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Citizen Journalism and Political participation: The *Youdecide* project and the 2007 Australian Federal Election

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ABSTRACT

The 2007 Australian Federal election not only saw the election of a Labor government after 11 years of John Howard's conservative Coalition government. It also saw new levels of political engagement through the Internet, including the rise of citizen journalism as an alternative outlet and mode of reporting on the election. This paper reports on the *Youdecide 2007* project, an initiative undertaken by a QUT-based research team to facilitate online news reporting on the election on a 'hyper-local', electorate-based model. We evaluate the *Youdecide* initiative on the basis of: promoting greater citizen participation in Australian politics; new ways of engaging citizens and key stakeholders in policy deliberation; establishing new links between mainstream media and independent online media; and broadening the base of political participation to include a wider range of citizen and groups.

KEYWORDS

Australia; politics; participation; citizen journalism; Internet; media; democracy; access.

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Contextual Factors behind the Rise of Citizen Journalism

The emergence of contemporary citizen journalism begins with the mass popularisation of the Internet from 1993-94. The Internet consists of both the technical infrastructure of computers, telecommunications networks and digital connecting devices, such as servers and routers, and the content, communications and information that are produced, circulated and distributed through these networks. Lievrouw and Livingstone (2005:2) have argued that, in understanding the Internet as new media, we need to conceive of it as consisting of three interdependent elements: (1) the *artifacts or devices (technologies)* that enable and extend our ability to communicate; (2) the *communication activities and practices* we engage in to develop and make use of these technologies; and (3) the *social arrangements, institutions and organizational forms* that develop around the use and management of these technologies. In other words, we need to think about the Internet and new media not simply as convergent communications technologies, but as a social technology having a wider impact upon communication practices and institutions.

Journalists understood the impact of the Internet as a disruptive technology quite quickly, although the extent of the disruption on communication and organization more generally was underestimated for many years. Media theorists such as Ithiel de

Sola Pool (1983) correctly ascertained that journalists would quickly identify the potential for the Internet to enhance their professional capacities. It provided vastly expanded access to information, new distribution channels, and the scope to better verify and triangulate information sources. The Internet also emerged at a time of a perceived crisis for journalism, arising from a sense of growing disconnect between journalism as an organized and institutionalized professional practice, and the audiences and communities it intended to serve.

Daniel Hallin's *We Keep America on Top of the World* (1994) captured some of the dimension of that crisis. Hallin argued that the period from the 1960 to the late 1980s marked a period of 'High Modernism' in American journalism, as 'an era when the historically troubled role of the journalist seemed fully rationalised, when it seemed possible for the journalist to be powerful and prosperous and at the same time independent, disinterested, public-spirited, and trusted and beloved by everyone, from the corridors of power around the world to the ordinary citizen and consumer' (Hallin 1994: 172). The 'journalist as hero' had a clear image in the popular consciousness, as Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford portrayed the *Washington Post* journalists Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward in the 1976 film *All the President's Men*, about the reporting of the Watergate scandal and the resignation of Richard Nixon. Hallin noted, however that there were inherent problems with journalists seeking to fill this vacuum in political institutions and public debate. First, journalists were often 'too close to the powerful institutions whose actions need to be discussed' (Hallin 1994: 175). Second, the commercial nature of news made it difficult for journalists in large, mainstream organisations to veer too far from what they perceive to be 'public sentiment', or to get too far offside with any major political entity, for fear of losing

audience or market share. Third, the journalistic ideal of objectivity tended to generate a focus upon ‘attributions, passive voice constructions, and the substitution of technical for moral or political judgements [that] is largely designed to conceal the voice of the journalist’ (Hallin 1994: 176). In response, Hallin argued for new forms of journalism that aimed to be in dialogue with the wider public rather than ‘mediating between political institutions and the mass public’, and where ‘the voice and judgement of the journalist ... [are] more honestly acknowledged’ (Hallin 1994: 176).

