian policy. Domestic angles to a story may also be emphasised, such as French attendees at the inauguration. Regardless of the specific frames employed, the overall effect is to domesticate international events (Clausen, 2004).

For bloggers covering an event such as the inauguration, similar framing approaches would be expected, placing the Obama presidency within local views or the specialist subjects of individual blogs. However, additional framing effects may

²⁵³ This chapter builds on earlier content featured in Highfield (2009b; 2009c; 2010b), and Highfield, Kirchhoff, and Nicolai (2011).

be seen through the resources used by bloggers in their discussion of the inauguration. Consistent citations for national mainstream media would imply that the same frames being used by *the Australian* or *Le Monde* may be shaping bloggers' coverage of the inauguration. Even if these frames are being critiqued by bloggers, taking umbrage with what the reporting on the event might or might not be featuring, some acknowledgement of the devices being used is present.

Greater citations for international media, on the other hand, would show bloggers looking beyond, or rejecting, their local media's framing of the ceremony and, if referencing U.S. sources in particular, using perspectives and commentary from resources with more direct investment in the inauguration. Choosing topical resources, such as blogs primarily discussing U.S. politics, official government or Obama websites and channels on social media sites, or live commentary on the ceremony itself would also demonstrate active reframing of the inauguration by bloggers. The use of primary sources such as video feeds can also reveal how bloggers analyse and discuss an event without necessarily following the same interpretations, or applying the same framing devices, as the mainstream media. Finally, bloggers citing an assortment of primary and secondary sources, U.S. and local mainstream media, may be found to be comparing the coverage of the inauguration and its associated themes, critiquing the frames employed by different news media.

While the inauguration took place over a few hours in the middle of a Tuesday in Washington, D.C., as a major political ceremony coverage of the event was not limited to 20 January 2009. To track not just commentary posted during or immediately after the inauguration, but the build-up and response to the event, this chapter draws on blog posts published over ten days, centred on 20 January. Inauguration-related posts published by French and Australian political bloggers between 16 and 25 January 2009 were identified using keyword searches and then isolated from the rest of the corpus.²⁵⁴ Covering not just the inauguration day but also the days immediately surrounding it means that the changing frames employed ahead of, during, and after the event can be tracked and compared

²⁵⁴ Keywords used included Obama, inauguration, White House, Bush, investiture, Maison Blanche, Washington, and Capitol. Posts were then verified, as noted in Chapter Three, for relevance to the inauguration rather than, for example, the state of Washington.

across the two blogospheres. The time difference between the east coasts of the U.S.A. and Australia respectively also influenced the period used for this study. With the inauguration ceremony not taking place until 2am on 21 January 2009 for people in the eastern states of Australia, using a longer timeframe allows for Australian reactions to be covered more thoroughly.

The inauguration also provides a useful counterpoint to later chapters in this thesis. Chapters Six and Seven track responses to developments concerning the HADOPI law in France and the Utegate scandal in Australia, featuring long-term discussion of ongoing debates punctuated by several key moments. This chapter, on the other hand, focuses only on a key moment itself, the inauguration ceremony, within a few days of build-up and response. While mentions of Obama could be located within the entire seven-month dataset in a similar way to the HADOPI and Utegate coverage, this chapter is concerned more with the conversation around, and framing of, a single international event. Tracking Obama discussion from January to August 2009 would highlight the different themes attracting comment from bloggers, identifying different events as stimuli for posts. In this chapter, though, the inauguration acts not just as a news event, but also as the ceremonial start to the Obama presidency and the hopes and aims associated with it. Coverage of this event would not be expected to be limited to the ceremony itself. Instead, bloggers would also set out their views on the incoming President and potential policies. The framing of the discussions around the inauguration is different from that of other Obama-related events during the first half of 2009, as for the most part further posts are responses to breaking news and announcements. The inauguration, as a set date on the U.S. political calendar, instead invites different themes in its coverage. For this reason the analysis is limited to the ten days around the ceremony, to highlight the frames used by bloggers within the immediate context of the inauguration itself, before other news events change the conversation.

The examination of the framing of the inauguration by French and Australian political bloggers draws on which resources were cited and what themes were present in the posts. The use of hyperlink analysis and content analysis allows the study to identify relevant sources and topics, and to track changes across and

between the blogospheres. Methods outlined previously were used to locate inauguration-related discussions within the wider corpus collected between January and August 2009. The resultant topical networks were formed respectively from 109 posts published by 45 French political blogs, and 68 posts from 25 Australian political blogs. How each network responded to the Obama inauguration will be studied individually in the next sections.

The French political blogosphere and the Obama inauguration

The topical network

Between 16 and 25 January 2009, 47 French political blogs published 119 posts discussing the inauguration, or mentioning relevant themes within their coverage of other topics. The posting patterns over this period follow the blogosphere rhythms established in Chapter Four. The inauguration day and the next day's response provided the highest totals of Obama discussion, the midweek peak in the activity compared to the weekend troughs. The daily topical network post totals for the ten days of inauguration blog posts can be seen in Figure 5.1. At its peak, on 21 January, the inauguration topical network accounted for ten percent of the French political blogosphere's total output. This level of attention decreased as the inauguration became older news, showing that, while the inauguration was a topic of interest to some bloggers, it was not the primary topic being discussed. Instead, the international event was a secondary topic being discussed within the French political blogosphere, temporally becoming a major theme at the time of the ceremony itself.

The inauguration ceremony acted as a catalyst for Obama-related blog posts, given the spike in posting activity around the event. Instead of bloggers' own analysis or opinion pieces, such a pattern suggests that the mainstream media reporting on the inauguration could provoke wider blog discussion of the event, with such resources becoming the most-referenced sites in the topical network. Figure 5.2 is

a visualisation constructed using the links made in the 119 inauguration topical network posts made by 47 French political bloggers. In the visualisation, the largest nodes are the sites receiving the most citations, the more popular, shared resources, and the darker nodes are the blogs making the most out-links within the topical network.

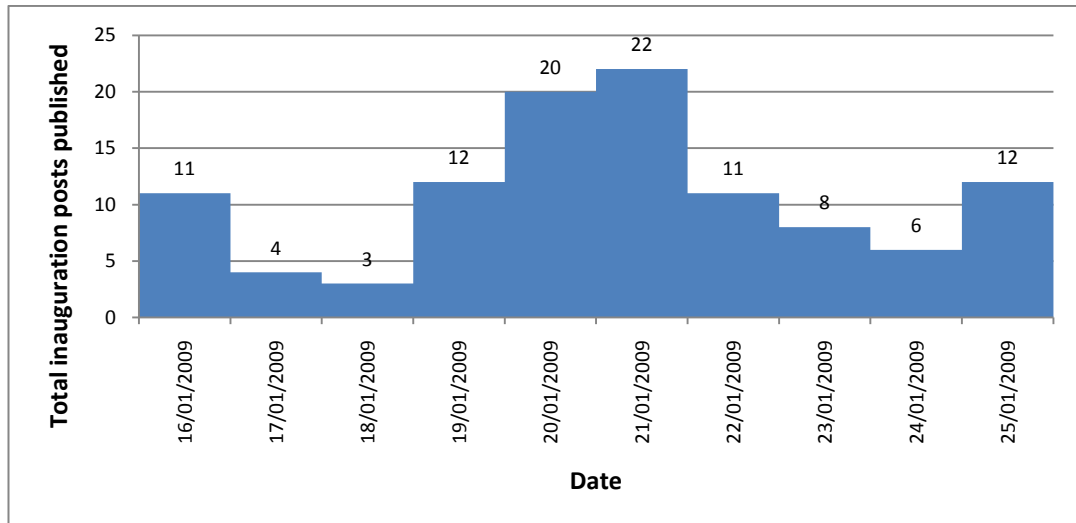


Figure 5.1: Total inauguration posts per day from French political blogs

Blogs

The blogs present in Figure 5.2 are not necessarily the same sites contributing the most posts overall to the blogosphere, as seen in the previous chapter. While the composite activity featured in Chapter Four established which blogs are most active overall, the inauguration discussion includes several less prominent blogs as the most frequent contributors. Blogs from the ‘A-list’ of the French blogosphere, including those with consistently high Wikio rankings, are still present within the topical network, but their posting activity is not as frequent as that of several bloggers who are less prominent within everyday political blogging activity. Table 5.1 shows the blogs contributing the greatest numbers of posts to the discussion of the inauguration.

Topical interest can account for the prominence of non-A list blogs within the inauguration discussion. The most active blog in the topical network, *I love politics*, is not a major contributor to the overall blogosphere activity analysed in Chapter Four. Despite its English name, it is a French blog, written in French. However,

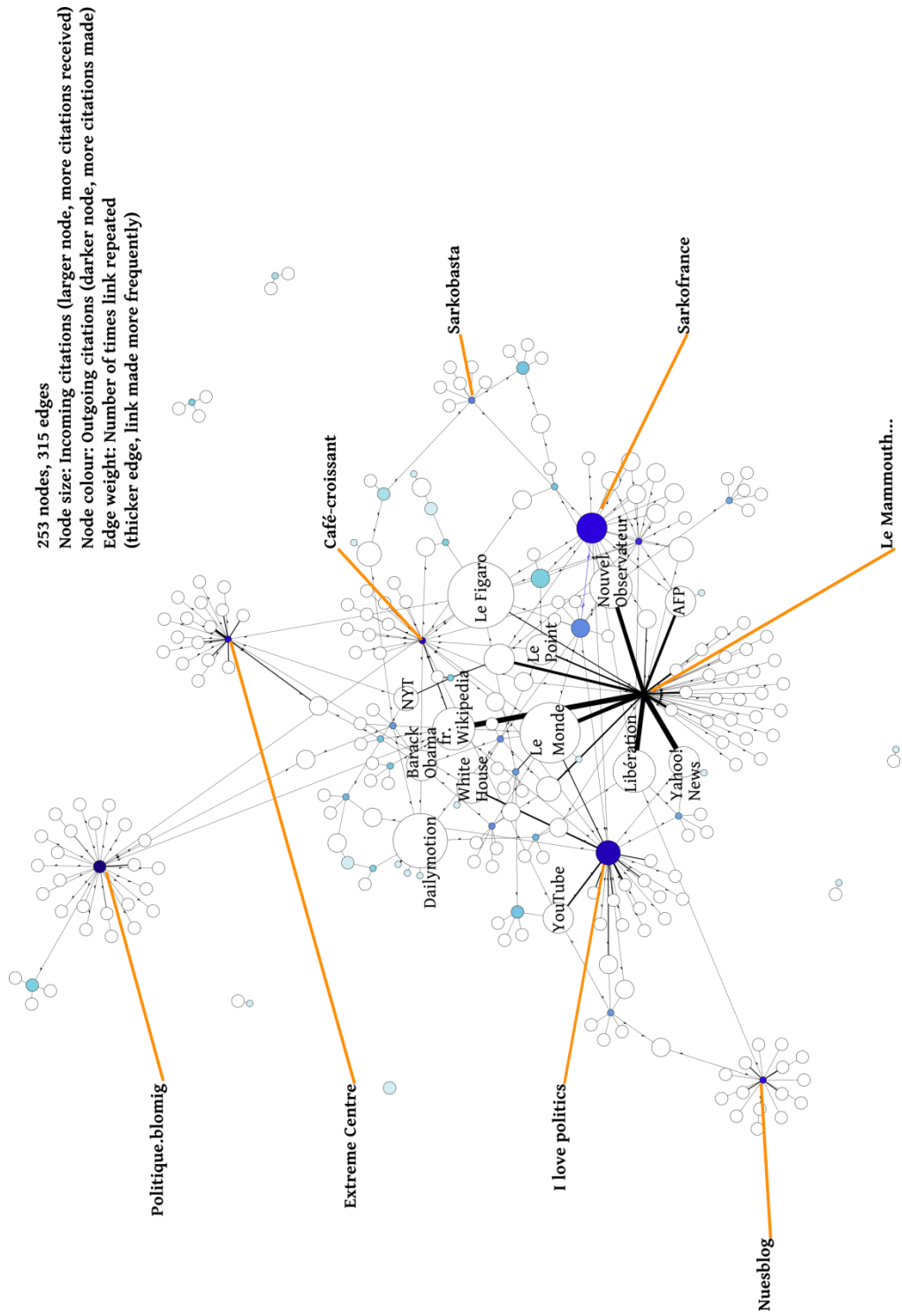


Figure 5.2: Inauguration topical network, French political blogs

unlike other blogs within the French political blogosphere, its specialist subject is U.S. politics rather than domestic affairs. Covering ‘la communication politique américaine vue de France’ (American political communication as seen from France), the blog is more concerned with the results of Congressional votes than the dealings of Nicolas Sarkozy. With this in mind, it is unsurprising that, at a time of great political importance in the U.S., *I love politics* was a particularly productive blog – and why, in the next chapter’s study of a domestic political issue, the blog does not contribute to the debate.

Blog	Topical network posts
<i>I love politics</i>	23
<i>Extreme Centre</i>	14
<i>Le Mammouth...</i>	9
<i>Mendes-France</i> ²⁵⁵	6
<i>Sarkofrance</i>	4
<i>Le blog politique de fluctuat.net</i> ²⁵⁶	4
<i>Yanndarc</i>	3
<i>Prof en campagne</i>	3

Table 5.1: French political blogs with most inauguration posts

The majority of *I love politics*’s posts published between 16 and 25 January 2009 were inauguration-related. Not only did this translate to the blog contributing the most posts to the topical network, but it also shows the blog as unusual compared to other sites discussing the inauguration. Of the sites with more than three posts in the topical network, *I love politics* is one of only two blogs for which the inauguration accounted for more than 50% of their posts. Of these blogs, *I love politics* is the only one for which the inauguration was a major theme. The second blog, *Mendes-France*, instead featured Obama discussion as a minor topic within other political discussions. Other blogs were more active in general during this period, discussing a wider variety of topics, and this suggests that for many French bloggers, the inauguration was only a major topic for a short period around 20 and 21 January 2009, and did not attract ongoing analysis beyond these dates. *Extreme Centre*, for example, with the second highest number of posts in the topical network, covered other topics in over 75% of its posts between 16 and 25 January,

²⁵⁵ <http://blog.mendes-france.com/>

²⁵⁶ <http://politique.fluctuat.net/blog/>

with a clear focus on reports from the conflict in Gaza. This relative inactivity for other blogs, when compared to the inauguration posts of *I love politics*, may also account for *I love politics* becoming an additional resource within the topical network, being cited by three other blogs in their inauguration discussion and providing a supporting role in informing the blogosphere.

Sources

Despite the presence of some citations for *I love politics*, neither it nor any other French political blog is a major resource for the topical network in terms of total links received. As with the overall activity tracked in this study, mainstream media sites are the preferred references in the inauguration topical network, with more widespread citations for these sites than for alternative media or citizen journalism resources. Table 5.2 shows the sites receiving the most citations from posts discussing Obama. The dominance of the mainstream media in the topical network is unsurprising: for an international event, without direct French involvement, it could be anticipated that blogs would reference the media that have the budget to provide additional, primary coverage of the inauguration as original sources. Furthermore, the inauguration did not have the same appeal or need for continued coverage from blogs as other topics, as seen through the post totals for blogs discussing the event.

Site	Citations (#sites)	Citations (total links)	Type
<i>Le Figaro</i>	10	11	National mainstream
<i>Le Monde</i>	9	17	National mainstream
<i>Dailymotion</i>	8	10	Online video-sharing
<i>Wikipedia</i>	6	15	Online encyclopaedia
<i>Libération</i>	6	13	National mainstream
<i>Nouvel Observateur</i>	6	12	National mainstream
<i>YouTube</i>	6	9	Online video-sharing
<i>Rue89</i>	5	7	Alternative, online-only
<i>AFP (Google News)</i>	4	8	Press agency, online
<i>Yahoo! News (FR)</i>	4	12	Online news

Table 5.2: Sites receiving most citations from French political blogs, inauguration posts

While alternative media sites have a minor presence in the topical network, they were more widely cited in the other blog activity taking place during this period. Although these sites are referenced by bloggers, for an international event such as the inauguration mainstream media coverage is preferred by political bloggers. In contrast to alternative media and citizen journalism sites such as *AgoraVox*, international media sites such as *New York Times* saw the majority of their citations originate in the inauguration topical network. The influence of the U.S. origins of the event also saw French bloggers cite more resources more commonly used in the U.S.A. than France. Although *Dailymotion* received several citations in the topical network, it was not the only video-sharing site referenced, with the topical network accounting for over 80% of *YouTube*'s inlinks over this period.

Table 5.2 shows that French political bloggers used mainstream media sites as major resources in their coverage of the inauguration, as well as alternative media in the form of *Rue89* and online resources *Wikipedia*, *Dailymotion*, and *YouTube*. Together, these sites form a group of primary resources for the inauguration topical network. These sites were also the most popular sources, in terms of citations received, within the composite citation network discussed in the previous chapter. French political bloggers making use of the usual, domestic sources in commenting on the inauguration, rather than more specialist sites or international media, suggests that the frames used in the discussions may reflect French issues and perspectives.

The secondary resources used by French political bloggers to discuss the inauguration include not just additional mainstream media sites but also *New York Times* and, unsurprisingly, the official sites for both Barack Obama²⁵⁷ and the White House.²⁵⁸ These secondary sites, although not as widely-cited as the likes of *Le Monde* or *Libération*, are topic-specific: all citations received from any French blog by *BarackObama.com*, *WhiteHouse.gov*, and *New York Times* between 16 and 25 January 2009 are from topical network posts.

²⁵⁷ <http://www.barackobama.com/>

²⁵⁸ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/>

Other international media sites also appear within the topical network, but these sites are cited only by individual blogs. While *The Wall Street Journal*, *CBS News*,²⁵⁹ *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*,²⁶⁰ *The Hill*,²⁶¹ *The Root*,²⁶² and *The New York Times* all represent different views, owners, or audiences, they also share one key trait when it comes to the inauguration topical network. They were all cited by the blog *Extreme Centre* – and only by that blog. Another blog, *Café-croissant*, also shows some support for international media. While its lengthy list of references includes several French mainstream media, the blog also cites *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, and *Haaretz*, both the French and English versions of *Wikipedia*, as well as *YouTube* and *Dailymotion* over the course of its inauguration discussion. With the majority of links to international media coming from four blogs, there may be a small group of sites within the French political blogosphere citing material from beyond French media. The blogs might not reference the same resources as each other, but the presence of multiple non-French sites in their list of out-links suggests that some bloggers are more likely than the rest of the sample to cite international media. These patterns also suggest that, while these blogs might seek out alternative perspectives and frames for the inauguration, they are not representative of the overall French political blogosphere’s coverage of the event.

As the inauguration was an international event, some non-French media might be expected to be referenced in the resultant discussion, even though they are written in a different (though not unfamiliar) language to the French blogs. However, for the majority of the topical network, inauguration discussion drew primarily on the French mainstream media’s coverage of the event. Even *I love politics*, the most active site in the topical network, only drew on two non-French sites, *YouTube* and *WhiteHouse.gov*. In this case, *I love politics*’s tagline ‘as seen from France’ might actually translate to ‘as seen through the French media’. International sites do appear in the topical network, but they are not major references either in terms of links received or number of blogs linking to them. The linking patterns suggest instead that, for the majority of French bloggers, not even an international event can lead to wider referencing of non-French media.

²⁵⁹ <http://cbsnews.com/>

²⁶⁰ <http://thedailyshow.com/>

²⁶¹ <http://thehill.com/>

²⁶² <http://theroot.com/>

The inauguration ceremony was used, sometimes only tangentially, as an opportunity for bloggers to write about a number of subjects. Leading up to the inauguration, posts mentioning Obama referred to such topics as the plans for the inauguration ceremony itself, and the strategies used in the successful Obama campaign, especially its use of the internet. For some commentators, refusing to get carried away with the hype surrounding the build-up to the inauguration, the event was used to talk about how Obama's speeches and communication strategies were now familiar to observers, but his politics remained unknown. Other posts placed the Obama inauguration within French domestic politics, comparing diversity and ethnicity within the two countries. The election of the first African-American President led bloggers to ask whether a French Obama would be possible, if one day a candidate of North African or Middle Eastern descent, raised in the banlieues, ran for President. Following the ceremony, posts were written about the first actions of the new President, and looked beyond at his possible political strategies and initiatives at national and international levels - including comments on the economic crisis and the Gaza situation. Finally, some bloggers also tracked the handover from Bush to Obama, and the differences between the two presidents in terms of actions, policies, and characters.

The distribution of these topics across the blogs contributing to the topical network can be seen in Figure 5.4. The visualisation shows the main names and key concepts featured in several blogs' topical network posts. It is clear from this that the inauguration (included under the 'Obama' umbrella concept) is not always the primary topic. Within the topical network, there are further, smaller sub-topical groups of sites centred on the one blog talking about an individual subject, such as those surrounding technology blog *Nuesblog* or economics blog *Politique.blomig.com*.²⁶³

I love politics contributed the most posts to the topical network, and, as would be expected from a blog dedicated to U.S. politics, Obama and the inauguration are the dominant subjects in the collected posts. Further commentary from the blog focussed on international relations, in particular the closure of Guantanamo Bay and how Obama planned to approach the Gaza conflict. Supporting roles within

²⁶³ <http://politique.blomig.com/>

the posts went to the outgoing President, George W. Bush, and Obama's rival Democrat presidential candidate and incoming Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. However, while *I love politics's* inauguration discussion focussed on the event, and U.S. politics in general, other sites were not as focussed. For *Le Mammouth...*, the inauguration was not the most cited concept, overshadowed by both items about Sarkozy and the global financial crisis. These can also be linked to Obama, but what this shows is that *Le Mammouth...* was still more likely to discuss an international event within the context of domestic themes.

The appearance of Sarkozy as the prominent figure in posts on *Le Mammouth...* is also seen with *Sarkofrance*. Even when looking at posts related in some way to the Obama inauguration, Sarkozy is still the dominant name discussed, the watchdog not going off-topic. The new U.S. President does receive some coverage, though mostly in reference to Sarkozy. Indeed, a post from 25 January begins by saying that the Obama inauguration eclipsed the presidential news in France, allowing the French media to forget about Nicolas Sarkozy for a few hours. The *Sarkofrance* discussion of the ceremony, though, keeps bringing Sarkozy back into its coverage. Other subjects covered by *Sarkofrance* include Gaza, the economic crisis, and, uniquely, Egypt. This last topic becomes less surprising, though, when its context – an official visit by Sarkozy to Egypt – is revealed.

As for the sites referencing international media, for *Café-croissant* the primary subjects of its topical network posts are the Gaza conflict, with one post dedicated to it, and the inauguration. On the latter topic, the event is not as important as what actions will follow from Obama, with particular reference to Gaza and Iraq, while there are some final comments on the Bush administration and its 'war on terror'. *Extreme Centre*, on the other hand, provides different content to other bloggers in the topical network. Not just citing English-language sites, several posts published contain the English text of articles from *Slate*²⁶⁴ or *New York Times*, or the full text of George W. Bush's final speech as U.S. President. In this case, *Extreme Centre* is an unusual blog compared to others in the topical network: rather than responding to the French mainstream media's coverage of the inauguration,

²⁶⁴ <http://slate.com/>

discussion of the event on this blog is framed through U.S. media commentary, drawing on material from both sides of politics.

Conclusion

The French political blogosphere's discussion of the Obama inauguration shows bloggers to position their coverage mostly within one of four themes: U.S. politics, the Gaza conflict, the global financial crisis, and French politics. Despite the international aspects of several of these themes, domestic references form the primary resources for the topical network, with French political bloggers drawing chiefly on the French mainstream media's reporting on the event. Following the overview of the Australian political blogosphere's own coverage of the inauguration, we will discuss in more detail how the findings from the two blogospheres are comparable, and how they relate to framing theory.

The Australian political blogosphere and the Obama inauguration

The topical network

The Australian political blogosphere's inauguration topical network is formed from links made in 68 posts by 25 blogs, with the network visualised in Figure 5.5.

Although French political bloggers contributed more posts about the inauguration, the posting patterns for both topical networks share some characteristics. For French bloggers, the days with the highest numbers of posts published were 20 and 21 January: the inauguration day and its aftermath. The same descriptions hold true for the Australian topical network, only the dates have changed: given the time difference, the inauguration ceremony took place for the Australian audience on 21 January, which also saw the peak in topical network activity. The days surrounding this, 20 and 22 January, also saw relatively high number of inauguration-related posts. Indeed, the three days surrounding the inauguration

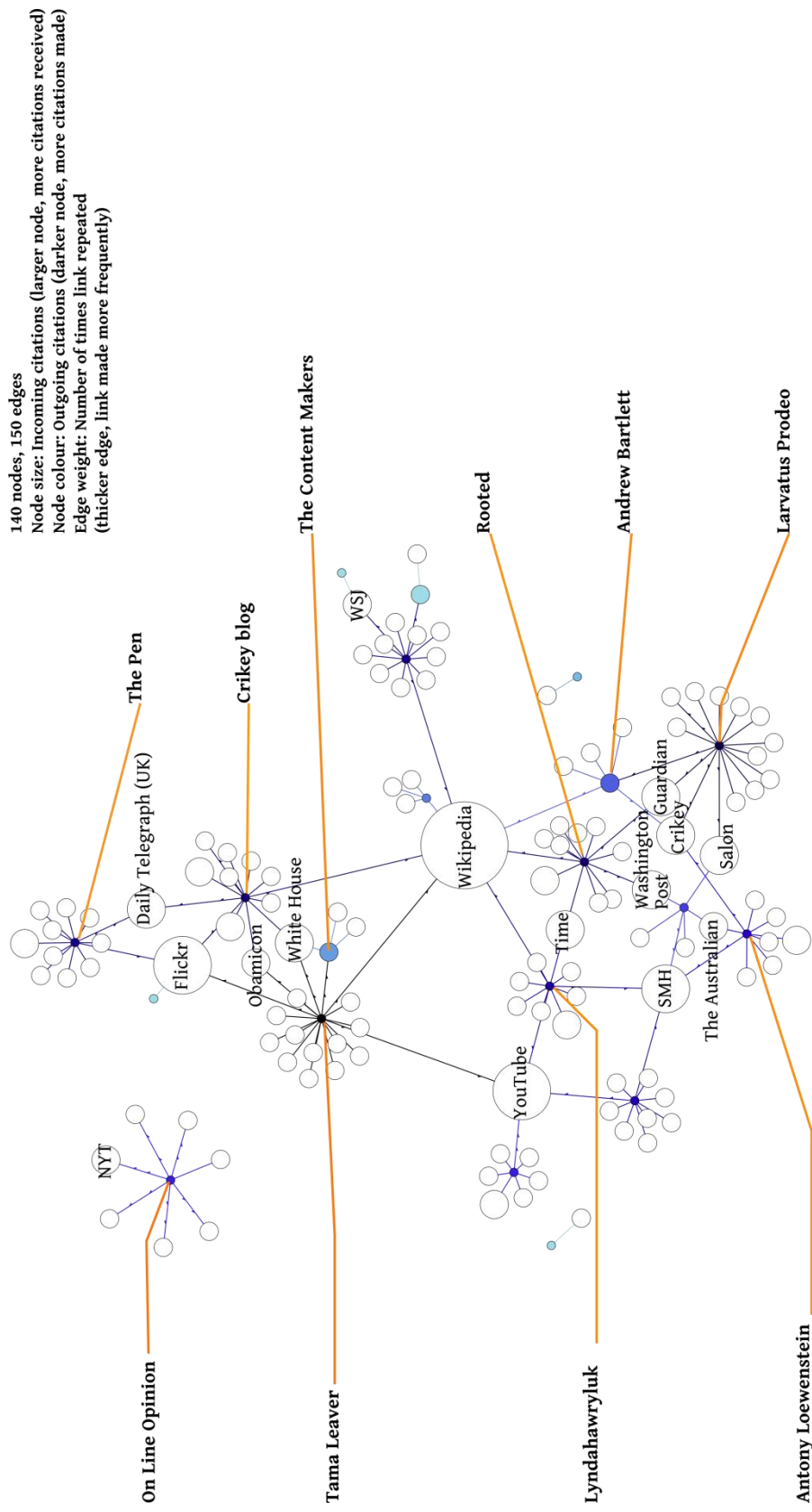


Figure 5.5: Australian political blogosphere, inauguration topical network.

ceremony itself saw the publication of two-thirds of the topical network posts. The remaining days featured here contributed at least one post each, but the major Obama commentary was published on the days surrounding the inauguration. The daily post totals for the inauguration topical network are shown in Figure 5.6. At its peak, the topical network accounted for nearly 30% of the total posts collected for this study published on 21 January 2009. French inauguration posts on the same day, in comparison, accounted for 10% of the total output collected. Fewer Australian bloggers may have contributed to the topical network than was seen in the French inauguration discussion, but the event was also a more popular topic for the Australian political blogosphere overall than its French counterpart.

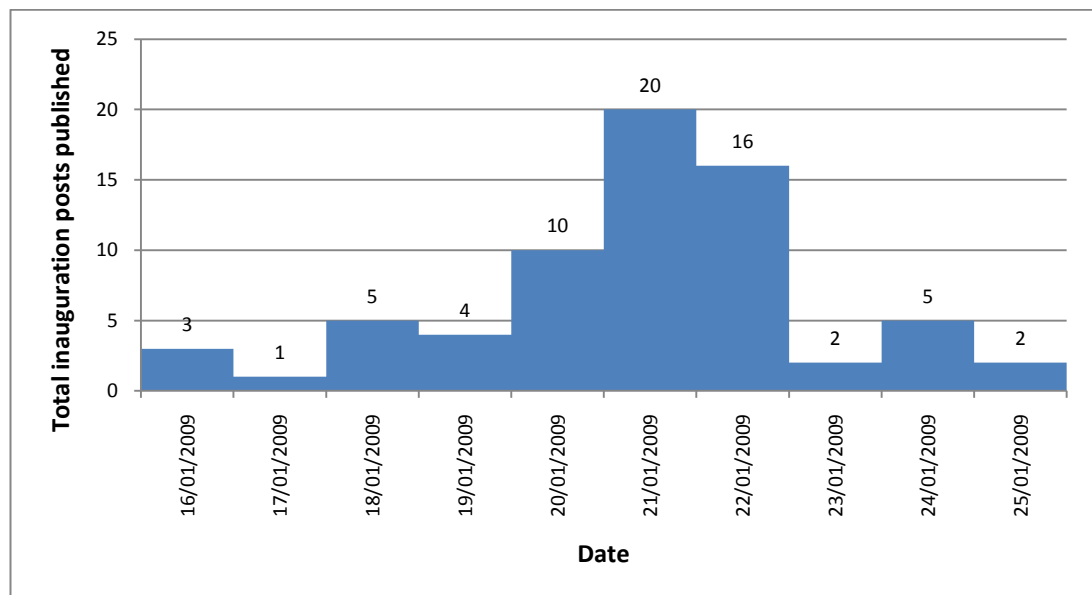


Figure 5.6: Inauguration posts per day, Australian political blogs

Blogs

Given the inauguration's prominence within the total blog output, it is unsurprising that some of the most active Australian political blogs over the ten days are among the sites contributing the highest number of posts to the topical network. Table 5.3 shows the sites publishing three or more posts within the topical network, with *Antony Loewenstein* and *The Pen* the most prolific sites. Some higher-profile blogs, including *Larvatus Prodeo*, *On Line Opinion*, and *Core Economics*, are also prominent in the topical network, as are a number of *Crikey*-hosted blogs.

For many of these blogs, the inauguration accounts for at least 10% of their posts between 16 and 25 January, with three blogs featuring the subject in over 30% of their posts.

Blog	Topical network posts
<i>The Pen</i>	9
<i>Antony Loewenstein</i>	6
<i>Lyndahawryluk</i>	6
<i>On Line Opinion</i>	6
<i>Larvatus Prodeo</i>	4
<i>Crikey blog</i>	3
<i>Rooted</i>	3
<i>Core Economics</i>	3
<i>machine-gun-keyboard</i>	3

Table 5.3: Australian political blogs with most inauguration posts

Geography may have some impact on the extent to which the inauguration was covered in Australia. In the southern hemisphere, the inauguration took place at the height of summer, during a period usually of reduced Australian political activity due to holidays and the parliamentary recess. Indeed, although Australians had returned to work after the New Year, the national public holiday also fell on 26 January, the day following the period covered here. While the inauguration might warrant such coverage regardless of the time of year, the comparative lack of local political topics may have led to additional inauguration posts as bloggers looked for a topic on which to comment.

Sources

The sites referenced in links by blogs in the inauguration topical network suggest that Australian bloggers drew on a wider range of perspectives than their French counterparts. Table 5.4 shows the sites receiving the most citations, with sources from Australia alongside U.S. and U.K. mainstream media sites. Online sharing and collaborative resources, including *Flickr*, *Wikipedia*, and *YouTube*, are also popular resources for Australian bloggers. A number of specific topical resources can also be seen, with the topical network links to *WhiteHouse.gov* and *Time*²⁶⁵ representing the total citations to these sites in blog posts published during this period.

²⁶⁵ <http://time.com/>

Although some Australian sites, most notably *On Line Opinion*, are not connected to the wider topical network, the general referencing patterns are similar for most blogs. In the Australian inauguration topical network, bloggers cite a mixture of local, international, and online resources in their coverage of the event. The sites referenced by individual bloggers may be different, with a broader spread of resources than in the French inauguration topical network, but the categories cited remain consistent between blogs.

Site	# blogs referencing	Total citations	Type
<i>Wikipedia</i>	7	8	Online encyclopaedia
<i>Flickr</i>	4	7	Online photo-sharing
<i>White House</i>	3	4	Website of the U.S. president
<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>	4	4	Sydney mainstream
<i>YouTube</i>	4	4	Online video-sharing
<i>The Guardian</i>	2	3	U.K. mainstream
<i>Crikey</i>	3	3	Alternative, online-only
<i>Salon</i> ²⁶⁶	2	2	U.S. online magazine
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> (U.K.)	2	2	U.K. mainstream
<i>The Australian</i>	2	2	National mainstream
<i>Time</i>	2	2	U.S. mainstream
<i>Washington Post</i> ²⁶⁷	2	2	U.S. mainstream

Table 5.4: Sites receiving most citations from Australian political blogs, inauguration posts

What is absent from the Australian topical network is an equivalent of *I love politics*: a blog specialising in U.S. politics from an Australian perspective. There are other specialist blogs represented in the topical network, including several Crikey blogs (in addition to *The Content Makers*, the environment-oriented *Rooted* appears). Australian bloggers based in the U.S. also appear: the author of *The Pencil Guy*²⁶⁸ was even in Washington D.C. for the inauguration. Instead of a local blog dealing in U.S. politics, then, what is shown by the topical network are citations for U.S. political blogs, both independent and run through the U.S. mainstream media, although again these sites do not receive citations from multiple sites.

What this suggests is that, for Australian political bloggers, there is equal demand for, or perhaps even preference for, commentary over general ‘news’ content. In the French inauguration topical network there was a noticeable divide between

²⁶⁶ <http://www.salon.com/>

²⁶⁷ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/>

²⁶⁸ <http://hourann.com/>

primary and secondary sources – those referenced in several blogs, and those only cited by one or two bloggers – but this distinction is harder to make for the Australian topical network, if only because just twelve sites receive citations from more than one blog. However, beyond the small number of common references are a larger number of resources receiving attention from one or two bloggers. The individual sites mentioned are different for each blog, but what can be determined from the topical network is that many blogs are referencing a mixture of mainstream media and opinion sites (sometimes run through the mainstream media). The French political blogosphere’s coverage of the inauguration showed a high amount of linking to the content of a few mainstream media sites over most other resources, but for Australian bloggers any reliance is lessened. Again, the smaller size of the Australian topical network may contribute to this – and the wider period statistics show that Australian mainstream media sites do receive a high number of citations overall – but for the specific topic of the Obama inauguration, local news sites are not favoured over other coverage or commentary.

The commentary angle is particularly interesting, with both mainstream media sites and other blogs being referenced by a given blogger. Some of the blogs cited in particular are representative of non-inauguration topics covered by bloggers, such as *Rooted* referencing *Green Inc.*²⁶⁹ However, other U.S. blogs such as *The Politico*²⁷⁰ and *The Daily Kos*, and blogs hosted by CNN,²⁷¹ *The Wall Street Journal*, and *New York Times*, are used in support of the Obama discussion by Australian political bloggers. What the inauguration topical network suggests is that, for an international political event, there is demand from Australian political bloggers for mainstream media content and opinion pieces. However, instead of citing the usual resources, Australian political bloggers looked for more specialised commentary from local and international sources.

