E-Electioneering: Use of new media in the 2007 Australian federal election

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Abstract

Like the 2007–2008 US presidential primaries, the 2007 Australian federal election was described as "the YouTube election" and an "internet election" (Media Monitors, 2008). This followed studies of use of what are termed 'new media' for political communication in a number of campaigns including the 2000 US presidential election (Bentivegna, 2002, p. 50) and the 2004 US presidential election which was described as "a critical turning point" (Xenos and Moy, 2007, p. 704). However, the development of web 2.0[1] internet media, expanding broadband, and other changes have overtaken many findings of previous research. Some of the most popular new media currently in use were 'invented' post-2004. The rapid rate of technological and social change makes new media research particularly time-bound and indicates that ongoing empirical studies and analysis are needed. This paper contributes to understanding of how new media are used in political communication and how they influence the public sphere (Habermas, 1989, 2006), particularly looking at public interaction and participation (Carpentier, 2007) which have been identified as key features of web 2.0 media and as requirements of an active public sphere, based on findings of a study conducted by the Australian Centre for Public Communication at the University of Technology Sydney during the 2007 Australian federal election.

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[1] Web 2.0 is a term reportedly coined by Tim O'Reilly in collaboration with MediaLive International in 2004 referring to a second generation of internet-based services (information and applications), the key attributes of which are that they allow openness for collaboration and high levels of interactivity without requiring programming skills.

Introduction

Like the 2007–2008 US presidential primaries[2], the 2007 Australian federal election was described as "the YouTube election" and an "internet election". For instance, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a half-page feature headlined "The YouTube Election" (2007). Media monitoring and content analysis conducted by Media Monitors found that the term "YouTube election" was headlined or prominently used 19 times and the term "internet election" was used twice in leading Australian national and metropolitan newspapers in the final two months of campaigning from 30 September to the election on 24 November 2007 (Media Monitors, 2008, p. 12).

In the US, Hillary Clinton announced her candidacy for the presidency on YouTube. Videos of political candidates posted on YouTube and other social media sites such as MySpace have been extensively downloaded and viewed. For example, a privately recorded song 'I got a crush on Obama' sung by a young woman calling herself 'Obama Girl' was reportedly seen by 20 million people in just a few months after it was posted on 14 June 2007 (Young voters caught hook, line and sinker, 2007). Another turning point in the use of new media[3] in political electioneering was a broadcast of a September 2007 presidential candidates' debate jointly by CNN and YouTube. Whereas, previously, network television and major newspapers dominated coverage of electioneering and were the primary sites of electioneering advertising and publicity, a major shift is evident in mediated communication during political campaigns.

Political electioneering using new media is also emerging in Australia and other countries. In July 2007, in approaching the federal election, the then Prime Minister John Howard posted a video discussing climate change policy on YouTube which

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[2] Elections conducted by caucuses and state governments in the US to decide which presidential candidate and deputy in each party that state will support at the national convention which decides the final two candidates to stand for open election to the Presidency.

[3] The term 'new media' is recognised as problematic. It is used in varying ways along with other terms to denote emergent digital media and internet media. It is used in this paper as it is a common term in current debate and refers to the range of one-to-one and one-to-many communication applications operating via the internet including e-mail, chat rooms, newsgroups, web sites, blogs, wikis and social networking sites and utilities such as YouTube, MySpace, Facebook and Twitter.

attracted widespread comment online and in traditional[4] media. Previously, Mr Howard became the first Australian Prime Minister to have a personal web site. The Australian Labor Party's Kevin07 web site and related MySpace sites and blogs during the 2007 federal election campaign represented an unprecedented use of new media, reportedly involving a dedicated team of 20 full-time staff (Australian Centre for Public Communication, 2008).

There is speculation and anecdotal argument that new media are introducing major change to political communication including increasing citizen access and engagement. During the 2007 Australian federal election the *Daily Telegraph* quoted the then Opposition Spokesperson on the Environment and the Arts and now Minister for The Environment, Heritage and the Arts, Peter Garrett, saying "the internet has made politicians more accountable and more accessible" (Poll puts it all online, 2007, p. 6). But is that the case?