Responses in the 1990s included computer-assisted reporting (CAR) and public journalism. CAR aimed to use the Internet to make journalism a more scientific practice, with its advocates looking to a new era of ‘precision journalism’, where the truth-claims of journalists would be backed up by thickets of verifiable data. Public journalism, also known as civic journalism, aimed to ‘see people as citizens rather than as spectators, readers, viewers, listeners, or an undifferentiated mass’, acting in ways that can ‘bring a genuine public alive’ (Rosen 2000: 680, 683). Public journalism aimed to reinvigorate participatory democracy by emphasising journalism’s social responsibility remit of ‘encouraging citizens to engage each other in a search for shared values’ (Glasser 2000: 683). Despite their differences, each rested on a common assumption that there existed a unique and powerful professional grouping – journalists – who may or may not choose to use new media to better serve another constituency – audiences, or the general public. Both held that the so important choices essentially rested with the profession of journalism itself.

By the 2000s, technological changes were quickly pointing towards a situation where this prospect of adapting new media technologies to otherwise unchanging structures of news production and organization, and associated assumptions about the distinctiveness of journalism as a gatekeeping profession, would be profoundly challenged. Foremost among these would be the developments variously associated with 'Web 2.0' (Musser and O'Reilly 2007), social software (Davies 2003), participatory media (Jenkins 2006) and social networking media (Benkler 2006). The Web 2.0 concept captured features that have long been seen as central to the Web as a communications infrastructure, such as the scope for mass participation, real-time interactivity, collaborative learning, and social networking. They also invoke positive networking effects that arise from harnessing collective intelligence; in other words, the quality of participation increases as the numbers participating increase, and this in turn attracts more users to the sites. Many of the fastest growing web sites and web phenomena of recent years have been based on these principles, such as the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, the user-generated video site *YouTube*, the photography site *Flickr*, DIY blog software such as *Blogger* and *Wordpress*, and the various personalized social networking sites such as *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *Cyworld*, *Orkut*, and *Bebo* (boyd and Ellison 2007).

A key moment in an emerging global awareness of the new possibilities of journalism was the rise of the *Indymedia* (Independent Media Centres) network in the wake of demonstrations in the U.S. city of Seattle against the inaugural summit of the World Trade Organization in November 1999. Indymedia established a bridge between the long traditions of radical or alternative media and the new possibilities for collective, egalitarian and non-hierarchical journalism to be accessed from multiple sources and

distributed globally through the Internet (Atton 2004). *Indymedia* was an explicitly activist intervention in media, but it struggled with the challenge of how to move beyond what Atton (2004: 54) referred to as ‘the “locked circuit” of alternative media participation’. Nevertheless, it demonstrated how new media were enabling both different forms of journalism and different forms of new media organization and distribution to emerge. For Matthew Arnison, one of the developers of the open publishing architecture that enabled the *Indymedia* network to function, the parallels between open publishing and the free and open software movement were explicit, as both drew upon a production process – which, for journalism, includes its editing process – that is open, transparent, participatory and non-proprietary (Arnison 2002; c.f. Bruns 2005).

Citizen journalism aims in principle to ‘invert the “hierarchy of access” to the news by explicitly foregrounding the viewpoints of ... citizens whose visibility in the mainstream media tends to be obscured by the presence of elite groups and individuals’ (Atton 2004: 40). It challenges journalism as a professional ideology by challenging the boundaries and hierarchies of professional authority by enabling alternative voices to receive publicity, thereby ‘challenging the status of the journalist as the sole “expert” or definer of “reality”’ (Atton 2004: 41). It actively seeks and promotes dialogue and interaction around news production values as well as stories (Deuze 2005). Bowman and Willis (2003) referred to this as *participatory journalism*, defined as:

The act of a citizen, or a group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. The

intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires (Bowman and Willis 2003: 9).

Dan Gillmor, founder of the Centre for Citizen Media at the Berkman Centre for the Internet at Society at the Harvard Law School, argued that whereas conventional 'Big Media ... treated the news as a lecture', the new models of citizen journalism in a Web 2.0 environment would see an evolution towards 'journalism as a conversation or seminar', as:

The lines will blur between producers and consumers, changing the role of both in ways we're only beginning to grasp now. The communication network itself will become a medium for everyone's voice, not just the few who can afford to buy multimillion-dollar printing presses, launch satellites or win the government's permission to squat on the public's airwaves (Gillmor 2006: xxiv).