²⁶⁹ <http://greeninc.blogs.nytimes.com/>

²⁷⁰ <http://politico.com/>

²⁷¹ <http://cnn.com/> - <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/>

The distribution of themes across the blogs discussing the inauguration is seen in Figure 5.8. Unlike the French blog coverage of the inauguration, Obama was treated by Australian political bloggers as the main discussion point. While other subjects featured, with only a few exceptions they were within the context of the inauguration and what the new President might do next. Local angles to the stories covered were fewer in Australian blog posts, with international news media referenced by most blogs. The range of subjects covered by Australian political bloggers helps to explain the groups of sites receiving links from only one blog, as different topics have their own specific references, with the network suggesting a wide variety of approaches available for commenting on the event. There is only limited thematic grouping, most obviously through *The Content Makers* and *Tama Leaver* both commenting on the communications and internet strategy of the Obama administration. In this case, the former's post on this topic was referenced by the latter in their discussion of Obama's internet strategy. Although the Australian topical network is more Obama-driven than the French network, the underlying themes covered by each blogger and their linking activity mean that the resultant discussion is, if anything, less focussed than parts of the French political blogosphere's coverage of the inauguration.

The range of topics discussed can be seen on a blog-by-blog basis. The blog with the most topical network posts, *The Pen*, reposted material from other Tumblr users or sourced from elsewhere online, with much of the content inauguration-specific. With content including a 'happy inauguration day' cupcake and Lego versions of the inauguration, unlike other bloggers in the sample *The Pen's* focus is on light-hearted or humorous material. Policy remains undiscussed, with *The Pen* highlighting just how coverage of a 'political' topic can be completely different when compared to other bloggers discussing the same event.

The ceremony itself was not always a key topic for Australian bloggers. For *Antony Loewenstein*, human rights and military issues are the focus of the topical network posts, with the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan both raised in different posts. What took place on the Capitol on 20 January (local time) is not a major concern of *Antony Loewenstein*, beyond linking to *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* videos after the

event. Instead, ongoing conflicts and what, if any, changes in approach or policy Obama might bring about provide the main subjects of *Antony Loewenstein's* topical network posts.

Larvatus Prodeo also discussed Afghanistan and the successful web strategy used by Obama, but the remaining contributions from *Larvatus Prodeo* are dedicated to the inauguration ceremony itself. With one post either side of the ceremony, the first links to several sites covering the inauguration live, before providing commentary on the possible directions Obama might take policy-wise, and the likely limits affecting his options. The posts surrounding the inauguration on *Larvatus Prodeo* cover several themes and link to bloggers and news media both local and international to support the points being made. The posts then provide both a synthesis of other material online and original commentary. Covering, and linking to, specific posts that 'might otherwise get lost in the flood', shows the position of *Larvatus Prodeo* within the Australian political blogosphere: as a relatively well-known political blog, it may act as an opinion leader, aggregating potentially interesting material from other sources that subsequently become more visible to readers by being featured on *Larvatus Prodeo*. This idea will be explored further in Chapter Seven, detailing the Australian political blogosphere's discussion of Utegate.

Like *Larvatus Prodeo*, *On Line Opinion* features content from multiple bloggers, although rather than being a group blog in the same vein as *Larvatus Prodeo*, *On Line Opinion* features reposted material from other sites in addition to its own commentary. The global financial crisis emerges as the major topic discussed by *On Line Opinion* in the inauguration topical network, with multiple posts dedicated to the U.S. economy and how Obama might try to rescue it. Although the topics covered by *On Line Opinion* are not ignored by other political blogs, its isolation in the hyperlink network can be explained by the sources used in posting on these themes.

While the likes of *Larvatus Prodeo* and *On Line Opinion* cover multiple inauguration-related subjects, other blogs focus on specific themes. The post-inauguration post from *Tama Leaver*, for example, deals exclusively with aspects of the ceremony and the Obama administration concerning the internet. The topical network also

features several specialist blogs hosted by Crikey, positioning their inauguration posts within their own subject areas. Given that *The Content Makers* focuses on media themes, it is unsurprising that its two topical network posts deal with communication and Obama, featuring topics related to the Obama inauguration without covering the inauguration itself. *Rooted's* posts, on the other hand, are positioned within existing environmental concerns. *Rooted's* post after the inauguration ceremony, for example, starts with comments on Obama's speech before linking them to combating climate change and developing renewable energy options. Included in the posts are links to U.S. and U.K. articles related to the environment, and the approaches used by the likes of *Rooted* show that, despite the absence of an Australian political blog dedicated to U.S. subjects, Australian political bloggers will readily source and comment on U.S. topics, often without needing to reframe the discussion as directly relevant to domestic politics.

Conclusion

The attention given to the inauguration by Australian political bloggers suggests that, although an international event, it was still an important topic to be covered. The percentage of posts discussing the inauguration, though, may also reflect a relative scarcity of Australian political topics. The inauguration would likely receive coverage regardless of when or where it occurred for Australians. However, its prominence on 21 January, representing nearly 30% of all blog posts collected on that day, may reflect the inauguration taking place at the height of the Australian summer. This could be a period with a smaller range of headline subjects being discussed by political bloggers, particularly while the Federal parliament was on recess.

The Australian inauguration topical network was also formed without the presence of a specialist U.S. politics blog in the mould of *I love politics*. The Australian political blogs featured primarily discuss Australian topics, or international subjects with an Australian perspective. In the absence of a dedicated U.S. politics blog from Australia, none of the blogs represented took on a role similar to that of *I love politics*. Instead, U.S. opinions were gathered from the U.S. itself, with bloggers

linking to *The Daily Kos* and *The Politico* amongst other sites. However, despite the reliance on non-Australian media, local themes were not prominent within the inauguration blog posts, suggesting that, for Australian bloggers, the inauguration did not need to be reframed within Australian issues or interests. This may reflect Australian bloggers regularly using international, English-language media, such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, as noted in Chapter Four. These patterns of media use may mean that, as frequent readers of these sources, Australian bloggers do not need to reframe international affairs within domestic contexts. French bloggers, on the other hand, do not show the same patterns, instead primarily citing French-language media, and this may be a factor in how the French inauguration discussion was often refocussed around domestic themes.

Inauguration in two blogospheres

The discussion of the Obama inauguration in the Australian and French political blogosphere saw bloggers from the two countries place the event within similar contexts. Themes such as the global financial crisis, Gaza conflict, war in Afghanistan and Iraq, terrorism, the internet, and U.S. foreign policy drew coverage in both blogospheres, alongside posts dealing more specifically with the inauguration ceremony itself. The distribution of these themes suggests that there may be a number of models for the framing of an international event within political blogs. However, some contexts for the Obama discussion were not common to both blogospheres. In particular, the repeated appearance of Nicolas Sarkozy as a prominent theme for French political blogs shows that, for these sites at least, local politics provided additional context for the inauguration discussion.

The French inauguration topical network shows the importance of the local to the international event, not just in themes but also in references. While the Obama discussion was fairly extensive, accounting for 10% of the blogosphere's total activity on 20 January, many blogs only posted once or twice on the topic. Furthermore, many of the primary resources drawn upon in commentary on the inauguration are from the French mainstream media. Although the inauguration was an event worth commenting on, bloggers did not dedicate a series of posts to

ongoing analysis of inauguration-related themes. With some degree of reliance on mainstream media citations and the presence of Sarkozy as a major theme within the Obama discussion, this would suggest that French blog coverage of the inauguration was shaped somewhat by their domestic media's coverage. The themes might reflect the blogger's own interests, but the source material would have already been positioned by the French mainstream media. Framing the inauguration within French politics was not a practice carried out by all bloggers active in the topical network. However, the at-times peripheral presence of Obama within these posts, not just through being the subject of only one of many links but by being overshadowed by other themes – including Sarkozy – shows that, in examining the work of political bloggers, how they frame their coverage of events is an important consideration.

Australian political bloggers, on the other hand, actively avoid contextualising the inauguration within local politics. Not only are Australian mainstream media sites not as widely cited as their French counterparts, but international sources act as the primary resources for Australian bloggers covering the inauguration. For the majority of blogs contributing to the topical network, Obama-specific topics dominate, with secondary themes appearing as secondary concepts rather than overshadowing discussion of the new President. These topics do not just cover the inauguration ceremony itself, but also Obama's approach to foreign policy, the internet, or the economy. The critical aspect is that the discussion, while varied in its overarching themes, is firmly within the context of the Obama presidency, rather than Australian or French politics. Climate change is discussed through the lens of what the Obama administration policy should be, the internet through what changes have been made to the White House's online presence.

The sources cited by Australian political bloggers may be responsible for the themes covered. In referencing U.S. sources, it would be expected that the material is framed for an audience familiar with U.S. politics, rather than requiring commentary to be repositioned for Australian interests. The articles cited cover a range of ideas relating to the start of the Obama presidency, and Australian political bloggers follow this approach without necessarily linking the discussion back to the Rudd government, for example. Some comparative analysis of U.S. and

Australian politics does appear in the topical network through *The Content Makers'* look at the communication strategies used by Rudd and Obama, but the local does not achieve the same prominence as for French political bloggers.

The preference for U.S. material over local commentary for Australian political bloggers, and the relative lack of widespread international citations in the French topical network, may be explained through several factors. In particular, the importance of language should not be ignored: although U.S. sites such as *New York Times* and *WhiteHouse.gov* received links from French political blogs, links to international sites were from only a small number of the blogs featured in the topical network. Australian blogs, on the other hand, cite U.S. and U.K. material readily, with some blogs not referencing local sites at all in the topical network. While the English language would not be expected to be a challenge for most French bloggers in accessing U.S. articles, when French language material is available the topical network suggests they are more likely to link to it. Australian bloggers, on the other hand, would not have the same concerns about the language of the material they link to when it comes to a U.S. issue. The general preference for U.S. content over local news sites in the Australian topical network may then come down to choosing the articles and posts from those involved in the event, or directly affected by the inauguration, supported by the Australian political blogosphere's repeated citations for international media overall.

Even though national politics are not an explicit theme within the Australian political blogosphere's coverage of the inauguration, the status of governments might have some influence on how the inauguration is reported in the two blogospheres. At the time of the inauguration, the Australian Labor Party (ALP), representing a centre-left stance, had formed government, at the time under the leadership of Kevin Rudd. More importantly, the ALP's election victory in 2007 had come after over ten years of government under the Liberal Party and John Howard. With the blogosphere arguably seen as a predominantly left-wing, liberal space in Australia (Garden, 2010), while opposition built up in the blogosphere towards the Liberal Party had been replaced with the ALP victory, the prevailing view of the George W. Bush presidency amongst Australian bloggers would not have been as positive. The generally optimistic views and hopes for the Obama administration,

then, may be a reflection of the prominent ideologies within the Australian political blogosphere. Given the absence of some of the more notorious right-wing bloggers in Australia from this study, such as Andrew Bolt or Tim Blair, the pro-Obama views promoted within the topical networks might not be found in other sections of the Australian political blogosphere.

The views expressed by the French political blogosphere also suggest some support for national politics influencing the coverage of the inauguration, through the prominence of Sarkozy within the Obama discussion. Although the French political blogosphere represents ideologies from across the French political system, from the extreme left to the extreme right, there is a known group of blogs connected to each other through their opposition not necessarily to a party, but to Nicolas Sarkozy himself. This opposition, and the importance of critiquing every movement by Sarkozy for some of these blogs, has some impact on the topical network coverage. Asking whether a French Obama could ever happen can, for example, be positioned within hopes for the next, non-Sarkozy President, while the general 'yes we can' desires accompanying the incoming administration in the U.S. were compared with French views of Sarkozy. Commenting on how Sarkozy was not present at the inauguration, and his attempts to be there, might not just be reporting on his movements. These comments can also be seen as negatively comparing the French President with the composed, in control images presented of Barack Obama and the groundswell of hope surrounding his presidency.

Framing and the inauguration

The coverage of international events by mainstream media has previously been seen to have made use of framing devices to tailor reporting to a domestic audience. In their review of framing research and foreign media events, Lee, Pan, Chan, & So (2001) state that such framing includes positioning these events within domestic interests, transforming from foreign affairs into variations on local themes (346). To some degree, this approach to reporting international events is apparent in the two blogospheres' coverage of the inauguration. Certainly, the French political blogosphere saw numerous posts discussing Obama as a tangential

theme from domestic politics, looking at themes surrounding the inauguration – the first African-American President, for example – and repurposing them for posts about French politics – would a French Obama be possible? Focusing on Nicolas Sarkozy provides further evidence of French political bloggers viewing the U.S. events through local topics and actors.

Australian political bloggers might not have been as explicit in discussing Obama through local political events, with only a couple of posts even mentioning the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. However, the linking behaviour suggests that other aspects of framing might be applicable to the inauguration topical networks. French political bloggers mostly cited their domestic mainstream media, further suggesting a local reframing of the inauguration, but Australian bloggers relied more on international resources. Even if citation patterns suggest that local mainstream media frames do not necessarily appear in the Australian political blogosphere, blog coverage of the inauguration shares a thematic focus with the specific sites referenced, such as *New York Times* blogs on environmental or economic issues. These sites may be referenced consistently by individual blogs, reflecting their own interests, with the inauguration coinciding with these interests. The Australian blog *Rooted*'s posts on Obama and energy and environmental policies, provide an example of this situation. In addition to posting about its specialist subject, environmental issues, *Rooted* also links to the *New York Times* blog *Green Inc.* In citing U.S. sources, Australian blogs might be avoiding the Australian mainstream media's own framing of the inauguration. However, that is not to say that there is no framing effect present in the inauguration topical network. Referencing sites such as *Green Inc.* shows that the particular themes or concepts used to frame U.S. Obama discussion – in this case, alternative energy-specific analysis of the Democrats' economic stimulus plans – also help to shape the Australian blogosphere's coverage of the inauguration.

Meraz (2011) has suggested that political blogs may 'struggle to reframe the news of the day for their news-reading web publics' (110), having decided what to post on based on the most popular topics of the day, but the inauguration topical networks suggest differently. While the inauguration might not have been a long-term concern of either the Australian or French political blogospheres, attracting

most of its coverage around the event itself, the posts that were published on this topic carried on several themes common to individual blogs. The likes of *Rooted* or *The Content Makers* fit the inauguration into their specific fields of interest, while *Sarkofrance*'s ongoing surveillance of Sarkozy included some Obama discussion. The content of these posts may draw on mainstream media, alternative media, or other blog posts, but the themes present are not new or unique to the inauguration. These sites may be seen as 'partisan blogs', a term used by Meraz to describe blogs strongly supportive of a particular ideology, but which shares some attributes with *Rooted* or *Sarkofrance*. As blogs dedicated to a specific topic, both blog posts and the audience for these posts would be focused along this subject. While the implications of 'spinning' an issue would be different for politically partisan blogs and topic-specific sites, the same practice is essentially at hand: the inauguration is being spun for an environmentally concerned audience, or to highlight the actions of Nicolas Sarkozy. In this case, what we see is that the long-term topical interests of specialist blogs will ultimately tend to supersede the framing power of the mainstream media, and other sites, on whose content the blog may draw.

The findings of this chapter support Xenos's (2008) suggestion of bloggers engaging in 'strategic framing of discussions in order to favour their own perspectives' (491). With the inauguration, these perspectives reflect specialist interests on the part of individual bloggers. In the coverage of Australian or French politics, the frames used would be expected to present a more partisan interpretation of domestic affairs based on a blogger's ideological preferences. For an international event without direct consequences for either Australia or France, the connections to domestic politics are not as strong. The Obama administration's environmental policy may be commented on by Australian bloggers. However, the severity of an individual blogger's response would not be as strong as would be expected for comments on the Rudd government's environmental policy, which would have direct implications for the blogger. In addition, a blogger in Brisbane would not necessarily expect to influence policy in Washington, D.C., but they would certainly promote their domestic causes and vote accordingly in local elections. Australian political bloggers, and the voting public in general, in this way have some impact on domestic politics. The framing of Australian political affairs would then be different to how the inauguration was covered by bloggers.

Even without direct effects on Australian or French politics, the framing of the inauguration by the two blogospheres raises further questions for the following chapters' analysis of bloggers' responses to domestic events. French political bloggers featured French media sites heavily in their inauguration citations, but did not necessarily use the same frames as journalists. Specialist subjects, personal interests, and ideology meant that French political bloggers reframed Obama discussion within their own site-specific devices, such as the Sarkozy context governing all content on *Sarkofrance*. For domestic political issues, this reframing may be more extensive, as bloggers respond to developments that directly concern them or their topics of interest.

The Australian political blogosphere's use of first-hand, U.S.-based content in covering the inauguration, rather than material presented for an Australian audience, also asks questions about referencing domestic media. Australian political bloggers took advantage of the accessibility of perspectives from around the world online in their inauguration posts. For Australian debates, local sources would be expected to feature more prominently, but as noted in Chapter Two, the relationship between some Australian publications and political bloggers is at times volatile. The 'us vs. them' dynamic between bloggers and journalists may then affect not just which sources are cited, but how their content is interpreted and repositioned by bloggers. This idea is examined further in Chapter Seven's analysis of the Utegate affair by the Australian political blogosphere.

What the inauguration topical networks suggest is that, rather than necessarily using the frames constructed by the mainstream media to discuss an international event, bloggers are using content, and the associated frames, from sources relevant to their interests. Although bloggers have the ability, as a group, to construct their own framing of an event which can then influence other media coverage (Drezner & Farrell, 2008b), the inauguration discussion features a range of frames that build on coverage from mainstream media, alternative media, and other blogs. Both hyperlinks and post content can provide information about how blogs frame an issue, looking at the themes covered and the sources cited. These two data sources work together to show how, even if a blog may cover themes not discussed by other blogs in the sample, the sites it links to have a particular topical focus also

present in the original blog post. The identification of popular resources and dominant themes within issue-specific posts during the period surrounding the Obama inauguration, as seen in Figure 5.4 and Figure 5.8, subsequently helps to provide an overview of the ways political bloggers have framed the inauguration.

Conclusion

Although the inauguration ceremony took place at midday, Tuesday 20 January, in Washington D.C., for Australians the president at the end of the day was still George W. Bush. Only in the early hours of 21 January in the eastern states, and as Wednesday started in Western Australia, did Barack Obama become U.S. President. The importance of time difference should not be underestimated here, as it is a key concern for comparisons of coverage of international events in several countries. While the inauguration might not attract the same global television audience as an event such as the Summer Olympic Games or the football World Cup, the ceremony itself brings forth similar quandaries for people living in inconvenient time zones. For sports fans, the choice is whether to stay up until (or sleep early and get up for) the game at 2am on a weekday, or record it and watch it later – possibly avoiding all reports about the outcome until they get a chance to watch the match.

The inauguration is not the same type of event – barring a particularly devastating series of events, the ‘result’ of the inauguration would not be a surprise for anyone recording the ceremony to watch later – but the question of whether to stay up and watch, and even blog, the live ceremony or hold on and delay comments until the next day may still have had some impact on how the inauguration was covered in Australia. If bloggers do not cover an event live, it may be that their posts move straight to related themes and commentary rather than reporting on what happened previously. This can be seen in the Australian discussion of the inauguration, where posts published after the event used the inauguration as the context for opinion pieces on U.S. economic or foreign policy rather than discuss the minutiae of the ceremony itself.

In this chapter, blog discussions around the inauguration of Barack Obama and the framing of the event have been studied, comparing coverage from the Australian and French political blogospheres. While framing effects were not universal, some evidence was found for blog posts featuring international events reframed within local contexts, and for blogs using the frames constructed by other sources in their coverage of the inauguration. In the following chapters, two domestic political issues will be examined, one each for the French and Australian political blogospheres. The analysis of the blog coverage of these issues will draw upon the theoretical framework outlined previously. Where the inauguration discussion was studied with regards to framing, the following chapter will investigate the French political blogosphere's coverage of a proposed 'three strikes' internet rights and piracy law, and how agenda-setting theory may be applied to the tracked blog activity.

Chapter 6: Agenda-setting and HADOPI in the French political blogosphere

Introduction

In October 2008, the French government released a planning document entitled *France Numérique 2012*, outlining how the government was looking to develop the nation's digital economy (Besson, 2008). Amongst the aims included in the document were such ideals as guaranteeing access to digital services and networks for all French citizens, attempting to reduce the digital divide, and improving the diffusion of film, audiovisual, and musical content. In the discussion of the last of these aims, the plan touched on various strategies aimed at both protecting the rights of the artists and producers of this creative content, and at preventing the spread of online piracy. Carrying out any anti-piracy measures was dependent on the launch date of mechanisms and resources outlined in the proposed 'Création et Internet' law, at the time being debated by the Sénat and subsequently passed in October 2008 (33). Although the *France Numérique 2012* plan did not go into further specifics about the mechanisms provided under the proposed law, it referred to a controversial plan first discussed by the French government in 2008, covering not just the protection of artists' rights but also measures for countering piracy. Dubbed a 'three strikes' law due to the successive penalties for breaking it – the punishment for a third 'strike' seeing citizens' internet access cut off for a year – under the bill a new administrative body would be established, the *Haute Autorité pour la diffusion des œuvres et la protection des droits sur internet* (High Authority for the Distribution of Works and the Protection of Rights on the Internet), or HADOPI. With this 'independent administrative authority' being seen as not just protecting content and rights online, but also as a possible means for surveillance of internet activity, piracy, and filtering (Herzberg, 2009), the first half of 2009 saw the debate around, and campaign against, the proposed law become a major political concern. The new body would also lend its acronym to discussions of the proposed law in

the blogosphere. In the following chapter 'HADOPI' is used to refer to the 'Création et Internet' bill, unless otherwise stated.²⁷²

In the previous chapter, the coverage of the Obama inauguration by French political bloggers was studied, showing the resources used and the subjects being discussed in posts centred on a specific event. Blogging about HADOPI highlights a different side to blogging activity. The debate surrounding the proposed law continued throughout the seven months of data collection, not just through the campaign against the law but also as parliament discussed and voted on the bill. Posts featured here, then, are not necessarily responding to any one event, but together show the development of the HADOPI law and the blogosphere's reaction to it. The international nature of the Obama inauguration contributed to how French political bloggers covered the event, and which sites were present within the topical network. For the HADOPI topical network, wider representation of the blogs in the original sample would be expected. This is not just because the subject is a local political issue, but as citizens with a degree of online engagement already, a proposed law pertaining to rights online but also linked with internet surveillance and censorship would be of interest to French political bloggers.

While it is possible to examine commentary on the HADOPI law centred on particular dates, such as the votes in the *Assemblée Nationale*, only looking at small date ranges can inadvertently ignore a function of political bloggers. Writing posts that respond to topics in the mainstream media is an approach used by political bloggers, amongst other genres of blogging, but it is not the sole tactic. With the blogs representing the political views of their authors, the sites can be used to promote a particular figure or campaign, and it is this use of blogs that will feature in part of the HADOPI topical network analysis. Given the opposition to the government's proposal, the views presented by, and the material referenced in, posts by French political bloggers would be expected to be more in line with the anti-HADOPI campaign rather than a general coverage of the event. If bloggers were actively campaigning against the bill, then we would expect to see the discussions in the blogosphere to be somewhat independent of the mainstream media's HADOPI coverage. Rather than following the mainstream media agenda

²⁷² This chapter builds on earlier content discussed in Highfield (2009b; 2010b).

and general reporting on the bill's progress through parliament, anti-HADOPI blogs may instead attempt to keep promoting the opposition to the bill and particular themes relevant to their debate. The HADOPI topical network is thus used to evaluate how, instead of mainstream media agenda-setting, the blogosphere sets its own agenda in promoting opposition to the HADOPI bill. To do so, this chapter draws on posts from across the first eight months of 2009, from 10 January to 10 August. As with the inauguration case studies, relevant posts were located using keywords pertaining to the HADOPI debate, with the link and content data from these posts then separated from the wider corpus as outlined in Chapter Three. In total, 442 posts from 86 blogs, along with 28 posts from 5 opinion feeds, were extracted from the wider dataset to form the HADOPI topical network.

HADOPI timeline

In January 2009, HADOPI was still only a bill in front of the French parliament. It had passed through the Sénat in October 2008, but had not yet been voted on by the Assemblée Nationale. Although it had been introduced to parliament by UMP Cultural Minister Christine Albanel in 2008, and was mentioned in the digital economy planning document by UMP Secretary of State Éric Besson, opposition parties still hoped that the bill would be defeated. Députés from the PS were split on HADOPI, with the main opposition to the bill coming from les Verts, while other parties did not publicly announce their stance. However, with the bill not being debated in the Assemblée Nationale until later in the year, the campaign against HADOPI was not at its most active in January. On 25 February, though, the anti-HADOPI campaign became reinvigorated. Aiming directly at the online presence of the HADOPI opposition, advocacy group *la Quadrature du Net (lQdN)*²⁷³ launched an internet 'blackout' to demonstrate the extent of anti-HADOPI sentiment.²⁷⁴ Internet users were encouraged to change their user icons and avatars to completely black images, on blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and other online platforms. By spreading this voluntary campaign across popular websites, it was hoped that public awareness

²⁷³ <http://laquadrature.net>

²⁷⁴ This followed a similar campaign launched a week earlier in New Zealand by the Creative Freedom Foundation NZ, mention of which was made by several French bloggers.

of, and opposition to, HADOPI would help influence the progress of the bill (Breindl & Gustafsson, 2011, 208).

Through March and into April, the HADOPI bill was debated in sessions of the Assemblée Nationale. As the Easter break approached, though, the UMP was keen to move a vote on the bill, to hasten its passage through the French parliament. On 9 April, the vote was finally scheduled. Unfortunately for the UMP, it did not go as planned. The Assemblée Nationale had continued debating the HADOPI bill that afternoon, with the vote scheduled for 1.30pm. However, the debate session was not well attended. Only five percent of the members of the Assemblée Nationale were actually in the chamber. However, with the UMP and its fellow HADOPI supporters having the majority, this was enough for Albanel to push for a vote on the bill, passing it through the lower house of parliament and only requiring the Sénat to reapprove the bill following amendments for HADOPI to become law. At least, that was the plan. Akin to a scene from the television programme *The West Wing*, when the vote was called several PS members entered the chamber, having been waiting elsewhere in the building in case of such a development (Ronai, 2009). Instead of the pro-HADOPI parties having the majority, suddenly the numbers were with the opposition, and the vote was subsequently lost. The final votes were 15 for, 21 against – and 541 absent from parliament. Scheduling errors were blamed for the surprise defeat of the bill. Several members had already returned to their constituencies for the Easter holiday, while others had gone to lunch before placing their vote, seemingly assured of victory (Davies, 2009). However, the defeat did not spell the end of HADOPI. Once the Assemblée Nationale returned after Easter, a second vote would be conducted.

Before the second vote took place, other developments caused a further spike in the HADOPI topical network. On 6 May, the European parliament's vote on a proposed Telecoms Package was changed at the last minute, as lobbyists from *lQdN* convinced members to adopt an amendment pertinent to the HADOPI debate. The amendment in question stated that European Union states could not restrict citizens' access to the internet without a prior ruling from the respective judicial authority (Breindl & Gustafsson, 2011, 193). While the amendment meant that the package itself would not be voted on until a third reading to take place later in

2009, the discussion in the European parliament highlighted possible obstacles to the UMP's HADOPI bill.

The next day, *Libération* broke a story about government intimidation against HADOPI opponents. The article revealed that, earlier in 2009, a TF1 employee named Jérôme Bourreau-Guggenheim sent a private email to his local member of parliament outlining his opinion opposing HADOPI. Instead of remaining a private communication, the email made its way to the Ministry of Culture. The ministry office promptly informed TF1 about the email, which expressed a view contrary to the interests of the broadcaster and its management, and Bourreau-Guggenheim was fired. In response to this news, mention was made of 'Big Brother' tactics on the part of the government against opposition to HADOPI. The same inference had been made in discussing the bill itself, with the possibility of all activity online being monitored to identify piracy and other illegal operations being carried out. With the circumstances of the Bourreau-Guggenheim firing, fears about a future with HADOPI spread further.

On 12 May, five days after the Bourreau-Guggenheim affair, the Assemblée Nationale voted again on the HADOPI bill. As expected after the events of 9 April, this vote was better attended, and the UMP ensured it had the numbers to pass the bill – 296 for, 233 against. The following day, the Sénat also passed the bill. The campaign had been unsuccessful. HADOPI would become law – pending approval from the Conseil Constitutionnel.

If several events involving HADOPI had been unexpected for political observers and politicians alike, from the successful 'no' vote to the Bourreau-Guggenheim affair, perhaps the most surprising development was yet to come. Following the approval of the bill by both the Assemblée Nationale and Sénat, the proposed law was sent to the Conseil Constitutionnel for final assent. Without it, HADOPI would not become a law but would be returned to parliament for further refinement. On 10 June 2009, the Conseil Constitutionnel made an announcement. It had decided that parts of the HADOPI bill were unconstitutional, and had not approved the bill's passage into law. Specifically, the Conseil Constitutionnel deemed that internet access constituted a basic human right and the HADOPI 'three strikes' process went against any presumptions of innocence for French citizens. Once

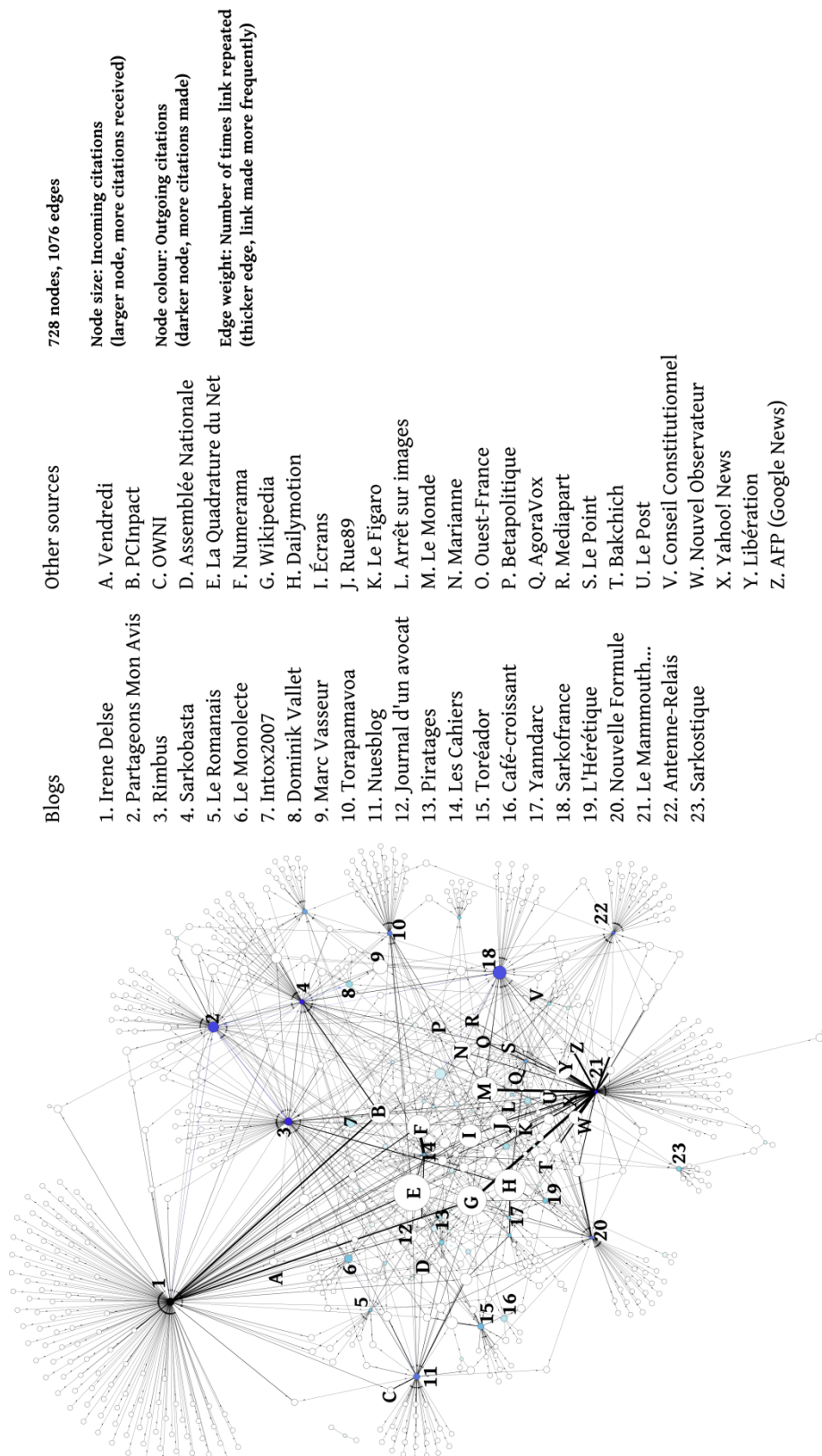


Figure 6.1: HADOPI topical network

again, HADOPI had suffered a setback, although as with the ‘no’ vote in April, this development did not spell the end of the bill. An amended HADOPI bill would be debated, and adopted, later in 2009, after the summer recess and beyond the data collected for this thesis. The opposition campaign might not have defeated HADOPI, but it had helped to make the bill’s passage to law a longer, more arduous process than the UMP would have preferred.

The HADOPI topical network

While not event-focussed, unlike the inauguration case study, the HADOPI topical network visualised in Figure 6.1 is similarly time-limited, although in this case the limits are caused by the start and end points of the data collection phrase itself. HADOPI-related posts were being published prior to January 2009, and discussion continued beyond August 2009. Rather than covering the entirety of the debate around the bill from its introduction in 2008 onwards, what follows is a snapshot of the wider HADOPI discussion in the first half of 2009. This analysis includes the development of campaigns opposing HADOPI and bloggers’ reactions to key events concerning the bill, including parliamentary votes.

These key events provoked spikes in the blogosphere’s coverage of the HADOPI debate. Figure 6.2 shows the daily total of HADOPI posts from January to August 2009, with a number of peaks amid the overall topical discussion. What the graph also shows, though, is the consistent publication of one or two blog posts mentioning HADOPI throughout this period. While the debate might have only become a prominent topic being featured in several blogs on a few occasions, it was still appearing in the blogosphere on most days, contributing to the background noise while other topics rose and fell. Later in this chapter, these lower-activity periods will be compared with the days around the spikes, looking at the difference between posts commenting on wider themes or campaigns and those reacting to specific events. The spikes will be compared with each other, identifying different types of discussion catalysts. Some of these events, including the two votes in the Assemblée Nationale as well as the return of the bill to the Assemblée in March, were foreseeable events, scheduled as parliamentary

business, although the outcomes were not always as expected. The other spikes, though, reflect breaking news of different origins, from the mainstream media breaking a story to an advocacy group announcing a new campaign strategy. Which sources bloggers use for these different spikes, and how these also compare with the non-spike period, will be discussed later in the chapter.

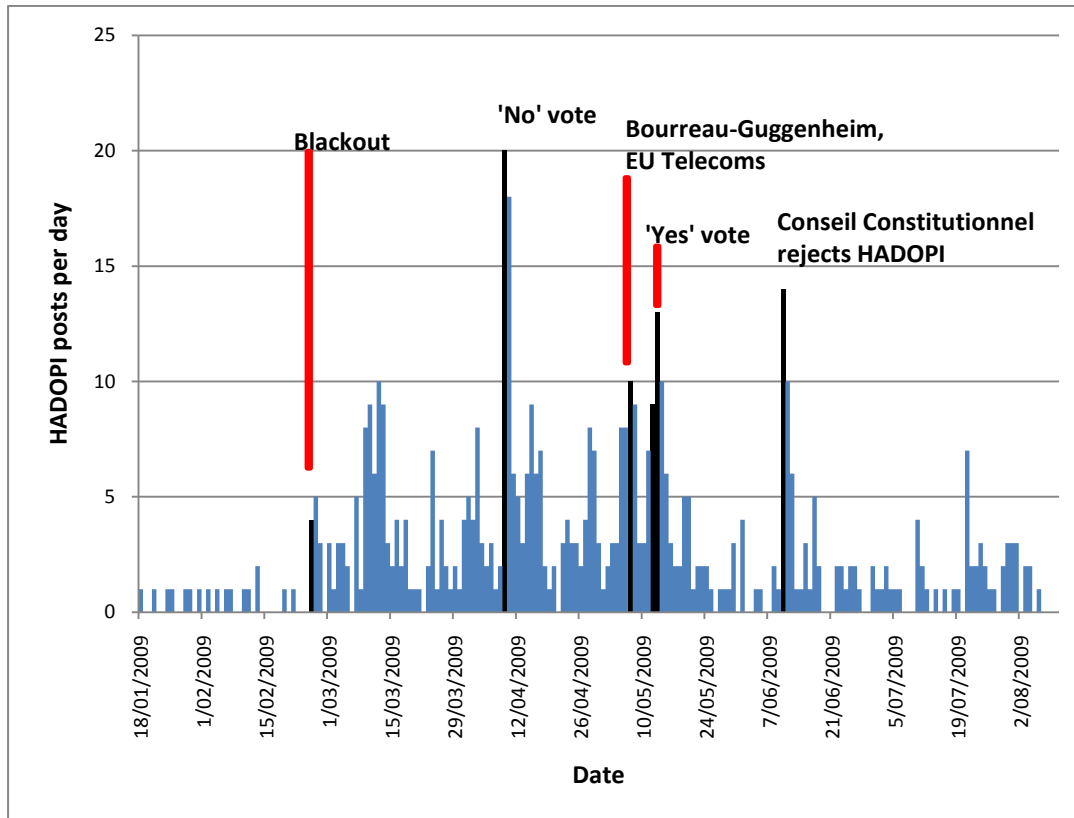


Figure 6.2: HADOPI posts per day

The HADOPI debate attracted comment from many of the French political bloggers featured in this study. 86 blogs posted at least once on the subject, representing 58% of the blogs from which data were collected. The HADOPI discussion also forms 1.7% of all blog posts published by French political bloggers from January to August 2009. The percentage of daily posts mentioning HADOPI will be featured later in this chapter. What is clear immediately, though, is that HADOPI is not a minor concern for a small group of French political bloggers, but rather a prominent theme receiving consistent coverage throughout the first half of 2009.