Use of new media for political communication has been studied by many scholars and organisations including Bentivegna (2002); Fallows (2000); Hill and Hughes (1998); Jones (1995, 1998); Livingstone (1999); McChesney (1996, 2000); Pool (1983); Schneider (1996, 1997) and the Markle Foundation (1997), to name but a few. However, the evolution of web 2.0 internet applications, rapidly expanding broadband, declining cost of personal computers and internet access, development of intelligent search engines which have replaced 'surfing'[5] and make finding information on the internet faster and easier, and possibly increasing user familiarisation with internet use, have overtaken many findings of most pre-2000 research and even much research conducted in the early 2000s. Many of the new media currently in use were 'invented' or began to achieve widespread use post-2004 – for example, YouTube was launched in February 2005.

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[4] The term 'traditional' media is used in this paper to represent newspapers, print magazines, radio and television. It is used in preference to 'mainstream' media, as the latter implies a value judgement, although a number of quoted commentators and sources use the term 'mainstream' media.
[5] 'Surfing' refers to pre-search engine ad hoc navigation of the internet which was often time-consuming and sometimes fruitless. Intelligent search engines such as Google have made 'surfing' largely redundant.

Rapid advances in technology, increasing use of the internet for political communication, and social change including declining newspaper readership and television viewing (Australian Media and Communications Authority, 2007; Newspaper Association of America, 2005; Roy Morgan, 2007) indicate that the social, political and media implications of new media need ongoing critical review.

The 2007 Australian federal election campaign officially conducted from 15 October to 24 November 2007, but also unofficially in progress for several months prior, provided an opportunity to update data on use of new media in political communication, and this paper reports key findings of a study by the Australian Centre for Public Communication at the University of Technology Sydney.

Methodology

Use of new media in the 2007 Australian federal election was examined using online content analysis of 10 web-based new media – personal web sites; social network sites including MySpace, Facebook, YouTube[6] and Twitter; blogs; vlogs (video web logs); e-newsletters; online surveys; and online petitions. The study involved, firstly, quantitative research to count the number of each new media type used and the number of 'friends' and public comments on social media sites and in blogs, the latter being indicators of public interaction and participation. These terms are recognised as open to multiple interpretations and having multiple levels (Carpentier, 2007). In this study, interaction and participation were interpreted as involving more than basic machine interactivity – what Szuprowicz (1995) and McMillan (2005) call "user to system interactivity" such as user selections from menus and documents. Levels of "user-to-user" interaction (Szuprowicz 1995) and what McMillan (2005) calls "para-social interaction" were investigated. Secondly, qualitative content analysis was conducted based on a questionnaire-cum-coding sheet which collected further information about the forms of interaction elements such as e-mail contact, feedback sections and public comment opportunities, as well as topics and issues discussed.

New media sites were coded on a five-point scale from ''very interactive' to 'completely one-way' based on a set of definitions and content analysis also examined the main topics of discussion and the overall tone of posted comments in terms of praise/support, neutrality, or criticism. Online data were collected during the final seven days of the campaign (17-23 November) and quantitative counts were accurate as at 20 November 2007.

More than 500 web sites were analysed and data was stored in an Excel spreadsheet. In addition, more than 120 screen shots were captured of typical and noteworthy sites due to the likelihood of many sites being shut down following the election, particularly those of unsuccessful political candidates.

Three main groups of political 'actors' were studied to gain an understanding of the use of these media for political communication during the 2007 Australian federal election:

1. 226 politicians comprised of 150 Members of the House of Representatives and 76 Senators;
2. Registered political parties (29 in total, but with focus on the four main parties);
3. Six leading political interest and activist groups (selected on the basis of highest search engine ranking which indicates those which are most popular and active).

While new media were also used by political candidates other than sitting Members of the House of Representatives and Senate (there were five or more candidates for most parliamentary seats), this research focussed on incumbent candidates because this approach yielded a large sample (226) and also because incumbent politicians mostly came from the major political parties and were the best-resourced to use online media. Small political parties and individual candidates with no party support were considered to have limited resources and little hope of success, so their inclusion was

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[6] YouTube is not a social networking site in the same way as MySpace or Facebook, but it is included in this broad category as it is open to wide access for posting videos and comments as well as voting, and is used for a range of entertainment and social uses.

considered to be unlikely to yield significant findings. This assumption was confirmed in another study of the 2007 Australian federal election by Chen (2008) which found that 75.76 per cent of incumbent political candidates had a web site compared with just 11.41 per cent of non-incumbent candidates.

