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Bloggers Watch as Journalists Turn on Each Other over Worm

By Axel Bruns, Jason Wilson, and Barry Saunders

In spite of the growing evidence of the role of bloggers like [Possums Pollytics](#) and citizen journalism projects like our own [Youdecide2007](#) as alternative commentators and opinion leaders in the federal election campaign, mainstream media from print to television remain crucial, of course. Indeed, the two are anything but mutually exclusive, and so - [along with 2.4 million other viewers](#) across the three channels broadcasting it - bloggers tuned in on Sunday to watch [the 'great debate' between John Howard and Kevin Rudd](#).

Though not necessarily adopting [the yoga pose of one of the ABC's debate watchers](#), Australian bloggers looked to a number of their own strengths in order to survive suffering through what at times appeared a rather stilted, formulaic contest between the two candidates for the top job; many leading Australian blogs provided [live blog coverage](#) of the event, offering a blow-by-blow, distributed running commentary as the debate was aired.

Unpacked in this process were not only the policies and political positions of the two leaders (few of whom, frankly, went significantly beyond what they'd announced already during the campaign so far), but also many of the more technical aspects of the debate itself, from Howard's body language to Rudd's tendency to fall back on well-worn 'on-message' phrases. A fair few contributors noted Rudd's initial nervousness and [occasional waffling](#), while many bloggers also commented on Howard's [apparent discomfort with his dentures](#) and [occasional nervous twitching](#).

But as it's turned out, such live blogging coverage was really little more than the entrée to a main course of debate and discussion about 'the worm', Nine's surprisingly controversial squiggly line. Bloggers have become keen followers of the emerging fight over the worm, and have quickly added to the process of examining the network of accusations and counter-accusations on who may have been behind the attempt to pull the Nine Network's live feed of the debate in mid-broadcast.

Following on from the squabble over the format of the debate, the worm controversy further highlights not only the Liberal Party's strong concerns over [Howard's traditionally poor performance in televised debates](#), but also the deep divisions amongst Australian journalists on whether and how far to accommodate such concerns.

As the controversy has developed, few participants (save perhaps debate winner Kevin Rudd, and Nine's chief worm farmer Ray Martin), have emerged undamaged. The Liberal Party machine had already shown its nerves by insisting on a hobbled debate format which deliberately excluded the wider public from the event; some suggestions that it pressed for Nine's feed to be pulled only further play into this perception. The ABC, as broadcast organiser, seemed all too eager to unplug the competition (and the quality especially of Rudd's microphone was [atrocious for most of the debate](#), anyway).

Most tarnished by the spectacle, however, is the National Press Club, whose declared aim it is, after all, ["to provide a genuine national forum for discussion of the issues of the day by the personalities who help shape them"](#). Even if we're generous enough to call the debate format itself a genuine forum, then disconnecting Nine's 1.4 million debate viewers hardly seems compatible with that aim, even more so if, as many blog commentators now suggest, the NPC did so on the direct or indirect urging of Liberal apparatchiks.

Current speculation about the behind-the-scenes dynamics of the night highlights especially the role of veteran print journalist Glenn Milne. Nicknamed the 'poison dwarf' of Australian political journalism by Paul Keating, and best known for [his physical attack on Crikey founder Stephen Mayne at last year's Walkley Awards for Journalism](#), commenters on leading blogs were surprised to discover that such disreputable behaviour had done nothing to disqualify Milne from holding a position as Vice President of the National Press Club.

As Grace Pettigrew opined on *Larvatus Prodeo*, "[after drunkenly assaulting Steven Mayne at the Walkleys earlier this year, you would think Milne would not have the effrontery to stand for such a position, or have the support to be elected](#)". His scoring of the leaders' performance in favour of Howard in the post-debate coverage also raised many a digital eyebrow (and made Milne one of only a handful of commentators to do so, in the face of overwhelming public and critical sentiment to the contrary).

Bloggers have been asking: if [the NPC pulled the plug on Nine's direct debate feed](#) (requiring the broadcaster to switch to a backup and, when that feed was also cut, to rebroadcasting the Sky News signal), ask the bloggers, could it have been Milne who was behind the decision to do so? Milne's bizarre suggestion the following day that by broadcasting the worm Nine have somehow "[harmed the political process](#)" certainly hints at a less than impartial role in the spectacle. But whoever at the Press Club made that decision, for a journalists' association to attempt to undermine the reporting on a matter of intense national interest so dramatically is nothing short of embarrassing.

At any rate, there are very few commentators in the Australian blogosphere - [including bloggers on the right](#) - who haven't scored the debate and the controversy surrounding it well in favour of Kevin Rudd. Added to the unmitigated electoral poison of Alexander Downer and Peter Costello (blog nicknames: Dolly and the \$mirker) heckling from the front row like a couple of hormone-driven schoolboys, this debate has turned out even more damaging for their electoral chances than the Coalition must have feared - Liberal campaign managers must be hoping the [Costello-Swan](#) and [Downer-McClelland](#) debates turn out more successful...

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