OnmyNews is perhaps the world's most famous citizen journalism initiative. Established in South Korea in 2000, it now has 60,000 citizen journalists nationwide producing alongside a staff of 60 full time journalists and editors. Its Korean-language site has over 750,000 unique visits a day, and it has now established an English-language site (*OhMyNews International*) with 3,000 contributors in over 100 countries, as well as an online video service and, since 2007, a citizen journalism school in Seoul (Siers-Poisson 2007; Min 2008). Oh Yeon-Ho, the founder and CEO of *OhMyNews*, sees online citizen journalism as marking 'a complete departure from the media culture of the 20th century ... [that will] change the culture of how news is

produced, distributed, and consumed, all at one time' (Yeon-Ho 2004). Arguing that every citizen is potentially a reporter, he proposes that 'journalists are not some exotic species; they're everyone who seeks to take new developments, put them into writing, and share them with others'. To that end he proposed three guiding principles for what he has termed the *news guerilla* approach:

1. Abolish thresholds for being a reporter;
2. Break down set formulas for news articles;
3. Demolish the walls that separate media, and separate journalists from citizens (Yeon-Ho 2004).

Exploring the wider implications of such shifts in media power, Couldry (2003) finds the potential significance of citizen journalism and other alternative media initiatives based around user-generated media as lying in their capacity to accumulate organisation and economic resources that can be used to tell different stories, and generate alternative sources of influence. To achieve substantive changes in the concentration, organisation and uses of media, what needs to be looked for are:

1. *New ways of consuming media*, which explicitly contest the social legitimacy of media power;
2. *New infrastructures of production*, which have an impact upon who can produce media and in what circumstances;
3. *New infrastructures of distribution*, which change the scale and terms on which media and other forms of symbolic production in one place can reach other places (Couldry 2003: 44).

For Couldry, the potential arises for new forms of media production and consumption associated with the Internet and user-generated content to generate ‘new hybrid forms of media *consumption-production* ... [that] would challenge precisely the entrenched division of labour (producers of stories versus consumers of stories) that is the essence of media power’ (Couldry 2003: 45).

YouDecide 2007 – An Australian Case Study in Citizen Journalism

Youdecide2007 was an action research initiative undertaken as the first phase of an Australian Research Council-funded Linkage-Project involving researchers in the Creative Industries Faculty at the Queensland University of Technology, with the industry partners including the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), Cisco Systems Australia and New Zealand, online publishers The National Forum (publishers of *On Line Opinion*), and public affairs think-tank the Brisbane Institute.¹ Each of these partners, from their own point of view, has a strong interest in understanding the dynamics and potential of online citizen journalism. In particular, there has been interest in both the capacity of Web 2.0 technologies and social networking media to increase the porosity of boundaries between media organizations and the audiences and communities they serve, and the potential of the ‘participatory web’ to bolster the quality and diversity of citizen inputs into policy networks and the political decision-making process (Stewart-Weeks 2007; Johnson and Stewart-Weeks 2007; OECD 2007). The project aimed to develop online resources that had the potential to promote greater citizen participation in Australian public policy and the political sphere. It also sought to examine the relationship between innovations in digital

journalism and emergent forms of political communication. The project is a case study in *practice-led research*, as it is based upon a cycle of developing and promoting online resources, evaluating their impact in the Australian mediasphere and public sphere, and providing insights for further initiatives in citizen journalism and online political communication.

YouDecide 2007 was developed as an online citizen journalism resource for the Australian Federal election. The site was launched in early September 2007, and operated for three months during the election campaign up to and shortly after the November 23, 2007 election date. It was developed as a collaborative Web site that promotes online coverage of the 2007 Federal Election by a diverse range of *citizen journalists* that will be located within particular electorates. In choosing the 2007 Federal election as an event around which to develop the site, three factors stood out. First, elections tend to coincide with spikes in visits to Web sites, particularly those associated with political news, information and debate. Second, the project team had some experience in managing election sites. In particular, Graham Young, the founder of On Line Opinion and a partner investigator on the project team, brought considerable expertise to understanding the relationship between the Internet and election campaigns, having developed initiatives through *On Line Opinion* for previous Federal and Queensland state elections, as well as being a former Vice-President and campaign director for the Queensland Liberal Party. Finally, and in contrast to issue-based Web sites, there is some degree of predictability surrounding the timing of elections, which enabled effective project management and the marshalling of necessary resources, including legal arrangements for the site that would minimise risk to our industry partners, prior to publicly launching the site.