In addition, because technologies and uses of new media are being widely reported in traditional media (eg. *Time*'s Person of the Year: You, 2006), and because it has been argued that new media rely on *intermediation* as discussed by Danielian and Reese (1989) and Severin and Tankard (2001, p. 232) to gain publicity and a wide audience, a second phase of research was conducted in association with an industry partner to identify discourse about new media and their impact in terms of secondary distribution. Media Monitors (2008) collected and analysed major Australian newspaper news reporting and commentary about and sourced from new media during the period 30 September to 24 November 2007. This yielded 281 media articles that were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively.

While some researchers see content analysis as principally or exclusively a quantitative methodology, media researchers and scholars such as Curran (2002), Gauntlett (2002), Hansen et al (1998) and Newbold et al (2002) refer to both quantitative and qualitative content analysis and see the two approaches as complementary. Media Monitors used the CARMA® International methodology incorporating quantitative and qualitative analysis based on human coding of texts into 'primary source', 'issue/topic' and 'message' categories established in a coding list (CARMA International, 2008).

Key findings

The study by the Australian Centre for Public Communication (2008) found that descriptions of the 2007 Australian federal election as the "YouTube election" and the "internet election" were greatly exaggerated. The study reported that, in the final week of the election, 61 per cent of Australia's 226 Members of the House of Representatives and Senators had a web site – meaning almost 40 per cent did not have a personal web site. Even more significantly in relation to new media, only 26 (11.5 per cent) had a MySpace site; just 15 (6.6 per cent) had a blog; only 13 (5.75 per

cent) had posted videos on YouTube; just eight (3.5 per cent) had a Facebook site; and only seven (3.1 per cent) had a podcast.

Also the study found that most internet communication used by politicians did not utilise the interactivity and 'conversation' features that distinguish new web 2.0 media such as blogs, MySpace, Facebook and YouTube. Instead, the study found that 'comments' were often turned off or, when allowed, were almost always moderated by 'gatekeepers', resulting in dialogue being restricted almost exclusively to "fan mail". Only one Australian politician posted negative and critical comments from a member of the public.
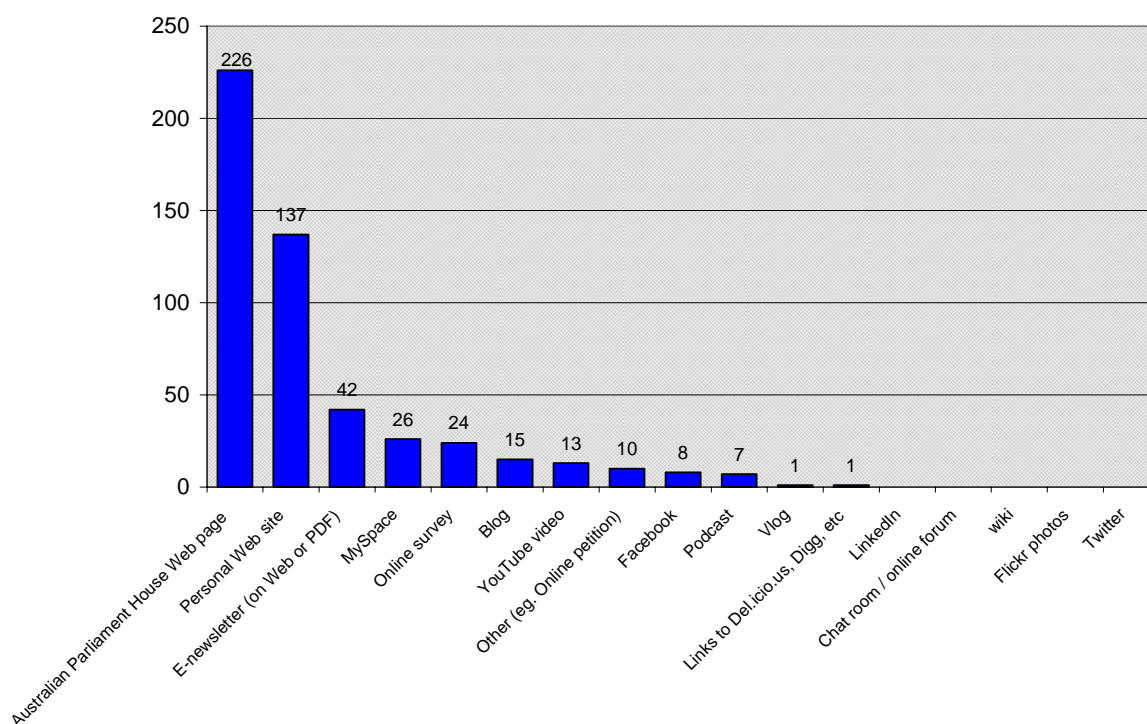

