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Club Bloggery: Baillieu and the Blogs of War

By Jason Wilson, Axel Bruns and Barry Saunders

On Saturday night the [story broke](#) about two Victorian Liberal Party staffers who had been sacked for blogging.

Needless to say, they weren't using the blog to share recipes or post pictures of their cats. Rather, it was a venue for some pointed, ad hominem criticism of the party's parliamentary leader in the State, Ted Baillieu. Although the original blog has been locked down, a range of people have taken the trouble to [archive](#) its contents elsewhere. Care for a sample?

"With ambition not seen since the early life of Mao Tse Tung; with paranoia not seen since the time of Emperor Tiberius; and a proclivity for nepotism not seen since the papal court of Pope Innocent the tenth - Red Ted is the ultimate hypocrite. If you think about it for a moment Ted Baillieu has many of the attributes of a Roman Emperor, except greatness."

It could be dismissed as the merest abuse if it came from outside the party, but given that it was set up and maintained from the Liberals' State headquarters, and the formerly anonymous bloggers were unmasked as paid party operatives, revelations about the "blogs of war" have had a range of consequences. Not least of these has been making Baillieu's already shaky leadership start to look terminal.

Breaking blog

Part of the interest here for us is that the story of the sackings was broken by a blogger. From Monday it was all over the media, and the first mainstream outlet to run it was [the Sunday Age](#). But it first came to light in [The Other Cheek](#), the gleefully-muckraking, tabloid-style blog of Andrew Landeryou.

Landeryou's political preferences mean that he's been supportive of the bloggers in his reporting, backing their criticisms of the "latte-sipping" Baillieu's leftward drift. (Other right-of-centre bloggers like Andrew Elder have instead [condemned](#) their "treachery" to their leader)

Landeryou has some purchase in the mainstream media with a News Limited column, but essentially he's working in the blogging space, using his political, business and media contacts to embarrass, harass and hold to account the state's worthies and not-so-worthies, and his own enemies, through open publishing.

Whatever you think of his politics, Landeryou is a lively and engaging writer who finds things out - one whose "inquisitive" approach allows him to uncover and share new information. This isn't his first scoop, and it almost certainly won't be his last.

The second interesting thing is the way in which the technology of blogging has helped to embarrass and imperil a party's leadership. There's some justified scepticism towards experts who argue that blogging is already having significant effects on political institutions, but incidents like this make their claims more compelling.

The lure of blogging's apparent anonymity, instant posting and global distribution has in this case led a couple of staffers to risk publishing things that they would hitherto have reserved for bar-room gossip. Time and again, the history of blogging has shown that online anonymity isn't quite as complete or safe as we might think. This won't be the last time that careers are threatened, and political earthquakes felt, as a result of blogospheric indiscretions by those who thought they were untraceable.

Blanket ban?

Unfortunately, all this will probably lead the Liberals to crack down on staff blogging - one might guess that a blanket ban has been instituted (or reiterated) in the Victorian branch already. Once the Schadenfreude has ebbed away, other branches and other parties might well do the same. We'd suggest, though, that this could only be counterproductive, and that the entire situation has only arisen precisely because of a widespread reluctance to engage with the possibilities of the new media of [produsage](#).

Towards the end of the election campaign, Jason and Marcus Westbury [pointed out in Crikey](#) that the Liberals, above all others, had refused any involvement with online political initiatives. Reports since the election have suggested that the ban on online campaigning may have come down from on high, perhaps even from the artist formerly known as "she who must be obeyed", Janette Howard.

From these facts, it might reasonably be concluded that the lack of organisational engagement with blogs, citizen journalism or social media has meant that Liberal Party staffers and parliamentary representatives alike are uneducated about the opportunities and threats posed by these platforms.

A quick workshop on the limits of online anonymity might have led the sacked staffers to lock down their blogs, take more precautions, and at least maintain their blogs from home computers. Bespoke internal online forums might have enabled them to vent their spleen in less damaging ways. But the staffers and the party were unprepared for an anonymous blog to have such wide-ranging consequences, mostly because they haven't taken the trouble to understand or use the new platforms.

All of this just underlines the fact that online publishing platforms are now firmly established as a part of the political landscape.

"The media" which politicians have always had to deal with are more ubiquitous now, and less manageable. It's harder to play gatekeeper on internal dissent, and harder to crisis-manage when dissent becomes public.

Political parties who fail to adapt will continue to be embarrassed by blogs; those who do not professionally incorporate the new platforms into their communications strategies will increasingly come to look like amateurs.

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