What insights did we hope to glean? First, we knew that running a citizen journalism site would provide rich information on the likely *audience*, or what Axel Bruns terms the “producers” (Bruns 2005, 2008) for such initiatives, and allow us to understand something about the dynamics of citizen journalism communities. Second, this practical initiative also allowed experimentation with *new forms of news coverage*. In *youdecide2007*, the project team was interested in trying out emerging models of online news, including the site-level aggregation of hyper-local content sourced at the level of the electorate or constituency. In this way we aimed to provide a “bottom-up” counterpoint to the “presidential” narratives of the mainstream media. Third, we were aware that running a citizen journalism site offers a “royal road” to understanding what the work of facilitating citizen journalism consists in. Through reflecting on our work in building and running the service, we hoped we would be able to speak to changes in the nature of media work as news goes online, and as ‘the people formerly known as the audience’ (Rosen, 2006) are brought within the fold as contributors to independent and commercial news production. Finally, a key area of interest for the project team was in discovering what kinds of *relationships* exist, or are possible, between independent, online news media (including citizen journalism initiatives) and mainstream media news services.

The relationship between mainstream media and the ‘blogosphere’ became an issue of growing importance during the course of 2007. With Kevin Rudd becoming leader of the Australian Labor Party in late 2006, it was apparent that a change of government was not only possible but likely, with the Howard government responding by drawing out the election date to as late as possible, and running what was pretty much a

'permanent campaign' through 2007. This in turn fanned ongoing tensions between the national newspaper *The Australian*, which had positioned itself since 2001 in particular as the national newspaper for conservative thought-leadership, and a blogosphere which tends to be politically left-of-centre. The key point of dispute was around interpretations of polling data, with blogs such as *Larvatus Prodeo*, *The Road to Surfdom*, *Mumble*, *Crikey* and *Possum's Pollytics* consistently taking *The Australian*, and particularly its chief political correspondent Dennis Shanahan, to task for what were seen as consistent attempts to put a positive 'spin' for the Coalition on polling data that was consistently indicating an election victory for Labor. These tensions bubbled over in what has been described as the 'July 12 incident' (Bruns 2008; Flew 2008), when an editorial in *The Australian* denounced bloggers as 'woolly headed critics' and 'sheltered academics and failed journalists who would not get a job on a real newspaper' (*Australian* 12/7/07). The editorial, titled 'History a better guide than bias', defended *The Australian's* political coverage, and argued that many bloggers were members of the 'one-eyed anti-Howard cheer squad' are 'out of touch with ordinary views'. In relation to the analysis of opinion polls, it was argued that 'unlike [online political commentary site] *Crikey*, we understand Newspoll because we own it.' *The Australian's* response, which seemed to have little echo elsewhere in the Australian media, indicated that at least some of the leading political commentators were beginning to resent the challenge to their authority to interpret and pass on political information. This pointed in turn to an interesting tension between the 'insider' culture of national political reporting and the new challenges being posed by those 'outsiders' using the Internet and their own knowledge to post alternative interpretations on their blogs.

The *Youdecide 2007* website and its support systems were designed for hybrid purposes. Partly, we needed to address the pragmatics of building a working online citizen journalism community: our site needed to be able to host multimedia content, facilitate community interaction, be user-friendly, allow the processing of content in a way that suited staff and users, and ensure that we met all legal and ethical obligations. This was particularly important as we had a link with the Special Broadcasting Service, which has its own Charter and Codes of Conduct issues, as well as its answerability to parliament on questions ranging from bias to morality, arising from its status as a public broadcaster. The site needed to be developed within a relatively short time frame and within the constraints of the project's resources. Besides working well as a service, it also had to enable subsequent research in each of the project's key areas of interest.

These principles were translated into a working site that was launched in September 2007, well before the campaign proper and the November 23 election. An open-source content management system, *Joomla!* was employed, and heavily customized to allow the submission of multimedia content through the public areas of the site as well as editorial work in the "back end". Statistics modules were included so that user activity could be tracked during and after the site's active life. The aggregated-hyperlocal, electorate-level model for our coverage informed the design and layout of the site – "hard" news content was near the top of the front page, and opinion pieces and media releases were further down. The site had static pages linked to from the front page, which contained technical and legal information, explanations of the initiative, details on licensing and privacy, and guidance in journalistic practice. Users were able to comment on stories, and recent comments were flagged on the front

page. The site required those wishing to post to register as citizen journalists, and a Manual for Citizen Journalists was prepared by Jason Wilson to be downloadable as a PDF. The content of this Manual was approved by the Legal division of SBS.