Sources

In the blogosphere's coverage of HADOPI, the overall dominance of mainstream media citations found in Chapter Four is lessened. Instead, bloggers made greater use of sites more specific to the HADOPI debate. These sites are referred to throughout the following chapter as topical resources. Table 6.1 shows the sites receiving the most citations from the topical network, listing both the total links received and the number of unique blogs referencing each site. As in the composite citation patterns described in Chapter Four, *Wikipedia* and *Dailymotion* are widely-cited resources for bloggers discussing HADOPI. Two other sites also appear ahead of any representatives of the mainstream media. Both *Numerama* and *lQdN*, for different reasons, are sites whose position in Table 6.1 reflects the subject of the topical network. *Numerama* is a site dedicated to digital culture and technology news and reviews, owned by a web-oriented company rather than a mainstream media conglomerate, while *lQdN* is an advocacy group focussing on online rights and freedoms, primarily in France and Europe. In addition to the large number of links received in total, *lQdN* was the most widely-cited reference in the topical network, with its links from 24 blogs exceeding even the number of sites linking to *Dailymotion*. Unsurprisingly, given its subject and the links to it, *lQdN* is one of the central sites to the topical network, and its contribution to the HADOPI debate will be seen as the spikes of activity are studied.

Another site appearing in Table 6.1, *PCInpact*²⁷⁵ has a similar focus to *Numerama*, dedicated to information technology and also unaffiliated with the other major resources cited in the topical network. Of the ten sites receiving the most citations in total within the topical network, five represent sites outside of the mainstream media. These five sites are all found in the top six places in Table 6.1, with only *Le Monde*, in fifth place, interrupting this group. Another topical reference, *Écrans*, can be found further down Table 6.1. However, while the site focuses on media news, it is not an independent resource but run by *Libération*, with some content appearing on both *Écrans* and its host site.

Despite the links directed towards sites like *PCInpact* or *lQdN*, mainstream media content remained well referenced by French political bloggers. *Le Monde*, *Libération*,

²⁷⁵ <http://pcinpact.com/>

Yahoo! News (FR), and *Nouvel Observateur* all appeared in both Table 6.1 and the equivalent table for the inauguration topical network (Table 5.2), with other mainstream media sites also receiving several citations. Meanwhile, alternative media sites are referenced more often in the HADOPI discussion than in the inauguration topical network. Whereas only *Rue89*, *Le Post*, and *Betapolitique* appeared within the list of resources cited around the inauguration, in Figure 6.1 they are accompanied by *Bakchich*, *AgoraVox*, *Mediapart*, and *OWNI*. Of these sites, the latter is a particularly topical reference, having been launched in April 2009 as part of the movement against HADOPI, an example of a new opinion site becoming integrated into the blogosphere's list of references. As with *Rue89*, or indeed *Crikey* in Australia, these sites provide news and commentary outside of the mainstream media. Some, such as *AgoraVox*, use a citizen-journalism approach, but others are run by a dedicated editorial team, with *Rue89* and *Mediapart* created by former journalists for *Libération* and *Le Monde* respectively. Along with the topic-specific sites such as *PCInpact* and *Numerama*, the overall statistics show French political bloggers to be utilising non-mainstream media content to a greater extent than in the inauguration topical network.

Site	Links (#sites)	Links (total)	Type of site
<i>Wikipedia</i>	19	58	Online encyclopaedia
<i>La Quadrature du Net</i>	24	46	Advocacy group
<i>Numerama</i>	14	46	Online technology news, opinion
<i>Dailymotion</i>	20	45	Online video-sharing
<i>Le Monde</i>	16	43	National mainstream
<i>PCInpact</i>	12	35	Online technology news, opinion
<i>Libération</i>	9	31	National mainstream
<i>Nouvel Observateur</i>	7	28	National mainstream
<i>Yahoo! News (FR)</i>	3	23	Online news
<i>Écrans</i>	14	22	Mainstream technology news
<i>Rue89</i>	10	21	Alternative, online-only
<i>L'Express</i>	6	21	National mainstream
<i>Le Post</i>	7	20	Alternative, online-only
<i>AFP (Google News)</i>	4	20	Press agency, online
<i>L'Humanité</i> ²⁷⁶	3	19	National mainstream

Table 6.1: Sites with most citations, HADOPI topical network

²⁷⁶ <http://humanite.fr/>

Given the regional focus of the proposed HADOPI law, it might be expected that international resources are represented even less here than in the inauguration discussion. However, some sites relevant to the topic at hand are occasionally referenced, such as *Irene Delse's* links to digital culture blog *BoingBoing*. The connection between the HADOPI campaign and global movements and organisations associated with online rights, copyright, and censorship is also made by several bloggers, citing local and international branches of the Pirate Party and Creative Commons sites.

As was noted in Chapter One, political bloggers have varying responses to different events and issues, depending on the type of blog being run and the subjects being discussed. HADOPI, as a domestic political issue, receives contributions from a larger group of blogs than commented on the international event of the Obama inauguration. Although there is some overlap between the two topical networks, not every blog discussing the inauguration also contributed to the HADOPI debate. *I love politics's* coverage of U.S. politics, for examples, accounts for its absence from the HADOPI topical network. Other blogs, such as *Le Mammouth...*, occupy similar positions in the two topical networks, with their posts featuring several political subjects rather than one specific interest. Meanwhile, a site that was peripheral to the inauguration topical network, *Nuesblog*, became a more active contributor to the HADOPI topical network. Given the technological focus of *Nuesblog's* posts, the different positions in the topical networks is not surprising, and will be covered further later in the chapter.

As with the inauguration, and despite the wider range of blogs contributing, the sites appearing in Table 6.2 are not those that published the most posts over the entire data collection period. HADOPI may have been a topic with more potential implications for French political bloggers than the inauguration, but the coverage reflects more specialist interests than the general activity patterns studied previously. The likes of *Yanndarc* and *Yann Redekker* are again present within the topical network, but with smaller post totals than might be expected given their total output. In all, only four of the fifteen blogs featured in Table 6.2 – *Torapamavoia*, *Partageons Mon Avis*, *La Lettre de Jaurès*, and *Dominik Vallet* – also appear in Chapter Four's list of the most prolific French political blogs overall (Table 4.8).

The blog posting most often to the HADOPI topical network, *Les Cahiers*, has more in common with the most active blogs in the Australian inauguration network, *Antony Loewenstein* and *The Pen*, than those in the French network. Although not a Tumblr blog, *Les Cahiers* uses a similar approach to posting, generally writing a sentence about an article elsewhere on the internet and then providing a link to it. A post then usually runs for one or two lines, with one or two links per post. While *Les Cahiers* contributes to the most posts to the HADOPI topical network, this does not mean the blog is publishing the most material or contributing original commentary on the topic. Instead, the blog acts as a filter, linking to interesting material online, although eschewing any aggregation of links into a single post or providing anything more than a brief summary of the article’s argument.

Blog	Posts
<i>Les Cahiers</i>	54
<i>Irene Delse</i>	23
<i>Le Mammouth...</i>	23
<i>Torapamavo</i>	21
<i>Partageons Mon Avis</i>	17
<i>Nuesblog</i>	15
<i>La Lettre de Jaurès</i>	14
<i>Rimbus</i>	13
<i>Sarkobasta</i> ²⁷⁷	13
<i>Dominik Vallet</i>	11
<i>Sarkostique</i> ²⁷⁸	10
<i>Nouvelle Formule</i> ²⁷⁹	10
<i>Rubin Sfadj</i> ²⁸⁰	9

Table 6.2: Blogs with most posts, HADOPI topical network

Other blogs amongst the more prolific contributors to the topical network include some of the French political blogosphere ‘A-list’ based on the Wikio rankings. *Partageons Mon Avis*, which held the top political blog ranking for the entire data collection period, posted 17 times on HADOPI-related themes, while *Rubin Sfadj*, *Sarkobasta*, and *Rimbus* were all ranked in the top twenty at different points between January and August. Two Sarkozy-related blogs are present within Table 6.2, with the satirical *Sarkostique* appearing alongside the anti-Sarkozy opinions of

²⁷⁷ <http://sarkobasta.over-blog.com/>

²⁷⁸ <http://sarkostique.over-blog.com/>

²⁷⁹ <http://blogs.lexpress.fr/nouvelleformule/>

²⁸⁰ <http://blog.sfadj.com/>

Sarkobasta. Other sites with similar views, including all three permutations of *Sarkofrance*, contribute at least one post to the topical network, making *les vigilants* more of a presence in the HADOPI network than in the inauguration discussion.

As would be expected, given the longer form of the HADOPI topical network, the average number of posts per blog was higher than in the inauguration topical network. However, only *Les Cahiers* published more posts in the HADOPI network than *I love politics* did in the inauguration network, with *Irene Delse* and *Le Mammouth...* contributing the same total of 23 posts. This would suggest that, unlike the inauguration where a specialist blog such as *I love politics* posted several times in a few days as the most active site within the topical network, the HADOPI debate features a greater number of blogs posting more times overall, but not as frequently. HADOPI was a topic of interest to many French bloggers, but as a long-term concern it did not lead to a single flurry of activity like *I love politics'* inauguration posts. Instead, blog posts were distributed across the seven month period, with several HADOPI developments causing heightened activity within the topical network.

The distinction between activity contributing to spikes and more general, ongoing coverage of HADOPI is crucial given the length of the period covered. Determining which blogs contributed the posts to the topical network, and which sites were referenced the most, is useful, but without also investigating when these posts were made or resources cited, generalisations may be made which do not take into account, for example, the campaign function of blogs. Table 6.1 shows the sites receiving the most citations within the topical network, with a mix of mainstream media sites and topical references appearing. However, the higher number of citations does not necessarily translate to consistent referencing from January to August. Similarly, Table 6.2's list of blogs contributing the most posts to the topical network does not show whether any, or all, of these blogs posted only within the spikes in coverage. For this reason, each spike will be studied separately to provide a brief outline of how blogs reacted to the different events.

Spike analysis

With the bill not being debated in the Assemblée Nationale until 10 March, the first two months did not see a great number of posts dedicated to HADOPI. Figure 6.2 highlights this, with only one or two posts per day over the first weeks of 2009, sometimes with several days between related posts. At this point, while there are consistent post totals on the topic, a concerted, widespread outpouring of opposition – or support – is not as obvious. The change came on 25 February with *lQdN* launching its internet blackout campaign.

Spike One: The blackout

The initial spike surrounding the blackout was only slightly greater than the daily post totals leading up to *lQdN*'s announcement. However, the number of days without HADOPI-related posts decreased in the wake of the blackout, and by the time the Assemblée Nationale started debating the bill in March 2009, French political bloggers were publishing up to ten HADOPI items a day. Part of this activity is directly connected to the blackout campaign. Prior to 25 February, *lQdN* had only received one citation, from *Les Cahiers*. Following the blackout announcement, though, the references started appearing: two blogs on 25 February, three different blogs the next day, three more different blogs on 27 February, and another two new blogs linked to the site on 1 March. In five days, ten bloggers had linked to *lQdN*, a particularly impressive total considering that the French blogosphere's HADOPI-related output for those days was only fifteen posts.

The first week of March continued the blackout spike and led into coverage of HADOPI being debated in the Assemblée Nationale, with links being made on eleven of the seventeen days immediately following (and including) 25 February. Indeed, this initial spike in the topical network saw the majority of references to *lQdN* - by 13 March, the site had already received half of its total 46 citations from the topical network, but more tellingly would not receive multiple links on any one day again. It would seem that the blackout campaign was *lQdN*'s primary contribution to the HADOPI topical network, and as the HADOPI bill was debated and voted on in parliament, the campaign-specific citations declined, to the extent

that within the final spike in the topical network featured here, *lQdN* was not referenced at all. Even during the first spike, the decline is noticeable after the initial flurry of activity around the blackout: 15 of 22 citations were made before 8 March, with fewer direct references to *lQdN* once the HADOPI debate resumed.

The mainstream media, on the other hand, went mostly uncited until 7 March. When *lQdN* announced the blackout plan on 25 February, *Écrans*, *20 Minutes*, and *Nouvel Observateur* also received citations - although not from the sites linking to *lQdN* - but only on 7 March was there widespread referencing of mainstream media content. However, while the totals show an increase in mainstream media references between 7 and 13 March, most of these links can be attributed to one source: *Le Mammouth...* Whereas there is a wider range of blogs linking to *lQdN*, around the first spike of the HADOPI topical network the mainstream media are not referenced by the French political blogosphere at large. With the likes of *PCInpact* and *Numerama* only receiving a few citations within the blackout spike, it appears that discussion of HADOPI around late February 2009 concerns the campaign rather than any news or media developments. This would suggest a successful attempt at agenda-setting by *lQdN*, bringing the debate to the blogosphere following a period of minimal activity.

Only with the resumption of parliamentary debate around HADOPI on 10 March did mainstream media receive links from bloggers. Any lack of mainstream media citations did not translate into references to alternative media, though. *Rue89* received only one link, on 1 March, with a further link to *eco.Rue89*²⁸¹ on 9 March. *Mediapart* and *AgoraVox* were each cited once between 25 February and 13 March, but neither *Bakchich* nor *Betapolitique* was referenced in any HADOPI-related posts. As with the mainstream media, an early focus on the blackout campaign, and direct links to *lQdN*, meant that bloggers were covering a separate topic to other media sources, and did not seek out further commentary from alternative or mainstream media sources.

The blackout and the start of the Assemblée Nationale debate on HADOPI features posts from more blogs than any of the other spikes. This is not surprising, as the

²⁸¹ *Rue89*'s economic news and commentary. <http://eco.rue89.com/>

first spike covers the longest period of the five spikes featured in this study. In total, 38 individual blogs posted at least once during this spike, but as with the citations there is a clear divide between blogs responding immediately to the blackout and those posting once HADOPI returned to parliament. The blackout was a dominant theme within the topical network up until 9 March, as seen through the links to *lQdN*. Several posts at the end of February, from blogs including *Barrejadis*²⁸² and *SuperNo*,²⁸³ went beyond mentioning the blackout, with the bloggers in question following through with the campaign by blacking out their sites. The blackout did not go without criticism, though. A post by law blog *Journal d'un avocat* complaining about the collective lobbying approach of *lQdN* instead of discrete, efficient political action was commented on in a further post by *Irene Delse*. As March began, other blogs commented on the state of HADOPI and its opposition, with a post by *Partageons Mon Avis* noting that HADOPI is the rare event that bloggers from the left and right sides of the political spectrum are close to agreement in opposing the proposed law. This consensus provides a further example of agenda-setting within the blogosphere, as will be explored later in this chapter. The main topics changed, though, with the blackout being replaced by discussion of HADOPI's passage through parliament.

Spike Two: The first Assemblée Nationale vote

By late March, though, the daily post totals in the topical network had become more variable. Sequences of days featuring only one or two posts were suddenly interrupted by a burst of activity, with seven posts published, and then a similarly quick decline to a couple of posts the next day. This continued into April, with, for example, only two HADOPI posts on 8 April. The next days, though, saw the single biggest spike in the HADOPI topical network, the magnitude of which – especially given the small number of posts the previous day – suggests that at least the outcomes of events on 9 April were unexpected.

Following the surprising defeat of the HADOPI bill, in a vote involving only a handful of members of the Assemblée Nationale, the blogosphere's reaction was

²⁸² <http://barrejadis.azeua.com/>

²⁸³ <http://superno.com/>

swift: 20 posts on 9 April, with a further 18 the following day. The number of voices featured from across the political blogosphere was similar to both parts of the blackout/debate spike, as 23 individual blogs published at least one HADOPI post on either 9 or 10 April 2009. Representatives from Table 6.2 commented on the temporary defeat of HADOPI, with ten of the fifteen sites in the table posting on at least one of the two days. The four most active sites, the only blogs to publish multiple posts over this period, were all from this list too. *Le Mammouth...* and *Dominik Vallet* both mentioned HADOPI in three posts, while *Nuesblog* and *La Lettre de Jaurès* posted on both days. Unsurprisingly, one subject dominated the posts: the unexpected success of the ‘no’ vote. Some blogs, such as *Des Jeunes Libres de s’engager*, took the opportunity to celebrate the victory, noting the contribution of *lQdN* over the previous months. However, one defeated vote did not mean the end of the HADOPI bill. A second vote would take place following a second reading of an amended HADOPI bill, and political bloggers were quick to remind readers that this second vote was unlikely to result in another rejection of HADOPI. The best they could hope for would be amendments reflecting the views of the French populace and the groups of citizens and artists opposing the first version of the bill.

The breaking news of HADOPI’s rejection by the majority of members in the Assemblée Nationale accounts for the site receiving the most citations during this spike. However, the site in question is neither a mainstream nor alternative news site. *Dailymotion* was cited seven times in total, with five of these links made on 9 April itself. One link came from a post published before the vote, when it was assumed that HADOPI would be passed without issue. The remaining four are all to the same video, albeit in different uploads: 90 seconds of footage from the Assemblée Nationale recording the vote, and the response of the 21 members voting against HADOPI. Rather than link to any news agency’s coverage of the vote, with its own framing, bloggers linked to the raw footage, uploaded soon after the vote had taken place.²⁸⁴

Overall, the majority of bloggers posting to the HADOPI topical network on 9 April did not link to mainstream media content. Instead, independent resources, such as

²⁸⁴ http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8xhok_rejet-du-projet-de-loi-sur-la-creat_news

Dailymotion and *Wikipedia*, and alternative media sites from *Rue89* to *Le Post* receive more citations. The importance of these sources to the majority of posts on 9 April, though, is limited. These posts are dedicated to the first reactions to the ‘no’ vote, providing bloggers’ own commentary on the ‘victory’ of the anti-HADOPI campaign. Secondary resources would have to wait until 10 April.

The mainstream media are more extensively referenced on 10 April, although the citations are almost entirely down to posts by *Le Mammouth...* and *Sarkofrance*. Instead of linking exclusively to mainstream media content or other blogs, the sites contributing to the second spike in the HADOPI topical network published personal reactions to the ‘no’ vote supported by articles and video from across the French mediasphere. Given the individual interest in the HADOPI law, the personal angle in many posts would be expected, especially as the build-up to the vote, and earlier as the debate began in March, had seen bloggers not just post HADOPI content but frame it within their own histories of sharing music or films across various media formats. The comparative lack of citations to mainstream media sites also suggests that these sites did not have articles expressing the same sentiments, or the same level of reaction. However, the bill had not been completely killed off, and while there was a sharp decline in posting between 10 and 11 April, the topic remained of interest to political bloggers ahead of the next vote in May.

Spike Three: EU Telecommunications and Bourreau-Guggenheim

The second Assemblée Nationale HADOPI vote did not account for the next topical network spike. Instead, this third spike, at the beginning of May, followed several HADOPI-related developments, including the European parliament’s amendment to a Telecoms Package on 6 May, and the Bourreau-Guggenheim affair made public by *Libération* on 7 May. HADOPI discussion was already fairly high in the blogosphere at this point, with eight posts published on 5 May, and the same number followed on 6 May. The peak activity came on 7 May, with 10 blog posts contributed to the topical network.

Unlike the breaking news of the ‘no’ vote in April, the HADOPI blog posts on 6 May did not cover the amendment to the Telecoms Package. Instead, the primary topic was a group of five artists who announced their support for HADOPI on 5 May, and who had questioned why the PS had led the rejection of the bill the previous month. Only on 7 May did developments from the European parliament receive blog coverage. However, although the amendment was mentioned in several posts, it was overshadowed in terms of total posts by the story broken by *Libération*. The Bourreau-Guggenheim affair became the lead story for the topical network on 7 May, and the delay before TF1 explained the decision to fire Bourreau-Guggenheim added to the story’s longevity.

Nineteen blogs posted during the spike, with eight representatives from Table 6.2 among them. Only a few blogs posted more than once over these dates, with *Dominik Vallet*, *Le MoDEM de François*,²⁸⁵ and *Sarkobasta* all publishing two topical network posts. The smaller totals for blogs, and the narrower range of blogs posting compared to the previous spikes, suggests that the three HADOPI-related events occurring over this period were not as newsworthy as votes or developments directly involving the bill itself. While the three events were of some interest, they did not command the attention of French political bloggers, with different HADOPI themes raised by other bloggers. Unlike the ‘no’ vote or the initial days of the blackout, the third HADOPI spike was the result of several coinciding events rather than one major development.

Although *Libération* had broken the Bourreau-Guggenheim affair, only *Le Mammouth...* linked to the site, along with several other mainstream media sites and the *Libération*-affiliated *Écrans*. Other blogs discussing the story linked to other sources, from mainstream media to online-only news services. The topic-specific sites *PCInpact* and *Numerama*, both major references for the topical network as a whole, were cited instead of mainstream media resources in *La Lettre de Jaurès*’s post on the EU Telecoms Package. No one reference was widely cited by bloggers during the third spike in the HADOPI topical network, though, with the overall range of sources cited similar to the preceding spikes: a mixture of mainstream media, alternative media (*Rue89*, *Le Post*), topic-specific sites, and online resources.

²⁸⁵ <http://lemodemdefrancois.over-blog.com/>

Spike Four: The second Assemblée Nationale vote

Following the third spike, the HADOPI topical network saw a brief lull in activity on 9 and 10 May - underlining the weekend effect discussed in the overview of general blogosphere posting patterns. However, the next week saw another three-day period of increased activity from 12 to 14 May. On 12 May, the Assemblée Nationale voted again on the HADOPI bill. As bloggers had warned, this time the UMP ensured it had the numbers to pass the bill. The following day, the Sénat also passed the bill, meaning that only approval from the Conseil Constitutionnel was required for HADOPI to become law.

Although the day of the Assemblée Nationale vote saw a slight increase in HADOPI posting activity, the peak in this spike came the next day, when Sénat approval guaranteed HADOPI's progress from bill to law - pending approval from the Conseil Constitutionnel. Topical network posts over these days respond to the outcome of the votes, with anti-HADOPI comments dominating. One prominent voice within the French political blogosphere, though, stated that they were pro-HADOPI. *Sarkofrance (Wordpress)*²⁸⁶ posted on 13 May that they were in favour of the bill, although they remained opposed to Sarkozy. This was not a popular view in the French political blogosphere, both admitted by *Sarkofrance (Wordpress)* and addressed by *Partageons Mon Avis*. Indeed, *Partageons Mon Avis* notes that the publication of a post supporting HADOPI led to posts opposing it that would not have been written without the provocation.

The number of blogs posting to the topical network during this spike was similar to the totals from previous spikes. Twenty blogs commented on HADOPI's successful passage through both houses of parliament. As with the previous vote, seen in the second spike, many of the blogs contributing the most posts to the topical network were active during this spike. In all, ten of the fifteen sites appearing in Table 6.2 posted during this spike, including eight of the top ten. As may be expected from their overall topical network totals, these blogs also contributed the most posts to this spike, with *Partageons Mon Avis*'s four posts leading *Le Mammouth...*, *Les Cahiers*, and *Sarkobasta* with three each. A range of political ideologies are present, from the far-right *Yann Redekker* to the socialist *Blog Actuality*, via the MoDem *L'Hérétique* and

²⁸⁶ <http://sarkofrance.wordpress.com/>

anti-Sarkozy *Sarkofrance*. Overall, the 32 posts made during the spike are also similar to the total making up the April spike in the wake of the ‘no’ vote, while ten blogs contributed to both vote-oriented spikes.

The topical resource *Numerama* was the most referenced site during this spike, receiving citations from four individual bloggers across the two days of votes. As has been seen in previous spikes, most mainstream media citations, and the range of sources receiving links, can be attributed to *Le Mammouth...*'s lists, and this spike is no exception. The topic-specific *Écrans*, part of *Libération*, is the most widely cited mainstream media site during this spike, with three bloggers linking to it, although its parent site was only referenced by *Le Mammouth...* Alternative media were again represented by *Rue89* and *Le Post*, and the likes of *Dailymotion* and *Wikipedia* received several citations. By this fourth spike, the sites being referenced are common to other spikes, with a similar range of topical, mainstream media, alternative media, and online resources receiving links from French political bloggers.

Given the result of the Assemblée Nationale vote on 12 May, the tone of many of the posts in the topical network is unsurprising. The opposition to HADOPI continued, with claims that the support for the law meant advocating invasions of citizens' privacy. HADOPI becoming law was described as ‘liberticide’ by blogs including *Sarkostique*, while *Intox2007* saw the result as France doing what China ‘never dared to do’ in placing restrictions on its citizens. With several blogs previously comparing HADOPI with the dictatorial regime in North Korea, the extreme opposition to HADOPI from French political bloggers is clear. However, while anti-HADOPI sentiments made up the majority of the posts collected here, *L'Hérétique*'s final post in the spike, on 14 May, shows a blogger becoming exhausted of all the HADOPI discussion. Having been a major topic for several weeks leading up to the vote, HADOPI's continued presence in the French mediasphere led *L'Hérétique* to state, despite their own dislike of the law, that there is more than HADOPI in life, suggesting it was time to talk about something else.

Spike Five: The Conseil Constitutionnel's decision

Following the successful 'yes' vote in the Sénat, the number of daily HADOPI posts declined, to the extent that the start of June saw consecutive days without topical network posts - the first time this had happened since *lQdN* announced the blackout campaign on 25 February, as seen in Figure 6.2. This is not to say that French bloggers were not posting at all - as the overall posting patterns have shown, the blogosphere was active, with the summer holiday posting decline not starting until July - and the start of June would have been particularly interesting to several political bloggers. Between 4 and 7 June, the European parliament elections were held, a topic receiving coverage across the French political blogosphere. HADOPI, on the other hand, was not a primary topic, until one final, unexpected spike, though, on 10 June. The rejection of HADOPI by the Conseil Constitutionnel led to the last major burst of activity in the HADOPI topical network covered in this study. In the wake of this decision, 12 posts were contributed to the topical network, with another 9 posts following on 11 June.

These 21 posts to the topical network were contributed by 21 unique blogs. Unlike the previous spikes, none of the blogs posted more than once on HADOPI on 10 and 11 June. The activity does follow the pattern of previous spikes, though, with a similar number of contributors to the other spikes. In addition, nine of the fifteen most-prolific sites within the topical network overall were also active during the fifth spike. The decision by the Conseil Constitutionnel drew comment from bloggers otherwise silent as HADOPI had passed through parliament. One-third of the blogs posting on HADOPI on either 10 or 11 June did not post during any of the previous spikes. Many posts repeated the announcement by the Conseil Constitutionnel, via reports from the mainstream media. Although some posts were victorious, claiming HADOPI to be dead, as with April's surprise 'no' vote the rejection of HADOPI did not mean the end of the law itself. *Rubin Sfadj* noted that the Conseil Constitutionnel's decision was only a partial rejection of HADOPI. With Christine Albanel vowing that the fight over HADOPI was not over, the bill's rejection on 10 June was not the end of either HADOPI or the debate surrounding it.

Unlike previous spikes, HADOPI-specific sites are not prominent resources for posts published on 10 and 11 June. The announcement by the Conseil Constitutionnel saw three blogs link to its site, a total exceeded only by *Le Monde*. Of the primary resources receiving links from bloggers over this period, these two sites are the major sources of information on the rejection of HADOPI. Additional commentary from *Journal d'un avocat* and *Marianne* is also referenced, but other mainstream and alternative media sites receive links only from *Le Mammouth...* and *Lait d'Beu*. For many blogs, the initial response to the new delay to HADOPI's progression to law meant further opinion pieces with one or two references, rather than any amalgamation of several resources and perspectives. Further posts examining the UMP and PS response to the decision followed the spike, before the topical network fell back to almost background noise levels of one or two posts per day. Summer did not bring about the end of the debate, nor did it spell the end of HADOPI itself. Although the topical network featured here is restricted to the period between January and early August 2009, the bill and the discussion surrounding it would continue past this range, with a July announcement that the next vote on HADOPI would take place in September 2009.

Taken together, these five spikes contribute approximately 150 posts to the topical network, or one third of the entire HADOPI discussion. However, as Figure 6.2 has shown, related coverage was published across the entire period studied here, and focussing solely on the spikes could mean overlooking a different approach to HADOPI posts. In the following section the non-spike periods will be compared with the findings from the five HADOPI events mentioned above, evaluating whether the French political blogosphere did alter its coverage of HADOPI depending on campaign or news periods.

Beyond the spikes

In the previous section of this study, the periods designated as spikes were 25 February to 13 March, 9 April to 10 April, 6 May to 8 May, 12 May to 14 May, and 10 June to 11 June. In total, 27 days fell under consideration as spike days, contributing 150 posts to the topical network. The remaining 169 days between the

first post on 17 January, and the last on 1 August, were treated as ‘non-spike’ periods, and saw the publication of the remaining 292 HADOPI posts. The data collected outside of the spikes reflect different posting patterns from the spikes, with 1.7 posts per day compared to 5.5 during the spikes. The period also reflects different posting approaches, at least for some bloggers. Whereas during the spikes many posts responded directly to news developments concerning HADOPI, bloggers posting outside of this period acted as promoters or campaigners as well as commentators.

At first glance, the differences between blogs contributing to spikes and non-spikes respectively do not appear that substantial. The most active blog outside of the spikes was also the second most active blog during them, *Les Cahiers*, with 44 of the blog’s total 54 topical network posts published during non-spike periods. The blogs with the next highest totals of non-spike posts all appeared in the list of sites with the most topical network posts overall: *Irene Delse*, *Torapamavao*, *Le Mammouth...*, *Nuesblog*, *Rimbus*, and *Partageons Mon Avis*, all of which posted at least nine times during non-spike periods. This shows that, for a subset of the blogs contributing to the topical network, HADOPI was an ongoing concern across the seven months, rather than just a topic worthy of comment only during the spikes. Table 6.3 shows the sites with the most non-spike posts.

Blog	Total non-spike posts
<i>Les Cahiers</i>	44
<i>Irene Delse</i>	18
<i>Torapamavao</i>	15
<i>Le Mammouth...</i>	11
<i>Nuesblog</i>	10
<i>Rimbus</i>	9
<i>Partageons Mon Avis</i>	9
<i>Sarkobasta</i>	7
<i>La Lettre de Jaurès</i>	7
<i>Nouvelle Formule</i>	6

Table 6.3: Blogs contributing the most posts during non-spike periods

A similar trend is seen among the most-referenced resources during non-spike periods. Headed by *Numerama* and *Wikipedia* (34 citations each), the presence of sites such as *Le Monde*, *PCInpact*, *lQdN*, *Libération*, *Dailymotion*, *Rue89*, and *L’Express* in the list, all receiving at least 12 citations, shows a consistent group of resources

cited across the topical network. The primary exceptions to this are *Le Figaro* and the satirical alternative news site *Bakchich*. Both of these sites received ten citations during non-spike periods, having only been cited once and twice respectively during the spikes.

The content of the posts published during the non-spikes covers a wider range of topics than the more focussed spike commentary. Responses to recent HADOPI events, including developments during spikes, can be found across the seven months of activity featured here. Some of these events did not attract enough commentary to generate further spikes in the topical network, such as the UMP passing the sections of HADOPI that the Conseil Constitutionnel had not found to be unconstitutional in mid-June. Parliamentary debates were also popular topics for bloggers discussing HADOPI, with responses to politicians' views on the bill - and politicians posting their own contributions to the debate - appearing in the topical network.

A key theme of many blog posts was the apparent discord between the importance the bloggers themselves gave to HADOPI and the actions of their elected members. In a prelude to the vote on 9 April, posts from 3 April by *Les Cahiers*, *Rubin Sfadj*, *L'Antre de Kag*,²⁸⁷ and *Partageons Mon Avis* all mention the low number of members in the Assemblée Nationale voting on HADOPI: 16. The small attendance was taken by *Rubin Sfadj* as a sign of the Republic dying through oligarchy, but other blogs asked directly why members or political parties were remaining silent on HADOPI. *L'Hérétique*, on 4 April, responded to comments about the MoDem view of HADOPI, with the party being noticeably quiet in the debate, linking to interviews with the party's leader Francois Bayrou to outline the support for some aspects of the bill. Similar posts questioned the stance of the PS, which appeared divided on HADOPI.

Although members of the Assemblée Nationale were seen to be silent on HADOPI, the blogosphere was not just a space for criticising the bill and the parliamentary response. The first spike around the blackout promoted by *lQdN* has already been noted, with several blogs not just providing links to the campaign but also turning their sites black in support. The blackout received some links weeks after its

²⁸⁷ <http://lantredekekag.fr/>

launch, with *Rimbus* continuing to promote it in mid-March, and the awareness of *lQdN*'s position as a major advocacy group meant that later anti-HADOPI messages created by the site were also circulated within the blogosphere.

Opposition to HADOPI was not solely centred on *lQdN*. Events showcasing the anti-HADOPI sentiment amongst French citizens were promoted through the political blogosphere. A flashmob against HADOPI organised by *Internet Mon Amour*²⁸⁸ and held on 1 April outside the Palais-Royal (home of the Ministry of Culture) was advertised by *Mendes-France*. Later that month, *Mendes-France* and *Torapamavao* promoted a wider anti-HADOPI protest to be held in Paris on 25 April. The event itself was accompanied by live video from *Mendes-France*, with further mentions by *Le Mammouth*...

Online avenues of protesting HADOPI were also promoted by political bloggers. Before the April vote, *Le MoDEM de François* urged concerned citizens to contact their local members about HADOPI, particularly given the low turnout in the Assemblée Nationale on 3 April: if HADOPI was to become law, it should at least be the decision of more than 16 members. Readers were also encouraged to sign petitions and pacts opposing HADOPI, with *Nuesblog* listing several sites and groups organised around their anti-HADOPI views. Tools for combating HADOPI directly, should it become law, were also signposted by bloggers, with *Rimbus* prefacing a summary of HADOPI developments up to 24 March with links to several proxy servers designed for anonymous browsing. Once HADOPI had passed through both houses of parliament, *Yann Redekker* mentioned similar information about sites showing how to encrypt files or change IP addresses. Other channels were also used for the topical discussion, with Twitter becoming a popular space for live debates of the issues through tweets featuring the #hadopi hashtag, although these were not tracked over the course of this study. However, as can be seen through the topical network, French political bloggers were not content to just discuss HADOPI, but actively promoted the debate and, depending on their point of view, organised opposition to the bill.

²⁸⁸ <http://internetmonamour.fr/>

Spikes vs. Non-spike

Analysis of the HADOPI topical network thus far has concentrated on activity during spike or non-spike periods. The main contributors to the topical network have been seen to be active across several spikes, but did some blogs post primarily in either spike or non-spike periods? In the following section, a brief comparison will be carried out of posting activity and references used during the spikes and other periods within the topical network.

Although the spikes responded to several different types of event, from votes to breaking news and campaign details, there were some common sites responding to each event. Three blogs posted during all five spikes: *Le Mammouth...*, *La Lettre de Jaurès*, and *Les Cahiers*. Six more blogs contributed in four of the five spikes: *Dominik Vallet*, *Irene Delse*, *Partageons Mon Avis*, *Sarkostique*, *Torapamavao*, and *Yann Redekker*. Table 6.4 shows the blogs contributing to the most spikes, while Table 6.5 shows the blogs publishing the most posts during the spike periods. Eight of the nine blogs contributing to the highest number of spikes also appeared among the most prolific blogs in the HADOPI topical network overall. The exception is *Yann Redekker*, which only published seven HADOPI-related posts to the topical network. Four of these fell within spikes, while two others were made just before Spike 2 and between Spikes 3 and 4 respectively. Given these posting statistics, *Yann Redekker* would appear to be a blog responding more to the major developments concerning HADOPI than a site invested in continually campaigning for or against the bill. This observation is supported by the site reposting material from other sites, such as *Novopress*,²⁸⁹ rather than mostly original commentary. It would be expected that non-blog, non-campaign coverage of HADOPI would follow the main news events concerning the bill.

Despite its higher post totals overall, the topical network activity for *Dominik Vallet* is also spike-centric. Of 11 HADOPI posts, only three fell outside the spike periods, and all of these were published in the days immediately following spikes. Looking at blogs contributing three or more posts to the topical network, *Dominik Vallet* has one of the highest percentages of spike activity, with 72.73% of HADOPI posts falling within four of the five spikes. Table 6.6 shows the blogs with the highest

²⁸⁹ <http://novopress.info/>

percentage of HADOPI posts in the spikes. While *Sarkofrance (Wordpress)* posted only four times on HADOPI, all within spikes, it should be noted though that the two other *Sarkofrance* blogs tracked in this study saw different posting activity. The main *Sarkofrance* blog published four of its five HADOPI posts during non-spike periods. 19 blogs contributed posts to the topical network only during spikes, with eight of these sites just active within the first spike.

