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Who's Afraid of the MSM?

By Jason Wilson, Axel Bruns, and Barry Saunders

Recent public spats between mainstream industrial journalism and citizen-led media – news bloggers and citizen journalists – actually mask their increasing interdependence, and obscure the advantages to be gained on both sides by recognising and nurturing this. A comparison between two recent moments of exchange between the “MSM” and its citizen counterpart illustrates both the scope of the conflict, and the underlying reality: citizen media is heavily reliant on the mainstream as a source for activities of [“gatewatching”](#) and metacommentary, and professional journalists are increasingly willing to turn to citizen media for news, talent and content.

The first incident follows common patterns of conflict between pro and am journalism. In what's become known as the ‘12th of July incident’, Australia’s national daily newspaper made good on a threat to “go” some [prominent public affairs bloggers](#) and rival online news service Crikey over their dissenting interpretations of Newspoll figures. There are already many print and online column inches devoted to the incident, but it is worth rehearsing the story briefly in the interests of comparison.

In brief: by mid-2007 The Australian and its political editor Dennis Shanahan had been persistently criticised over six months by public affairs bloggers – including online psephology (statistical, scientific election analysis) sites such as [Mumble](#) – for putting a “positive spin” on the Coalition Government’s polling figures as determined by News Limited’s own polling service, Newspoll. Whereas the polls seemed to be consistent (and fairly static) in showing the Government’s diminished popularity, it was imputed by many – including the pundits at [Crikey](#) – that the paper was unscientifically reading small poll movements as signs that Rudd’s honeymoon was over, and that the Government was about to turn the corner in public sympathies. Along with this came complaints of a conservative bias at the paper.

The Australian’s exasperation at bloggers’ taunts that it was little more than the “Government Gazette” boiled over in an [extraordinary editorial](#) on the 12th of July, 2007, where bloggers were attacked for being “out of touch with ordinary views” and were told that “unlike Crikey, we understand Newspoll because we own it.” (Many of the newspaper’s readers were no doubt led to Crikey and the public affairs blogs for the first time by the editorial, eager to find out what the fuss was about.)

It should be understood that The Australian’s assertion of “ownership” of Newspoll in this connection is not an objection to it being quoted and discussed by other media outlets. Indeed, the fortnightly Newspoll normally sets the agenda for political reporting across the media, including outlets not owned by News Ltd, and this is precisely what the poll is intended to. It can also influence political events, as seen in the near-implosion of the Howard Government in mid-September 2007 after Newspoll showed them trailing the Opposition by sixteen points after preferences. Newspoll allows the company to be not just a reporter of events, but a catalyst for them – a political actor. News and The Australian want people – politicians, colleagues and ordinary citizens – to talk about the poll figures, but what The Australian’s leader-writer could not accept were the consistent, ongoing challenges to the newspaper’s authority to interpret the results and predict the political future. The intention of the editorial was not to guard “ownership” in the sense of the intellectual property that inheres in the results of the polls. Rather, this is a struggle over the prestige, authority and cultural capital that maintains influence and attracts audiences.

The Australian’s decision to “go” the bloggers on polling can be seen as indicative of a range of underlying tensions. It perhaps shows, as the bloggers argue, how much some writers at the paper have riding on an unlikely Coalition victory. It most certainly indicates how much heat there is remaining in Australia’s left-right “culture wars”. It also gauges the pressure that the Rudd ascendancy is bringing to bear on right-of-centre opinion-makers, who have until now been able to claim – like Howard – a special insight into the mind of “mainstream Australia”. To be fair, Shanahan himself suggests that it demonstrates how much writers at

the Australian were offended by the personal vitriol with which they felt they were attacked in some quarters (and here it should be said that some bloggers – both Left and Right - do take an unrealistically jaundiced view of the “MSM”). The fact that it is polls rather than policy issues that generated the argument might be, as politicians like Senator Andrew Bartlett suggest, a sad reflection on the state of Australian political discourse, which places a premium on theatrical competition and “the contest” rather than policy content. (For Wednesday’s Australian to suddenly [adopt that view](#) and lament that the media and those pesky, ever-present bloggers “indulge in the reporting of politics as if it were a sporting match”, however, seems more than a bit rich given the paper’s own contributions to that particular contest.)