Figure 1 Front page of Youdecide2007

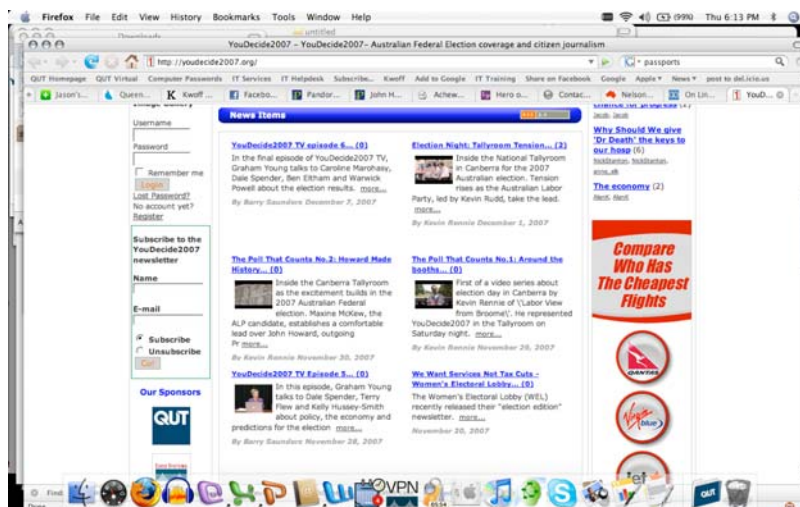


Figure 2 Front page of Youdecide2007

Before and during its active life, a core three-person team managed the day-to-day operation of the site.ⁱⁱ Prior to launching the site, the *Youdecide 2007* initiative was publicized through a *Facebook* page, which attracted 250 members, as well as a *YouTube* video; we also sent out letters to political organizations and to journalism

and media school at Australian universities. Through its active life, the site got around 2000 registered users, and we published 230 stories. These stories came from 50 of Australia's 156 electorates, and citizen journalists submitted print, video, audio and photographic materials. At its peak, the site attracted over 12,000 readers a week, and according to our Nielsen netratings statistics and monitoring of traffic counters like Alexa.com, throughout the election period it was receiving more traffic than all major political parties' sites except the Australian Labor Party. There was also a *You Decide* television program that ran for 30 minutes on Brisbane community television channel Briz31 on Friday nights, and the five programs were also downloadable from the site or from *YouTube*.

Youdecide2007 received significant coverage in the mainstream media, with stories about the site in *The Age*, ABC Radio National, various local ABC radio stations, local newspapers and Fairfax online. The item that received the most hits (about 2000 overall) was an interview with Peter Lindsay, the Liberal member for Herbert (a North Queensland electorate based around Townsville), where he said that 'mortgage stress' was primarily the result of young people lacking financial management skills and getting into debt too easily. Noting that when he was younger, if you could not afford furniture you would sit on a milk crate until you could, the story became known as "Crate-gate", and Lindsay's remarks were referred to by then Opposition leader Kevin Rudd in the House of Representatives. *Youdecide 2007* broke stories that were picked up by the national press, most notably the "crate-gate" story, and the project team was able to send our most accomplished citizen journalist, Kevin Rennie from Broome, WA, in electorate of Kalgoorlie (the world's largest electorate) to the the National Tally Room in Canberra on election night. Although ambitions for such

services tend to be high, *youdecide2007* was considered a successful effort as a citizen journalism service, especially in the Australian context, where little has been attempted in this area.

Evaluating the *Youdecide2007* Initiative

The *Youdecide2007* initiative can be evaluated in terms of achieving its goals of enabling and broadening citizen participation in the 2007 Australian Federal election, and in terms of lessons learnt from the project in terms of the forms of work and community building that are involved in citizen journalism projects.ⁱⁱⁱ This paper focuses upon the contribution to citizen political engagement, and four evaluative criteria have been identified for the project as an initiative in citizen journalism:

1. Promoting greater citizen participation in Australian public policy and the political sphere;
2. Developing innovative approaches to engaging citizen and key stakeholders and decision-makers around issues in Australian public policy;
3. Establishing links to mainstream media, and promoting flows between ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ news gathering practices;
4. Broadening the base of political participation to include a wider range of citizens and groups.