Blog	Number of Spikes
<i>La Lettre de Jaurès</i>	5
<i>Les Cahiers</i>	5
<i>Le Mammouth...</i>	5
<i>Yann Redekker</i>	4
<i>Irene Delse</i>	4
<i>Sarkostique</i>	4
<i>Torapamavao</i>	4
<i>Dominik Vallet</i>	4
<i>Partageons Mon Avis</i>	4
<i>Rubin Sfadj</i>	3
<i>Rimbus</i>	3
<i>Sarkofrance (Wordpress)</i>	3
<i>Nuesblog</i>	3
<i>Sarkobasta</i>	3

Table 6.4: Blogs contributing to most spikes during HADOPI topical network

Blog	Total spike posts
<i>Le Mammouth...</i>	12
<i>Les Cahiers</i>	10
<i>Partageons Mon Avis</i>	8
<i>Dominik Vallet</i>	8
<i>La Lettre de Jaurès</i>	7
<i>Sarkobasta</i>	6
<i>Torapamavao</i>	6
<i>Nuesblog</i>	5
<i>Sarkostique</i>	5
<i>Irene Delse</i>	5

Table 6.5: Blogs contributing the most posts to spikes in the HADOPI topical network

Non-spike activity saw a similar split, with twenty blogs contributing to the topical network not posting during any of the spikes. Table 6.3 showed the sites contributing the most posts during the non-spike period. Several major contributors to the topical network published more posts during non-spike periods, including *Les Cahiers*, *Irene Delse*, *Torapamavao*, *Rimbus*, and *Nuesblog*. In

total, 28 blogs with three or more HADOPI posts contributed over half of their topical commentary during non-spike periods, while 14 were more active during spikes than at other times. Four blogs have an equal split between spikes and non-spike periods, including *La Lettre de Jaurès* and *Sarkostique*. Table 6.7 shows the sites with the highest percentage of non-spike HADOPI posts.

Blog	Percentage of posts in spikes
<i>Sarkofrance (Wordpress)</i>	100.00
<i>Arnaud Lehmann</i> ²⁹⁰	75.00
<i>Dominik Vallet</i>	72.73
<i>Barrejadis</i>	66.67
<i>Tropicalboy</i> ²⁹¹	60.00
<i>Yann Redekker</i>	57.14
<i>Le Mammouth...</i>	52.17
<i>La Lettre de Jaurès</i>	50.00
<i>Sarkostique</i>	50.00
<i>Aurélie Filippetti</i> ²⁹²	50.00
<i>Sarkozix</i> ²⁹³	50.00

Table 6.6: Blogs with the highest percentage of spike posts (minimum three HADOPI posts)

Le Mammouth... has a slightly higher percentage of spike posts than non-spike, with 12 of 23 posts published during the five spikes. With the blog contributing the most posts during spikes, this is reflective of the role played by the blog within the topical network. The majority of *Le Mammouth...*'s posts provide lists of relevant articles from across the French mediasphere. These have accounted for a large number of the mainstream media citations in particular during spikes, and given that these posts include links to responses to specific HADOPI events, it is unsurprising that the blog contributes the greatest number of posts within spikes. With the sites contributing the next highest spike post totals also being those sites most active across the whole period, including sites with high non-spike post totals such as *Les Cahiers* and *Partageons Mon Avis*, it appears that the HADOPI topical network did not see many sites respond solely to news developments. Instead, the blogs contributing to the most spikes were also among the most active sites outside of these periods, forming a group discussing HADOPI between January and August without necessarily needing a vote to stimulate posting activity.

²⁹⁰ <http://leblogdearnaudlehmann.blogspot.com/>

²⁹¹ <http://tropicalboy.canalblog.com/>

²⁹² <http://aureliefilippetti.free.fr/>

²⁹³ <http://sarkozix.canalblog.com/>

Blog	Percentage of posts in non-spike period
<i>Richard Trois</i> ²⁹⁴	100.00
<i>Politique.net</i>	100.00
<i>Aymeric Pontier</i> ²⁹⁵	83.33
<i>Yanndarc</i>	83.33
<i>Les Cahiers</i>	81.48
<i>Sarkofrance</i>	80.00
<i>Irene Delse</i>	78.26
<i>Thierry Crouzet</i> ²⁹⁶	75.00
<i>Blog Actuality</i>	75.00
<i>Torapamavao</i>	71.43
<i>Rimbus</i>	69.23

Table 6.7: Blogs with highest percentage of non-spike posts

A similar finding can be observed in the resources used by HADOPI bloggers, with a group of common references for spike and non-spike posts. Ten sites were cited more than 13 times during non-spike periods, but were all also cited during at least four of the five spikes. All ten sites appear in the list of sites with the most citations across the topical network, with *L'Express* and *Le Post* joining the first eight sites appearing in Table 6.1. In the following analysis of the citations made in HADOPI blog posts, I have removed the links made by *Le Mammouth...* This blog is an outlier in the topical network through its citations consistently referencing material from across the mediasphere. I have taken the step of removing *Le Mammouth...*'s links in order to more effectively study the wider patterns of mainstream and non-media references among French political bloggers, and to avoid skewing the data based on the work of one link blog.

Despite the presence of a common group of resources across the HADOPI topical network, there are some thematic variations between spike and non-spike citations. During the non-spike period, *Numerama* and *PCInpact*, two technology-specific news and opinion sites, both out-rank all mainstream media resources cited, while only *Le Monde* receives more citations than a third topical reference, *lQdN*. Table 6.8 shows the sites receiving the most links during the non-spike period. However, during the spikes the position of several mainstream media sites

²⁹⁴ <http://www.lepost.fr/perso/richardtrois/>

²⁹⁵ <http://aymericpontier.tumblr.com/> (now defunct)

²⁹⁶ <http://blog.tcrouzet.com/>

improves, with *Le Monde* and *Nouvel Observateur* appearing ahead of *Numerama*.

Table 6.9 shows the sites receiving the most citations during the spikes.

Site	Total citations	Type
<i>Numerama</i>	34	Online technology news, opinion
<i>Wikipedia</i>	34	Online encyclopaedia
<i>Dailymotion</i>	26	Online video-sharing
<i>PCInpact</i>	25	Online technology news, opinion
<i>Le Monde</i>	24	National mainstream
<i>La Quadrature du Net</i>	21	Advocacy group
<i>Libération</i>	20	National mainstream
<i>Nouvel Observateur</i>	15	National mainstream
<i>L'Express</i>	13	National mainstream
<i>Le Post</i>	13	Alternative, online-only

Table 6.8: Sites receiving the most citations during the non-spike period (without links from *Le Mammouth...*)

Site	Total citations	Type
<i>La Quadrature du Net</i>	25	Advocacy group
<i>Dailymotion</i>	19	Online video-sharing
<i>Wikipedia</i>	13	Online encyclopaedia
<i>Numerama</i>	12	Online technology news, opinion
<i>Écrans</i>	9	Mainstream, technology news
<i>PCInpact</i>	9	Online technology news, opinion
<i>Le Monde</i>	8	National mainstream
<i>Journal d'un avocat</i>	7	Law blog
<i>Assemblée Nationale</i> ²⁹⁷	7	Government site
<i>Le Point</i>	5	National mainstream a
<i>L'Express</i>	5	National mainstream
<i>Marianne</i>	5	National mainstream

Table 6.9: Sites receiving the most citations during spikes (without links from *Le Mammouth...*)

Five sites receiving more than 10 links were referenced mostly during the spikes. *lQdN* heads this list, with 25 of its 46 citations during spikes, followed by *Yahoo! News (FR)*, *Écrans*, *Marianne*, and *Journal d'un avocat*. The sites with the highest percentage of links received during the spikes can be seen in Table 6.10.

Some topical resources saw relatively small proportions of their citations during the spikes. As previously mentioned, both *Numerama* and *PCInpact* appear higher on the list of popular citations during the non-spike period than the spikes. The longer period saw a greater proportion of citations for these topical references,

²⁹⁷ <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/>

with 73% of links to *Numerama*, and 71% to *PCInpact*, being made beyond the spikes. However, it was not just topical sites experiencing more citations during this period. Two otherwise popular references for French political bloggers, *Bakchich* and *Le Figaro*, went almost uncited during periods of heightened activity. Instead, both sites saw the majority of their citations in the non-spike period: 91% for *Bakchich*, 83% for *Le Figaro*. Similarly, citizen journalism site *Betapolitique* received all seven of its citations, and *AgoraVox* three of its total four, during the non-spike period. Table 6.11 shows the sites with the highest percentage of citations during the non-spike period.

Site	Percentage citations received during spikes	Type
<i>Conseil Constitutionnel</i> ²⁹⁸	75.00	Government site
<i>TF1</i>	75.00	National mainstream
<i>Journal d'un avocat</i>	58.33	Law blog
<i>Écrans</i>	54.55	Mainstream, technology news
<i>La Quadrature du Net</i>	54.35	Advocacy group
<i>Marianne</i>	52.94	National mainstream
<i>Yahoo! News (FR)</i>	52.17	Online news
<i>20 minutes</i>	50.00	National mainstream
<i>Assemblée Nationale</i>	50.00	Government site

Table 6.10: Sites receiving highest percentage of citations during spikes (minimum four citations)

The presence of a group of blogs and resources common to both spikes and non-spike periods of the topical network suggests that, for the main contributors to the HADOPI discussion, the topic was worthy of comment not only when the major events took place. The likes of *Les Cahiers*, *Irene Delse*, and *La Lettre de Jaurès* also had a number of preferred references to which they would link or respond. The proportion of links dedicated to topical, alternative, or mainstream media sites may have varied between spike and non-spike posts, but the resources were being cited across the entire seven month period. Although its citations declined after the initial spike around the blackout campaign, *lQdN*'s citations confirmed its position as a key component of the anti-HADOPI movement. The high numbers of citations for both *PCInpact* and *Numerama* and their position within the topical network highlight the importance of these resources to discussions of technology-oriented politics.

²⁹⁸ <http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/>

Site	% citations received during non-spike periods	Type
<i>Betapolitique</i>	100.00	Citizen journalism
<i>Arrêt sur images</i>	100.00	Media watchdog
<i>YouTube</i>	100.00	Online video-sharing
<i>Read Write Web</i> ²⁹⁹	100.00	Technology/digital culture blog
<i>TéléObs</i> ³⁰⁰	100.00	National mainstream
<i>Bakchich</i>	90.91	Alternative media
<i>BoingBoing</i>	85.71	U.S. technology/digital culture blog
<i>Le Figaro</i>	83.33	National mainstream
<i>Eco.Rue89</i>	81.82	Financial news, alternative (online-only)
<i>Radio France</i> ³⁰¹	80.00	National mainstream
<i>AgoraVox</i>	75.00	Citizen journalism
<i>VENDREDI</i>	75.00	Alternative media
<i>Numerama</i>	73.91	Online technology news, opinion
<i>PCInpact</i>	71.43	Online technology news, opinion

Table 6.11: Sites receiving highest percentage of citations during non-spike periods (minimum four citations)

The blogs making up the HADOPI topical network reflect a wide range of political ideologies, from the socialists to the far-right via the centrist MoDEM bloggers. Unusually, for the most part the voices were united in their opposition to HADOPI. There might not have been links exchanged between blogs of different political ideologies, but any divide in the topical network of Figure 6.1 is not necessarily a result of supporting different parties. Furthermore, some blogs did link to sites expressing opposing views on HADOPI, such as *Partageons Mon Avis*'s response to *Sarkofrance (Wordpress)* starting their support for the bill. With 86 unique blogs represented in the topical network, HADOPI was a more inclusive topic than the Obama inauguration had been. Not only did it provide a topic that a majority of French political bloggers were compelled to comment on, but also a somewhat unifying subject for the blogosphere at large.

Observations from the inauguration topical network are also borne out in the HADOPI discussion. In particular, the approach employed by *Le Mammouth...* is seen throughout the HADOPI topical network, providing links to relevant articles throughout the debate on the bill. During the spikes, *Le Mammouth...* is often critical

²⁹⁹ <http://fr.readwriteweb.com/>

³⁰⁰ <http://teleobs.nouvelobs.com/>

³⁰¹ <http://www.radiofrance.fr/>

to the number of citations for the mainstream media. Without the posts from this blog, the references to mainstream media content would decline heavily. During non-spike activity, without *Le Mammouth...*'s posts the mainstream media still appear amongst the most widely-cited resources. However, during the spikes the topical resources of *Numerama* and *PCInpact* would remain at the top of the popular citations list. For breaking news, the mainstream media were not always the first site referenced by bloggers – when HADOPI was defeated in the Assemblée Nationale on 9 April, for example, bloggers linked to the raw video footage from the Assemblée on *Dailymotion* rather than any news commentary. The context for the events is important, though, with international aspects – the European Union Telecoms Package – or the story broken by mainstream media journalists, the Bourreau-Guggenheim affair, attracting more mainstream media citations than in the other spikes.

As with the inauguration case studies, then, while mainstream media sources remain popular citations for bloggers, they can often play a supporting role to topical resources. The approach used by bloggers will have some impact on the range of citations present in the topical network. The news aggregator approach of *Le Mammouth...*, for example, is not the only method amongst French political blogs. The technology-specific *Nuesblog*, a peripheral site to the inauguration topical network, became a major contributor to the HADOPI discussion through a focus on the previously-tangential intersection between technology and politics. Other blogs actively campaigned against HADOPI, such as *Mendes-France* promoting protests in Paris or *Rimbus* passing on details of online campaigns, including *lQdN*'s internet blackout. Even blogs that did not appear to be campaigning were still promoting a particular view on HADOPI, through the links to articles concerning the law or decrying the small turnout of members in the Assemblée Nationale. Despite the length of the debate, and blogs such as *L'Hérétique* becoming tired with the amount of HADOPI discussion, the blog coverage shows a group of sites willing to promote the topic and their views regardless of the probable outcome of votes on the bill.

Bloggers' interest in HADOPI

The French political blogosphere's coverage of HADOPI shows multiple levels of engagement with the topic. In Chapter One, discussion of the different approaches used by political blogs mentioned how bloggers develop their own niches within networks and provide a new perspective or analysis to debate. Within the topical network, different roles or functions of blogs can also be witnessed. These roles may not necessarily be the same as in the wider network, as the intensity of a blogger's interest in one specific topic might not match their overall activity. The most active blogs in total in this study may find HADOPI to be only of interest during the spikes, while a blog otherwise inactive during the first seven months of 2009 posts regularly to promote an anti-HADOPI campaign. Using the study of the HADOPI coverage as an example, three distinct groups of political blogs, based on their activity, can be found within topical networks.

The first group refers to the most active blogs, those contributing the most posts to the topical network across all periods, not just during times of heightened awareness of the topic – the partisan blogs within the topical network (Meraz, 2011). The majority of posts are published by a group of blogs contributing consistently across the seven months of topical network activity, promoting the anti-HADOPI campaign or stories relevant to the bill. While the spikes attract activity from these blogs, they are also among the main contributors during non-spike periods, showing the importance of HADOPI politically to the bloggers concerned. These are specialists, as seen in Chapter One's typology of political blog, for whom HADOPI reflects particular topics of interest.

The second group includes those blogs which are the major contributors to the political blogosphere as a whole, the 'A-list' bloggers as seen in the overview of the French political blogosphere. While they are most active overall, within the topical network these bloggers have more variable interest in the debate when compared to the group of specialist bloggers. The A-list blogs act instead as aggregators of information, drawing on a range of sources to present their views within the topical network. They might only post during spikes, but, as the most visible sites within the political blogosphere at large, their posts may still be noted by other

bloggers, fulfilling a boundary-spanning function. The political bloggers featured here are those that respond to most topics, not focussing on a specific subject only but covering the major political news and themes. This second group, therefore, does not contain the leaders of the discussion or the primary campaigners, but instead features sites through which topical awareness is distributed across the blogosphere, amplifying the messages published by other blogs. This is not to say that HADOPI posts are published solely because of the topic becoming a major political issue during spikes. This group includes citizens both supporting and opposing HADOPI, and their posts include personal accounts on why they are promoting a particular view, often posted during non-spike periods. However, HADOPI was not the only political concern in France in 2009, and coverage of the issue by the A-list blogs is not as focussed as for the specialists because of the former group's wider, more comprehensive discussion of French politics in general, beyond the topical network.

The first and second groups of topical blogging are formed from the most active sites within the topical network, and the blogosphere overall. The third group, on the other hand, is formed from those blogs whose contributions to the topical network are comparatively few, while their total output within the blogosphere shows them to be minor blogs, including sites which only occasionally discuss politics. This can be seen through the number of posts published and citations received. This group is formed by the occasional contributors, the blogs posting only a few times to the topical network, perhaps purely in response to the spikes. HADOPI may be an important topic to these bloggers, but this is not shown through posting patterns. Of course, these blogs might be posting only once or twice a week or per month, and overall HADOPI posts could form a large proportion of their total output. What the topical network shows, though, is that HADOPI did not lead these bloggers to publish comparatively extraordinary numbers of posts. For the third group of bloggers, campaigning for or against HADOPI, or reporting on related themes, through blog posts was not an ongoing concern.

If the third group is made up of the sites that posted infrequently to the topical network, as well as overall, there is a final group containing the absentee blogs not

contributing to the HADOPI debate at all. There may be any number of reasons for not featuring the topic. Although news related to the bill would have reached these bloggers as politically engaged French citizens, the visible spread of information through the blogosphere stops before it can reach the entire blogging population.

Discussions within the three groups

This model of topical blogging can be applied to other discussions within the blogosphere. The sites appearing within the three groups of blogs will vary depending on the debate. The blogs leading the HADOPI discussion are not the same as those in the inauguration. Nevertheless, the first group of blogs contains the specialists, the bloggers whose interests are reflected in the topic at hand. This can be seen in *I love politics*'s focus on U.S. politics and its place within the inauguration topical network, and *Nuesblog*'s technology coverage and the HADOPI topical network. Because of their interest in a particular subject area, these sites would be expected to have their own primary, trusted resources for information rather than those geared at a mass audience. This can be seen in the presence of *Numerama* and *PCInpact* as key nodes within the HADOPI topical network, referenced by the likes of *Les Cahiers* throughout the seven months of discussion.

As Meraz (2011) also found, agenda-setting effects are variable within the three groups. Any agenda-setting effects from the mainstream media are more likely for the A-list blogs or the minor commentators than the specialists, and these are also more likely during non-spike periods. However, the A-list blogs may also draw on information from alternative media sites and other blogs, in a sense following the pattern of the 'moderate' blogs in Meraz's study. The work of these blogs may be highly politically partisan overall, but for the specific context of HADOPI they highlight articles from a range of publications.

Specialist blogs are proportionally more active within the HADOPI topical network than the overall discussions tracked in Chapter Four. These sites are more likely to reference those sources that support their individual views. Furthermore, as blogs with a specialist interest in the topic at hand, the bloggers involved are more likely to cite topic-specific references than more generic, mass audience mainstream

media sites. Blogs have the ability to ‘cut traditional media out of the agenda setting equation’ (Metzger, 2009, 568), and this is most obvious with the work of the specialist blogs. With their continued coverage of HADOPI, any new developments or articles attract some attention, with the major events attracting immediate reaction. In the case of the 9 April vote, the reaction followed the bill’s defeat, not just without mainstream media citations but appearing before journalists’ response to the news. Breaking news meant the bloggers either wrote their own opinions without citations, or linked to primary source materials, such as the videos taken from the Assemblée Nationale stream. The specialist blogs may also be actively avoiding the mainstream media agenda, with the perception that these sources hold a different perspective on HADOPI to their own or are not as informed as the specialists. The Bourreau-Guggenheim affair highlighted TF1’s support for the bill by firing an employee who was opposed to HADOPI, and the preference for alternative, topical resources may be a choice by bloggers to voice opinions more sympathetic to their cause.

Where the mainstream media, and the major alternative media sites, appear in the topical network then is through links from the A-list and minor blogs. These sites might not have the same investment in the coverage of HADOPI. For these bloggers, HADOPI is a topic warranting discussion, but they have wider interests and their posts reflect a wider range of topics than the content posted by specialist blogs. HADOPI may even be only tangentially relevant to the posts by some of these bloggers, being mentioned within the context of a summary of recent French political developments or lists of interesting articles posted within the mediasphere. Without the same topical focus as the specialists, the A-list blogs and in particular the group of minor topical blogs reference more generic sources, the sites receiving citations across topics and the entire seven months featured here.

The A-list blogs, in referencing a mixture of blogs, alternative media, and mainstream media sources, can also be seen as providing the space in which different agendas are contested. If the specialist blogs make the majority of their links to non-mainstream sites, ignoring the agenda that the mainstream media have set, and the minor blogs link more often to the mainstream media, then in between these two groups are sites whose references are more inclusive. No one

group of sites alone influences what the A-list bloggers cover. Neither the mainstream media agenda, nor the alternative media agenda, are reflected consistently in posts by this group of blogs. If anything, the A-list blogs exhibit gatewatching traits (Bruns, 2005), taking material from across the mediasphere, endorsing it if it meets with their approval, critiquing it, and comparing the content and approaches used. As the most prominent sites in the blogosphere, the A-list blogs provide the highest visibility for content within the topical network, aggregating, amplifying, and disseminating messages from other sources. Fitting with Meraz's (2011) description of moderate blogs selecting the information they post from across the mediasphere, collecting different perspectives on HADOPI, including the bloggers' own, exposes readers to a range of opinions. Rather than following the themes and attributes present within the mainstream media agenda, the A-list blogs include elements of several agendas, allowing their audience to evaluate for themselves what are the important angles in the discussion of HADOPI.

Links and agenda-setting

The variety of sources receiving links from French political bloggers discussing HADOPI supports a view put forward by Meraz (2011). In studying agenda-setting and its applicability for political blogs, Meraz finds that 'partisan blog platforms, driven by their ideological agendas, now handpick the media (traditional or citizen) that best serves their larger political goals' (121). While some of the blogs featured in the HADOPI topical network might not be considered as ideologically partisan normally, the effect of the HADOPI campaign itself means that, for this context, bloggers become strongly affiliated with a specific political viewpoint. The anti-HADOPI campaign crosses traditional political ideologies, with blogs which usually occupying opposing stances to each other reaching consensus on an issue. Already likely to have an opinion on HADOPI because of their status as citizens with online interests, and politically engaged internet users at that, the opposition to HADOPI leads to the blogosphere having a different objective than purely reporting developments surrounding the bill. It is unsurprising, then, to see that the most popular references across the entire HADOPI topical network, during

spikes and non-spikes alike, include an anti-HADOPI advocacy group and alternative media sites dedicated to specific themes concerning HADOPI.

In discussing the links made by blogs to different media sources, the different approaches between journalists and bloggers with regards to agenda-setting should be noted. The establishment of a media agenda is a by-product of the work of the mainstream media, being formed through the publication of articles and opinions. Political blogging is often more reactive, responding to the work of the mainstream media and other sources without necessarily accepting their view on events. Both the groups of specialist and A-list bloggers highlight ways that the media agenda may be engaged with, or negated, within the blogosphere. The specialist blogs linked mostly to non-mainstream, topical resources, sites which provided information more reflective of their interests and more supportive of their own views on HADOPI. Rather than link to mainstream media sites, which might not hold the same views or focus on the right attributes of the topic, the specialist blogs pursue their own agenda, citing the resources they find most appropriate. Meanwhile, the A-list blogs draw from more resources to air a wider range of perspectives on HADOPI, going beyond the media agenda to highlight voices from alternative media sites and other blogs.

Spikes, non-spikes, and agenda-setting

The HADOPI topical network contains five major spikes of posting activity, surrounded by longer periods of lesser, but consistent, post totals. The spikes, accompanying several key events in the progress of the HADOPI bill through the French parliament, exhibit aspects of the burst-like lifespan of news stories, where interest in the story increases rapidly before declining if no further information is forthcoming, as discussed by Barabási (2010). More blogs comment on HADOPI during the spikes, this factor distinguishing them from non-spike periods, but with each event not immediately followed by another major development, the spikes quickly diminish to the non-spike level. For the most part, the non-spike periods feature posts from a core group of HADOPI bloggers, while the spikes feature a mix of these primary contributors and other blogs called into action by unfolding

events. What is most interesting about the spikes is not their length – Barabási’s estimate of 36 hours per news story appears to hold true here – but their citations. Although accompanying breaking news about HADOPI, the references during the spikes are primarily the domain of non-traditional sources, highlighting the posts of specialist and A-list blogs within the spikes.

The type of event leading to each individual spike has some impact on the sources cited in the subsequent posts. Stories of parliamentary business without any particular outcome, such as HADOPI being debated in early March, European politics, and stories broken by journalists attract more mainstream media citations. However, the other spikes have other major sources. Although the votes were events that bloggers and journalists had some forewarning of, the breaking news led bloggers to link to different sites in posting during these spikes.

As each spike unfolded, the majority of blogs contributing posts at these times would post responses to new developments, often incorporating personal views based on their own HADOPI stance. For most of the spikes, if links were included they were directed towards topical references, such as *lQdN*, *Numerama*, and *PCInpact*. The centrality of *lQdN* to the first spike skews its position here slightly, but it was also cited during other spikes and across the non-spike periods, confirming the advocacy group’s position within the anti-HADOPI movement. Both mainstream media and alternative media sites without a topical focus, while important references for the political blogosphere as a whole over the seven months, do not feature to the same extent as topic-specific references during the spikes. That is not to say they do not appear at all, and during two spikes the mainstream media in particular act as key references. However, these two spikes are the second half of the first spike, when parliamentary debate on HADOPI resumed, and the third spike, a combination of the Bourreau-Guggenheim affair and the European parliament’s amendments to a proposed Telecoms Package. It could be argued that these spikes coincide with events of a different nature, and importance to the anti-HADOPI campaign, than the other spikes. When HADOPI returned to the Assemblée Nationale in March 2009, a vote was still several sessions away at least, with no new developments surrounding the bill. Media outlets reported on parliamentary business, which was in turn noted by political

bloggers and used as a starting point for other HADOPI discussion. With the Bourreau-Guggenheim affair, the story was broken by journalists working for *Libération*, and some initial recognition of the mainstream media's role in this development would be expected.

For the votes and the Conseil Constitutionnel's decision to reject aspects of HADOPI, though, the breaking news aspect becomes critical to how bloggers posted during the spikes. Here, topical references received the greatest citations. At times these resources did not present opinion pieces or commentary on events – the 9 April vote was accompanied by four individual posts containing the same unedited video of the session in the Assemblée Nationale – but they were chosen by political bloggers as the most appropriate sources for the view they were publishing.

Delwiche (2005) argues that the news story is the 'most useful unit of analysis' in determining any agenda-setting effects within the blogosphere, given the ease of comparability between blogs and mainstream media. For HADOPI, events featured by bloggers would also be major stories within the mainstream media, such as the defeat of the bill on 9 April. However, any possible agenda-setting effect on the blogosphere from the mainstream media for this example is negated by the choice of sources referenced by specialist bloggers. In the aftermath of the bill's defeat in the Assemblée Nationale, French political bloggers were not linking to the breaking news sections of *Le Monde* or *Nouvel Observateur*. Instead, they were citing the primary source material – or at least, the original footage from the chamber of the Assemblée Nationale, uploaded by other users to *Dailymotion*. Accompanied by only a minimal amount of text, the video footage told the story without additional commentary or framing. Longer responses to the event would follow later. When news of HADOPI's defeat broke, all French bloggers needed to report the story were a few words along the lines of 'victory' and 90 seconds of video showing députés voting, and those who had voted 'no' celebrating.

Embedding just the raw video content may also suggest that bloggers got to the story first: rather than having to prepare articles about the defeat of the bill, bloggers could instantly post a small amount of content, to be followed up later. At the time the first post covering the HADOPI defeat was published, other media sources may have still be working on their articles. The lack of mainstream media

citations in the blogosphere could reflect a lack of relevant content to reference. Furthermore, as stated before, the victorious reactions of bloggers may have led to citing material other than that of the mainstream media, which might not have held the same views on the result. Later pieces would draw on reactions published in the mainstream media, such as the response of Christine Albanel to her bill's defeat, but the immediate response on 9 April saw posts without any influence from a media agenda.

Topical resources account for the breaking news references during the spikes, but outside of these periods the mixture of references is more representative of the French mediasphere as a whole. Mainstream and alternative media sites are more widely cited during non-spike periods than spikes, although topical resources still receive the greatest volume of links. Two types of post may account for this activity. While the initial reactions to votes in particular drew on few resources, and those that were cited were generally topic-specific, in the aftermath of the events longer posts may appear in the topical network, drawing on more points and perspectives. Bloggers might not agree with what is being said in other places, but using other sources provides different angles to discussing HADOPI. Without the alternative opinions or aspects of the story being introduced, additional posts could be doomed to repetition (and even with the new developments, there is some degree of acknowledged repetition: several bloggers stated they would rather not talk about HADOPI as they have nothing new to add), and posting activity fell from spike to non-spike levels.

In the days following the spikes, then, posts drew on a wider range of resources, as bloggers respond to events and articles at more of a distance from the initial events and their associated feelings. The variety of sites linked to during non-spike periods can also be attributed to keeping the HADOPI discussion ongoing beyond the periods of high activity or interest. Although the parliamentary debate of HADOPI would be of some interest to the anti-HADOPI campaign, seeing what individual députés had to add to the discussion, without a particular event or announcement providing new content might not be as inspired as during the spikes. Bloggers link to, and respond to, HADOPI-related stories published across the mediasphere, keeping awareness of the issue within their circle of influence.

The blackout campaign provided additional HADOPI coverage during the period following the first spike, but after the votes, with only isolated protests and petitions occasionally being promoted, other media content is used to provoke further discussion. While the material reflects diverse origins, though, what it shows is how bloggers source information in the construction, and maintenance, of the agenda they are promoting, the salient points they have chosen – what HADOPI means for active internet users, for example – and how for specialist blogs the topic is a major concern. For other blogs, and indeed for mainstream and alternative media sites, HADOPI may come and go across the first seven months of 2009, as other topics are seen as more or less important. For the specialist blogs in the topical network, these changing agendas are resisted in place of a more consistent thread running through their blog posts over this period, with a primary topic supported by what material can be used to stimulate further discussion or awareness.

Bloggers were aware of some of the events that would end up causing spikes in the topical network before their results were known, these being the votes in the *Assemblée Nationale*. The other spikes appear without any anticipation or preamble, but the votes attract some lead-in discussion from bloggers, covering what they saw as the important points prior to the vote. The choice of topics might also reflect different themes from those promoted through the media agenda. For the 9 April vote, for example, several bloggers, representing different political party affiliations, criticised the low turnout of elected members of parliament to debate an issue seen as important by political bloggers, with the relative silence of some parties on HADOPI also noted. Bloggers encouraged their readers to contact their député and demand they attend the session in order to vote against HADOPI. Given the result of the 9 April vote, a similar success would be unlikely for the May vote, and the build-up for that spike was more subdued. However, the pre-spike period for the votes shows how the campaigning angle of the HADOPI topical network took another form than during other spikes or the non-spike period. Instead of responding to news or promoting more indirect forms of protest, such as the blackout, bloggers appealed to readers to directly contact the people who would determine HADOPI's future, ignoring any agenda but the blogger's own political desires. At times throughout the HADOPI topical network the mainstream

media agenda appeared to have some influence on the posts published by minor topical and A-list blogs, and even occasionally by the specialists, but the context shows how the form of HADOPI discussion, and its citations, changed over the period covered here. When political bloggers decided to campaign one way or another, mainstream media citations were not featured, with a different agenda being promoted, and endorsed, across the blogosphere. It might not have lasted the whole period, or ultimately succeeded, but campaigning against HADOPI shows not only a key function of political blogging, but also how different sources are made use of within the different stages of events, providing further information on agenda-setting and the blogosphere.

Conclusion

Agenda-setting effects within the blogosphere have previously been found to be variable, depending on the types of story, resources, and blogs involved. Intermedia agenda-setting, where blogs and mainstream media influence each other's agendas at different times, has been suggested as a possible model for further examining the applicability of agenda-setting theory to the blogosphere. While ascertaining any effects on the mainstream media agenda by political bloggers does not form part of this research project, what can be tracked are the resources contributing to, and the themes present within, the political blogosphere's coverage of different topics. However, it would be expected that any major themes promoted by the blogosphere would be taken note of by the mainstream media, even if they went uncovered at the time. The blackout campaign's popularity and the focus it placed on *lQdN* as a major anti-HADOPI force would have contributed to later attempts by députés to discredit the organisers behind the advocacy group, noted in a post on *Les Cahiers* on 22 April.

Although the HADOPI topical network was located through the presence of a common subject – the HADOPI bill – in blog posts, the themes and opinions published vary from blog to blog and over time. The sources cited and the subjects discussed by French political bloggers have been used to evaluate the agendas present within the HADOPI topical network. In doing so, the types of resources

influencing a blog's posts have been found to vary across the topical network, based on a blogger's activity, approach to the subject, and engagement with the campaign elements of the HADOPI discussion.

The HADOPI topical network shows a major political issue receiving attention from the French political blogosphere. The salience of an ongoing debate like HADOPI fluctuates over time. Specific events act as catalysts in blog activity, provoking spikes within the topical network. Traditional agenda-setting theory would suggest that the mainstream media coverage of HADOPI during these spikes leads to additional posts on the subject. However, posts made during the spikes reflect a wider range of sources. Topic-specific sites are also the most popular resources within the discussion, and several events provoked bloggers to comment on HADOPI without reference to the mainstream media. What this suggests is a revision of agenda-setting theory with respect to the sources available to interested parties. Where the original theory dealt with a mass media situation, the present media situation includes not only the traditional sources but a wealth of alternative media, blogs, and other sites referenced in political discussions. These different sites may all attempt to set alternative agendas to those of the mainstream media or political parties, and some of these are successful. A notable example of this is seen through the effect of *lQdN*'s blackout campaign on the blogosphere's coverage of HADOPI.

Citizens are also able to make their own decisions and promote their perspectives on an issue without following any agenda set by the mainstream media.

Organisations and governments provide raw material which citizens can use in their own interpretation of specific topics, including video streaming of parliamentary sessions and the availability online of full transcripts of these debates. Furthermore, breaking news is accompanied not only by journalists' articles, but also first-hand reactions on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms, with the #hadopi hashtag-oriented discussion on Twitter an important channel for opponents of the bill throughout the campaign. Access to these resources means that there are more ways for people to find out about events, without necessarily relying on any one site and its agenda, with the HADOPI

topical network showing how different bloggers drew on different sites depending on the context of the HADOPI debate.

The presence of these topic-specific sites shows that, for the specialist blogs within the topical network, those sites for whom HADOPI is most salient throughout the entire period covered here, the mainstream media agenda has a negligible effect on their posts: certainly, using the hyperlink as an explicit indicator of information sources as suggested by Delwiche (2005), it is the topic-specific sources, chosen by the bloggers as reflecting their own interests, which receive the most citations from these blogs. This may suggest that, for the specialist blogs, there was some degree of setting an alternative agenda to the mainstream media, or at least preempting the coverage of events within the spikes, in particular with the framing of the 9 April vote. Certainly the blogs here exhibit posting behaviour independent of the material posted by the mainstream media.

However, specialist blogs contributing to the HADOPI debate only make up a small portion of the total sites active within the topical network. For the majority of blogs discussing HADOPI, the topic's salience is more variable, being provoked by the spikes or relevant articles posted by media sources, but not remaining a consistent subject within the blog's output. This does not automatically follow any changes in HADOPI coverage from the mainstream media. Instead, especially for the A-list blogs, HADOPI posts reflect topics discussed by other resources within the mediasphere, not just mainstream media sources but alternative media, citizen journalism sites, and other blogs. The A-list blogs draw from a wealth of resources in discussing HADOPI. The original agenda-setting theory examined the effects of mainstream media coverage, from only a few sources, on its audience. In the contemporary mediasphere, though, bloggers and their readers are able to access and respond to a wider variety of perspectives. For the most active sites within the topical network, the groups of specialist and A-list blogs, the mainstream media alone do not set the agenda. These blogs fit the descriptions outlined by Meraz (2011), as 'partisan' and 'moderate' blogs, and their respective choice of sources further supports Meraz's findings.