Figure 1: Types of internet media used by Australian federal politicians in the 2007 election (Australian Centre for Public Communication, 2008, p. 16).

The lack of significant citizen engagement by politicians online is also evident in the finding that only 20 per cent allowed direct e-mail contact, with 80 per cent directing 'contact me' to their parliamentary or electorate staff (Australian Centre for Public Communication, 2008, p. 19).

Another study in the same period by Chen (2008, p. 1) of 217 political candidates including non-incumbents compared with previous elections reported "incremental but stochastic adoption of online media" – in other words, an increased but random and inconsistent use of new media among political candidates.
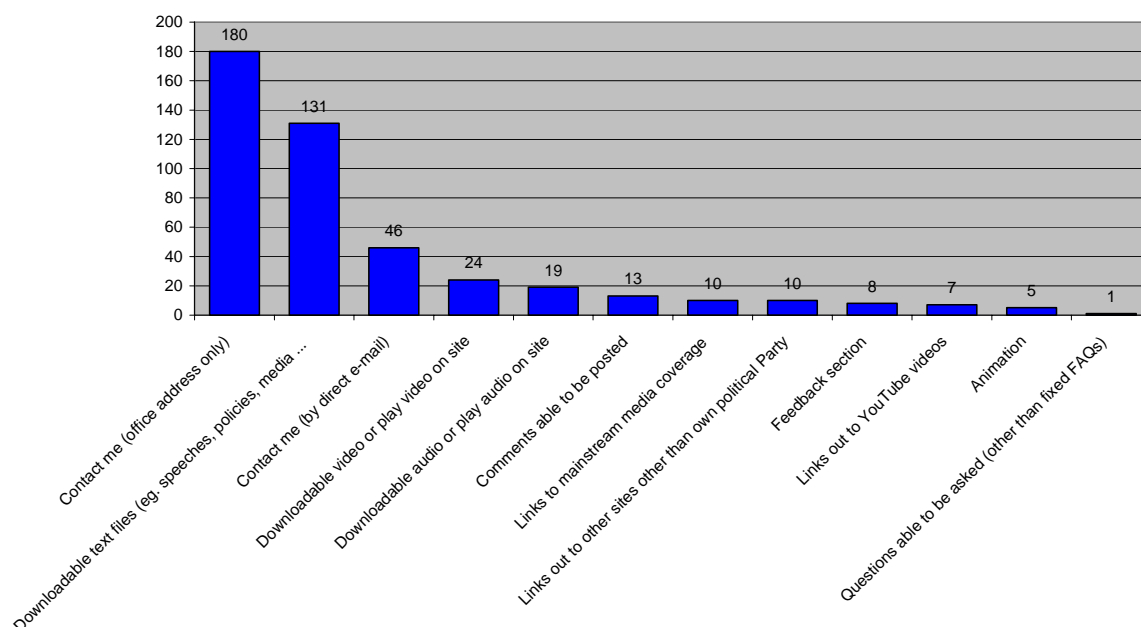

Figure 2: Interactive features on Australian federal politicians' internet sites during the 2007 election (Australian Centre for Public Communication, 2008, p. 20).

