

This is the author version of an article published as:

**Wilson, Jason A. and Bruns, Axel and Saunders, Barry (2007)
Jumping the Shark. In ABC News Online: Club Bloggery, Australian
Broadcasting Corporation.**

Copyright 2007 (The authors)

Accessed from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au>

Jumping the Shark

By Jason Wilson, Axel Bruns, and Barry Saunders

Collectively, the writers here at Club Bloggery have been watching the Australian political blogosphere for years. We know that the bloggers who have perhaps been most important and prominent down under are [psephologists](#) – specialist electoral statisticians who try to understand and analyse polls, and consider the interlocking numbers games of electoral politics.

Head counters like the anonymous [Possum Comitatus](#), [Simon Jackman](#), [William Bowe](#), and [Peter Brent](#) produce accessible, incisive, original takes on polling, and engage in prolonged discussion with their readers about the meaning and import of their analysis. Week after week, free of charge, they offer in-depth analysis on polling that improves our understanding of the political process and of how party strategists think. That's why we were surprised this week when a journalist in The Australian, Samantha Maiden, attacked a few psephs by name, implying that their sites amounted to little more than left-wing wish-fulfilment.

Perhaps our surprise was unwarranted. We've written [before](#) about how The Australian earlier this year [attacked](#) bloggers who pointed out that the newspaper's poll interpretations simply did not match the clear trends that the figures were describing. While the polls were showing a clear and obvious Rudd ascendancy, the Oz regularly predicted Government "bounces", "narrowings" and "recoveries" that have never quite materialised. "We understand Newspoll because we own it," trumpeted its editorial, embarrassing even Newspoll's own analysts.

Weighing in for a rematch, Maiden called [Possums Pollytics](#) and the [Poll Bludger "online therapy" for Labor voters](#). Maiden's claim was that all year, the blogs have provided hope and sustenance for die-hard lefties who are concerned about an imminent Howard recovery. She paints a picture of "a subculture infested with Labor-loving pessimists who have spent the year dreading the Newspoll that shows the Coalition is back in the game", and condescendingly imagines a Monday night ritual where left-sympathisers log on, tune in and wig out in anticipation of the latest Newspoll. Maiden visualises the psephs' readerships as awaiting Tuesday morning with "fear, trepidation, excitement and furious reinterpretation," and sees it as a twilight zone where "The Australian's analysis of the result is always wrong."

If the psephs' readers did always assume The Australian was wrong, it would surely be justified by the paper's consistent tendency to talk up bad poll news for Labor. If the psephological bloggers have attracted a loyal audience, it's because they offer reasoned, evidence-based, long-term assessments of a range of poll data, which takes into account not just Newspoll but other surveys, as well as betting markets, leaked internal party materials, and anything else that gives quantitative insights into electoral behaviour. Once again, it's hard to see this salvo from the Australian as anything other than a cranky reaction to the diminishment of their authority, as bloggers attract a premium readership by offering more considered takes on the electoral battle.

If the last week is any guide, if there's bias in the air, it's not coming from the bloggers. Possum Comitatus offered a stark, [simple and persuasive illustration](#) of the direct relationship between rises in the cash rate and the ALP's primary vote on Wednesday, and on Thursday followed it up with a [patient explanation](#) of the statistically significant relationship – and the time-lag – between rate rises and spikes in the ALP's two party preferred vote. Possum was clear, showed his working, coached his readers in statistical methodologies and allowed for the possibility of diverging interpretations. The results were compelling.

Meanwhile, over at the Oz, Caroline Overington was trying to argue that [the rate rise would surely benefit the Coalition](#). This was based on a small segment of Newspoll that measures voters' trust in which party is best placed to manage the economy, but most of all on Overington's insight into the voters' "gut instincts". As with all true believers, her certainty about this interpretation was in inverse relation to the evidence on offer – for Overington and

a few of her fellow columnists, a view of the Coalition as inherently superior economic managers has turned into a quasi-religious credo. Judging by the 450-odd readers' comments the piece received, the audience didn't buy it.

The tendentiousness continued on Thursday in the Australian, with front-page proclamations that business was [backing Howard on rates](#), full coverage of the PM's [somewhat qualified contrition](#) on the rise, and Dennis Shanahan's reading of the detail of the (pre-rate rise) Tuesday Newspoll carried under the headline, "[Home owners in mood to forgive](#)", even though the data he was analysing showed the Coalition trailing with voters in every age group except the over-50s. We'd ask our readers to make their own judgment about who is engaging in wish-fulfilment or carrying out journalism-as-therapy.

It's a small slice of the campaign to date, but what it shows is bloggers analysing evidence in good faith, with scientific transparency, precision, and attention to fact, and in ways that establish new perspectives on poll movements. On the other side we have a national daily newspaper giving over space to partisan cheerleading. For some time now, TV watchers have pointed out moments when their favourite shows run out of puff, and "[jump the shark](#)" (a reference to a Happy Days plotline towards the end of its run). The Australian's pundits, it seems, are now standing perilously close to the water's edge, contemplating that a Labor win might very decidedly spell the end of their own happy days.

Media historians may well record The Australian's development into an openly right-of-centre paper over the tenure of the Howard government as a marketing triumph, and, although there is room for concern over the lack of diversity in Australia's media ownership, there is no problem as such with papers following particular editorial lines. As media researchers, we're comfortable with the idea that particular outlets are rarely completely objective, and we think that many consumers are accustomed to taking familiar biases into account as they read the news. What grates many, though, are myopic accusations of partiality which go well beyond the pot calling the kettle black. Pieces like Maiden's can simultaneously be read as attempt to delegitimise new spaces for political commentary, and to provide a smokescreen for a catalogue of bias and error that makes The Australian seem radically out of touch with the mood in the electorate.

First published at *Gatewatching*:

<http://gatewatching.org/2007/11/10/club-bloggery-part-6-jumping-the-shark/>

Also published in a condensed version at *ABC Online*:

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2007/11/09/2086436.htm>