The blogosphere is not completely free of any mainstream media agenda – intermedia agenda-setting implies some mainstream media involvement, as does

any gatewatching process carried out by bloggers – but it is primarily with the minor blogs occasionally contributing to the topical network that mainstream media sources have the most noticeable effect. HADOPI is not seen by these bloggers as a topic warranting repeated posting, with many of these sites contributing material around the events provoking spikes, drawing on mainstream media citations. While mainstream media sources are among the most widely-cited resources in the topical network overall, they are the primary resources alone for the group of minor blogs. When cited by A-list blogs, it is as part of a wider reading of mediasphere material. For specialist blogs, mainstream media citations are a means of responding to further developments surrounding the bill, and keeping the discussion and campaign visible, during non-spike periods. Within the political blogosphere, there is no one overall agenda present, nor is any one group of sites setting it. A range of influences, from blogs and alternative media to the mainstream media, contributed to the shape of the HADOPI topical network.

Chapter 7: The Utegate affair, opinion leaders, and gatewatchers in the Australian political blogosphere

There's a guy named Kev, and he's got a problem with his ute.
WELCOME TO AUSTRALIAN POLITICS³⁰²

Introduction

So far in this thesis's study of debate within the Australian and French political blogospheres, I have examined coverage of an international event (Chapter Five) and French domestic policy (Chapter Six). These case studies have enabled analysis of framing and agenda-setting effects among bloggers, and how different media sources impact upon the discussions taking place. In the following chapter, I examine another domestic political event, this time from Australia. Unlike the HADOPI debate featured in the previous chapter, the episode studied in this chapter is not policy-oriented, but instead a dispute between leading politicians, dubbed 'Utegate' by political commentators. The debate developing around Utegate provides the context for studying political blogging from the final perspective featured in the theoretical framework of Chapter Two: opinion leadership and information flows. Identification of possible opinion leaders within the blogosphere is carried out by studying political bloggers' responses to the scandal. The subsequent categorisation of specific bloggers as opinion leaders draws on the links received within the topical network and the composite citation networks of Chapter Four, and on the themes featured, and sources cited, in the Utegate discussion. Citations are used as the primary indicator for readership and visibility within the blogosphere.³⁰³

In Chapter One, I outlined a typology of political blogs showing the range of approaches and themes that bloggers use in their coverage of politics. As well as the specialist blogs identified within the inauguration and HADOPI discussions, the

³⁰² Comment left by 'delperro', in Colgan (2009).

³⁰³ This chapter builds on earlier content featured in Bruns, Highfield, Kirchhoff, and Nicolai (2009), Bruns, Burgess, Highfield, Kirchhoff, and Nicolai (2011), and Highfield (2010b).

typology included bloggers using different approaches, including gatowatching practices. Political blogs practising gatowatching highlight and, at times, critique the output of the mainstream media. The following case study discusses gatowatching as an outcome of the relationship between Australian political bloggers and the mainstream media. This discussion draws on the reluctance of bloggers to cover a political 'scandal' in June 2009, despite the championing of the story by the mainstream media. At the same time, the case study analyses the topical network formed around the scandal to evaluate the presence of opinion leaders within the political blogosphere, and how the functions of these sites relates to earlier theories of information flows.

The origins of Utegate can be traced to events inspired by the global financial crisis, in particular in late 2008, when the Australian automotive sector was affected by two international financiers pulling out of the market. In response, the Treasurer, Wayne Swan, announced plans designed to provide Federal assistance to car dealers finding themselves without financial support, to be introduced from 1 January 2009 (Swan, 2008). The scheme became known as 'OzCar', and would provide financial aid to eligible dealers with support from the Federal government and major Australian banks.

A month after the launch of the scheme, John Grant, a Queensland businessman, made an enquiry to OzCar about obtaining assistance for his dealership. While this development went either unnoticed or just without comment at the time, in early June 2009 the Opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull questioned the Prime Minister about the connections between his office, Grant, and the OzCar scheme. Prior to the 2007 Federal election campaign, John Grant had donated a utility vehicle ('ute') to Kevin Rudd, for use as an electorate vehicle. Given this donation, and the fact that Grant and Rudd were acquaintances living in the same Brisbane suburb (S. Lewis, 2009b), Grant's enquiry to OzCar led the Opposition to wonder whether Grant had received preferential treatment. While Rudd initially dismissed the repeated questioning on the subject of OzCar, the idea of preferential treatment did not go away, with further questioning on 15 June, before the scandal became front page news on 19 June with a Senate inquiry into the matter (S. Lewis, 2009a).

The early exchanges between Rudd and Turnbull went unreported in the Australian political blogosphere. Only after the Senate inquiry and the prominent mainstream media coverage accompanying it did political bloggers start to comment on the unfolding scandal. As with the HADOPI debate covered in Chapter Six, blog posts discussing Utegate have been located within from the entire corpus of blog posts, rather than focussing on a smaller range of dates as in the inauguration study of Chapter Five. Utegate covers a shorter period than HADOPI, but locating as many related posts as possible allows this chapter to feature not only the spikes in Utegate discussion, but also how the coverage tailed off and returned in response to new developments. Relevant posts were identified using keyword searches around terms and names appearing in the debate, including Utegate, OzCar, and Grech, using methods outlined in Chapter Three. A total of 52 Utegate posts, published on 17 blogs, were identified, and their links and text content were extracted from the wider corpus for further analysis.

In this chapter, Utegate is used to examine political blogging through the final aspect of the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter Two, exploring opinion leadership and information flows within the blogosphere. Linking patterns found within the topical network and in Chapter Four are used in the identification of opinion leaders. Links to blogs are used as a proxy for readership. Any presence of repeated citations from multiple bloggers between January and August 2009 demonstrates a blog's visibility and prominence within the blogosphere. For this study, these links translate into readership, with the greater number of citations reflecting the largest audience potentially receiving information from an individual blog. The content of blog posts and the sources used by blogs are then used to support whether a site might be counted as an opinion leader. How a blogger framed their discussion of the scandal, providing their own views and interpretation of events and other sources, shows whether blogs might be acting as opinion leaders for their readers.

The case study also provides an example of commentary on politics in general in the Australian blogosphere. As a domestic political topic that attracted extensive coverage from the mainstream media – who, it will be seen later, would play a key role in the scandal's development – how Utegate was discussed by Australian

political bloggers becomes a guide to how other, similar subjects may be featured in the blogosphere. Utegate, at its core, is a dispute between the leaders of the two main Australian political parties, a common occurrence within parliamentary debate. These disputes do not require a specialist interest in technology or economics, instead acting as a familiar example of Australian politics for commentators within the blogosphere.

Utegate chronology

The Utegate topical network, formed from posts published between 19 June and 5 August 2009, responds to several developments concerning the question of preferential treatment, with the scandal ultimately unravelling over several days in late June 2009. Its beginnings, though, were not commented on by the blogs in the sample. Prior to the analysis of the topical network itself, a brief timeline is provided of the events contributing to Utegate.

On 4 June, over a week before the earliest blog post in the topical network, Malcolm Turnbull used information connecting Rudd, Grant, and OzCar to open Question Time (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009):

Mr TURNBULL (2.10 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. I refer the Prime Minister to the standards of ministerial ethics and I note that the Prime Minister's register of interests states that he has been given a free car complete with registration, insurance and RACQ membership by a Mr John Grant of John Grant Motors. Has the Prime Minister, his office or anyone on his behalf made representations on behalf of Ipswich Central Motors, John Grant Motors or any other car dealership owned by or associated with John Grant to OzCar, the taxpayer funded special purpose vehicle managed by the Treasury and set up to provide finance to car dealers? (5767)

At the time, Rudd required information from his office to answer the question, eventually stating nearly an hour later:

On the question of the special purpose vehicle, let me say in response to some of the insinuations that have been made by the Leader of the Opposition: (1) I have been advised that neither I nor my office have ever spoken with Mr Grant in relation to OzCar; (2) neither I nor my office have ever made any representations on his behalf; and (3) I have not been aware

of any representations on his behalf made by anyone in the government, including the referral referred to before by the Treasurer's office. (5778)

By then, though, Turnbull had returned to the subject of John Grant several times, asking further questions of both Kevin Rudd and Wayne Swan, with the latter acknowledging Grant having contacted his office but being directed to OzCar contacts. The next day, John Grant was not mentioned by the Opposition, and Rudd's denial of preferential treatment appeared to have ended the debate.

Two weeks later, on 15 June, Turnbull again asked questions of Swan and Rudd about John Grant, and although the same denials were repeated, this time the debate did not go away. A Senate inquiry was launched into the Rudd government's dealings with Grant and the OzCar scheme. On 19 June, Senator Eric Abetz, an opposition senator from Tasmania, read out an email from a prime ministerial advisor to Treasury official Godwin Grech, who also testified in front of the inquiry, supposedly confirming that Grant had received preferential treatment (Economics Legislation Committee, 2009, E 19). Having previously denied this, Rudd was accused of corruption and lying in parliament by Turnbull, while the Prime Minister subsequently ordered a full investigation into the affair.

The next day, the News Limited-owned New South Wales newspaper *the Daily Telegraph* published the text of the Grech emails, dating from late February 2009 (S. Lewis, 2009b). Alongside claims made in parliament that Turnbull had sought out and told Andrew Charlton, an advisor to Kevin Rudd, not to lie on the Prime Minister's behalf, these new developments highlighted that one of Rudd, Swan, or Turnbull was misleading the parliament. Depending on the outcome, 'Utegate' (a term first used on 19 June) threatened the political future of some or all of these three figures.

However, the Senate inquiry, emails, and denials of preferential treatment were just a long preamble. On 22 June, the parliamentary day started in a similar vein to the previous week's debate. Members from both sides demanded that the other provide the evidence supporting their own stance on Utegate and explain their respective actions. Dominating the early exchanges was the email featured in the *Daily Telegraph*. Malcolm Turnbull cited it when outlining the Treasurer's

involvement in John Grant's application for OzCar support, while Kevin Rudd repeatedly stated the email was fraudulent.

In the middle of this debate, though, a breaking news report posted on the ABC website was relayed to members sitting in parliament. The Australian Federal Police had searched Godwin Grech's house, looking for the emails on which the whole Utegate scandal was now centred. Informing the House of Representatives of this latest development, Shadow Treasurer Joe Hockey took the police's actions as proof of the email's existence, something that Kevin Rudd had repeatedly denied. However, the police raid actually provided support for the Rudd government's denial of preferential treatment. Later that day, a press release confirmed that the police had found the email to be a fake, created by Grech himself. Instead of discrediting the Rudd government, the focus turned to the Opposition leader's performance during the scandal, in particular Turnbull's keenness to base his allegations on evidence proven to be unreliable, and his approval ratings fell after Utegate.

The scandal faded away over July, although the Auditor-General's investigation into the preferential treatment claims remained ongoing. The final major Utegate activity took place at the beginning of August. On 3 August, the ABC broadcast an episode of the *Australian Story* television programme, filmed at the height of Utegate and focussing on Malcolm Turnbull.³⁰⁴ The next day, the Auditor-General released his report into the Utegate claims, concluding that there had been no wrongdoing on the part of Rudd or Swan (Australian National Audit Office, 2009). However, these incidents were quickly overshadowed by breaking news on the same day. In an interview with *The Australian*, Godwin Grech admitted forging the email used as evidence of the government's preferential treatment, although he remained adamant that the fake email was an accurate copy of an actual message from the Prime Minister's office that had since been lost. Grech also divulged that he met with Turnbull and Abetz about the email several days before appearing in front of the Senate inquiry in June. These revelations provided the final Utegate discussions in the data collection period for this thesis, although the fallout from

³⁰⁴ *Australian Story* is a weekly documentary programme, presenting the personal stories of contemporary Australians. The Malcolm Turnbull episode can be found at <http://www.abc.net.au/austory/content/2007/s2645536.htm>

the scandal continued past August 2009. Malcolm Turnbull would lose the Opposition leadership in December 2009. Grech, who had been admitted to a psychiatric facility in June 2009, was initially told he would not face criminal prosecution in November 2009 (Murphy, 2009), but stated in October 2010 that he had still not been definitely told that he would not be charged over the affair, 14 months after confessing to concocting the fake email (Maley, 2010).

Utegate in the Australian political blogosphere

Although the role played by the mainstream media in breaking new developments was a notable part of the Utegate chronology, from *The Daily Telegraph* publishing the (fraudulent) email supporting the preferential treatment claims, to the ABC reporting the police raid on Grech's house, Utegate's coverage in the political blogosphere features a different angle to the scandal. For several blogs, posts concerning Utegate act as direct responses to the commentary of journalists and other bloggers. Rather than covering the political implications around the accusations against Rudd and Swan, the bloggers contributing to the Utegate topical network discuss the surrounding media event instead. For other bloggers, though, Utegate is only a tangential issue, mentioned only as background for their discussion of approval ratings. While the scandal was a major topic covered by journalists over this period, and given front page status, Australian political blogs did not follow this lead in dedicating extensive coverage to Utegate. From the blogs in the sample, the Utegate topical network contains 52 posts, from 17 blogs, published over eight weeks between 12 June and 5 August 2009. On the day with the highest Utegate activity, 22 June, the topical network accounted for just under 13% of the total posts published, while other days fluctuated between five and ten percent of each day's posts.

The distribution of Utegate-related blog posts over this period can be seen in Figure 7.1. Even though questions about any preferential treatment for John Grant were raised in parliament on 4 June, and the scandal would not reach its denouement until the start of August, blog coverage of Utegate mostly occurred in

two flurries of activity, in the final weeks of June and the first days of August. These spikes coincide with the aftermath to the Grech email being published in *The Daily Telegraph*, including the raid on Grech’s house, and with Grech’s admission that the email was a fake. The dates of these last two events, 22 June and 4 August, are shown in black in Figure 7.1. Between these spikes, though, Utegate received minimal attention. Indeed, for most of July, Utegate was not even a background concern for the Australian political blogosphere.

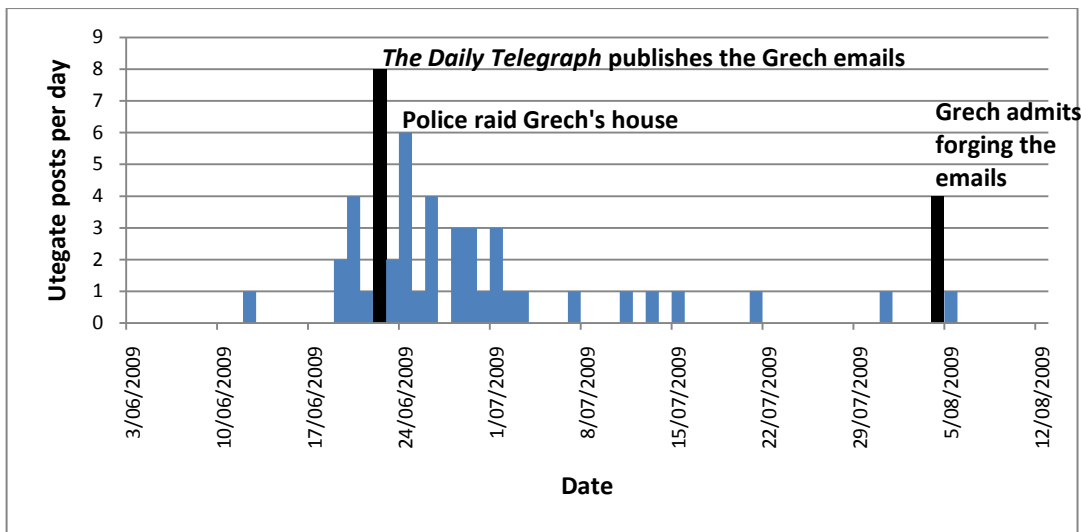


Figure 7.1: Utegate topical network posts per day

Blogs and sources

The mainstream media’s role within Utegate’s development can be seen in the list of primary resources for the blogs discussing the scandal. Compared to HADOPI or the inauguration cases, both in France and Australia, the Australian political blogosphere’s coverage of Utegate provides a situation where local media dominate the reference list. While the mainstream media are the most prominent sites in the list of most-referenced resources in Table 7.1, the absence of sites such as *Wikipedia*, *YouTube*, and *Flickr* should also be noted. Not only are they absent from the most-cited list, but they do not feature in the topical network at all. This would suggest that the blogosphere’s coverage of Utegate is positioned around the scandal as a media event, responding directly to the mainstream media. Whether reliant on or responding to the mainstream media’s Utegate reporting in their

posts, the Australian political blogosphere can be seen as predominantly making use of journalistic content, rather than raw source material seen in part in the HADOPI topical network.

Site	Citations (# sites)	Citations (total)	Type
<i>The Australian</i>	7	11	National mainstream
ABC	4	7	National mainstream
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	4	5	Sydney mainstream
<i>Crikey</i>	2	5	Alternative, online-only
<i>The Punch</i>	2	5	Mainstream opinion site
<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>	3	4	Sydney mainstream
<i>Malcolm Farr</i>	1	3	Mainstream blog
<i>The Age</i>	3	3	Melbourne mainstream
<i>Pollytics</i>	1	3	Blog
<i>The Poll Bludger</i>	2	2	Blog
<i>news.com.au</i>	2	2	National mainstream, online-only
<i>Parliament of Australia</i>	2	2	Government site
ABC News	2	2	National mainstream

Table 7.1: Sites receiving most citations, Utegate topical network

The short lifespan of the scandal, and its lack of a back story, may also account for the blogosphere's primary use of mainstream news sites in the topical network. Unlike HADOPI, which mixed an ongoing campaign with sudden developments, Utegate provides an example of breaking news across the Australian mediasphere. This event, unlike Chapter Five's inauguration discussion or even the anti-HADOPI campaigning in Chapter Six, developed without a clear frame for its coverage. The links to mainstream media sources, and other blogs, in this case may then demonstrate the blogosphere using the work of journalists and fellow bloggers to make sense of an emerging issue. Connected with this idea, Utegate also acts as a further example of Australian bloggers engaging in gatewatching, and reflects in part the 'us vs. them' relationship between the blogosphere and the mainstream media introduced in Chapter Two.

Australian mainstream media dominate the most-cited references of Table 7.1: News Limited provide five of the top 15, including *The Punch*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and Malcolm Farr's blog on the latter website, with two further sites cited once. Fairfax's two major news sites, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, also appear

in the top 15, while a third site, *The Brisbane Times*, was also cited. The national broadcaster the ABC is represented by its main domain and its news site in Table 7.1, and *Crikey* is referenced alongside three of the blogs hosted on its domain (all three of these blogs also contributed posts to the topical network, while a fourth, *Andrew Bartlett*, published a post but did not receive a citation). Finally, the website of the Australian Federal parliament appears as a topical resource for the Utegate discussion, hosting government announcements and transcripts of parliamentary debates and inquiries.

While only nine of the sites featuring in the topical network received three or more citations, and just five of these sites were referenced by three or more blogs, this pattern is reflective of the smaller scope of the Utegate coverage. These pattern also follow trends identified in the composite citation network in Chapter Four, where a subset of mainstream media sites, mostly pertaining to print publications, were found to be the primary resources for Australian political blogospheres. These become the main shared resources of the topical network. The citations made by the bloggers in the topical network limits the number of shared resources, as seen in the list of sites making the most out-links in Table 7.2. Only two blogs, *Larvatus Prodeo* and *Peter Martin*, cited more than ten individual resources. This also means that there are fewer sources unique to individual blogs, as bloggers instead link to the main group of media sites. These patterns underline the importance of the central mainstream and alternative media sites to the Utegate discussion.

Blog	Out-links (# sites)	Out-links (total)	Total posts
<i>Larvatus Prodeo</i>	17	33	10
<i>Peter Martin</i>	11	14	8
<i>The Catallaxy Files</i>	6	6	2
<i>The Tally Room</i>	5	5	1
<i>Antony Loewenstein</i>	4	4	1
<i>Duncan Riley</i> ³⁰⁵	3	3	2
<i>araquel.livejournal.com</i>	3	3	1
<i>Pollytics</i>	3	3	8
<i>The Poll Bludger</i>	3	3	2
<i>Andrew Bartlett (Crikey)</i>	2	2	1

Table 7.2: Blogs contributing most out-links to Utegate topical network

³⁰⁵ <http://www.duncanriley.com/>

The total posts contributed by blogs in the topical network helps to explain some of the linking patterns. Of the 17 blogs represented here, ten published at least two posts discussing Utegate, while only six published three or more times on the subject. As with the out-link list, *Larvatus Prodeo* and *Peter Martin* head Table 7.3, showing the sites with the most posts in the Utegate topical network. Three Crikey blogs also appear amongst the sites contributing the most Utegate posts, *Pollytics*, *Pure Poison*, and *The Poll Bludger*, and their place within the network will be examined more thoroughly later in this chapter.

Blog	Utegate posts
<i>Larvatus Prodeo</i>	10
<i>Peter Martin</i>	8
<i>Pollytics</i>	8
<i>ABC Unleashed</i>	6
<i>Pure Poison</i>	5
<i>On Line Opinion</i>	3
<i>The Poll Bludger</i>	2
<i>John Quiggin</i>	2
<i>The Catallaxy Files</i>	2
<i>Duncan Riley</i>	2

Table 7.3: Blogs contributing most posts to Utegate topical network

While these statistics show the major contributors to the network, and the references they cited, the context for these is unclear from the tables alone. As a breaking news event, the coverage of Utegate followed and commented on developments as they happened, not just on blogs or in the mainstream media but in parliament as well. Unlike HADOPI and the inauguration, the topical network featured here has two major phases with a gap between them, based on specific events related to Utegate. Because of the shorter period represented compared to the HADOPI network, and the nature of the news event involved, rather than breaking the analysis up into spikes and non-spike periods the following section will study the blogosphere's coverage of Utegate as it happened, on a day by day basis.

The blogosphere's Utegate timeline

The earliest activity in the Utegate affair, when Malcolm Turnbull first asked related questions in 4 June, was not covered by bloggers in the sample, with later posts claiming that initially it did not seem that there was any scandal, and so there had not been any apparent need to comment on it. Only with the Senate inquiry into the preferential treatment claims and Godwin Grech's testimony did the Australian political blogosphere start to respond to the scandal. *The Catallaxy Files* and *Larvatus Prodeo* were the first contributors to the topical network, on 19 June, with another four bloggers discussing the issue the following day in the wake of the publication of Grech's emails. Prior to 19 June, the topic had received a passing mention in a post on the ABC's *Unleashed*, but was not leading the content itself, with commentators not imagining the story would develop as it did. Indeed, the first Utegate-specific post, published on *The Catallaxy Files* on 19 June, confirms this:

The opposition had been making something of a fuss over the ute and I thought it all a waste of time - afterall (*sic*) with the government's irresponsible spending why carry-on about a ute?

Even with the allegations becoming front page news and enquiries being called for, not all bloggers were treating the story as a potential scandal. While *The Catallaxy Files* questioned whether Rudd would continue as Prime Minister, *Larvatus Prodeo*'s post later that day (which also linked, somewhat scathingly, to the *Catallaxy* post) was already treating Utegate as a non-event and the News Limited-led coverage as 'nonsense'. *The Australian* may have been convinced that Utegate was a major crisis for Rudd, but several bloggers in the sample were not.

The publication of the emails by *The Daily Telegraph* gave Utegate more substance as a scandal worthy of comment by bloggers. As with *The Catallaxy Files*, *John Quiggin* had refrained from posting on the topic as Turnbull initially pushed the issue, but the latest twist led to a post on 20 June:

The Great Ute Scandal has been bubbling along for weeks but I ignored it, partly because scandals are rarely interesting and partly because I couldn't get to the starting point of working out what wrongdoing was supposed to have taken place.

Grech's testimony to the Senate inquiry helped to focus the apparent crisis. Rather than solely asking whether John Grant received preferential treatment, the discovery of emails supporting the claims meant that attention turned to the Prime Minister himself. Having previously denied Turnbull's allegations, Rudd was now facing further questioning from the opposition about whether he had misled parliament.

Not that the blogosphere was convinced that Turnbull's allegations were altogether accurate. Of the four Utegate posts made on 20 June following *The Daily Telegraph's* front page story on the subject, there was no consensus as to who was at the most risk in the scandal. The lobbying aspect of Utegate gained some coverage, from *Duncan Riley* commenting that Rudd insisting that he did not do favours for donors did not seem believable, to *Peter Martin* providing background information on Rudd's advisor Andrew Charlton, who had been implicated in the scandal by Turnbull. However, both *Duncan Riley* and *John Quiggin* noted that the strategy used by the Opposition was not the most sound, and if the information they were using was not reliable then Turnbull's own position would be at risk.

The fourth post responded directly, and briefly, to *The Daily Telegraph's* contribution to Utegate. In a post entitled 'Journalists and sources', *Pollytics* linked to two scanned documents uploaded by *Crikey* correspondent Bernard Keane. These documents showed the results of the government search for the emails published by *The Daily Telegraph*, with no trace of these messages being found. *Pollytics*, like Rudd in parliament earlier that week, noted that the emails were looking increasingly likely to have been faked, and asked whether *Telegraph* journalist Steve Lewis should still protect his source. The following week, when parliament returned on 22 June, and the OzCar questions from Turnbull to Rudd continued, this angle would see the next major development in the scandal.

The blog coverage of Utegate on 22 June, though, came before news of Grech's house being searched spread. The majority of posts were still responding to the events of Friday afternoon and Saturday, following the general blogosphere trend of a lull in posting activity over the weekend. Seven blogs contributed to the topical network on 22 June, yet most of the initial content was posted in the

morning prior to the ABC's report being published.³⁰⁶ An article on the ABC's *Unleashed* opinion site provided a summary of the issues covered by Utegate, but the political side of Utegate was to some extent ignored by other sites in the sample. Instead, the coverage of the scandal by News Limited was commented on, and in some cases attacked, by *Pollytics* and *Pure Poison*, while *Larvatus Prodeo* acted as an aggregator once more, linking to relevant content from News Limited, Fairfax, and other blogs. In doing so, Philip Gomes, the author of the *Larvatus Prodeo* post, summed up a view that would become a prevailing trend amongst bloggers on Utegate. After linking to several, external articles, Gomes wrote:

Do I have an opinion? Sure. Does it matter? Nope. As is usual, when it comes to press gallery and political types, truth is the first casualty.

In the wake of Grech's email being found to be fake, bloggers turned to commentary on Malcolm Turnbull's future, based both on opinion and on polling data. The amount of time and coverage devoted to Utegate also attracted some scorn. On 24 June, Andrew Bartlett wrote on his *Crikey* blog that

I don't dispute that there are some interesting twists and turns in the utegate/fake email saga. But it always infuriates me that politicians and political commentators will devote endless hours to such things, thus excluding any real examination being given to issues, policies and legislation that directly effect (*sic*) peoples' lives.

Similar views were also noted on *Larvatus Prodeo* and *Pure Poison*, and with the Opposition's argument derailed by the fake email, the general view was that Utegate would quickly disappear as an issue. Shortly before Utegate became front page news, a major political crisis had developed in the U.K. over leaked parliamentary expenses, and it was argued that Australian politicians would be rather keen to avoid a similar investigation into their activities.

Following the police's involvement on 22 June, new developments in the Utegate case were not forthcoming, and the topical network saw a gradual decline in posts over the last days of June. Malcolm Turnbull remained the major subject in posts contributing to the topical network, with *Pollytics*, *The Poll Bludger*, and *The Tally*

³⁰⁶ Updates on the event may well have taken place in comments threads rather than in separate posts, given the general absence of multiple posts per blog. However, as outlined in the methodology, comments were not able to be archived in this project.

Room all providing analysis of polling data showing how the Leader of the Opposition's personal approval ratings had plummeted since Grech's email was confirmed to be a fake. While the ALP's ratings had fallen as Utegate unfolded, once the fraudulent evidence supporting Turnbull's claims was exposed it was the Coalition's numbers that fell, to the extent that *Duncan Riley* commented that it was unlikely Turnbull would remain Opposition Leader for long. The subject had changed once again: from the claims of preferential treatment and a government facing major crisis to the faked emails being used as evidence for these claims, Utegate was now used to question the man who had instigated the original story, when it was very briefly, but still tangentially, about a ute. As June drew to a close, so Utegate disappeared from the Australian political blogosphere, with a final flurry of activity on 1 July including *Larvatus Prodeo*'s linking to alternative commentary on the scandal from *Bek's Blog*,³⁰⁷ retelling the story of Utegate in the style of *LOLcats* (the original blog is not publicly accessible, but the page is mirrored at "Utegate, as told by LOLCATS," 2009).³⁰⁸

Utegate's final spike within the Australian political blogosphere was not indicative of widespread coverage. Only two blogs within the sample commented on Grech's confession: *Larvatus Prodeo* and *Peter Martin*, the two blogs contributing the most posts to the topical network. As with their previous posts about Utegate, the content is a mix of original opinion and quotes from other sources, with *Larvatus Prodeo* reproducing a piece about Malcolm Turnbull previously featured in *Crikey*.

Unsurprisingly, the focus of the final Utegate posts is on Turnbull and Grech, the figures most harmed by the scandal. However, while Turnbull and Grech remained closely associated with Utegate, Rudd and Swan were not featured in the blog posts discussing the end of the affair. Having ceased to be the centre of the story on 22 June, Rudd's citations from political bloggers in August were in the context of policy and current events, including economic concerns. Australian political

³⁰⁷ <http://bekk.blogspot.com/>

³⁰⁸ *LOLcats* is a name given to a series of images of cats receiving humorous captions using often-infantile language and intentional misspellings (for example, 'I made you a cookie but I eated it'), the 'LOL' coming from the instant messaging acronym for 'laugh out loud'. These images have also been referred to as 'cat macros'. Although the initial *LOLcats* involved photographs of cats, the term has also been used to describe similar approaches using other themed pictures, such as *LOLtheorists*. The main repository of these images is the site *I Can Has Cheezburger*: <http://icanhascheezburger.com>

bloggers moved on from Utegate quickly, avoiding giving credence to something that was seen as a non-story distracting from more pressing subjects. Utegate would have some minor long-term implications, contributing to the declining approval ratings of Malcolm Turnbull and subsequently Tony Abbott's successful challenge for the Opposition leadership. At the time, though, the scandal itself was not seen as a major subject, and this can be seen in the number of blog posts related to Utegate but responding to media coverage rather than the politics of the event.

Unlike HADOPI, Utegate had a short lifespan, with most of the bloggers contributing to the topical network mentioning it once or twice. In a way, Utegate acts as the opposite kind of topic to HADOPI: for campaigning reasons, bloggers may have wanted to keep HADOPI featured in their posts, to maintain awareness of it. With Utegate, on the other hand, it seems that Australian political bloggers wanted to avoid giving it importance through repeated coverage when there were other subjects that – in their opinions – should have been dominating the political and media agendas.

The Utegate topical network

Initially seen as a distraction by some bloggers, the eventual discussion of Utegate in the Australian political blogosphere led to the least extensive coverage by the smallest group of sites in the three case studies featured in this thesis. With the Obama inauguration, while the event did not directly affect their domestic politics, French and Australian political bloggers chose to comment on a number of other, tangential issues within the context of Obama becoming President, from climate change and the Middle East conflicts to the global financial crisis. In the HADOPI topical network, meanwhile, French political bloggers responded to multiple events concerning the bill and its technological implications, accompanied by wider coverage from a large number of blogs with their own unique references. For Utegate, though, the lower number of Australian mainstream and alternative media sources, as well as the contribution of fewer bloggers, translates into a

network centred on a small group of major sources. This network is visualised in Figure 7.2.

The visualised Utegate topical network is centred on Australian mainstream media sites, including *The Australian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The Age*. These sites and their News Limited and Fairfax counterparts are the prominent references of the network, followed by the ABC sites and *Crikey*. A number of blogs are also cited by other contributors to the network, such as *Pollytics*, *Peter Martin*, and *The Poll Bludger*, suggesting that the discussion of Utegate within the blogosphere is being noted and linked to by other bloggers. Most of the links to other blogs in the topical network come solely from *Larvatus Prodeo*, and these linking patterns around Utegate imply that the local political issue led to a smaller, less diverse topical range in its discussion. The inauguration, for example, received more distributed coverage across the Australian and French political blogospheres. Utegate, on the other hand, with more direct responses to other sites commenting on the topic, shows bloggers responding to each other, but also a more limited range of themes featuring in this discussion.

The limited scope of the Utegate topical network can be explained through the blogosphere's coverage of the scandal itself. The contributing blogs represent A-list, specialist, and minor blogs within the model of topical discussions introduced in the previous chapter. However, as an example of domestic politics in general, Utegate's coverage is led not by the specialists, but by the A-list blogs. The scandal gains traction in the blogosphere when it is pushed by the mainstream media to saturation levels, but this coverage is led by the A-list blogs who feel obliged to discuss it, if only because of their commentary on most political subjects. When the scandal became a major topic at both the media and political level around 22 June – other parliamentary business was at times overshadowed by the Utegate debate – these bloggers would be expected to provide some comment on the issue. However, the lack of enthusiasm for the topic shown by the blogosphere limits the extent of the topical network. Although the A-list involvement led Utegate to become a topic of interest in the blogosphere, it did not also give the discussion any longevity. These leading bloggers discuss Utegate at its peak, but the topic

does not extend further into the blogosphere and, with no new developments around the scandal, the topical network quickly disappears.

Members of the other groups of blogs reflected in discussions, the specialists and the minor blogs, do contribute to the Utegate discussion. However, specialist blogs, such as *The Poll Bludger*, appear not because Utegate reflects their topic of interest, but because it provides a context for other discussions. In the case of *The Poll Bludger*, Utegate is mentioned within the analysis of polling data from a period coinciding with the scandal. Minor blogs are also present in the topical network, occasionally discussing the issue. Nevertheless, although blogs such as *Duncan Riley* post once or twice on the subject of Utegate, they do not continue the coverage beyond the peak activity of the topical network.

The initial reticence of bloggers to discuss Utegate also suggests that the blogosphere as a whole was still trying to make sense of the scandal during its early developments. The posts of *The Catallaxy Files* and *John Quiggin* featured in the previous section support this, while *Larvatus Prodeo*'s work in aggregating other posts and summarising mainstream media coverage shows the blog attempting to establish why Utegate is an issue. In the previous topical networks, and particularly the inauguration, the events at hand were known events, fitting into established media frames and enabling bloggers to construct their own alternative frames where applicable. With Utegate seemingly unfolding without a clear point, at least in the beginning, bloggers appeared unsure of how to frame the scandal. The topical network then develops in part as a means of communal sense-making, trying to establish the questions that need answering around the scandal.

The attempts to make sense of Utegate account for a prevailing theme within the topical network, not just in its content but in the links. The role of News Limited in publishing Grech's emails, and the wider media coverage of a topic treated by bloggers as of debatable importance, are themes returned to in several blogs, and reflect the prominence of several mainstream media sites in Figure 7.2. As well as using media coverage to make sense of the issue, these patterns also demonstrate some blogs questioning the work of journalists in their Utegate reporting. Repeated posts around this theme have clear implications for the discussion of opinion leadership and gatewatching within the Australian political blogosphere.

Topics

The Utegate topical network visualised in Figure 7.2 provides the clearest example of blogs in the sample responding to each other within the three case studies. With the inauguration, Australian political blogs drew on international news and opinion sites for the bulk of their references, with only two *Crikey* blogs cited. However, for Utegate, links to other Australian bloggers were present from the earliest posts on the scandal. *Larvatus Prodeo* quoted *The Catallaxy Files* in the first topical network posts, and later cited *Pollytics*, while *The Tally Room* noted analysis by *The Poll Bludger*. Many of the links to other blogs originated from *Larvatus Prodeo* in its aggregation of Utegate commentary from across the Australian mediasphere – and noticeably *Larvatus Prodeo* was not itself referenced – but these additional citations do show that Utegate coverage was not, for example, simply repeating the work of the mainstream media.

Most of all, Utegate provides a clear example of Australian political bloggers acting in a gatewatching capacity, critiquing the actions of the mainstream media. The sites for *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and *The Australian*, amongst others, were referenced not just for their content but also in opposing the decisions of editorial teams to give coverage to an event that bloggers saw as unimportant. The spread of sites carrying out a media watchdog role in the topical network can be seen in Figure 7.2. This combined visualisation shows the major themes contained in the posts of several blogs in the topical network in addition to the sites they reference. A group of blogs covering the mainstream media's approach to Utegate can be seen towards the right of the network, featuring *Larvatus Prodeo*, *Pollytics*, and *Pure Poison*. While *Pollytics* and *Larvatus Prodeo* also raised other topics in their Utegate posts, the mainstream media theme common to the three blogs can be seen in the shared references as all of the sites linked to by at least two of the three blogs are News Limited sites: *The Punch*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The Australian*. Rather than citing the Utegate coverage by other Australian mainstream media with different ownership, from other print outlets such as *The Age* or *The West Australian* to broadcasters such as SBS or the *ninemsn* portal, these blogs instead focus only on a few sources. News Limited's ownership of these sources, and the lack of shared citations for other mainstream media sites,

shows that, while bloggers were acting as media watchdogs, only a particular subset of Australian media were provoking responses from the blogosphere. This is not to say that other sites did not cover Utegate, but that their methods of reporting and analysing the scandal were not as questionable, for bloggers, as the work of News Limited publications.