No new media sites of elected federal politicians were assessed to be "very interactive" (defined as having multiple inputs from people other than the author). Only 13 (5.75 per cent) of elected federal politicians had a new media presence assessed as "fairly interactive" (involving links inviting people to comment, ask questions or leave messages), and 29 (12.8 per cent) of elected federal politicians' new media sites were assessed to have very little interactivity or public engagement. Significantly, 185 elected federal politicians' new media sites (81.9 per cent) were completely one-way information dissemination with no opportunity for comment or input by members of the public. This is one of the most important findings from this research. It suggests that, while the level of new media use is growing, the method of using new media echoes traditional media practices – that is, it is predominantly one-way information dissemination.

The average number of voices speaking on politicians' sites other than the politician was 34.6. This is an impressive number on the face of it, but it is inflated by a small number of sites that attracted large volumes of comments such as Kevin Rudd's Kevin07-linked MySpace site which attracted 22,296 friends and 5,017 comments. A more realistic illustration of the level of interactivity and citizen engagement on federal politicians' new media sites is the finding that the average number of negative comments appearing on each site was 0.035 (Australian Centre for Public Communication, 2008, p. 22). It is clear that political 'gatekeepers' are controlling politicians and political party sites.
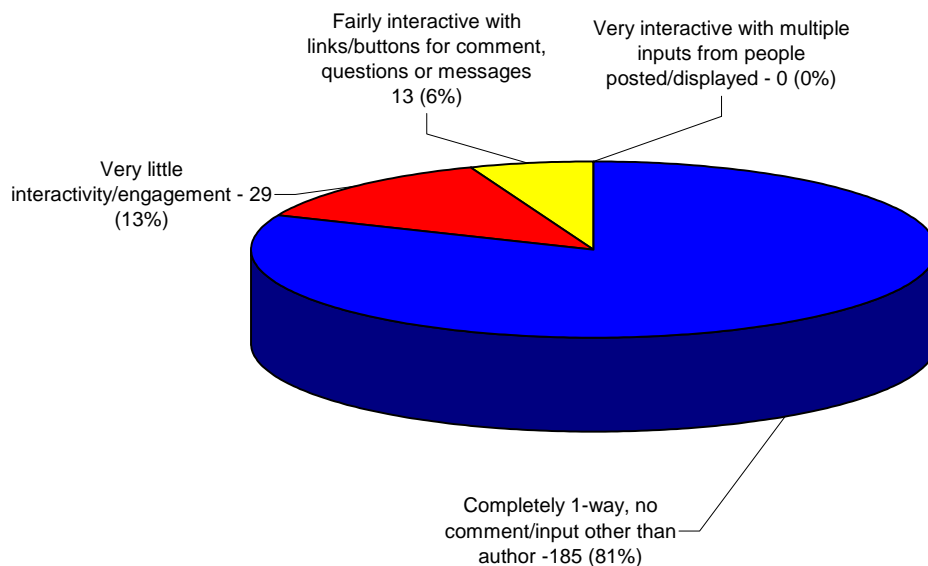

Figure 3: The level of interactivity of politicians' online sites during the 2007 Australian federal election (Australian Centre for Public Communication, 2008, p. 21).

Notwithstanding the overall limited and cautious approach of politicians to new media, some did make significant efforts which changed the landscape of political electioneering. Substantial new media use including some citizen engagement was noted by the following politicians who had the highest total of new media uses and interactive features as at 20 November 2007:

- Kevin Rudd (ALP) whose MySpace site had 22,296 friends and 5,017 comments and his Facebook site had 53 discussion topics and 391 'Wall' posts – the highest of any politician in the sample. However, much of this was partisan support drawn from the Labor Party's Kevin07 web site. He also had links to Del.icio.us and Digg and included YouTube videos critical of John Howard which attracted 4,264 views;

- Peter Garrett (ALP) whose MySpace site had 4,348 friends and 293 comments (including three duplicates) and his blog had 61 comments posted, all positive from supporters;

- Malcolm Turnbull (Liberal) whose MySpace site had 281 friends and 54 comments and was the only politicians' online presence to allow critical comments to be posted. He also had a Facebook site and a blog titled 'Dog Blogs' which was noteworthy for its personal approach;

- Bob Brown (Greens) who posted 44 videos on YouTube gaining 4,411 views. His MySpace site has 2,316 friends and 258 comments and his Facebook site had 2,472 friends and 140 'Wall' posts;