An epilogue to this typical example of citizen/mainstream media interchange is instructive, suggesting that the opposition between the mainstream media and the blogosphere is not as clear as this conflict might suggest, and that citizen and professional journalism are already deeply intertwined in Australia. When Tim Dunlop, recruited by News as a blogger from his own site [The Road to Surfdom](#), criticised the editorial on [Blogocracy](#), news.com.au removed it. The piece was reprinted by a sharp-eyed contributor to [Larvatus Prodeo](#), so that News’s attempt to silence its blogger backfired. When Jason interviewed him, Dunlop deadpanned that he was “not very happy” with this result, even to the extent of considering his position with news.com.au, but he was persuaded by readers to stay on as one of the few left-of-centre voices in the organisation.

Oddly, this knock-on effect of the original editorial shows that despite The Australian’s bluster, News is already making some significant accommodation to the rise of citizen media, and is recognising its impact and importance. This is true even if it is not yet making structural changes or making space available to reflect the dialogical structure and temporality of blogging. Dunlop’s employment at News is instructive: The Australian’s failure to represent left-of-centre voices during the tenure of the Howard Government has contributed to what many recognise as a flowering of left-wing opinion in the blogosphere. Avowedly left wing voices, and even the brave remaining bands of “small l” Liberals, have few national outlets, and they have therefore disproportionately engaged with the possibilities of the new online spaces. The looming change of government might leave News looking out of step with the national mood if it were not, somewhere in the organisation, encouraging a diversity of opinion. News’s employment of Dunlop is not only an implicit recognition of the lack of diversity in its own pages, though, but also of the blogosphere as a place where talent and content can be sourced, and as a space where some bloggers have become extremely skilled at fostering dialogue and exchange with their readers, successfully using techniques and a welcoming tone that many mainstream commercial outlets still struggle to reproduce.

At the same time, the incident shows the extent to which bloggers feed on the mainstream news agenda, even when they are subjecting it to critical scrutiny. The fact that the fight was over polling indicates the prominence of psephological blogs – like [Mumble](#), [Possums Pollytics](#) and [The Poll Bludger](#) – in the Australian political blogosphere, outlets which often discuss published poll data such as Newspoll’s. The Australian’s fit of pique indicates the extent to which left-wing bloggers comment on the mainstream news agenda as expressed in organs like the Oz. The old canard that bloggers “never break stories” seems a little pointless when we survey the amount of space given over in daily newspapers to commentary and analysis on polling data. But it’s true, as pointed out in Axel’s work, that bloggers regularly perform a special kind of “[gatewatching](#)” role, pointing readers in the direction of MSM stories and at the same time offering a sustained metacommentary on individual items or trends in particular outlets which the industrial news cycle is unable to provide.

In any case, a more recent event shows that mainstream outlets are more than willing to quietly pick up on stories that citizen journalists break when they coincide with the news agenda. Recently, as part of our work on [Youdecide2007](#) (a citizen journalism site run by QUT in partnership with On Line Opinion, SBS, Cisco Systems and the Brisbane Institute) Jason [interviewed](#) Peter Lindsay, MP for Herbert, and specifically asked him about housing affordability in the Townsville region. Perhaps forgetting the “message” briefly, or giving in to the temptation to lecture, Mr. Lindsay repeated the opinions of mortgage brokers he had

talked to that mortgage stress was a result of the “financial illiteracy” of free-spending young people, and contrasted it with his own experience when younger of “sitting on milk crates” until he could afford furniture.

The interview was picked up and became the basis of a parliamentary question by Kevin Rudd to the Prime Minister, where he asked if the PM endorsed Lindsay’s “milk crate solution” to housing affordability. This piece of parliamentary theatre was picked up by AAP, and run in all [major Fairfax papers](#) as well as the Townsville Bulletin. The local Labor candidate, George Colbran, had some fun with the story on local television, brandishing a milk crate for the cameras and saying that “THIS is Peter Lindsay’s solution to housing affordability!”

Admittedly, the story was a one day wonder for the national press, but what it showed were the possibilities of one kind of “hyperlocal” citizen journalism in a context where political reporting tends to be highly centralised in the echo chamber of the Canberra press gallery. National reporters are only ever likely to speak with front line performers on either side of the house; local reporters do not have a national forum, or a reliable channel to a national audience. If citizen journalism starts breaking stories ahead of the national media, it may be on this basis, where members who are on the government’s or opposition’s “reserve benches” are led to reveal their real opinions in a context where they don’t feel threatened by the questions of professional journalists. But such grassroots reporting goes well beyond attempting to trip up representatives. Our project, at least, is about giving national issues a local relevance, and aggregating local stories for a new kind of coverage that is different from the increasingly “presidential” narratives of the MSM.

Newspaper editors, we feel, should be studying experiments like this sympathetically, and with an eye to the future, and looking to the blogosphere for the next generation of knowledgeable, clever, engaged political commentators.

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