Other mainstream and alternative media sites can be seen amongst the larger nodes of Figure 7.2, but only receive links from *Larvatus Prodeo* or blogs covering different topics altogether. Supported by Andrew Bartlett's comment that Utegate was a distraction – in a post without mainstream media references and instead discussing the emissions trading scheme that Bartlett believed should have been covered and voted on – the topical network shows that, even among a small sample of blogs, gatewatching remains a key function of political blogs.

A second thematic grouping can be seen further to the right of the topical network, sharing one member, *Pollytics*, with those blogs responding to the mainstream media's Utegate coverage. Again consisting of three members, Utegate is for the most part a secondary concern in these blogs' posts. Rather than being the focus of the commentary, the scandal instead acts as context for the results of polls and surveys. The three blogs, *Pollytics*, *The Poll Bludger*, and *The Tally Room*, are members of a thematic group of blogs introduced in Chapter Four, focussing on psephology: the analysis of polling data, votes, and trends. With the exception of *Pollytics*'s News Limited-oriented posts, the Utegate discussion published by these three blogs is psephological in content, with bloggers linking to subject-specific resources. These references included the parliament of Australia site and market research group *Roy Morgan*. Approval ratings for Kevin Rudd and the ALP during the period before the Grech email was found to be faked attracts led to several posts in the week following 22 June, while the subsequently plummeting approval ratings for Malcolm Turnbull are also covered. Utegate is not the focus, though: the data, which would be made available at that time regardless of when or if there was a political scandal, are more important to the work of these bloggers. Utegate is just a possible context for any changes in approval ratings.

For commentary on the actual events of Utegate, the other half of the topical network provides some response to the allegations being made and the people

involved. However, the bloggers concerned would also use Utegate as context for more tangential pieces. *Duncan Riley*, for example, not only covered the accusations and Turnbull's future as Opposition Leader, but also used the initial questions of Rudd to discuss parliamentary lobbying in general. Meanwhile, *Peter Martin* returned to the original subject of Utegate, publishing a post highlighting the increasing sales of utility vehicles in May, the only ute-specific Utegate post.

The structure of the Utegate topical network, centred around mainstream media references and with several thematic groups within it, can be partly attributed to the blogosphere's general disinterest in the subject. With most blogs only posting once or twice on Utegate, there is a lack of sites with many unique references surrounding them, with several prominent shared resources instead. However, as has been outlined previously, the period surrounding Utegate was not atypical for the Australian political blogosphere, with June and July still experiencing similar weekly rhythms and average post totals to the first five months of 2009, as discussed in Chapter Four. With the Utegate topical network representing a much smaller percentage of total activity than the inauguration topical network, and no extraordinary posting activity being noted, these figures may give credence to claims by bloggers that Utegate was a distraction from other topics.

Utegate as distraction?

If Utegate was not a topic warranting repeated coverage, it would be expected that the blog posts collected over this period would feature other subjects and concepts more prominently than the likes of 'OzCar' or 'Godwin Grech'. Figure 7.3 shows the primary concepts discussed in all Australian blog posts published between 19 June and 3 July 2009, including those discussing Utegate.³⁰⁹ This period was chosen for analysis as it provided the longest stretch of continuous Utegate-related content. What is immediately apparent is the presence of a cluster containing Utegate and associated names, including Swan, Turnbull, and Rudd, suggesting that blogs were more likely to mention these political figures in an Utegate context than in connection with any other subject. After a further review of the relevant blog

³⁰⁹ The processes for creating this concept map are outlined in Chapter Three and Appendix B.

continued to attract widespread coverage from Australian political bloggers throughout 2009. The federal government's policies were the focus of posts on these issues in June and July. Ten bloggers directly discussed emissions trading schemes over this period, the topic that Andrew Bartlett had suggested should not be forgotten as the media attention for Utegate grew, and were accompanied by posts on other climate change and energy policy themes. ETS bloggers included a number of contributors to the Utegate topical network, including *Larvatus Prodeo*, *On Line Opinion*, *John Quiggin*, and *The Catallaxy Files*. They were also joined by lengthy opinion pieces from *Webdiary* and environmental blog *Rooted*, providing commentary and analysis of the issues and science involved in proposing an ETS. International equivalents were cited, with similar schemes from Scotland, the U.S., and Sweden all raised by different bloggers, while a number of posts looked ahead to the summit on climate change to be held in Copenhagen in December 2009.

The ETS-specific posts might not have outnumbered those discussing Utegate between 19 June and 3 July, but the wider context of climate change and energy policy was mentioned more times, by more bloggers, over this period. Both the environment and the economy had some connection to the topical network, whether as subjects bloggers should be covering, policies affecting politician approval ratings, or scandals developing out of schemes to combat financial crises. However, the wider discussion of economic and environmental subjects by Australian political bloggers than the distraction of Utegate shows that these issues were a greater concern for the blogosphere. Utegate did receive some attention, but quickly faded away once the main intrigue was resolved on 22 June. In its place, other discussions arose without overshadowing environmental or economic subjects. The death of pop star Michael Jackson on 26 June (Australian-time) had led to 13 related posts by 3 July, for example, although the bloggers involved included several who had refrained from Utegate commentary.

When Utegate briefly reappeared in the mediasphere on 4 August, it remained a minor concern to the blogosphere. With only *Peter Martin* and *Larvatus Prodeo* commenting on the new developments, Utegate would not be expected to be a prominent theme within the total activity that day. Figure 7.4 shows the concept map for all blog posts published on 4 and 5 August. As with the concept map from

it in the blogosphere's consciousness. The limited spread of Utegate coverage is seen in Figure 7.5, with topical network posts shown as a percentage of each day's total posts. Over the two months between 3 June and 10 August, the 51 active blogs published 2920 posts, at an average of 57 posts per blog. Utegate's 52 posts represent less than 2% of the blogosphere activity over this period. During the main period of coverage, between 19 June and 3 July, the topical network accounts for only 5.5% of the total collected activity, although on a few days Utegate features in over 10% of the posts published.

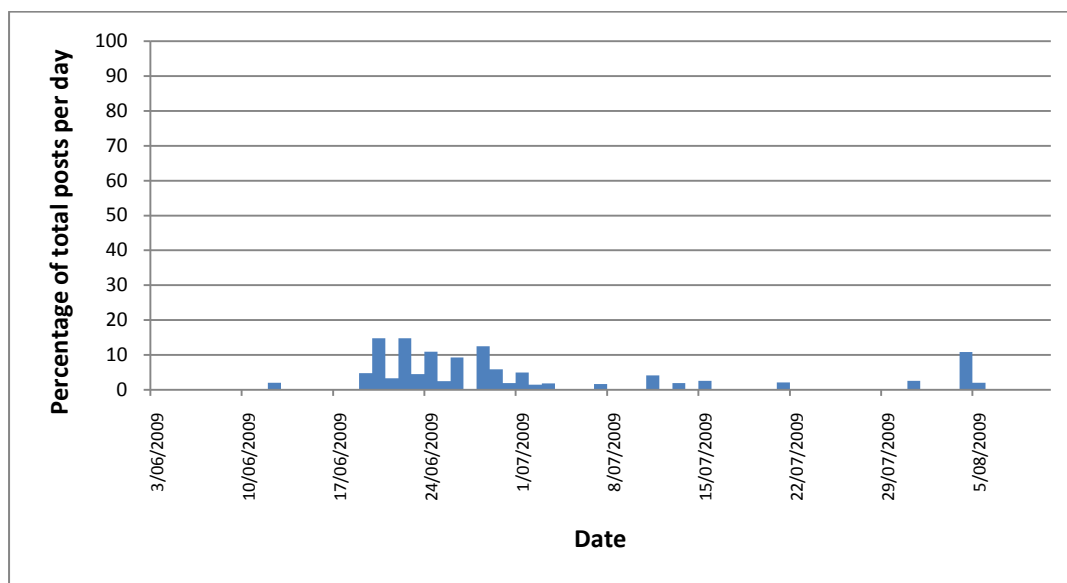


Figure 7.5: Utegate posts per day as percentage of total posts collected each day

Despite the limited and somewhat reluctant coverage Utegate received from Australian political bloggers, the resulting discussion raises further questions about the flow of information and formation of opinions within the blogosphere. The reservations of bloggers in commenting on Utegate help to reinforce conclusions about the relationship between Australian political blogs and the mainstream media. Similarly, the topical network provides further indications about the presence and work of opinion leaders within the Australian political blogosphere, and the failure of the mainstream media to act as opinion leaders, at least according to the bloggers themselves. In the following section, the discussion returns to the concepts of opinion leaders and gatewatchers within the Australian political blogosphere, using the Utegate topical network to illustrate these ideas.

Opinion leaders and the Australian political blogosphere

The topical network formed around Utegate discussion shows how blogs responded to the overall scandal and specific events within it. In the following section, the debate and activity surrounding Utegate are used as an example for determining the presence of opinion leaders within the Australian political blogosphere. In doing so, the discussion returns to the composite data introduced in Chapter Four, with long-term citation patterns denoting which blogs, if any, may be described as opinion leaders. How bloggers covered Utegate, from the post and link strategies to the practice of gatewatching, also forms part of the examination of opinion leadership in the blogosphere. Finally, the examination of the Utegate coverage in the Australian political blogosphere also returns to other aspects of the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter Two, showing how these sites can set alternative agendas and reframe debates, even during the discussion of 'politics in general'.

The initial description of opinion leaders by Lazarsfeld *et al.* (1948) reflected their finding that 'in every area and for every public issue there are certain people who are most concerned about the issue as well as most articulate about it' (49). Without even discussing the flow of information or influencing capabilities of opinion leaders, this description may be applicable to different groups of sites already identified in this thesis. In the previous chapter, specialist blogs were actively engaging in the discussion of, and campaigning around, the HADOPI bill, and although they might not be as productive around other issues, for that particular topic they could fulfil Lazarsfeld *et al.*'s original categorisation of opinion leaders. For a topic such as Utegate, though, the 'politics in general' aspects of the discussion mean that, rather than the specialist bloggers leading the discussion, it is the overall A-list bloggers contributing the most posts to the Utegate coverage.

Based on the previous studies and critiques of opinion leadership and information flows outlined in Chapter Two, the main functions of leading bloggers reflect those of opinion leaders in general. Such activities include aggregating content and views from other commentators, collecting otherwise widely-dispersed

perspectives, and making them visible to a different, and larger, audience. Bloggers acting as opinion leaders would be expected to gather news and opinion not just from mainstream media sources, but also from across the mediasphere, showcasing the range of views being published.

In both the HADOPI and Utegate topical networks, this approach was used by A-list blogs to present an overview of the latest debates. This raises a potentially contradictory description of blogs as opinion leaders. Bloggers are ideally placed to be opinion leaders based on their active engagement with political discussion and campaigning around specific issues. However, if they then just repeat the work of the mainstream media without further interpretation, as argued by critics of blogging in Chapter Two, then what they are contributing to public debate could not be considered opinion leadership. If the cited content is not being further discussed, reinterpreted, or critiqued, then the views presented are those of the original source without any filtering or explanation from the blogger. Here, rather than the blogger, the original source is arguably acting as an opinion leader, as it is their interpretation that is potentially influencing the blogger's audience. For a blogger to be seen as an opinion leader, they must not only be repeatedly cited by other blogs and engaged in aggregating discussions from across the mediasphere, but they should also be identifying the salient points in debates, adding their own commentary, and repositioning material for their own readers.

One way that bloggers performed opinion leader functions in the Utegate topical network was through gatewatching, as evidenced by the growing prominence of criticisms of mainstream media coverage over the course of the affair. Gatewatching in itself is an act of at least attempted opinion leadership, as bloggers respond to, and reframe, the reporting of an event such as Utegate by journalists. While the mainstream media may provide the original content underpinning the discussion, bloggers put these views into a different context. By providing an alternative interpretation of the issues at hand – including an outright rejection of what others see the issues to be – bloggers filter and shape messages from across the mediasphere for their readers. This is further supported by other linking practices seen within blogs, such as in blogrolls. The choices made by bloggers reflect the resources and perspectives they find to be interesting or

pertinent, either on a long-term basis or with regards to a particular debate. In signposting these external sites, the blogger concerned is also presenting a set of resources, introduced through the blogger's own commentary, which when taken together may further influence the opinions formed by the blog's audience.

Gatewatching in the Utegate topical network also reflects an extension of the 'us vs. them' dynamic between Australian journalists and bloggers, introduced in Chapter Two. Initially, the blogosphere had ignored the early stages of the scandal, while mainstream media publications built up the accusations around preferential treatment into a front page issue. When Utegate became a major media topic, the blogosphere then responded but, rather than focussing on the politics surrounding the issue, blog posts instead critiqued the media coverage. Linking patterns show widespread citation of mainstream media sources, and the original reporting referenced was the work of professional journalists, but the blogosphere did not link to news stories of interest and just accept what was being presented. Instead, the Utegate topical network started a continued discussion thread of media critique. News Limited publications received the harshest criticism, with *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Australian*, and the opinion site *The Punch* all singled out at various times for promulgating the story or maligned for their coverage. Blogs took umbrage with how these sources presented the story, including *Pure Poison's* response to articles in *The Daily Telegraph* after the email they published was found to have been faked:

The Daily Telegraph is responsible for publishing an email, later showed to be fraudulent, that has seriously compromised the career of opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull. The email was possessed and possibly created by a public servant by the name of Godwin Grech. So what does the Tele do? Apologise for running a false email? Analyse the scandal? Add to the serious ongoing commentary about UteGate?

No. They make fun of Grech's garden. [...] How proud you must be to have your bylines slapped on this tabloid trash, Janet Fife-Yeomans and Alison Rehn.

Similarly, a *Pollytics* post criticising a piece in *The Australian* about a conversation between Malcolm Turnbull and Rudd advisor Andrew Charlton featured the title 'You'd have to be a lead poisoned crackhead to believe this'. Utegate was a major political topic for the mainstream media, but its coverage was being rejected by

bloggers. Disputing the work of journalists did not stop at rubbishing the content either, with *Pollytics* following its criticism of *The Australian's* article with a timeline and alternative interpretation of the events in question. Mainstream media may have received the most citations in the Utegate topical network, but that does not mean that their content was not being challenged.

The blogosphere's gatewatching may also be seen as part of a wider dispute than just how to cover Utegate. The relationship between News Limited and several political blogs has at times been tumultuous, as seen in episodes such as the Newspoll-psephology debate in 2007 and Grogsgate in 2010, both of which were discussed in Chapter Two. Even when *The Australian* is not actively seeking confrontation with bloggers, the Australian political blogosphere can often appear to be in an 'us vs. them' dynamic with the mainstream media. The escalation of Grogsgate and the inflammatory statements posted by both sides may be attributed to this perception, while the gatewatching aspects of Utegate may be in part because there is a predilection among bloggers to critique *The Australian*. Additional factors, such as the composition of the Australian mainstream media landscape and the apparent conservative bias among News Limited publications (Tiffen, 2009), may also contribute to this, with bloggers commenting on what is published in *The Australian* simply because it is the sole 'national news' newspaper and the News Limited flagship title. If there were a competing title, it might be similarly held accountable by the Australian political blogosphere.

Regardless of the rationale behind the decision to respond to the work of *The Australian*, though, what the actual practice shows is that bloggers are, in a sense, attempting to establish their own status as opinion leaders. Both Utegate and Grogsgate show bloggers discussing topics that they feel the mainstream media have been getting wrong in their reporting. In their discussions, though, the blogosphere commented more on the problems in the media coverage of the issue than on the political figures concerned, simultaneously undermining the position of journalists as opinion leaders and asserting the bloggers' own claims to that status.

Bloggers may also act as would-be opinion leaders by commenting on an issue and including the supporting materials relevant to their argument for their audience

to follow up or use in constructing their own opinions. Through their posts, political bloggers contribute ‘through careful fact-checking, scathing critiques, and bipartisan dialogue’ (Carpenter, 2010, 221), and this may attract attention from other bloggers and a wider audience of citizens, journalists, and political actors (Tomaszeski, Proffitt, & McClung, 2009, 73). Referencing and reframing media content, even if not gatewatching, also positions bloggers as intermediaries in information flows between media sources and the general public, with Tremayne *et al.* (2006) noting the role of ‘bloggers who, if not already serving as opinion leaders, at least provide a window into the process of opinion formation’ (291). In this way, all bloggers are would-be opinion leaders for their readers, although not necessarily for other bloggers. Overall, then, what can then be seen in the political blogosphere is a contested space around the identity of the opinion leaders, with some blogs more successful than others at attracting an audience.

In the Utegate topical network, the most likely example of an opinion leader is *Larvatus Prodeo*, which contributes the highest number of posts to the discussion of the scandal and also cites the widest range of resources. The most important factors for placing *Larvatus Prodeo* as an opinion leader within the Australian political blogosphere, though, are the citation patterns concerning the blog. The outgoing links show the variety of sites informing the discussion of Utegate. At the same time, the collected incoming citations seen in Chapter Four show *Larvatus Prodeo* to be a prominent, repeated reference for other blogs tracked in this study.

Citation patterns are crucial to identifying potential opinion leadership, as they can indicate the size of a blog’s audience through how many other bloggers respond to its posts, and also the range of sources referenced in the blog’s posts. Benkler’s (2006) description of information flows among blogs starts with an initial site, before the discussion travels through any thematic or organisational groups to which the blog belongs, to the most visible and connected blogs in the network. *Larvatus Prodeo*’s coverage of Utegate follows this pattern. Although *Larvatus Prodeo* cites articles from News Limited, Fairfax, ABC, and *Crikey* publications, it also draws on the work of fellow bloggers to highlight multiple perspectives on the Utegate affair. Referencing the mainstream media alone, while a common practice among bloggers, does not necessarily mean that a blog is acting as an opinion leader,

particularly if the site is not particularly visible in citation or even blogroll networks. However, the commentary posted by one blogger may be noticed, and repurposed, by another, as Benkler suggests, moving information through the blogosphere. Rather than relying solely on one source, *Larvatus Prodeo's* coverage of Utegate draws from multiple types of voice within the mediasphere – professional, amateur, mainstream, alternative, news, opinion – and from different clusters within the blogosphere. In referencing the polling analysis posted by *The Poll Bludger* the month after the initial Utegate activity, or *Bek's Blog's* reinterpretation of the scandal through the medium of LOLcats, *Larvatus Prodeo* can be seen to be making use of this original content outside of its local, possibly subject-specific, audience, constructing a further perspective on Utegate.

One potential limitation to *Larvatus Prodeo's* status as an opinion leader for the Utegate debate, though, is that the blog does not receive any citations from other blog posts featured in the topical network. While the short-term data from the topical network shows which blogs may cite one another, any indications about readership are limited by the size of the Utegate dataset. Instead, discussions of opinion leadership are supported by studying the overall citation and blogroll networks found in Chapter Four, where *Larvatus Prodeo* was a well-connected node. McNair (2010) has noted that just because bloggers post their opinions on any subject does not mean that any of their sites are being read. However, if a blog becomes a large node within the composite citation network because of the number of links received from other blogs, as seen with *Larvatus Prodeo*, then some conclusions about its readership can be made. Although other sites do not reference *Larvatus Prodeo* in their Utegate posts, the structure of that blog's Utegate coverage also suggests that it is still acting in a manner similar to an opinion leader.

The composite data analysed in Chapter Four draws on the collected citations made in blog posts, and these linking patterns can be seen as indicating patterns of readership. Although links are not the only metric for evaluating how many readers a blog has, the composite data allows the identification of which blogs are most-cited during this period, outside of particular contexts. These patterns are then supported by the topical network analysis, highlighting whether a blog's

prominence might be unusual or typical behaviour within the blogosphere. In the case of *Larvatus Prodeo* within the Utegate topical network, the activity tracked is similar to the blog's coverage of the inauguration in Chapter Five, and its position in both networks is clarified by the citation and blogroll patterns. The blog acts as a summariser and commentator on other sources' writing about an issue, and its posts are cited across the blogosphere. The citation networks thus become affiliation networks of their own – in this case, showing actual affiliation as opposed to the aspirational connections of the blogroll network. In combination, these networks highlight the prominence of some blogs over others, the most widely-cited blogs having the greatest profile within the blogosphere. For *Larvatus Prodeo* and Utegate, this suggests that the blog's interpretations have a comparatively large audience making use of its views in forming opinions on different subjects. In another topical network, the findings might support the description of other prominent blogs in the composite networks as opinion leaders, such as *Club Troppo*, *On Line Opinion*, or *John Quiggin*. While these data cannot confirm whether or not blogs are actually influencing readers, using linking patterns over time the study can identify which blogs are most likely to be acting as opinion leaders.

The Utegate topical network in itself permits only a limited identification of opinion leaders within the Australian political blogosphere. However, the activity tracked here does provide further information on the nature of opinion leadership among bloggers. In the early discussions by bloggers and journalists alike, the scandal did not receive much coverage from the blogosphere, with the story considered by several bloggers as a non-issue. While not reporting on Utegate, though, bloggers practiced opinion leadership by commenting on other topics deemed as more newsworthy. Utegate was not a part of the blogging agenda, and by focussing on other subjects bloggers encouraged their audiences as well as their fellow commentators to consider other issues. When the scandal became a front page issue, though, and the accusations were backed up by apparent evidence of preferential treatment for John Grant, bloggers started commenting. However, this spike in topical network activity shows another form of opinion leadership. Taking issue with aspects of the mainstream media coverage of Utegate, blog posts within the topical network exhibited gatewatching tendencies rather than just repeating

the work of journalists, and reframed the debate around media coverage. The mainstream media interpretation of Utegate was treated by bloggers as incorrect, as seen in posts by *Pollytics* or *Pure Poison* criticising content published by *The Daily Telegraph*. Rather than allowing the mainstream media perspectives to go unchallenged, political blogs were actively contesting the position of opinion leader, giving their readers another angle to the Utegate discussion.

How blogs use other sources in their commentary affects whether or not they can be seen as opinion leaders. Although the choices made by a blogger around what information to include in their posts, and which material to cite, reflect aspects of the traditional opinion leadership process, the degree to which a blogger may act as an opinion leader is variable. In Chapter One, I outlined several types of political blog found in this study, including link blogs and commentators. These approaches may lead to different levels of engagement with issues, or limit the visibility of the blogger's own views. The effects of these approaches can also shape the audience for a blog, as readers look for different styles of blog, a focus on a given topic, or posts written from a specific ideological viewpoint.

Within the political blogosphere overall, views put forward in blog posts are not necessarily likely to lead or convert the opinions of other bloggers. This is particularly true for blogs differing along ideological lines. While there may be links between left-wing and right-wing blogs, for example, this does not translate into one influencing the other as such, but rather a blog drawing on the views of others to construct its own, potentially conflicting, commentary on an issue. In the Utegate topical network, for example, citing a post by *The Catallaxy Files* does not mean that *Larvatus Prodeo*'s views have been shaped by the former blog. In the composite data, too, one of the more prominent blogs is that of Andrew Bolt, but many of the blogs linking to Bolt from this study's sample take an opposing position to the ideas put forward in his posts. While these sites have their own audiences whose opinions are both served and shaped by the likes of Bolt or Tim Blair, opinion leadership is not widely applicable between blogs. Instead, what is seen is along the lines of 'opinion sharing' (Meraz, 2011), where blogs do not influence each other but build on each other's coverage – supportively or critically – in their discussion of an issue and in shaping their readers' views.

Opinion sharing may mean that bloggers do not appear to lead topical discussions. Over the course of the Utegate discussion, *Larvatus Prodeo* rarely appears to be at the forefront of the debate. Instead, the blog is placed as chief respondent to the collected views of journalists, commentators, and bloggers. For other blogs in the topical network, some or all of their incoming citations came from *Larvatus Prodeo*, with the referenced blogs including *The Catallaxy Files*, *Peter Martin*, *Pollytics*, *Pure Poison*, and *The Poll Bludger*. *Larvatus Prodeo* also referenced other blogs that were highly-connected nodes in their own right within the composite citation network seen in Chapter Four, such as *Club Troppo* and *Hoyden about Town*. These sites posted their own views or analysis of the issues surrounding Utegate, and *Larvatus Prodeo* subsequently collated these opinions and linked to the relevant posts. Coupled with the blog's wider citations of mainstream and alternative media discussion of Utegate-related themes, the opinion leader attribution is clearer. Throughout the mediasphere, different perspectives are published, in various locations – including, as seen in Chapter Four, members of several distinct blogging clusters – and these are then collected, filtered, and centrally cited by the opinion leaders of the blogosphere, in this case *Larvatus Prodeo*. With the limited discussion of Utegate in the political blogosphere, this means that *Larvatus Prodeo* has, in a sense, the last word in its posts.

As we have seen, posts linking to the filtered discussion of Utegate were not found within the topical network. However, as many of the blogs that do appear are also cited by *Larvatus Prodeo*, it is arguable that the first blogs would not respond, in post form, to the referencing of their own views. Indeed, it may be that further conversations take place in the comments threads of the relevant posts, involving more participants than just the bloggers concerned, rather than through the publication of additional blog entries. Above all, though, by collating and critiquing this diverse range of views on the Utegate scandal, *Larvatus Prodeo* positions itself as an opinion leader for its own readership – and that readership, as we have established in Chapter Four, can be inferred to be amongst the largest for any of the Australian political blogs included in this study.

Conclusion

The Utegate topical network, and *Larvatus Prodeo*'s position within it, acts as an example of how opinion leaders function and may be identified within the political blogosphere. Similar patterns would be expected around other debates, with citation patterns and engagement with the work of other commentators showing which blogs are most effectively acting as opinion leaders. For more thematically-oriented discussions, such as the French political blogosphere's coverage of the HADOPI bill, the identity of the bloggers acting as opinion leaders may change to reflect the specialist blogs leading the discussion. The Utegate topical network, though, acts as an example of 'politics in general'. Although an affair like Utegate is not necessarily an 'everyday' occurrence in Australian politics, at its most basic level it can be seen as a dispute between the leaders of the two major parties, without any specific link to policy or topical focus. In this case, the coverage of the affair would be expected to be most representative of 'typical' commentary on a 'general' political theme, as opposed to the specialist bent to both the inauguration and HADOPI topical networks. How Australian political bloggers discussed Utegate, and the sources that they referenced, would then reflect the roles they play within the overall blogosphere.

Although seen by Australian political bloggers as a distraction more than a serious political scandal, the fallout from Utegate would contribute to the eventual ousting of Malcolm Turnbull as opposition leader in December 2009. The decline in Turnbull's approval ratings started after Grech's email was found to be a fake, as noted in posts by *The Poll Bludger*, while alongside the debate around the mainstream media's coverage of Utegate several bloggers also pondered Turnbull's future as opposition leader. Although the media debate became a prominent theme within the topical network, helping to show how political blogs can be seen at times as gatewatchers, it should be noted that it was not the only angle to the Utegate discussion. Figure 7.2 shows the themes addressed by several blogs contributing to the topical network, not just those questioning News Limited. While this chapter has focussed on the opinion leaders and gatewatchers within the topical network, the topical network also shows that these roles are not applicable to all bloggers involved in this discussion.

Even though Utegate was seen as a distraction by some bloggers, blog posts on the subject still provide important information on how the Australian political blogosphere responds to national issues. As was expected following the inauguration discussion in Chapter Five, local news media are more widely-cited when Australian politics is being discussed. Utegate saw bloggers reference a mix of mainstream and alternative sources, including sites owned by News Limited and Fairfax, the ABC, *Crikey*, and other blogs and opinion sites. The resources receiving the most citations here reflect the major nodes of the composite citation network analysed in Chapter Four. However, although sites like *The Australian* were primary references in the Utegate discussion, this does not mean that bloggers were repeating, or trusting, the content published by journalists. Analysis of the topical network showed that the News Limited citations were in part made by bloggers criticising how the company's publications had reported Utegate. Rather than only linking to material they agreed with, political bloggers acted as a media watchdog, noting different opinions being published across the mediasphere and asking questions of ethics and standards in the mainstream media's Utegate coverage.

The Australian political blogosphere's coverage of Utegate also reflects theoretical concepts discussed in the inauguration and HADOPI topical networks. In Chapters Five and Six, how blogs featured these subjects was examined with regards to framing and agenda-setting theory respectively. These same theories can be applied to the Utegate topical network too, most notably through bloggers questioning, and rejecting, the mainstream media's coverage of the scandal and instead finding other, salient angles to the debate. For some blogs discussing Utegate, the scandal is reframed as a question of journalistic practice, while other blogs, finding Utegate to be an unwelcome distraction within political debate, choose to focus on other subjects. Indeed, the contributions of blogs such as Andrew Bartlett and Larvatus Prodeo to the Utegate topical network hint at bloggers actively setting an alternative agenda to that of the mainstream media. In the following chapter, these ideas will be explored more thoroughly, discussing the findings of the three case studies within the context of the theoretical framework for this thesis.

Chapter 8: Discussions in the political blogosphere and public debate in Australia and France

One of the interesting things about blogging is that you can never tell which posts are going to attract interest, or when.

Andrew Bartlett (personal blog), 17 February 2009

I see that lots of you have come to my blog following the posts I wrote about the television show/contest Britain's Got Talent, Susan Boyle, Diversity, and more generally the other contestants such as the Greek Irish Dancers, Andy Demetriou, or Manjit Singh. But now I would like to talk to you about another 'contest' that will be held on 7 June. It will be contested by skilled and talented people. They will not get to perform before the Queen of England, but, who knows, they will certainly have the chance to meet her if you send them to the final.³¹⁰

L'Hérétique, 31 May 2009, introducing selected MoDem candidates for the upcoming EU parliament election

Introduction

The previous chapters have examined the coverage by political bloggers of, and around, specific topics. While these were clearly not the only subjects featured within the two blogospheres between January and August 2009, the case studies act as examples of blogging activity from which we can extrapolate to discuss the

³¹⁰ *Bien, je vois que vous avez très nombreux à venir sur mon blog à la suite des articles que j'ai écrit sur l'émission/concours Britain's got Talent, Susan Boyle, Diversity et plus généralement les autres candidats comme les Greek Irish Dancers, Andy Demetriou ou encore Manjit Singh. Mais maintenant, je voudrais vous parler d'un autre "concours" qui va avoir lieu le 07 juin. Il met en concurrence des gens compétents et talentueux. Eux ne viendront pas jouer devant la Reine d'Angleterre, mais, qui sait, ils auront certainement l'occasion de la rencontrer si vous les amenez en finale.*

contributions of political blogs to public debate. The findings from the previous chapters give us further information about how blogs cover a range of topics, both political and seemingly apolitical, and these conclusions are developed in this chapter to answer the research questions introduced at the start of this thesis.

The analyses carried out in this thesis have underlined the importance of context in studying blogging and other social media. Examining composite linking patterns can suggest one interpretation of blogging activity, but closer investigation of subsets of the data reveals entirely different behaviours. Chapter Four introduced the overall patterns of posting and referencing within the Australian and French political blogospheres featured in this study, while the case studies of Chapters Five to Seven provided explanations, or challenges, for this activity. In Chapter Five, the Obama inauguration provided the setting for examining how political bloggers frame international events in their posts. As a comparative study, this chapter also highlighted differences between Australian and French political bloggers in their coverage of the inauguration and their apparent preference for international and local sources. Chapter Six looked at the French political blogosphere's response to the proposed HADOPI bill. Within this chapter, a model of political blog engagement with topical discussions was developed, depicting three different groups within debates: specialist, A-list, and minor bloggers. The HADOPI discussion also highlighted the ability of political blogs to set agendas for campaigns. Returning to the blog typologies introduced in Chapter One, these political uses of blogs further distinguish political blogging from other, related approaches, such as news blogging. Finally, in Chapter Seven, Australian political blogs' coverage of Utegate led to an examination of opinion leadership within the blogosphere. By reframing debates around topics of interest and by wresting opinion leadership roles from the mainstream media, political blogs may shape the formation of opinions by their readers. These conclusions are supported by the composite linking patterns studied in Chapter Four. A subset of the blogs featured in this study was found to be widely cited by other bloggers between January and August 2009, giving these sites the greatest visibility and prominence within the citation network. The linking patterns act as a proxy for a blog's readership, as blogs with the greatest number of citations overall obtain a higher profile among bloggers and readers alike.

In the following sections, these findings are drawn together within the overall theoretical framework introduced in Chapter Two. Observations from how political blogs covered the inauguration, HADOPI, and Utegate together answer the research questions guiding this study. These questions concern respectively the role played by political blogs in public debate, the use of media sources by bloggers, and differences between the Australian and French political blogospheres. Following the discussion of each question, the chapter returns to the implications of this study, its limitations, and further directions for research in this field.

Political blogs and public debate

In Chapter Two, a number of perspectives on the work of bloggers, and their relationship with the mainstream media, were outlined. These highlighted the at-times contradictory views concerning what bloggers achieve through their commentary, elaborated further with the Grogsgate episode in the Australian political blogosphere. What the present study has found, though, is that while these different perceptions may be applicable to individual blogs, the overall activity of a group of blogs forms a new, if at times ideologically coloured, contribution to public debate.

Perhaps the most notable contribution made by political bloggers is through original analysis. This includes the gatewatching and reinterpretation of news items seen in particular during the Utegate coverage, but moves beyond these activities to the research and study of specific reports, press releases, and polls by bloggers. The psephologist blogs within the Australian political blogosphere are an obvious example of sites providing original analysis, but other specialist blogs do the same for their own chosen subjects, couching their posts within their area of expertise, such as the judicial commentary of *Journal d'un avocat*. Developing longer-form responses to issues is further encouraged by bloggers such as Andrew Bartlett or Rubin Sfadj writing for sites other than their own as guest contributors, or having their posts featured for a new audience, on alternative media sites from *New Matilda* to *OWNI*.

Political blogging also enables the inclusion of alternative perspectives on a person, event, or issue within debates. These are not limited to those voices that are not represented within either the mainstream media or domestic politics, though. While political blogs can certainly act as a platform for otherwise disenfranchised citizens, alternative perspectives in this case can also reflect the work of specialist blogs, group blogs, and blogging collectives. These sites may promote alternative opinions and analysis of political issues. The visibility of these views is increased as specialist blogs group together around shared subjects and link to each other. The position of blogs within public debate is then further consolidated with the launch of group blogs and collectives of like-minded bloggers, giving the views of individual bloggers a central location and audience.

Information flows and discussions within the political blogosphere

Political bloggers forming groups around common interests or ideologies also leads to debate among bloggers. Discussion spreads within the blogosphere, between different members of collectives, and across specialist groups. A prominent blog such as *Larvatus Prodeo* then draws together the content of various topic-specific bloggers, bridging economic or psephological perspectives in its discussion of a wider range of political themes, as seen in Chapters Four and Seven. This approach can serve to present a final response to an event, based on the interpretations provided by a variety of sources from across the political blogosphere, and the mediasphere in general.

Chapter Six's study of the HADOPI topical network introduced a model describing the flow of information between different types of political blog, covering different levels of engagement with particular topics through the amount of posts published and sources referenced by bloggers. These findings also return to the different types of political blog introduced in Chapter One, with topical discussions featuring varying contributions and roles reflective of different approaches within the typologies.

This thesis has shown that a debate such as HADOPI or the inauguration is led, in terms of posts contributed, by specialist bloggers whose topic of interest is

reflected by the subject at hand. The comments and analyses from these blogs are then used by the more prominent, A-list blogs to frame the discussion around wider political themes, before these combined discussions reach the individual, minor blogs who contribute only a few posts to the debate. These flows may be reversed, although their impact is not as strong: a minor blogger commenting on the ideas put forward by an A-list blogger might provoke a further response from the A-list blogger. This information flow is depicted in Figure 8.1.

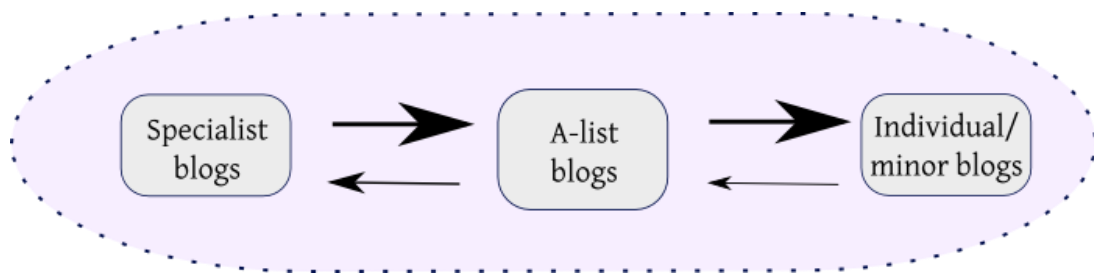


Figure 8.1: Flow of discussion around specialist political topics

The HADOPI topical network saw the greatest number of contributions from political blogs specialising in technology-related issues and campaigning against the bill itself, followed by the A-list French political blogs, and then finally infrequent, primarily individual bloggers. Although a general domestic issue, the bill's technological and cultural implications led to the presence of the specialist blogs as the most active blogs in the network. With Utegate, on the other hand, the 'politics in general' aspect to the scandal meant that coverage was instead led by the A-list blogs which cover most political stories without a particular thematic focus. In this situation, the leading Australian political blogs were the most active sites in the Utegate debate, with specialist blogs occupying a relatively minor role as Utegate was only tangential to their subjects of interest. This suggests an alternative flow of information for domestic political discussions in general, shown in Figure 8.2.