- Joe Hockey (Liberal) who posted three videos on his personal web site and had an extensive blog with 68 comments (albeit all positive), 1,012 friends in MySpace and 843 friends in Facebook;

- Brendan Nelson (Liberal) who posted seven videos on his personal web site, three surveys and an e-newsletter with an RSS feed and 'comment' section (but it required visitors to log-in to comment);

- Bob McMullan (ALP) whose personal web site had links to ALP YouTube videos and also links to a useful video encouraging people to enrol to vote and showing how. His MySpace site had 208 friends and 50 comments;

- Peter Costello (Liberal) who had 228 friends in MySpace and 72 comments;

- Lindsay Tanner (ALP) whose Facebook site had 451 friends and 22 'Wall' posts. He also used YouTube extensively to distribute speeches and ALP commercials;

- Pat Farmer (Liberal) whose MySpace site auto-loaded the song 'Straight Lines' by Silverchair on opening and had 669 friends and 57 comments;

- Sharon Grierson (ALP) whose MySpace site also opened with the song 'Straight Lines' by Silverchair. She had 213 friends and 22 comments (two from one person) and also a Myspace blog, but with only seven posts and two comments.[7]

This 'top 10' based on counts of new media uses and interactivity features shows no political party was more successful than others, with five Labor, five Liberal and one Green politician among the highest users of new media (Australian Centre for Public Communication, 2008, pp. 25–26).

There was also no evidence of younger politicians using new media more frequently or more effectively than older politicians. To the contrary, several younger politicians were among the lowest users of new media and those with new media sites had among the least interactive functionality (Australian Centre for Public Communication, 2008, p. 22). This finding was confirmed in research during the 2007 Australian federal election by Chen and Walsh (in press) who comment: "these media were not necessarily used by a younger demographic as is commonly assumed".

The former Prime Minister, John Howard, did not make the list of leading new media users as, although he used YouTube videos, a personal web site for a time, and intermittently published a blog, qualitatively his efforts were rated poorly both in traditional media election reporting and in widespread criticism including malicious and obscene comments on YouTube and on other web sites. He was also the subject of the largest number of anti-videos, spoofs and parodies, a unique element of new social media, which are discussed later.

One of the more innovative new media uses by an Australian federal politician was the web site of Malcolm Turnbull which featured his 'Dog Blogs' – a blog mainly talking about his and his family's dogs. Turnbull seems to have recognised that one of the key attributes of new media is personalising communication and speaking in the

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[7] Note that no value judgement is made in relation to politicians whose online sites were analysed other than for the specific purposes of this study. This list was determined by a count of new media types used and interactive features and their average overall interactivity rating from content analysis.

language and context of popular culture, rather than from the elite position of the traditional political 'soap box' which, in modern times, has become policy speeches and 10-second TV 'sound bites'.

The stand-out new media presence during the 2007 Australian federal election overall was the ALP Kevin07 political party site which was the most visited and talked about site during the election. A version of the Kevin07 web site was built for access from mobile phones (www.kevin07.mobi) and also SMS (Short Message Service) alerts were offered. Labor campaign spokeswoman, Penny Wong, claimed the mobile Kevin07 site to be "a world first" (A ringing endorsement, 2007, p. 32).

Chen and Walsh (in press, n.p.), citing research from previous Australian elections as well as the 2007 campaign, report that "the use of online media in the 2007 election by Australia's major political parties showed a higher degree of sophistication than in previous election cycles".

Figure 4: The Kevin07 web site of the ALP which was the most visited and talked about in the 2007 Australian federal election (Australian Centre for Public Communication, 2008. p. 30).

However, close analysis revealed that, despite the much-acclaimed success of the Australian Labor Party's Kevin07 web site and related MySpace sites and blogs, these and other political party sites also primarily used the internet for one-way dissemination of information and restricted public interaction and participation to supporters' comments. No negative or critical comments were found on any political party site. This cautious approach to new media by politicians and political parties is at least partly justified, as the new participatory media are double-edged swords for political candidates and parties. Another type of new media use highlighted by the study was a large number of spoofs and parodies and some malicious and obscene comments posted on open sites such as YouTube which often outnumbered official political communication. These are potentially damaging, especially when online material is reproduced and widely distributed by traditional media with large

audiences, a form of intermediation (Severin and Tankard, 2001, p. 232) which is increasingly common.