1. *Promoting greater citizen participation in Australian public policy and the political sphere.*

As indicated above, *youdecide2007* made a modest but significant contribution to allowing new voices to be heard during its three months of operation that included the 2007 Australian Federal election campaign. The aim of developing this on a hyperlocal, seat-by-seat basis also had some impact, with contributions from 50 electorates. As well as the Peter Lindsay/ “crate gate” story noted above, other stories that attracted over 400 hits included stories on the environment, nuclear power, ‘pork-barreling’ in marginal electorates, housing affordability, campaign strategies and African immigration, as well as audio interviews with various candidates, and an ‘open opinion thread’ that invited registrants to comment on issues in their local electorate. The project team also developed 60-second video electorate profiles for marginal seats such as Longman (QLD), Herbert (QLD) and Bass (Tasmania). The largest number of site registrants was from Queensland (40%), followed by New South Wales (20%) and Victoria (13.3%), and the significance of Queensland contributions was also seen with 14 of the 20 most represented electorates in terms of site registrants being from Queensland seats, with two from the ACT, one each from NSW, Victoria and South Australia, and one consisting of those ‘not sure’. The largest number of site hits were for stories from the Queensland seats of Brisbane, Herbert, Ryan, Griffith and Moreton, and the Western Australian seat of Kalgoorlie.

Two limitations can be observed. One was that the geographical spread of contribution was uneven, with more contributions from Queensland – the state where the project team was based – than other parts of the country. Interestingly, we did not get stories from what were generally considered to be the two most prominent ‘swing’ electorates, both in Sydney, which were the electorates of Wentworth (inner Sydney,

held by high-profile Liberal MP Malcolm Turnbull, who kept the seat) and Bennelong (inner-northern Sydney, held by the Prime Minister, John Howard, who lost the seat to ALP candidate and former ABC broadcaster Maxine McKew). This pointed to a failure of one strategy that was applied to generate news stories and site content, which was to contact journalism and media programs around the country to promote the site to teaching staff and encourage them to get students to contribute content. Both the Wentworth and Bennelong electorates have high numbers of university students, and were the focus of a lot of mainstream media attention, but *youdecide2007* was not able to generate contributions for these electorates. The preponderance of registrations and contributions from Queensland may also indicate that in such projects, offline networks are important for recruitment and for building momentum. Had the site played out for longer, the Queensland bias may have been lessened.

This tendency towards localism was reinforced by our experience with the *Queensland Decides* site for the 2008 Queensland local government election (www.qlddecides2.org), which in fact received more hits than *youdecide2007*, and developed strong local contributor bases in cities such as Cairns, Moreton, Logan, Brisbane and Wide Bay. The other limitation was that *youdecide2007* became more of a site for posting stories than for discussions about the material posted. While this was perhaps likely with a site developed over a short time frame around a specific, time-bound event such as an election, an approach that aimed to build greater deliberation around policy issue would need a different model. In terms of overall impact, it is wise to observe the point made by Bruns (2008b), that it is perhaps best to understand the site as part of the broader ecology of independent online news and discussion sites that received a lot of traffic during the campaign, including sites such as *On Line*

Opinion and *Larvatus Prodeo*, and to identify the wider influence of online political news and comment sites in terms of this overall ecology rather than upon single sites.

2. *Developing innovative approaches to engaging citizens and key stakeholders and decision-makers around issues in Australian public policy;*

As indicated above, a site that wanted to develop more deliberative communications models that aimed to improve the quality of public participation and decision-making in public policy formation would need to be established over a longer time frame and to have already built a constituency of contributors and users. An important lesson of *youdecide2007* was that, even with a more deliberative and less news driven site, there would be a vital role for site managers and core contributors to develop ‘seed content’ and not only manage but also promote community building and contributions to the site. This is discussed in more detail below.