Debate within the blogosphere will then depend on the type of issue being discussed. Different events will provoke reaction from different bloggers, although most political issues will lead to some comment from the A-list blogs. The extent to which other blogs take up the issue, though, can determine whether any alternative agendas will be formed or if reframing of a story will take place. For the

minor blogs, coverage will often follow the mainstream media's lead, meaning that it is the specialist topical blogs and the A-list blogs who are most likely to reshape debates within the blogosphere. It is these sites, too, who determine the role of the political blogosphere overall in response to a given issue, such as the media watchdog function by critiquing and correcting journalists' reporting. These leading and topical blogs promote the chosen approach either by acting in this way themselves or by drawing attention to others doing this.

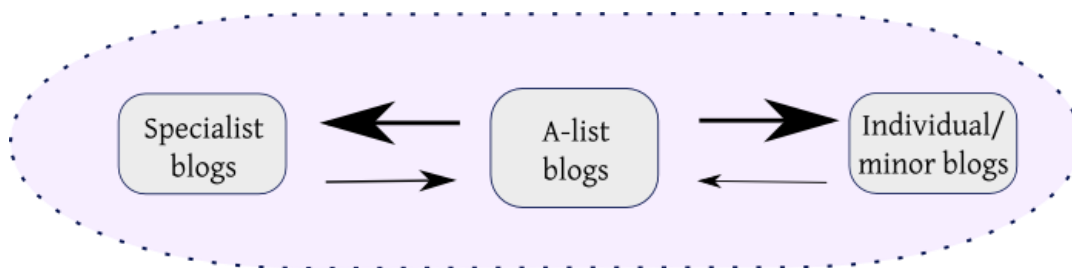


Figure 8.2: Flow of discussion around 'general' politics

Specialist blogs lead topic-specific discussions such as HADOPI, but are relatively minor contributors to the coverage of 'politics in general' in comparison to the A-list blogs. This was seen in the Utegate discussions featured in Chapter Seven. Members of both the psephological and economics groups were among the sites discussing the scandal, suggesting that aspects of the story pertained to the themes featured by these groups. However, for these sites Utegate is often featured within the context of their specialist subject, rather than the other way around. For *The Poll Bludger* or *The Tally Room*, for example, Utegate was mentioned, almost in a throwaway manner, as a way of describing and accounting for the results from a particular period of polling data. One of the psephological blogs, *Pollytics*, did also contribute to the debate around the media coverage of the scandal, but further in-depth examination of the scandal was not featured on these blogs. Instead, Utegate is framed within psephological analysis. This would suggest that, for the most part, the connection between the content of posts on *The Poll Bludger*, for example, and the topics featured by other, non-psephological blogs is somewhat tenuous, but the data analysis of these blogs is cited by other bloggers, in particular the A-list, to ground their discussion of Australian political issues. The appearance of a story in multiple topical clusters may also reflect aspects pertaining to the themes featured by the different groups.

The success of any contribution in shaping public debate will depend on the audience for the blogs concerned, but these findings show the blogosphere to be not just as another channel for publishing views but also as a space where consensus may be formed. In this regard, bloggers may at times be trying to get the last word in debates by drawing on ideas from across the mediasphere, positioned within their own commentary. How other sources cover an issue may help bloggers shape their own argument. This can be seen by bloggers employing the same reading of the debate as journalists, and by the promotion of other, related themes that have so far gone unreported, rejecting how others have framed their discussion of an issue. These approaches by political bloggers also relate to aspects of the theoretical framework used in this thesis, and the following sections briefly revisit how blogging relates respectively to framing, agenda-setting, and opinion leader theories.

Blogs and framing

In the inauguration discussions, both Australian and French political bloggers made use of mainstream media sources, although only French blogs relied predominantly on domestic sources. Australian bloggers instead used U.S., and to lesser extent U.K., mainstream and alternative media sites in their coverage of the inauguration. This difference in referencing behaviour may explain the different frames employed by bloggers contributing to the Obama discussion. In the French political blogosphere, the inauguration was presented as an extension of domestic themes. Obama became a supporting actor within the discussion of Nicolas Sarkozy or the global financial crisis, as bloggers focussed first on French politics and then covered the thematic intersection between these subjects and the incoming U.S. President. Australian bloggers, on the other hand, comparatively avoided linking the inauguration to events in Canberra, with their posts instead containing U.S.-specific themes. Given Australian political blogs' use of non-Australian sources, the international themes are unsurprising, but also show the Australian political blogosphere to not be reliant on domestic mainstream media sources such as *The Australian* or *The Age* in its coverage of the inauguration. Bloggers and other internet users are able to freely access perspectives from around the globe. In

discussing an international event, Australian blogs appeared more willing to cite first-hand sources rather than articles framed for an Australian audience or reproduced from press agencies.

Taken as a whole, the three case studies featured in this thesis also show that bloggers will reframe debates around their own specialist interests rather than rely on those employed by other media sources. With HADOPI, some blogs positioned their discussion around the anti-HADOPI campaign. Blogs supporting particular ideologies also framed their HADOPI posts around those views, such as the centre-right *L'Hérétique's* note on the MoDEM response to the bill. Generally, the overall frames used by specialist blogs may take priority over the subject-specific frames used by other blogs or media sources. Issues are discussed within a blogger's own, site-wide frames. This can be seen with *Sarkofrance's* coverage of the inauguration as an event mentioned within a Sarkozy context, and with *The Poll Bludger's* tangential mention of Utegate as part of its polling analysis. The latter case study also shows that bloggers will reframe a debate if there are more pertinent themes within a story that the mainstream media are not covering, or indeed to change the story completely. In this case, Utegate transformed from a question about preferential treatment on the part of the Prime Minister and the Treasurer, to a debate about the mainstream media's coverage of an unimportant scandal. The changing focus of the blogosphere's coverage of Utegate is reflected in the different frames used, as the story changed from a political issue to a media debate. The active reinterpretation of an issue, and in particular any subsequent use of the new frame by other commentators, 'may be viewed as a process of public opinion formation' (Im, E.-mee Kim, K. Kim, & Y. Kim, 2011, 620), or even reforming opinion around different perspectives or issues. Ultimately, bloggers preferred an alternative interpretation of the issue, framing their Utegate discussion around the media coverage of the scandal, or ignoring the topic by featuring other issues seen as more pressing for debate.

Outside of the specifics of the case studies, too, bloggers use other devices in their coverage of issues. Topical conversations may develop within a group of blogs, as bloggers respond to each other's posts. These comments may be accompanied by personalised coverage by each blogger. Discussions are presented not just with

summaries of events but with anecdotes and alternative interpretations of the issues at hand, reflecting the concerns and interests of the individual blogger. The inclusion of personal details in posts, and continuing conversations with other bloggers, help connections between bloggers to form. As these links develop, such as through the creation of group blogs or self-identified networks, the framing of a debate may take account of a blogger's new audience, including fellow bloggers and readers. Overall, while the approaches used vary from blogger to blogger, what is clear is the flexibility of framing devices within the blogosphere, with topics being repositioned within bloggers' own beliefs and interests.

Blogs and agenda-setting

The references blogs used to cover the inauguration, HADOPI, and Utegate also suggest a revision of agenda-setting theory with respect to the wider range of sources available within the mediasphere. The mainstream media are no longer the sole references accessible to a mass audience, nor are French or Australian bloggers restricted to their own, domestic media. Breaking news is obtained through social media and alternative media as well as the mainstream media. Furthermore, what journalists and editors treat as the salient themes within a topic are not necessarily going to appear as the major angles within blog posts on the same subject. Bloggers write topical posts to the extent that they feel necessary, rather than as a function of how much mainstream media reporting is dedicated to the issues at hand, and position their discussion according to their own perspectives. In the HADOPI discussion, French political bloggers established an alternative agenda through their campaigns against the proposed bill. The resulting topical network also showed that agenda-setting effects are dependent on the level of engagement with the topic. The blogs leading the coverage of an issue, contributing the most posts, are least likely to follow the mainstream media but instead draw on topic-specific sites in setting an alternative agenda. The mainstream media remain a key source, though, if only to keep stories or campaigns alive during periods of lower activity. For the occasional commentators on an issue, on the other hand, posts are most likely to follow key events and cite the mainstream media, responding to a topic only when it is in the news.

Political blogs practicing gatewatching also have some implications for agenda-setting within the blogosphere. In this case, the sites are still reliant on following the mainstream media and other sources initially, but then respond by critiquing coverage or setting an alternative agenda by rejecting the salient themes used by journalists. With Utegate, for example, bloggers set their own agendas. Initially, bloggers noted that there had been no need to mention Utegate until actual questions were asked of the Prime Minister and Treasurer with apparent evidence to support the accusations, while later posts depicted the scandal as a distraction and criticised the mainstream media's reporting. As a local political issue, it was seen as taking away attention from more important subjects, with bloggers questioning the strategies of spin employed by the Liberal Party in directing political attention towards the scandal. Utegate was not considered an important political development, and the majority of Australian political bloggers in the sample either ignored the topic or only mentioned it in passing. When the scandal returned in August, too, only two blogs featured responses, with environmental and economic topics being favoured over a would-be scandal without any bearing on current policy. However, it should also be noted that there is also no blogosphere-wide agenda being set. The range of specialist subjects, perspectives, and beliefs present within the blogosphere mean that the same issues and events are being reinterpreted in various ways by different bloggers. This reflects the technological capabilities of online media, where there is a relative abundance of views compared to the limited perspectives provided by traditional media. In addition, no one group of blogs is able to set an agenda for the rest of the blogosphere. Although a number of blogs may respond to the same post or opinion, the case studies featured in this thesis show that a given theme employed by a blogger will usually have only a limited reach within the political blogosphere overall.

Blogs and opinion leaders

In responding to the work of other blogs, though, blogs may be positioning themselves as opinion leaders for their readers, having the last word on an issue after collecting comments from other sources and framing them around their own

views. In this study, potential opinion leadership was determined using the composite citation patterns featured in Chapter Four. A blog cited by a wide range of bloggers within the overall dataset was seen to have higher visibility within the blogosphere, and a greater readership, than a blog with relatively few citations. Opinion leadership was then further inferred by a blog's coverage of an issue for its readers, evaluating both the approaches used within discussion, and the sources referenced by a blogger.

Within the Utegate discussion, the most likely opinion leaders within the blogosphere were the A-list bloggers. Drawing on the information flows between particular groups of bloggers, modelled in Chapter Six, these leading blogs, covering most political topics, supported their coverage of the scandal with comments on articles from other blogs and journalistic sources. However, for more topical discussions than the day-to-day debates concerning Australian or French domestic politics, such as the international event of the Obama inauguration or the technological themes of HADOPI, the relevant group of specialist blogs may have a more prominent role in leading the development of blogosphere consensus and opinion.

The Australian political blogosphere's coverage of Utegate also demonstrates how gatewatching can be seen as an act of opinion leadership. Mainstream media sources reported the key developments of the scandal, but how and why they did this was not always well-received by the Australian political blogosphere. For bloggers, a major issue around Utegate was the media coverage of the scandal, rather than the scandal itself. In criticising the work of publications such as *The Daily Telegraph*, Australian political bloggers attempted to wrest the role of opinion leader from the mainstream media, who were focussing on the 'wrong' aspects or ideas. Even without outright condemnation of mainstream media content, though, political bloggers' reinterpretation of articles in *Le Monde* or *The Sydney Morning Herald* sees them acting as opinion leaders as described by Lazarsfeld *et al.* (1948). The original opinion leaders filtered news and commentary from the mainstream media, adding their own perspectives when informing their peers. The flow of information involving political blogs might not take two steps, but the filtering

aspect of opinion leadership is certainly apparent within the Australian and French political blogospheres.

When describing opinion leadership within the blogosphere, though, the opinions being influenced are not those of other bloggers or media sources, but instead of the readers of a given blog. Bloggers are unlikely to act as opinion leaders for each other, particularly among the leading blogs. This was seen in the HADOPI discussion when reactions to a *Sarkofrance* post supporting the bill did not change the views of the original blogger nor its respondents. Ideological concerns put further limits on the potential for bloggers to shape each others' views. Political bloggers will cite material with opposing views, but use contrasting arguments to support rather than change their stance on an issue. Ultimately, what we may see instead of opinion leadership among bloggers is opinion sharing, between A-list blogs and specialist blogs in particular, where bloggers build on each other's discussion and analysis in the development of an argument. Some blogs may be more likely than others to have their opinion shaped by other bloggers. In particular, the smaller, individual blogs without a large audience or highly visible status within the blogosphere may follow the views being promoted by the more prominent and active blogging voices. The posts published by the leading political blogs may in this case inspire a change of opinion, or development of views around an issue, while the work of specialist bloggers may highlight a previously unnoticed question within a wider topic. A clearer opinion leadership function is seen in the way bloggers select content and reposition it, promoting a specific interpretation of a debate for the blog's readers. Opinion leadership is reliant on a blogger's engagement with any material cited, filtering and commenting on the views put forth. Simply linking to another person's reporting is not necessarily opinion leadership. Although the selection of material shows a blogger promoting specific analysis or subjects for their readers, the perspectives put forth and potentially influencing opinions are those from the original article, not the blogger's own post. On the other hand, if bloggers annotate their links and frame references to other sources around their personal analysis of an issue, then they are making their own views visible and their potential status as opinion leaders is reinforced. There is greater scope for projects to identify and study opinion leaders within the blogosphere by drawing on site traffic and comments in addition to

links and posts. However, this study has introduced some initial approaches around this theoretical discussion, to be developed further for additional research into the blogosphere and other online media.

The findings from the three case studies have shown the varying contributions of political blogs to public debate. No issue is guaranteed to generate comment from every site within the political blogosphere, nor will every blog cover a topic to the same degree. The political blogosphere instead is a space made up of transient topical networks discussing a number of subjects. These networks may intersect at a common point or theme, but the group of blogs involved varies from topic to topic. As a result, the processes of framing, agenda-setting, and opinion leadership which are described by the different theories employed in this thesis are not universally observable in all debates featured within the Australian and French blogospheres.

For some political bloggers, the framing devices of other media sources are unlikely to be repeated in blog posts on the same issue, instead positioning an issue within a subject of personal or professional interest. Agenda-setting effects may be negligible for specialist blogs, who cover their chosen subjects regardless of their prominence within the mainstream media. On the other hand, for relatively minor blogs any mainstream media coverage may bring an issue to their attention and provoke further posts. Finally, opinion leadership may be practised by political bloggers, in particular through shaping the views of their readership. However, this is as part of a complex system of information flows which involves contributions not just from the mainstream media and the blogosphere, but from alternative media sites, social media, other websites, and blog readers themselves.

What we can see, though, is that even if not all blogs fit this description, the most prominent sections of the blogosphere are helping to shape public debate in a number of ways. These roles vary between contexts, as seen in the case studies, as bloggers react to different political issues. Through original analysis, bloggers provide new information and interpretation of an issue, providing an alternative source to other voices within the mediasphere. Campaigns led or promoted by bloggers can impact on public debate by giving continued coverage to a particular issue, shaping the views of readers and other commentators in the process. Blogs

are used by representatives of different political parties and groups of citizens, publishing responses to events and political developments. Not all of these views might be included in one site's coverage, whether a mainstream media site or a blog, but what the blogosphere does provide is an alternative channel for opinions to be promoted that might not otherwise be featured in public debate. Individual sites might not be well-read, or paid attention by other sections of the blogosphere, but the combined efforts of political bloggers can play important roles in the discussion of political issues.

One of these roles, as noted in Chapters One and Two, is that of watchdog, for both politicians and other media sources. The relationship between bloggers and journalists in particular has been occasionally volatile, based on bloggers being perceived as influencing debate, correcting and challenging the mainstream media. This relationship was highlighted further in Chapter Seven's analysis of the Australian political blogosphere's reaction to Utegate. However, bloggers do not cite media content only to criticise it, but for a variety of reasons. In the following section, I examine how Australian and French political bloggers made use of different media sources, returning to the second research question guiding this thesis.

Blogs and media sources

For both the Australian and French political blogospheres featured in this study, mainstream media sources dominated the overall citation patterns identified in Chapter Four. The likes of *Le Monde*, *Libération*, *The Australian*, and *The Sydney Morning Herald* appear as widely-cited resources, and these patterns would seemingly support claims about political bloggers being reliant on the work of journalists, simply repeating articles from other websites. For some sites, this is true, with bloggers reposting entire news pieces at times to highlight a particular story. However, not all bloggers use content from other sites in this way. Citations directed towards mainstream media sites have different meanings for different bloggers.

The three case studies analysed in this thesis show a range of uses for mainstream media content by political bloggers. The Obama inauguration saw the mainstream media acting as primary sources for the topical discussion. French political bloggers referenced their domestic media while commenting on the inauguration and related topics. For Australian political bloggers, though, U.S. and U.K. mainstream media sites were featured more prominently in the inauguration coverage. The discussion of an international event meant that political bloggers were reliant on mainstream media sites, as well as other sources, to find out about new developments. However, the choices made by Australian political bloggers show a preference for content written from perspectives more directly affected by U.S. domestic politics, and for first-hand commentary rather than material filtered for Australian audiences. This shows that, while bloggers do use mainstream media content in their discussion, the media in question are not necessarily domestic. Rather than simply repeating the content by Australian journalists, Australian political bloggers instead sought out and choose the material most relevant to their interests or offering original perspectives on an issue. For the inauguration, the discussion was not reframed within Australian issues, and coverage of U.S. economic and environmental policies, for example, was found on U.S.-based sites, not the likes of the ABC or *The West Australian*.

The selection of media sources by bloggers can depend not only on whether an issue is in the news, but also how other sites are covering it. The HADOPI debate provides another example of bloggers actively citing a range of sources, not limited to the French mainstream media, in their discussion of the bill. Specialist blogs, contributing the greatest number of posts to the topical network, drew on resources with a particular relevance to HADOPI, including technology news sites and advocacy groups. However, they also cited mainstream media content, in particular to continue covering HADOPI during lulls in the topical network activity. These sites were not the primary references for HADOPI specialist blogs, but any continued coverage of the bill within the mainstream media was cited to keep the issue visible within some sections of the blogosphere. On the other hand, minor blogs discussing HADOPI only infrequently used mainstream media content predominantly, posting only in response to major events in the HADOPI timeline. For some French political blogs, the mainstream media are one of a wide range of

references from which information and opinion might be sourced, but for others these sites are their main resources and may influence when posts are published.

Finally, the Utegate case study found mainstream media sites to receive the highest number of citations from blogs discussing the scandal. The politics in general aspect to the topical network may also influence the referenced cited, as in the absence of Utegate-specific sites it was mainstream media sites which acted as central resources. However, Australian political bloggers' motives behind linking to the domestic mainstream media were not to appropriate journalists' coverage for blog posts, but to criticise the reporting on Utegate. Highlighting aspects of the 'us vs. them' dynamic between Australian political bloggers and journalists described in Chapter Two, the Utegate topical network is a further example of blogs acting as a watchdog and adversary to the mainstream media. As with the dispute between *The Australian* and psephology blogs in 2007, News Limited publications received the harshest criticism for their Utegate coverage, with *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Australian*, and the opinion site *The Punch* all singled out at various times for promulgating the story or maligned for their coverage. The Australian mainstream media were widely-cited among the Utegate bloggers as the scandal was a domestic issue, but this did not mean that the reporting by journalists was simply accepted and repeated without question.

The different contexts of the case studies highlight the various uses of mainstream media content by political bloggers in Australia and France. Journalistic content was widely-cited by bloggers from both countries, but for a number of reasons. Political bloggers might at times be parasitical on the work of journalists or provide complementary information, as debated in Chapter Two. However, neither of these descriptions, or the other interpretations of the blogger-journalist relationship, is applicable to *all* blogs, at all times. The use of mainstream media content in particular is dependent on the type of issue being discussed, and how journalists are covering it. As Utegate in particular showed, the media watchdog role remains an occasional function of political blogging, highlighting a more critical reason for citing mainstream media sources. Questioning media coverage can lead to a reconsideration of how the mainstream media should be reporting on political debates, as seen in the Grogsgate episode. By asking different questions of

the issues at hand, bloggers can reframe discussions and focus on alternative themes. In addition, continued debate among bloggers can suggest some degree of communal sense-making around a particular topic.

Bloggers do not cite the same types of reference as each other, as noted in the model of discussion flows between different groups introduced in Chapter Six and elaborated on earlier in this chapter. There are also distinctions in citation patterns for different sites within particular groups of resources. While the mainstream media in general were prominent references for bloggers, for example, some mainstream media sites received more attention from Australian or French political bloggers than others. The dominant sources, in terms of citations received, were titles with a national audience and the flagship publications for different companies. These were also the sites of print titles, especially for Australian political bloggers. With the exception of the ABC, websites of domestic television and radio news media were not widely-cited by Australian bloggers, even though some of these sites are dedicated news portals, such as *nineMSN*. In France, television and radio content received more attention, either on their own sites such as *Europe1*, or through re-hosted material on *Dailymotion*. The differences and similarities in media citations by Australian and French political bloggers are examined further in the following section. What these patterns suggest, though, are that the online formats of national print media are the mainstream media sources paid most attention to by bloggers.

Alternative media sites also received varying attention from Australian and French political bloggers. Some sites, such as *Crikey* and *Rue89*, were widely-cited overall, while others appeared around more topical discussions, such as technology news site *Numerama* within the HADOPI debate. Political bloggers referenced the perspectives and analyses provided by alternative media sites, and at times also contributed their own discussions to these sites. Some of these sites only received similar amounts of links as regional mainstream media, cited only occasionally by bloggers, but the major, established alternative media sites can be seen as primary resources for the overall Australian and French political blogospheres.

International media, including mainstream and alternative sites and blogs, were also cited by Australian and French political blogs. Again, a few titles – *The*

Guardian, *The New York Times* – received the most citations overall, suggesting that these are the initial destinations for bloggers searching for international perspectives and analysis. Unsurprisingly, these sites are referenced in response to international events or themes that are not solely grounded in domestic politics. The amount of references directed by Australian political bloggers to *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* overall suggests that international topics might be regular features of Australian posts in comparison to their French counterparts. However, as Chapter Five showed, French political bloggers primarily drew on domestic interpretations of the inauguration, and other internationally themed discussions may similarly make use of the French mainstream media.

Alongside major domestic mainstream media and alternative media sites as the most widely-cited references for both blogospheres are content-sharing sites, social media, and *Wikipedia*. The construction of a blogger's discussion involves not only mainstream media content, but also material sourced from freely accessible repositories of videos and images, including *Flickr*, *YouTube*, and *Dailymotion*. This content may be created by the bloggers themselves, provide raw footage of debates or protests or alternative interpretations of issues, or show mainstream media reporting. Regardless of the type of content, the general pattern is that for many bloggers, a blog post is not simply the text written by the blogger, but also the accompanying audiovisual material.

Overall, though, the distinction between mainstream and alternative sites is perhaps irrelevant when it comes to how blogs source their information. Bloggers do not necessarily go to a specific news site, but find out about stories from a vast array of tools and voices online. This does not mean that there is a preference for alternative media over mainstream media, or, for example, Fairfax over News Limited for Australian political bloggers. A post on *Larvatus Prodeo* in July 2009 shows how the writer, Philip Gomes, gets his information, and the general approach would not be unfamiliar to other bloggers and internet users in Australia and France alike:

Once again I'll repeat, the mistake being made by the media giants is in thinking they are the destination, but with aggregation via whatever method you choose (RSS, Google, Social Media etc) the web itself is the destination – I see specific sites as just a subset of that destination. I don't

go to News Ltd sites, I go online.

The use of media resources by political bloggers varies with the topics being discussed. For many bloggers, there is no single site from which information is gathered. The citation patterns found in this study show that the bloggers who are leading topical debates take note of discussions across the mediasphere, from domestic and international mainstream media to alternative media and fellow bloggers. Such references can include links to blogs and websites promoting opposing political ideologies. Discussions in the blogosphere do not simply rely on articles published by journalists, but also draw on alternative perspectives from other sources. These findings contradict the notion of mainstream media-reliance presented by some critics of blogging in Chapter Two.

Bloggers will highlight relevant or interesting material in given debates from a variety of sites, taking in views from across the mediasphere. Political blogs are not always, or only, covering the news events of the day, and will discuss and link to non-political subjects too. In addition, bloggers are not obliged to present their posts in the same way as a journalist might report a story. Instead, blog posts feature personal anecdotes, familiar terms for politicians, and user-generated content within political commentary. Posts are further developed using video and images, and background reading on related events and subjects are provided primarily through *Wikipedia*. These approaches and citations show that bloggers make repeated use of information and content made available through the collected efforts of professionals and amateurs alike. Ultimately, political blogging in Australia and France forms part of wider mediatised public debates, and the sources used by bloggers reflect the growing diversity of voices within the mediasphere.

Political blogging in Australia and France

In this thesis, I have used findings from the Australian and French political blogospheres together to examine the roles played by political blogs within public

debate. The two systems are not identical, though. In the introduction and Chapter Four, I noted the different political and media contexts for bloggers in Australia and France. The following section then returns to this background information in comparing the state of political blogging in the two countries.

As would be expected from the different population sizes of Australia and France, the French political blogosphere is larger than the Australian system, taking into account the networks of blogrolls and in-post citations. The list of sites from which data were collected for this study included more French blogs than Australian, as seen in Appendix A. However, the networks identified in Chapter Four also show a larger French blogosphere beyond these initial sites, as a greater number of non-sample blogs appear in the blogroll and citation networks than are found in the Australian networks. As suggested by previous studies of the French political blogosphere (for example, RTGI, 2007), these blogs are organised in part along ideological lines. Divisions between different political groups are not consistently distinct, though. Bloggers from the extreme right-wing Front National cite each other, but they do not appear to be connected to the rest of the blogosphere. On the other hand, there is a notable overlap between bloggers from the left-wing Parti Socialiste and centrist Mouvement Democrate, and any ideological position in-between.

While the bloggers explicitly promoting a particular party or politician might not link to other ideological perspectives, there is a gradual move from militant blogs to partisan but more agreeable commentators. In the French political blogosphere, this overlap takes place among a group of PS and MoDEM blogs. These connections are aided by bloggers supporting these parties being members of the same collectives, created not around parties but shared values. Ideology and party affiliation might have a noticeable influence on the posts of some French political bloggers, but for others these factors are not as strong. Some blogs will cite across certain ideological boundaries, others will not, and some boundaries will not be spanned at all. The larger network of blogs in France also means that bloggers are not necessarily aware of what others are saying in their posts, as they can pick and choose which blogs to follow based on factors including political beliefs. The visibility of the leading blogs, and the promotion of ranked lists of political blogs,

can lead bloggers to focus their attention only on a particular subset of the French political blogosphere. Such a trend may also account for the development of collectives such as the *Réseau LHC*, *les kiwis*, or *les freemen*. The blogs within the collectives share beliefs, approaches, or interests, and they may also find that their discussions as individual blogs are diluted or missed completely by the amount of material within the blogosphere. By forming a collective, the bloggers' posts may become more visible, and continued posting on a given theme may attract a larger audience for these views.

Ideology is not a similarly dividing force for the Australian political blogosphere. Although bloggers promoting liberal and conservative views are present, the range of beliefs is much narrower in the Australian networks identified in Chapter Four. This relative lack of ideological diversity reflects the dominance of Australian politics by two parties, holding centre-left and centre-right views respectively. It may also be a response to the political situation in 2009. The Kevin Rudd-led ALP were in power, and given the left-wing leanings of several leading Australian political blogs, the Australian political blogosphere would not be expected to feature a domestic equivalent to *les vigilants*. This French collective opposed to the centre-right President Sarkozy also promote left-wing views, positioned around Parti Socialiste supporting blogs in Chapter Four. Crucially, the left-wing PS was not in power, and, as we saw in the introduction to this thesis, several anti-Sarkozy blogs were created in immediate response to Sarkozy's success in the 2007 Presidential election.

Any divisive ideological effect on the Australian political blogosphere is also negated because of the continued overlap between groups. Bloggers note, and respond to, what the 'other side' are posting, with the most extreme example being *Pure Poison* (and its earlier *Bolt Watch* and *Blair-Bolt Watch* incarnations) acting as a watchdog for the conservative commentator Andrew Bolt. Instead of a political blogosphere organised around party affiliations, what the Australian system shows instead is a loose group of sites centred on the leading blogs covering most political issues, with other groups sharing topical concerns and connecting the political to other blogospheres. This is a key distinction between the two blogospheres. Although specialist bloggers were present in the French political

blogosphere, especially within the topical networks, the composite citation and blogroll networks do not betray strong grouping activity along shared topics beyond party support. The Australian political blogosphere, though, shows the specialists to be key components of the blogosphere, with a small number of leading blogs accompanied by psephological, economics, and feminist blogs in particular. Other political blog types introduced in Chapter One can be found in the two blogospheres, but the type of specialists and their visibility within the networks vary.

Partisanship in the French political blogosphere reflects bloggers' support of political parties and politicians, as has already been noted. There is a different kind of partisanship at play within the Australian political blogosphere. Instead of highlighting differences between bloggers, the distinction is between blogs and the mainstream media. For some Australian blogs, discussion of bloggers and journalism remains along 'us vs. them' lines. The responses to Utegate have given further support to this view, following Chapter Two's commentary on two episodes in 2007 and 2010. It can be argued that this dispute is to some degree along ideological lines, with the left-leaning blogosphere confronting the conservative *Australian* and other News Limited publications more than any other mainstream media. However, this may also be an artefact of the Australian media landscape, where there are comparatively fewer media titles and owners than in France.

For Australian political blogs, there is a group of primary media sites that are referenced most often, with a larger group of secondary sites only occasionally receiving links from the blogs in the sample. The primary resources for Australian political bloggers are not just mainstream media sites, but the major titles of, predominantly, print news organisations. Four of the sites are national in scope: *The Australian*, the ABC (and its news subdomain), *news.com.au*, and *Crikey*. Two others are specific to Sydney and Melbourne, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, but receive greater attention than other city- or state-based media as Fairfax's flagship titles. The print media dominance is not limited to the primary resources, either, with the sites for additional News Limited newspapers following in the list of media citations, as seen in Chapter Four. Not only do print publications attract the majority of domestic media citations, but attempts by rivals to establish web-

only news sites in single newspaper markets have had only limited success. Fairfax's *Brisbane Times* received less than half as many citations as the News Limited site for *The Courier Mail*. The Perth-based News Limited site *WA Today*, on the other hand, and the West Australian Newspapers publication *The West Australian*³¹¹ were both referenced 18 times, but these numbers also show that, for Australian political bloggers, these are only occasional references. Based on these citation patterns, there is a preference within the blogosphere first and foremost for print media sites, with national and flagship titles referenced before regional publications. Radio and television networks and their associated news sites are near-ignored by Australian political bloggers, with the other primary resources representing alternative media, international news media, and social media.

For the French political blogosphere, the primary mainstream media resources are also print media, although the sites represent both daily newspapers such as *Le Monde* or *Le Figaro* and weekly news magazines, including *Nouvel Observateur* and *Marianne*. These sites are again national titles, although some regional newspapers, including *Ouest France* and *La Voix du Nord*, appear among the secondary sources for the blogosphere. Television and radio sources have a greater presence here than in the Australian political blogosphere's citations. While their total citations are not as large as the major print media, or indeed the leading blogs, the sites of *TF1*, *Radio France*, and *Europe1* are more widely-cited than any equivalent non-ABC Australian site. For Australian bloggers, the mediasphere regularly referenced by the blogosphere includes mostly print media with a few international and alternative examples. For French bloggers, on the other hand, more channels are included. International media sites do not appear as central resources, but domestic media, from print to radio and television, have greater importance. This suggests that, from the perspective of political bloggers and in general, in France journalism and news commentary online are the work not just of the print media but also of television and radio. The development of debate and public opinion involves not just *Libération*, but *TF1* and *Radio France* too. These sites might not be cited in all debates, but the citation patterns show that they are referenced more than infrequently. For Australian bloggers, though, news and opinion online within

³¹¹ Now owned by Seven West Media following West Australian Newspapers purchase of the Seven Media Group, including the Seven television network.

mainstream media outlets is primarily linked to print sources. Radio and television channels other than the ABC have minimal presence within the citation network, suggesting that they are not part of the regular sources used by political bloggers in their commentary, and possibly that they have not adapted their content for the internet.

The French media's relative embrace of online functionalities is further emphasised by citations directed towards *Dailymotion*, many of which are linking to videos originally from mainstream media sources. These are not necessarily uploaded by users, but by the media organisation themselves on their own *Dailymotion* channel. This use of other sites to host content by French mainstream media highlights a further difference between the two countries. While footage from the Australian television news media appears on *YouTube*, the primary repositories for this content are the television networks' own websites. Citations for any video content are then folded into the total references to the network's domain, as in this study I have looked at links to sites than specific pages. At the same time, French news media host their videos locally too, and any references to videos on the *TF1* domain, for example, are included within the total citations for *TF1*. The main disparity between Australian and French bloggers, then, is in how they make use of sites such as *Dailymotion* and *YouTube*, and how video content forms part of posts on an issue.

Although I have used findings from the Australian and French political blogospheres in combination to answer the primary research question concerning political bloggers' contribution to public debate, the study at hand has also shown how the two systems differ. Debate within the French political blogosphere involves more sites, both blogs and media resources, but the extent of discussion can also be affected by ideology. Not all groups are isolated from one another, and there are resources common to supporters of the PS and the Front National, for example, but there are still some noticeable divisions along ideological lines among the blogs featured in this study. For Australian political bloggers, ideology does not limit blog-to-blog citations, but the shape of debate may instead be impacted upon by the domestic media situation. International media feature as major resources alongside the main Australian media sites, suggesting that bloggers look beyond

their local context for news and commentary on some issues. Furthermore, the relative scarcity of different voices within the Australian print media in particular may account for why bloggers continue an 'us vs. them' relationship especially with News Limited journalists. Bloggers respond to and criticise the most visible reporters and commentators within the Australian mediasphere, in part because there are few alternatives to these sources. These variations between the two blogospheres are only brief outlines of possible differences, based on the three case studies and the total citation patterns tracked for this study. Further differences and similarities between the two blogospheres may be identified by analysing additional case studies. In the following sections I discuss what the aims might be of research beyond the scope of this thesis, first by outlining the limits to this study and then in outlining further directions for the analysis of political communication online.

Limits to this study

In this thesis, I have examined the contributions to public debate of a sample of Australian and French political bloggers. There are limits to the conclusions being drawn, and in this section I outline the key restrictions that would need addressing when expanding this project.

First, there is a notable dimension to political communication absent in the data collected for this study. Gathering comments on blog posts is a task with its own methodological concerns, including determining for how long to check for comments and distinguishing between spam comments and actual responses from readers. These challenges were not surmountable at the time this research project started, and prompted the decision to look solely at blog posts and links within them. However, further research would benefit from tracking comments in addition to blog posts where possible. Comments may not be restricted to one-way comments from readers without further response from a blogger. A new conversation may be started as readers continue the discussion of an issue among themselves, following an initial post but potentially going along new tangents. As noted in Chapter Three, links made in comments, from the blogger and readers

alike, constitute a further type of topical link. While these citations reference topically relevant resources, if they are provided by readers they do not necessarily reflect the perspectives of the original blogger. The distinction between links provided by commenters, and those made by the original blogger, is important if the research is looking solely at what a given blogger is discussing in their posts, but not as critical if the combined output of a blog is being analysed, from posts to comments.

A further angle of research provided through studying comments is the identification of communities of readers around specific blogs. In this study, I identified groups of blogs around topical interests and citation patterns, but connections between sites may also be made by tracking who comments on which blogs. Posts on a blog such as *Larvatus Prodeo* might attract lengthy comments threads, but the bulk of these contributions may be from a small number of readers. Similarly, a specialist blog such as *The Poll Bludger* regularly receives hundreds of comments to its posts, and further research could look not just into what the readers of these blogs are discussing, but also whether there is any crossover among the blogs' commenting audiences.

Further, this thesis does not track the entirety of the Australian or French political blogospheres. Attempting to include every blog which might discuss politics from these two countries is a thankless task, and likely to result in an overrepresentation of minor blogs in evaluating the role of political blogs in public debate. Many bloggers do not attract, or seek, large audiences, and politics is only one of many topics featured in their posts. While these sites are still part of the political blogosphere, I argue that trying to identify every political blog is a lesser concern compared to analysing a sample of sites representing leading, specialist, and minor blogs in order to determine what blogs contribute to debate.