The popularity of spoofs, parodies and even abuse on new media sites raises a number of questions about new media, political campaigning, and the capacity of new media to function as part of the public sphere as envisioned by Habermas (1989, 2006). Some of these are explored later in this paper.

Another finding of the Australian Centre for Public Communication (2008) research worth further exploration is that the main issues discussed in new media differed significantly from those discussed in official political policy statements which were examined on political party web sites and traditional media. Whereas policy statements and traditional media focussed predominantly on macro-economic management and national industrial relations policy including Work Choices, the most discussed issues in new media were:

1. Education and schools – often local (23 per cent);
2. Health and hospitals – often local (22 per cent);
3. The environment including climate change, carbon trading, forests, etc (17.7 per cent);
4. Water management, particularly local rivers and dams (11.5 per cent);
5. Social welfare for the poor and under-privileged (11 per cent);
6. Roads, particularly local (10 per cent);
7. WorkChoices and industrial relations (9.7 per cent);
8. Economic management (8 per cent);
9. Farming and rural industry (6.6 per cent);
10. Veterans affairs (5.75 per cent).

The leading issues discussed in policy statements and traditional media can be seen to be the 7th and 8th most discussed issues in new media. This suggests that new media focus on different issues and potentially are more closely connected to the day-to-day lives and concerns of citizens. This may be a factor of the sample, as only national and metropolitan traditional media were analysed, not local suburban or community media which could be expected to focus on local issues. However, the new media

analysed implicitly or explicitly purported to be national, so there appears to be differences in focus which warrant further investigation.

While politicians and political parties are taking cautious and incremental steps in new media, citizen engagement through the interactive capabilities of new media is being significantly advanced among political interest and activist groups and through citizen journalism and comment posted to social networking sites. Significant interaction and public engagement was found on sites such as Get Up (www.getup.org.au) which claimed more than 200,000 'members' during the election (more than some political parties); Senator On-Line (www.senatoronline.org.au) which stood political candidates in the election and claimed to be the first internet political party in the world; Election Tracker (www.electiontracker.net.au) funded by the not-for-profit youth media and arts group Vibewire to present a youth perspective on political issues; and You Decide (http://youdecide2007.org) which invited citizens to report on issues in their electorates. Also, a specialist Australian federal election site set up by Google (www.google.com.au/election2007) provided searchable information on political speeches and policies in an 'On the Record' section and a facility to check electoral names and boundaries in Google Maps.

In addition, the Australian Centre for Public Communication (2008, p. 37) study reported that, despite some self-indulgent rants, a number of independent blogs contributed incisive analysis and commentary and more accurately predicated the election result than traditional media which focussed on reporting opinion polls. One blog, Club Bloggery commented that "unlike the mainstream media, they [bloggers] have been able to carry out analyses and host conversations that reveal the range of community opinions" and, as an example, noted "the blogosphere – which is not hitched so tightly to the campaign caravan – has been better able to offer in-depth analysis, discussion and deliberation about climate change policy" (Club Bloggery, 2007, ¶ 4). The first part of this claim was evidenced by interactive discussion in blogs which is not possible in traditional media, but the second generalisation about in-depth analysis of climate change policy was a subjective claim. Further research is necessary to identify whether blogs generally provide more in-depth analysis, discussion and deliberation than traditional media.

Conclusions

Overall it can be concluded that it was not the "YouTube election" or "internet election" as claimed in some media and online comment, given the limited use of new media by most politicians and the predominantly one-way controlled approach used by politicians and major political parties. However, an increase in citizen outreach and engagement is evident compared with previous elections. Also, some actors in the public sphere, notably political interest and activist groups and some bloggers (citizen reporters) are engaging in interaction with citizens and offering opportunities for participation, thus increasing the range of information and viewpoints available.

Research by Chen and Walsh (in press) reached similar conclusions. They comment: "Online civil society was a visible presence during the 2007 election. Though perhaps not as significant as made out by popular mass media, a number of types of civil society actors became prominent during the campaign." They instanced citizen journalists, political commentary blogs, grassroots online activists, "subversive forms of political satire" and "the occasional hacking".