The other major element of this was the extent of ‘buy in’ from politicians and political organizations themselves. The project team made a point of contacting campaign offices of all major political parties prior to *youdecide2007* going ‘live’, in order to establish our legitimacy and political independence, and to encourage contributions from local candidates. The relationship to political parties presented us with a dilemma. On the one hand, we did not want the site to become a staging point for ‘electoral war by proxy’, where party staffers presented campaign materials disguised as ‘news’ items. On the other hand, we wanted the political parties and candidates to engage with the site, not only to ensure that their policy positions were

represented, but to make it possible for citizens to interact with political parties on the site. This issue was addressed at a design level by having different entry points for News Items, Opinion Pieces and Media Releases, with the front page consisting of news items. In practice, the distinction proved to be hard to maintain, and the *Queensland Decides* site was developed without these different pages.

The buy-in from political parties was variable, with a skew towards minor parties and left-of-centre politics. The Australian Democrats contributed media releases regularly to the site, and material was also received from the Australian Labor Party, the Greens, Socialist Action and various independents. Interviews were conducted with Liberal, Labor, Greens and independent candidates that could be downloaded as an audio or video file and commented on. The glaring absence was sustained participation by the conservative Coalition parties. Through the campaign, the project team speculated that this was because of the embarrassment caused by “crate-gate”, but we learned during and after the campaign proper from colleagues in other organizations that the Coalition had been extremely reluctant to engage with any online initiatives. The major non-project-team contributors to the site tended to have a political affiliation, but contributed stories that clearly had news value. Our best contributor, Kevin Rennie from Broome, WA, declared himself as an ALP supporter in an electorate (Kalgoorlie) held by the Liberals, but his contributions showed a depth of engagement with issues in the electorate that represented the best aspects of citizen journalism. Notably, Rennie contributed the only piece dealing with Aboriginal perspectives, even though the Federal government intervention into Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory was considered to have been one of the major and most debated government policy decisions in 2007.

3. *Establishing linkages to mainstream media, and promoting flows between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' news gathering practices.*

Youdecide2007 was developed as a news and information site that aimed to be complementary to mainstream media in terms of the content that it generated, yet distinctive in terms of how this content was accessed. As to whether it should be considered to be *alternative media*, in the term identified by Atton (2004), it did seek to 'strengthen democratic culture' and to 'sustain a community of citizens engaged in democratic practice', but not in the sense of being one of "channels of resistance" that are deliberately created as oppositional forms of communication by activists or their spokespeople' (Atton 2004: 4-5).^{iv} This was consistent with the approach taken by online publications such as *On Line Opinion*, which seek to get balance over time by seeking contributions from across political divides, as distinct from more avowedly activist models such as the *Indymedia* sites (Deuze *et. al.* 2007; Young 2008). The site aimed to generate content that would be picked up in the mainstream media, through what Hindman (2007) refers to as the 'trickle-up' model that characterizes the capacity of blogs to have wider political and media influence.

It was intended that the site would generate original news content through a mix of 'crowdsourcing', semi-targeted initiatives to attract 'Pro-Am' journalists and bloggers (such as a YouDecide Facebook page and a promotional YouTube video), and electorate-based 'hyper-local' news that could emerge from a mix of 24 key electorates that the project team had identified as decisive to determining who would form the next Australian Federal government. An underlying assumption of the

project was that while large media organizations focus primarily upon the Prime Ministerial candidates, large-scale quantitative opinion polling and national politics, the actual results in individual electorates are significantly shaped by local issues and the distinctive demographic profiles of these localities; as a result, electoral swing are far from uniform, and local trends are better detected by those who live within those areas and who can act as independent voices in that community or region.

The project team therefore took references to *Youdecide 2007* in the mainstream media as success indicators, and we did have some of those both during and after the three-month site operation. Examples included:

MEDIA COVERAGE	EXAMPLES
Articles referring to the project	Piece by Matthew Ricketson in <i>The Age</i> (15/10/07) on ‘Cyberspace Democracy’ that discussed <i>Youdecide 2007</i> , <i>On Line Opinion</i> and <i>Larvatus Prodeo</i> as examples of social media that were changing the politics-media relationship in the 2007 Federal election
Reports on stories first published on <i>Youdecide 2007</i>	‘Crate gate’ story reported in <i>The Age</i> , <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> , <i>The Townsville Bulletin</i> and on ABC Radio. “Meta-story” about the success of citizen journalism reported in Crikey and ABC Radio National’s <i>Media Report</i> .
<i>You Decide</i> television program on Briz31 community TV	Estimated to have attracted a Brisbane audience of 12-15,000, which is close to that of ABC <i>Stateline</i> ,

station which also ran on Friday night

Project team members becoming Axel Bruns, Barry Saunders and Jason Wilson commentators on other media became regular commentators on ABC Online 'Opinion' site with their *Club Bloggery* site; Graham Young was an opinion commentator for *The Australian* during the 2007 campaign; Wilson contributed articles on the initiative to *Crikey* and *New Matilda*.