As noted in Chapters Three and Four, not all blogs included in the initial sample list were featured in the eventual data collection, for a variety of reasons ranging from inactivity and changed addresses to technical issues around updating RSS feeds. Although this means that the posts of some leading blogs are not included in this study, the findings from this study highlight traits of political blogging activity around different events that may be developed further with more extensive

analysis of the Australian or French political blogospheres. In this thesis, I have used a partial network approach (Hogan, 2008) to study the responses of bloggers to different issues, generalising findings for the wider blogospheres. These conclusions have been aided by determining the position of blogs not represented in the sample on the basis of the overall and topical networks. Prominent blogs might be absent from the data collection, but citations from the blogs that are represented can at least confirm the importance of other leading blogs within the Australian or French political blogospheres.

The identity of the bloggers appearing in this study has not been a primary concern of this research. Some Australian and French political bloggers post under their full names, others use only a first name or a pseudonym. Although official blogs for politicians or journalists may be published under full names, some of the leading blogs are run by bloggers who do not reveal their identity. The *Sarkofrance* sites, for example, are the work of an individual going under the moniker of Juan. The disclosure of identities may differ between blogs based on the intent of the blogger and the content of the site. However, there are no clear patterns. While some partisan blogs are operated under pseudonyms, such as *L'Hérétique*, others highlight the names of contributors, as seen with Yann Redekker's eponymous Front National blog. Koop and Jansen (2009) respond to concerns about the pseudonymous identity of bloggers, and thus the potential fictitiousness of writing and persons in the blogosphere, by 'employing blogs and blog posts rather than the bloggers as [the] unit of analysis. What is of interest here is the content of the blogs and their posts rather than the person(s) writing that content' (160). This study has followed similar lines, looking not at the people writing the posts but the content published and links made. That is not to say that the identity of bloggers is not of interest. In Chapter Two, the Grogsgate episode has shown that other parties within political communication are intrigued as to who is behind the pseudonyms, arguing that there is a public right to know who is influencing debate. Further research may return to the identities of bloggers, and the identities created by blogging, in examining discussions within the blogosphere.³¹²

³¹² Events taking place as this thesis was completed have highlighted additional questions around the identity of bloggers. The revelation that the blogger behind the *A Gay Girl in Damascus* site (<http://damascusgaygirl.blogspot.com/>) was not a Syrian woman but instead a middle-aged

A final limitation reflects the case studies supporting this thesis. The analysis of blogging around the Obama inauguration, HADOPI, and Utegate shows how the contributions of political blogs vary in response to different issues. These were not the only topics discussed by political bloggers, and a study of further events covered by the blogospheres could develop additional conclusions about the roles of political blogs within public debate. In this thesis, I have focussed on specific events and issues in the analysis, grounded in unique contexts. Further research could move beyond this approach to track issues or the coverage of key actors across the entire dataset. Australian bloggers' mentions of Kevin Rudd, for example, could be compared with the French blogosphere's Nicolas Sarkozy coverage, which over a seven month period would feature a number of different events. In addition, rather than looking solely at the inauguration, the two blogospheres' Obama discussion could be extended to the new President's first 100 days in office, or indeed tracked across the first half of 2009. The study at hand has developed new methods for studying topical discussions online and identified varying ways in which bloggers may participate in, and shape, public debate. The research also highlights areas that may be investigated by additional research, and in the following section I outline further directions for studying political blogging and other online communication, beyond the scope of this project.

Further directions

In this thesis's analysis of political blogging in Australia and France, I have presented several key findings that, while based on activity within the blogosphere, also have wider applications for the contemporary mediasphere. Questions about information flows and media use online, especially in social media environments, will continue to be prominent research topics as new platforms develop and news media organisations change their approaches to creating and providing content. The analysis in this thesis has focussed solely on

American studying in Scotland (Addley, 2011) shows that the profiles of bloggers constructed through posts and links can be very different to the actual person writing the posts. The use of pseudonyms in the French political blogosphere in particular means that any ideas about an individual blogger are dependent on the information provided on their blogs and on other sites. This information might be public, but that does not mean it is representing the person responsible.

representatives of the blogosphere. However, the interactions between blogs, other media, and their audience mean that there is great potential for further research into the concepts and patterns from this study and applying them to other sections of the mediasphere.

In Figures 8.1 and 8.2, information flows between three types of blog are depicted, reflecting different topical contexts. This model for examining the contributions made by each blog type to public debate, and their respective prominence within topical networks, can be adapted for studies of other forms of online discussion. The different roles played by specialists, A-list bloggers, and comparatively minor bloggers would be expected to be replicated in similar discussions taking place through platforms such as Twitter. Specialists would provide analysis and commentary based on their topics of interest. These views would then be recontextualised, and retweeted, to a wider audience by the A-list equivalents, Twitter users with large numbers of followers or incoming tweets. As with the blogosphere, contributions by other users might respond to the work of the A-list or specialist users, but these comments might not attract any further attention. The size of the respective networks and distribution of users within the different categories would again vary between platform and topic. Nevertheless, there are obvious applications for the discussion flows developed in this thesis beyond the political blogosphere.

Blogging itself remains an important subject for further research, in particular through continuing studies of intermedia news and debate. In this thesis, I have discussed how bloggers use, respond to, and at times change the coverage of issues and events by other media sources. The convergence of different platforms in the delivery of news content means that different participants are involved in multiple stages of the creation of, and commentary on, news and debate. Mainstream media sites also promote their stories on Twitter, journalists and editors write for their organisation's blogs, bloggers contribute pieces to opinion sites, and readers comment directly on news stories. These interactions between commentators and audience, journalists and bloggers, and the multiple roles played by individuals within the flow of information depicted in Figure 2.1, underline the growing importance of understanding the intermedia news environment.

This thesis has shown that there are different ways that users are involved in public debate within the blogosphere. Blogging the news, as with blogging politics, can take a variety of forms, as noted in Chapter One. There are multiple genres of political and news blogs, with their own individual approaches and specialist subjects guiding their discussions. In addition to examining how debates flow between these blog types, a notable finding of this thesis is how different bloggers will draw on a variety of media sources in their posts. Previous studies have suggested that bloggers are reliant on the work of the mainstream media for their content, and for some blogs this remains true. However, other blogs will almost exclusively cite resources which are relevant to their topic of interest, or reference a mix of sites that includes not only the mainstream media, but also alternative and social media sites. There are multiple ways of both commenting on and sourcing news and opinions.

While this thesis has focussed on political blogging and its interactions with other media forms, further research would also investigate how media organisations have responded to the internet. Some reactions by the mainstream media to the changing news environment are noted in this thesis, in particular editorial responses to criticism from the more visible and vocal audience found online. However, there are many more ways in which the mainstream media have adapted to the opportunities afforded them by the internet, including the creation of blogs, discussion fora, and comments sections on their websites. The coverage of news has also seen the integration of different styles of reporting. Stories published by journalists contain a mixture of text, video, audio, images, and links to previous articles and external resources – the same way that many political bloggers present their own posts.

To study intermedia news flows further, then, research would look into the interactions between different media forms, and how they may shape and question coverage and commentary. This thesis has provided findings on dynamics between political blogs and the mainstream media, showing that the work of journalists is challenged or recontextualised by bloggers, that blogs on occasion can change how the mainstream media cover issues, and that the mainstream media are not the sole source of information for the blogosphere. However, to get a more complete

view of intermedia news flows, additional research would also look at the articles published on mainstream and alternative media and opinion sites, as well as on social media and blogs, alongside the network of citations linking these different sources.

This thesis contributes an identification of patterns and processes pertaining to the political blogosphere that can be adapted and expanded for further research in this field. These include the revisiting of media effects theories, re-evaluating concepts of framing, agenda-setting, and opinion flows within the contemporary mediasphere. Furthermore, this study has developed new methods that have applications beyond the blogosphere. In particular, the development of the topical network as the subject of analysis means that similar discussions can be identified and tracked across different media.

Tracking other topical discussions within and beyond the political blogosphere can provide new information on the dynamics of online discussions. As a form of issue public, a topical network experiences growth and decline over time, reflecting the changing debate around an issue or the length of an event. In this thesis, I have provided a brief overview of topical network dynamics within the HADOPI debate, showing the difference in coverage during spike and non-spike periods. Other topical discussions could be used to develop these ideas further. These can include debates around specific issues, events, or political actors.

The networks studied in Chapter Four also suggest how the sample of blogs featured in this thesis may be expanded to include bloggers specialising in other subjects than just politics. The Australian blogroll network, for example, positioned several leading political blogs as bridges between different topical groups, in addition to being central to the network overall. Additional research could examine the intersection of different groups further by expanding the sample and evaluating the spread of issues and debates beyond the 'political blogosphere'. As this thesis has found, political blogs do not only discuss politics. It would be expected that the reverse is true too: that bloggers who do not see themselves as 'political' bloggers will still comment on some political themes or events.

It could also be argued that focussing only on one platform does not provide the full conversation around a given topic. Bloggers featured in this study, for example, often had accompanying Twitter accounts that were not tracked in the data collection phase. The discussion of topics, or the sharing of additional links, was not restricted to their blog posts, with French bloggers noting how the HADOPI debate was continued on Twitter using the #hadopi hashtag. The Grogsgate episode discussed in Chapter Two also highlights the interlinkage of blogs and Twitter. The original blog post gained attention and generated further discussion through Twitter, while the debate around the unmasking of Grog as Greg Jericho was also debated in posts and tweets alike.

Although political bloggers might see their blogs as their primary communication channel, it is unlikely to be their only outlet for sharing information. A post on *Café-croissant* from February 2009 highlights the use of other platforms for discussion:

There has been a lot of news these last three days, and rather than comment on every subject it would be more appropriate to fly over several subjects through a selection of not-to-be-missed links. Remember, you can always follow the ‘off’ (haha) side of *Café-croissant* on Twitter and also a selection of articles through the ‘reading online’ section of this blog or by subscribing to my del.icio.us account’s RSS feed.³¹³

Bloggers do not write posts on every issue, and most individual bloggers do not have the time or interest to cover *every* political discussion. However, they might pass comment on a wider range of subjects through short messages on Twitter, Facebook status updates, or sharing topical links. The blogosphere is not separate to the social web, but instead forms parts of an increasingly intertwined group of sites, each with their own functionalities. The next step for research into political communication online, then, is tracking multiple platforms concurrently. There could be a comparative aspect to such a move, discerning the topics of the Twittersphere as opposed to the political blogosphere. Of course, expanding a research project to incorporate multiple social media platforms is still unlikely to

³¹³ *L’actualité fut très chargée ces trois derniers jours et plutôt que de m’exprimer sur chaque sujet, il sera plus pertinent de survoler ces quelques sujet au travers d’une sélection de liens à ne pas rater. Je vous rappelle par ailleurs que vous pouvez suivre le “off” (haha) de Café-croissant via twitter et que vous pouvez aussi suivre une sélection d’articles que j’apprécie au travers de la rubrique “à lire sur la toile” dans la colonne du milieu de ce blog ou en vous inscrivant au RSS de ce carnet de bord réalisé grâce à del.icio.us.*

come close to tracking *every* relevant account or piece of data – and technical limitations may mean that the amount of data returned might not represent activity from every site in the sample. Nevertheless, with embedding Flickr photos in blog posts, linking to YouTube videos on Twitter, or synchronising last.fm profile updates and blog feeds with Facebook, as well as near-ubiquitous ‘share this’ links to social media on blog posts and across the wider web, users are continually integrating content from different social media sites. Studies could attempt to track the profiles of a common group of internet users, tracking not just their blog posts but their Twitter feeds as well, for example. Moving beyond a single platform focus provides the opportunity to get an overall view of how public debate is carried out online. Bruns, Burgess, Highfield, Kirchhoff, and Nicolai (2011), for example, include blogs, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr as examples of sites to be included in studying Australian use of social media sites, and further research might make use of additional platforms.

Studying online communication is important, particularly as internet accessibility improves and use of social media platforms grows. However, there is also a danger that, in an ever-developing space such as the social web, the new can become the old or the irrelevant without warning. The scope of projects can also be restricted by the platforms being studied. Privacy controls, public access, and changes to site organisation and functionality are challenges to research projects, although their applicability varies depending on the site involved. New functions, or changes to existing ones may not only affect the phenomena being tracked in the research, but also change site-wide behaviour. For site-specific research, especially closed systems requiring an account for access, such as Facebook, or relatively newer, in terms of usage and research, sites such as Twitter, alterations to the site may have substantial implications for the research project. Here, the researchers themselves are not in control of the sample, but are instead essentially at the mercy of the developers of the sites being used. As Rogers (2009) points out, studies of social media sites are in danger of being ‘overtaken by events of the medium, such as software updates that “scoop” one’s research’ (10).

The risk, or one of many risks involved in internet research, in studying ‘new’ sites such as Facebook or Twitter is that the research tries to keep ahead of the curve,

seeking to analyse and publish on the most recent phenomena. Baym and Markham (2009) advise caution for researchers engaged in 'chasing the new', as studies are not guaranteed to remain up to date with the site they are covering (xiv-xv). Despite, or even because of, these risks, the development of methods for tracking activity and collecting data is critical for continued research into online communication. These methodological concerns create further challenges, though. Regardless of the specific subjects, be they Twitter, blogs, or Facebook, giving the sample limits is a necessary step, especially for data storage purposes – while researchers could attempt to collect data from whole networks, the amount of material being gathered, as well as the processing required to analyse it all, could be excessive. Manovich (2008) highlights this problem in describing how cultural analytics aims to overcome it in its use of huge, contemporary datasets. The increasing size and availability of datasets falls into what Wilbanks (2009) describes as a 'data deluge' facing those interested in research in these fields, claiming that 'our capacity to measure, store, analyze, and visualize data is the new reality to which science must adapt' (210). Although these are not inconsiderable challenges for further research into online communication, the findings of these studies are important for understanding online activity, in the context of this particular research in the context of political engagement. In this thesis I have developed new methods for tracking topical discussions within the political blogosphere. This approach may be applied to other sites and subjects beyond the strictly political, providing further means for examining how discussions take place online, how different media are used, and whether there are differences between international and regional contexts.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that political bloggers have a greater role to play in the development of public opinion and sharing of information than simply repeating or criticising the work of the mainstream media. The contributions of individual bloggers vary depending on the type of site and the issue being discussed. However, the combined efforts of political bloggers can be seen as a form of

communal sense-making, discussing relevant themes, developing original analysis, and citing a range of sources and perspectives in order to understand or reinterpret an issue.

In carrying out this research, I have developed new methods for studying political blogging activity to take into account variations over time and subject. The analysis of topical networks allows different functions of blogs to be identified. Rather than treating all discussions as the same, by using this method we can examine further the place of political blogging within the mediasphere and political debates. Conclusions concerning the relationship between blogs and the mainstream media are also aided by the theoretical framework used in this thesis. By adapting older, established media theories to the blogosphere, I have provided an initial discussion of how different blogs may follow or reject media frames and agendas in their coverage, depending on their apparent level of engagement with the topic at hand. I have also developed new models of information flows involving the blogosphere and wider mediasphere, taking into account the greater diversity of sources available to users today.

The findings of this study and the theoretical framework and methods used have further applications in researching online activity and discussion across different platforms over time. Since the conclusion to the data collection for this thesis in August 2009, the media landscapes of Australia and France have continued to change with the growing popularity of social media sites such as Twitter and new potential means of contributing to public debate afforded by these platforms. This does not mean that political blogging is in decline as attention moves to Twitter. Towards the end of June 2009, a post on French blog *Cratyle*³¹⁴ discussed the changing position and functions of blogging given the growing popularity of other sites within the 'participatory web'. The post notes that blogs are not the sole sites for citizens to debate political issues online, but that while social media might have reduced the number of posts a blogger publishes, by moving the simple sharing of links and brief comments to Twitter or Facebook, the act of blogging is arguably improved. Similarly, using Twitter alongside blogs may also benefit the blogger:

³¹⁴ <http://www.cratyle.net/>

Paradoxically, I believe that blogs are finding themselves reinforced [by the rise of social media]. Since a blogger can continue discussions away from their own blog, create an identity across multiple networks and from site to site, and travel in this way with their community, then the posts that they really want to blog find an increased power, a more diverse audience, and, above all, the ability to distribute the post much further than the old networks of bloggers offered.³¹⁵

This sentiment is supported by the Grogsgate episode of mid-2010, discussed in Chapter Two, which at its early stages saw a blog post commenting on media coverage of an election campaign reach a wide audience, and further debate, through Twitter.

In this thesis, I have outlined how political blogs contribute to public discussions of issues, within several different contexts. These contributions range from simply filtering news coverage by highlighting articles of interest, to critiquing the work of journalists and politicians, to developing original analysis of debates, trends, and statistics. The roles played by political bloggers within political debate have developed over the past decade as blogging has grown in popularity and stature within the mediasphere. In this thesis, the Australian and French political blogospheres have presented a wide variety of ideological and topical voices discussing political issues, more than would be found in the mainstream media environment. As research turns to newer platforms for online discussion, and the comparison of activity across multiple sites, the findings and methods from this thesis can help to track any diversification of voices and roles within public debate, as carried out through conversations across the social web.

³¹⁵ *Je crois paradoxalement qu'ils s'en trouveront renforcés. Puisque l'on peut faire vivre des discussions ailleurs que sur son propre blog, développer une identité de réseau en réseau et de site en site, voyager ainsi avec sa communauté, alors les textes que l'on a véritablement envie de bloguer trouvent une force accrue, un public diversifié, surtout, une capacité de diffusion bien plus large que celle que les vieux réseaux de blogueurs offraient.*

Appendix A: Blogs featured in this study

Australian blogs and opinion sites

abc.net.au/unleashed/
andrewbartlett.com
andrewleigh.com
angus-reid.com
antonyloewenstein.com
araquel.livejournal.com
balneus.wordpress.com
barista.media2.org
benambra.org
bjd.au.com
blogs.crikey.com.au/bartlett/
blogs.crikey.com.au/contentmakers/
blogs.crikey.com.au/crikey/
blogs.crikey.com.au/electioncentral/
blogs.crikey.com.au/pollbludger/
blogs.crikey.com.au/pollytics/
blogs.crikey.com.au/purepoison/
blogs.crikey.com.au/rooted/
blogs.news.com.au/news/news
blumensacha.wordpress.com
castironbalcony.media2.org
catallaxyfiles.com
cjwriter.com
craigbellamy.net
crazybrave.net
crookedtimber.org
deggles.csoft.net
duncanriley.com
everyonedeletestom.com
fulltimecasual.com
hourann.com
iainhall.wordpress.com
jargonmaster.wordpress.com
johnquiggin.com
kevgillett.net
laruth.livejournal.com
larvatusprodeo.net
leftwrites.net
lyndahawryluk.livejournal.com
machinegunkeyboard.com

monkeybusiness.wordpress.com
mushroomandrooster.net
onlineopinion.com.au
penguinunearthed.wordpress.com
petermartin.blogspot.com
polemica.info
probblogger.net
redrag.net
rowlirowl.livejournal.com
rubenerdshow.com
ruthellison.com
sarsaparillablog.net
southsearepublic.org
stoush.net
tallyroom.com.au
tamaleaver.net
tedalog.blogspot.com
thought-after.com
violinkid.com
webdiary.com.au
yobbo.wordpress.com

French blogs and opinion sites

17millions.canalblog.com/
20minutes.bondyblog.fr/
abadinte.canalblog.com/
alain-lambert-blog.org/index.php
antennerelais.canalblog.com/
ataraxosphere.canalblog.com/
atortouaraison.canalblog.com/
aurel.hautetfort.com/
aureliefilipetti.free.fr/
aureliesiou.com/
aymeric-pontier.blogspot.com/
baractu.canalblog.com/
barrejadis.azeau.com/
benoithamon.eu/
bgr.hautetfort.com/
bigblogger.org/bigblogger/
blog.jmlg.fr/
blog.mendes-france.com/
blog.monolecte.fr/
blog.plafonddeverre.fr/
blog.sfadj.com/
blog.tcrouzet.com/
blog-bois.com/
blogdevedjian.com/

blogduchi.canalblog.com/
blog-fillon.com/
bloggingthenews.info/
blog-identitaire.com/
blogs.lexpress.fr/a-l-elysee/
blogs.lexpress.fr/barbier/
blogs.lexpress.fr/e-veille-marketing/
blogs.lexpress.fr/media/
blogs.lexpress.fr/noellelenoir/
blogs.lexpress.fr/nouvelleformule/
blogs.lexpress.fr/nycoste/
blogs.rtl.fr/aphatie
blogs.rtl.fr/laparole/
blog-ump.typepad.fr/blog
bonnenouvelle.blog.lemonde.fr/
cafecroissant.fr/
carnetjpr.com/
carnetsdenuit.typepad.com/
carolinefourest.wordpress.com/
castronovo.canalblog.com/
catherinemorindesailly.typepad.fr/
circe45.over-blog.com/
claudesoula.blogs.nouvelobs.com/
clementineautain.fr/
club-des-democrates.fr/
comingoust.canalblog.com/
corinnelepage.hautetfort.com/
coteboulevard.com/
crapauidumarais.hautetfort.com/
cratyle.net/
criticusleblog.blogspot.com/
danielriot.com/
dechiffrages.blog.lemonde.fr/
democratieetavenir.over-blog.com/
depresdeloin.eu/
destin-et-turbulences.blogspot.com/
diego.melchior.over-blog.com/
dominikvallet.over-blog.com/
dominiquedevillepin.over-blog.com/
eklectik.info/
equilibreprecaire.wordpress.com/
expat-prague.com/leblog
extremecentre.org/
fnvilleurbanne.hautetfort.com/
francoishollande.fr/
frednetick.fr/
fromageplus.wordpress.com/
gabrielbastian.hautetfort.com/
gerardsebaoun.canalblog.com/
gklein.blog.lemonde.fr/

globe.blogs.nouvelobs.com/
hebdo.parti-socialiste.fr/
heloim.sinclair.over-blog.com/
heresie.hautetfort.com/
herve.nowak.over-blog.com/
iledere.parti-socialiste.fr/
ilikeyourstyle.net/
ilovepolitics.info/
incroyablemaisvrai.centerblog.net/
insolent.fr/
intox2007.info/
irenedelse.com
jean-luc-melenchon.fr/
jeanpierregrand.fr/
jegpol.blogspot.com/
jlhuss.blog.lemonde.fr/
kamizole.blog.lemonde.fr/
koztoujours.fr/
lalettredejaures.over-blog.com/
lantredekag.fr/
lapolitiqueduchacal.over-blog.com/
lautre-monde.fr/
leblogdearnaudlehmann.blogspirit.com/
le-grand-barnum.fr/
lejournalduchaos.hautetfort.com/
lemammouth.over-blog.com/
lemodemdefrancois.over-blog.com/
lepan.be/
le-pave.com/
lepost.fr/perso/birenbaum
lepost.fr/perso/mamie-en-colere
lepost.fr/perso/richardtrois
lepost.fr/perso/salam93
leromanais.free.fr/
lescahiers.over-blog.com/
lesjeuneslibres.hautetfort.com/
lheraultrepublicain.midiblogs.com/
libelyon.blogs.liberation.fr/info/
lignedroite.hautetfort.com/
lolik.hautetfort.com/
mamilitance.blog.lemonde.fr/
marland-militello.fr/
maxime.leftblogs.info/
memoirevive.tv/
modpingouin.free.fr/wordpress/
nouveaucentre.hautetfort.com/
nuesblog.com/
obouba.over-blog.com/
orangerougevert.hautetfort.com/
oreadecentrisme.20minutes-blogs.fr/

pageliberale.org/
partageonsmonavis.blog.20minutes.fr/
partisocialiste.blog.lemonde.fr/
paulosergelopes.hautetfort.com/
petites-phrases.com/
picy.fr/
pierrecatalan.hautetfort.com/
pierre nicolas burel.hautetfort.com/
pierrevallet.com/
piratages.wordpress.com/
pire-racaille.blogspot.com/
placedelarepublique.wordpress.com/
poliblog.canalblog.com/
politique.blomig.com/
politique.fluctuat.net/blog/
politique.hautetfort.com/
politique.net/
politiquearabedelafrance.net/
politique-blog.over-blog.fr/
polluxe.free.fr/wordpress/
poly-tics.over-blog.com/
pourlafrance.hautetfort.com/
presse.parti-socialiste.fr/
profencampagne.com/
pscharleville.over-blog.com/
puisney.eu/
quentin-thevenon.com/
renefoulon.canalblog.com/
reverdenouveau.canalblog.com/
rimbusblog.blogspot.com/
robert-spieler.hautetfort.com/
romero2008.hautetfort.com/
rouxdebezieux.org/
rue-affre.20minutes-blogs.fr/
ruedelaloi.blogspot.com/
sarkobasta.over-blog.com/
sarkofrance.blog.20minutes.fr/
sarkofrance.blogspot.com/
sarkofrance.wordpress.com/
sarkostique.over-blog.com/
sarkovite.typepad.fr/
sarkozix.canalblog.com/
sarkozynews.canalblog.com/
sebastienpereira.hautetfort.com/
segoleneparis.fr/
segoleneroyal2007.net/
social.societal.free.fr/
somni.blog.lemonde.fr/
superno.com/blog
synthesenationale.hautetfort.com/

thebenitoreport.typepad.com/
torapamavoia.blogspot.com/
toreador.fr/
toulouse-socialiste.over-blog.org/
tropicalboy.canalblog.com/
ump9208.typepad.fr/ump9208/
ungraindesable.hautetfort.com/
uniondespatriotes.hautetfort.com/
veritesurlefn.org/modules/news/
vge-europe.eu/
villepinouunevisiondelafrance.hautetfort.com/
vincent.ducrey.com/
vinz-a.blogspot.com/
voxfnredekker.canalblog.com/
wernerb.free.fr/
yanndarc.com/

Appendix B: Data preparation

In Chapter Three, the methodology for this thesis was outlined, and then executed in the analysis of the baseline data in Chapter Four, and the case studies of Chapters Five to Seven. These studies drew on various subsets of the data collected by Sociomantic Labs between 12 January and 10 August 2009. The data received from Sociomantic Labs had already been prepared by isolating the required sections – post text, links, and post identifiers – from the remainder of the blog data before being sent through for the project-specific analysis. However, for each case study, and for the composite activity examined in Chapter Four, further processes were run to get the data into appropriate formats for analysis. Some of these processes are alluded to in the respective chapters. In this appendix, a step-by-step outline is provided of how the data sent by Sociomantic became, at its final stage, the combined hyperlink and concept network visualisations.

For the topical networks, first the relevant posts discussing each subject were identified. Keywords in post titles, links, and the text of blog posts were used to locate relevant posts, verified first using *Leximancer* to identify any missed posts around key dates, and then by manually reading posts. Following the identification of the topical network, the content of the relevant posts was run through text analytics software *Leximancer* to find the major concepts and names mentioned by bloggers. By doing so, it can be determined not just which resources were being cited by bloggers, but also how they were discussing the topic at hand: their opinions and other themes featured, through the identification of keywords and their connections within posts. Finally, the two processes will be combined to show, within the topical network, which themes were being discussed by which bloggers within the context of the inauguration.

The raw data collected by Sociomantic Labs is provided in two primary datasets. The first set comprises the text of each blog post or published article gathered during the data collection period, saved as individual text files (.txt). Each feed is given its own folder, with the respective text files organised into the appropriate folder. The file name for any given text file includes the date published, the feed

collected from, and the unique identification number (id) assigned to the post by Sociomantic.

The second dataset includes several Excel spreadsheets (.xls) and comma-separated values files (.csv). These documents provide overviews of the total data collected, listing each post, its id, the date and time collected, the original URL of the post, and the folder and file name for the relevant text file. In addition, the hyperlinks created in each post are also listed alongside these other details, with each link separated by a semicolon - for example, <http://www.lemonde.fr/>; <http://fr.wikipedia.org/>

These two datasets are used together in the analysis of French and Australian political blog activity. Two different approaches are employed for this study. Hyperlink analysis, drawing primarily on data from the second set, is used to locate networks around particular link types and several news events. The study of blog activity around these events is then supported by content analysis of selected blog posts from the first set.

Hyperlink analysis – preparation

The first hyperlink analyses, the whole period overview and the blogroll networks, use different methods to obtain their initial data, but are then prepared using the same processes outlined for the topical network studies. For the whole period overview, all blog posts collected by Sociomantic Labs, and all out-links present, are prepared in Excel in the same way as the topical network posts. For the blogrolls, though, links have been collected manually from all sites contributing to the dataset. The links from each site were imported into Excel and prepared using the same formulae as below.

For the topical network studies, covering the Obama inauguration, the proposed HADOPI law, and the Utegate scandal, data were first drawn from the spreadsheets of the second dataset. Each case study featured one or more key dates – such as the inauguration ceremony itself, for example – but also includes posts and links made in the days leading up to and following these key dates. For the inauguration case

study, the data used is only from a ten day period surrounding to the ceremony itself. This step has been taken in developing the methodology for studying topical networks in order to feature both build-up posts and responses to events, particularly for international events where time difference is a factor, while keeping the dataset for each topical network manageable. For both the HADOPI and Utegate cases, an alternative approach to locating topical networks is employed, drawing on posts from the entire January-August dataset, tracking the mentions of keywords or people over the first half of 2009, with the three case studies working together in developing methods for researching topical networks.

For each case study, the hyperlink analysis is carried out over two stages. First, all out-links from blogs, opinion sites, alternative media or citizen journalism sites – all sites that did not fall under the mainstream media or international categories – made in posts published during the relevant periods were used to generate network visualisations. Each step of the network data preparation was carried out in a new sheet within the spreadsheet. To prepare the links for both this process and the topical network analysis, the spreadsheet was formatted in order for each out-link to appear in its own cell within the same column. The ‘http://’ and ‘www.’ were removed from each hyperlink, as well as ‘https://’ and variations on ‘www.’ to keep domains consistent. At this point, links deemed superfluous or potentially confusing to the dataset, including advertisements, ‘share this’ links for sites such as StumbleUpon³¹⁶ or Digg, and Blogger or Canablog images, were removed from the case study dataset. All remaining hyperlinks were then truncated to the top-level domain (for example, from an original URL of <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQw4w9WgXcQ> to youtube.com/) using the formula =LEFT(E1,SEARCH("/",E1,8)). For shorter domains and addresses not including a final ‘/’, entries were formatted manually. The resulting list was then verified for blogs using a subdomain, such as <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/purepoison/> so that different blogs on the same site were not grouped together.

Following this step, duplicate entries were removed from the dataset. In this case, a duplicate entry was seen as having the same linked-from domain, linked-to

³¹⁶ <http://www.stumbleupon.com/>

domain, and date. This process was carried out in order to avoid, where possible, double-posts affecting the analysis. Such posts occur when a post is changed following its initial publication, such as correcting a spelling mistake, and the post may appear twice in the RSS feed but only once on the actual site.

The domains found in the 'from' and 'to' columns were then used to create two master lists of all sites posting or being referenced between January and August 2009, one for the Australian dataset and one for the French. Each domain was assigned a unique id, and this list of sites was used for each of the case studies. Sites with multiple domains and subdomains were assigned the same id where appropriate. For example, links directed to *The Sydney Morning Herald's* mobile website (<http://m.smh.com.au>) were treated as being directed to the newspaper's main site (<http://www.smh.com.au>). The ids were cross-referenced to generate a two-column matrix containing site names, organised as 'from' and 'to' columns. This matrix was saved as a .csv file and opened in *Gephi* for the network analysis processes.

The second stage, the location of the topical network, uses many of the same functions outlined above. However, prior to the transposing of out-links into one column, posts mentioning specific keywords in titles or links made during the relevant period were extracted from the spreadsheet. Such keywords included, for the inauguration case study, 'Obama', 'inauguration', 'White House', 'Bush', 'investiture', and 'maison blanche'. For both HADOPI and Utegate, the identification of relevant posts uses a similar process, but is only limited by the extent of the overall dataset. Rather than limit the analysis to the days surrounding key events, these chapters draw on posts collected between January and August, in the case of HADOPI, and June and August for Utegate. Posts were again identified through keywords, including HADOPI, black-out, Utegate, and OzCar. This smaller list of posts was then processed in the same manner as the wider period out-links, being truncated to top-level domain and then cross-referenced with the master list of sites to locate each domain's id, before being imported into *Gephi*.

Within *Gephi*, the visualisation of each network used a common approach, although individual cases used additional filters and settings that are discussed in their

specific methods sections. On opening the .csv file in *Gephi*, the network is set as 'directed' and edges are reweighted to give repeated links a thicker edge. Nodes are resized and coloured according to different degree aspects. Size is dependent on in-degree, with nodes sized from 10 to 100 based on the number of incoming links they receive. The nodes receiving the most citations are the largest nodes in the network. Colour, on the other hand, is dependent on out-degree. Nodes with no out-links are coloured white, while an out-degree of one or more is coloured according to a spectrum from blue to black, with the darkest nodes having the highest out-degree in the network.

The network is then organised using the Force Atlas algorithm. The settings for the visualisations again vary depending on the number of nodes in each network, but the initial settings for each *Gephi* project included a repulsion strength of 1000 versus an attraction force of 120, as well as a gravitational force of 50 and adjustment according to the size of nodes, to allow for greater space between nodes.

Having run the Force Atlas algorithm, the network visualisations are exported to .svg format in multiple forms. Each network has at least four versions exported to .svg format: with node labels on, with node labels off, mutual links highlighted with node labels on, and mutual links highlighted with node labels off. The images without node labels are used for the combined hyperlink and concept network visualisations as they allow more easily for custom formatting and additional text, which were prepared in *Inkscape*.

Content analysis – preparation

The content analysis supporting the study of each topical network uses a similar, multiple stage approach. The first dataset features all posts in text file format, organised into folders by site. These folders were then moved into a hierarchy of folders sorted by category, to separate blogs from mainstream media sites for easier analysis in *Leximancer*. To study the posts from the inauguration topical network, the corpus was first narrowed down to posts published between 16 and 25 January 2009, using a script developed by the QUT High Performance Computing

Lab for this project. The script extracts text files for a given range of dates from the wider set, maintaining the folder structure used. This allows for site-by-site analysis within *Leximancer*, as well as blog- or mainstream media-specific study. For the HADOPI and Utegate studies, posts have been identified through keyword searches for relevant terms (such as HADOPI, blackout, Utegate, Grech) within the entire dataset. These posts have been manually verified for relevance to the topic, rather than discussing a different meaning of a keyword, and then extracted for analysis.

Having extracted the relevant files, folders were imported into *Leximancer*. Separate projects were created for whole period and individual day analysis. At the import stage, the language for each folder was set to either English or French depending on whether Australian or French data were being processed – for all case studies, as with the hyperlink analysis, the Australian and French data were kept separate. As an automated analytics tool, *Leximancer* runs several processes intended to identify concepts, names, and phrases within the text corpus. Within these processes, some manual additions were made in order to remove erroneous or generic terms, and highlighting and merging related concepts and names – for example, ‘Kevin Rudd’ and ‘Prime Minister Rudd’ may appear as names identified by *Leximancer* which can then be merged into one concept. The merging of names, in particular, avoids a concept map featuring several variations on the same person.

Leximancer also has a stop-list of terms that are removed automatically from the analysis, such as ‘and’ or ‘the’, and this list can be manually altered too. Although *Leximancer* was originally developed as an English language analytics tool at the University of Queensland, dictionaries have been created for various other languages, including French, which identify the generic words, such as *le, la, je, et,* and *c’est*, that appear frequently in the corpus but do not relate to any one particular concept. However, although using the *Leximancer* French dictionary makes removing the generic terms a faster process, preparations for this study have found that different characters, such as ‘ and ’, being used for the same phrase, such as *c’est*, are not supported by the dictionary (depending on the file encoding format stated upon import into *Leximancer*). In this case, one version of

the term will be removed automatically, but the filtered concept list still needs to be checked thoroughly for generic terms that have not been removed.

Following the concept identification, filtering, merging, and removing processes, *Leximancer* generates a concept map of the major terms and names featuring in the corpus, grouping together related terms and providing information on how different terms are connected to each other, based on proximity settings defined by the researchers. In addition, the concept map is accompanied by a searchable database, enabling the evaluation of which sites mentioned which terms, and in which context. For this study, *Leximancer* has been used as a repository for the posts analysed in each chapter. Rather than use *Leximancer* strictly for its concept analytics, the software has been treated as a search engine, locating specific names and keywords within each topical network. The concept maps generated give an overview of the key terms found in each group of posts, but the main use of *Leximancer* has been to find and manually compare the discussion of particular keywords by bloggers.

The method for concept analysis using *Leximancer* is the same for the posts forming the topical networks identified during the hyperlink analysis. Having extracted the relevant text files, they are also imported into a new *Leximancer* project in order to locate topics of discussion within the context of a specific event. Using *Leximancer* enables site-by-site comparison, such that, through both the *Gephi* visualisations and *Leximancer* concept searching, the sites referenced by a blogger and what they were discussing in their posts can be mapped in the same space. This can be seen in the inauguration and Utegate case studies through combined hyperlink and concept network maps. In these final visualisations, concepts located in each blog's posts in *Leximancer* appear in a ranked list alongside the blog's node in the topical network. The font size of each theme is scaled to reflect its prominence within the posts, with the largest font size representing the most frequently discussed theme. Further explanation of the combined hyperlink and concept network maps can be found in their respective chapters.

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