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Club Bloggery: Super Rehearsal for November

By Jason Wilson, Axel Bruns, and Barry Saunders

It's almost a cliché now to assert that the US blogosphere is an election-cycle ahead of what we have in Australia.

We're not so sure it's that simple, mostly because it seems that online, independent media are on a slightly different developmental track on this side of the Pacific. But it's certainly true that the American online mediasphere is flexing some fairly impressive muscles in the presidential primaries.

This year's election season will be one to watch, and it might just be the one in which online coverage - from bloggers and the MSM - outstrips television and the press in depth and importance.

It should be said at the start that the US political blogosphere is a lot more polarised, various and influential than Australia's.

As we've pointed out [before](#), Australia's bloggers are overwhelmingly left-of-centre: we might have our equivalents to the left-leaning [Daily Kos](#) but it's hard to pick out our own equivalent to [Little Green Footballs](#) or [Town Hall](#), where Australian conservatives can form communities of opinion and respond back (except maybe at Tim Blair's [blog](#)).

Australia's blogosphere is less diverse in some other ways as well - like the US we have a lot of serious commentary, but few sites given over to "snark", or snide remarks, like the US liberal site, [Sadly No!](#) The US blogosphere is now courted by political candidates, with Kos's endorsement being sought by Democrat hopefuls, and prominent right-wing bloggers lurching at the Bush Jr White House.

For all their apparent influence, though, so far the bloggers can't turn elections - or at least primaries - in quite the same way that the MSM can. Most of the so-called "[netroots](#)" - America's online left-wing grassroots activists - were backing candidates much further to the left than Clinton or Obama: people like John Edwards or Dennis Kucinich. On the right, many prominent Republican bloggers got behind the Republican "establishment" candidate, Mitt Romney, but they weren't able to swing the voters behind him to a sufficient extent to keep him in the race.

Outsider Republican Ron Paul - a libertarian - had amazing support online, but his poor showing at the polls was more evidence that libertarianism seems a lot more sensible on the Internet than it does to the voters on the hustings. After an initial burst of interest in the anti-war Republican candidate (particularly on Digg.com), [online revelations](#) of his history of racist politics and pandering to conspiracy theorists turned a lot of people off.

Agitate, Educate, Organise

Nevertheless - like the shock-jocks - most of the value of the prominent bloggers on either side of politics seems to be in fulfilling the old political imperative: agitate, educate, organise.

Granted, there may be less emphasis on "educate" than might ideally be the case, but US bloggers - with their actually and proportionally larger audiences - are able to galvanise supporters into keeping the faith between elections, and making the trip to the ballot-box on election day in a country where voting is not compulsory. They aren't bound, as the MSM are, to gravitate towards the perceived centre in their political coverage. So they're able, as internet-powered "monitorial citizens", to develop a constituency for bolder positions.

That's why there is a significant cross-over emerging between the MSM and the blogosphere in the US - something that we're yet to see significant evidence of in Australia. News services

like [CNN](#) and [Fox News](#) employ bloggers, and many pundits like [Michelle Malkin](#) and [Keith Obermann](#) maintain independent blogs alongside their [MSM responsibilities](#).

(Tim Blair maintains a blog alongside his gig as the *Daily Telegraph's* opinion editor, and Peter Martin [blogs](#) while working as the economics editor of the *Canberra Times*, but we have yet to see Kerry O'Brien or Ray Martin start a blog.)

Such bloggers are able to offer immediacy, forthright opinions and real-time reflections on political events that, in the past, the mainstream media have struggled with. They are also able to connect with their particular constituencies in a climate of political opinion that is arguably more diverse than ours. They also work effectively to expand the [Overton window](#) - to popularise positions that are outside the current parameters of debate.

This works in both directions - just as Michelle Malkin opens up debate on immigration by [staking out a position](#) in favour of internship of ethnic minorities, Amanda Marcotte [opens up discussion](#) of health insurance by supporting universal health coverage.

Established news services like *The New York Times*, CNN and *The Washington Post* have recognised this, and had live bloggers covering Super Tuesday - their comments sections became more and more lively as the evening went on.

Perhaps even more fascinating this Super Tuesday, though, was the first significant incorporation of social media in the election coverage. "Microblogging" service [Twitter](#) teamed up with [Google Maps](#) in order to [visualise](#) their users' own coverage of the primaries, and [YouTube](#) offered a [very similar service](#) embedding links user-generated videos in a map of the United States .

These [mashups](#) are the beginnings of new kinds of platforms for crowdsourced, citizen-led coverage of political events, which differ radically from any established patterns of news coverage.

We'll be watching with interest as November's general election draws closer.

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