Subversive forms of political satire were particularly prevalent on YouTube where what Chen and Walsh (in press) call "guerrilla videomakers" posted numerous spoofs, parodies and comments including obscene language and abuse. A question to be asked is whether this is a failure of new media to provide a public sphere of political discourse as envisioned by Habermas (1989, 2006), or whether spoofs, parodies and even abuse are part of the public sphere, allowing citizens to express their views in their own language and cultural context rather than being bound to a lingering liberal bourgeois concept of political discourse that requires reasoned and rational debate (Habermas, 1989).

Another key issue for ongoing debate is whether new internet media genre such as blogs, YouTube and social utilities such as MySpace can reach beyond small niche audiences, or whether, as some say, they can only be effective when they *intermediate* with press, radio and/or television through which they can reach large mass audiences. Jenkins (2006) says of viewpoints posted online "the real challenge is to get those

ideas back into mainstream media" (p. 207). However, this research found that, while traditional media report extensively on new media as a topic of interest, their respective content is often significantly different. Nevertheless, Chen and Walsh (in press) note that the ALP's Kevin07 web site gained press, radio and TV coverage that "reinforced notions of progressiveness, change and modernity, a favourable image the ALP was happy to project, regardless if limited number of electors visited their sites". Also, widespread discussion of new media in traditional media is inevitably contributing to community awareness of these new media.

Intermediation is not one-way benefiting only new media though. Traditional media have a fascination with new media at three levels. First, they are often a news source from which press, radio and television gain leads and content such as images of the London bombings from citizen reporters on the scene. Conversely, new media gain wide distribution when their content is picked up by press, radio or television such as when the Monica Lewinski-Bill Clinton relationship first reported by blogger Matt Drudge became world headlines. At a second level, traditional media are fascinated with new media as a news subject. The novelty of new media make their users appear up with the times and this is arguably a driving force behind some new media use by politicians and political parties. Thirdly, despite sometimes relying on them for news, information and leads and exploiting their novelty value for headlines, traditional media concurrently hold conflicted views about new media, seeing them also as competitors and often striving to assert and maintain their dominance. For instance during the 2007 Australian federal election build-up period, the leading national daily *The Australian* commented in an editorial: "while Myspace and YouTube are important arenas for reaching out to younger voters, the decisive battles will be waged in the mainstream media" (Winning battlers, 2007, p. 15). This remains to be seen, as new media genre develop and expand, as content is increasingly intermediated both ways between media types, and as media platforms continue to hybridise. That traditional media see it necessary to defend their position is perhaps the most significant sign of change afoot.

The Australian Centre for Public Communication (2008) study concluded that the most likely mediascape of the future is one in which intermediation, as well as what Roger Fidler (1997) called *mediamorphosis*, and hybridisation will continue. The report noted: "In future, all media content may be 'mash ups' and intermediation will be the norm" (p. 11).

The evolution of new media is likely to be gradual, tensioned and contingent on many factors. In *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins (2006) summed up from a US perspective what Australian Centre for Public Communication (2008) confirms in Australia saying "the new media operate with different principles than the broadcast media that dominated American politics for so long: access, participation, reciprocity, and peer-to-peer rather than one-to-many communication." He concluded that "given such principles, we should anticipate that digital democracy will be decentralised, unevenly dispersed, profoundly contradictory, and slow to emerge" (p. 208). But some level of digitally-enhanced democracy is emerging and bringing a changed sense of community, a greater sense of participation, less dependence on official channels and expertise, and a repositioning of politics within popular culture.

A further general observation from this research is that it is probably time to drop the terms 'mainstream media' and 'new media'. While 'new media' is a useful shorthand term for a range of media that do not fit into the established categories of press, radio or television, the internet, first established with interactive features including newsgroups in 1969, and the web developed with the first browser in 1991, are now approaching the end of their third and second decades respectively. It is time to recognise the internet as a mainstream media type. Also, the range of internet media and communication applications, rather than being a source of confusion, can be identified as new genre of internet media. Just as news, current affairs, features, documentaries, talk-back and drama are media genre within press, radio and television, web sites, blogs and social network utilities such as MySpace, YouTube and Facebook are genre peculiar to the internet.

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