One of the limitation of the *Youdecide 2007* project was that it did not build the anticipated link that was being sought with the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) as the mainstream media outlet that was also an industry partner on the ARC Linkage project. One factor here was that the SBS Web site underwent a major revision over this period, and while the *youdecide* site could be linked to from the SBS site, few stories from *youdecide2007* were carried on the SBS news site. At the same time, it has been noted that the news and current affairs division at SBS was skeptical about the value of user-generated content as compared to that produced by professional, in-house journalists, while the *youdecide* project was not notably successful in attracting a more culturally diverse range of contributors to site content (see Thurman 2008 for a discussion of public broadcasters and user-generated content in Britain).

4. *Broadening the base of political participation to include a wider range of citizens and groups.*

The scope for online media to broaden participation in the political sphere has been one of the more widely projected possibilities of the Internet. Stephen Coleman (2005a, 2005b, 2006) has argued that liberal democracies in the 20th century refined the politics of indirect representation (politics as elite competition between heavily resourced parties and organisations, and political representatives who were increasingly distanced from the communities and citizens they represented) and virtual deliberation ‘whereby professional politicians and journalists tended to dominate political discussion on behalf of the public’ (Coleman 2005a: 195). Coleman argues that ‘an atmosphere of crisis [that] surrounds virtual deliberation and indirect representation in the early 21st century’, characterized by distrust of political representation, disenchantment with mainstream media coverage of politics, and ‘a post-deferential desire by citizens to be heard and respected more’ (Coleman 2005a: 195). If ‘the framing of 20th century politics by broadcast media led to a sense that democracy amounted to the public watching and listening to the political elite thinking aloud on its behalf’, the rise of interactive online and networked media ‘opens up unprecedented opportunities for more inclusive public engagement in the deliberation of policy issues’ (Coleman 2005b: 209). Coleman argues that engaging the latter constituency provides the basis for a revitalized 21st century political public sphere:

The irony of contemporary democracy is the dependence of the *demos* upon ventriloquized forms of representation. As politics becomes more technocratic and instrumental, it has less to do with contested values and becomes more like an ongoing audition of competing management teams. The public finds this uninspiring. They vote less, watch less and join in less. They are not just

politically disengaged; they disengage as a political act ... Rather than the top-down model of accountability, with its exclusive emphasis on the images, activities and foibles of political representatives, there is scope for a two-way model which, as well as holding politicians to account, enables the public to provide their own accounts of how they want to be represented (Coleman 2006: 476, 477).

Youdecide2007 did not particularly break with the mould in terms of participation. While overall levels of engagement with the site were significant, the bulk of our contributions came from those who Coleman would classify as ‘political junkies’ or ‘PJs’ i.e. those already engaged with the Australian political process. There is no evidence that we stimulated engagement on the part of those who were not already deeply invested in the election, and in politics more generally. One of the difficulties for screening for political affiliation on the site was that it was in fact the politically affiliated who were most likely to engage with the material, and the most viewed material on the site was that written by staff contributors, whose material was most likely to replicate the ‘production values’ of mainstream media reporting.

Conclusion

The *Youdecide2007* project provided an important action research benchmark for the scope to develop independent, online citizen journalism initiatives in Australia and elsewhere. Site hit rates were high, a significant number of new commentators were engaged, and the project attracted attention from the mainstream media as an example of how more participatory model of social media would increasingly shape political

engagement in Australia. Limitations of the project arose in part from a short timeframe in which to develop and publicise the initiative, the failure to realize more sustained links with the mainstream media that would enable two-way news flow, and some geographical biases in terms of participation. Perhaps most importantly, focusing the project around a Federal election generated its own strength and weaknesses. The timeliness and focus of an election-based site is traded off against the tendency for contributions to revolve around immediate news and opinion rather than sustained reflection on policy issues, and the likelihood of participation being partisan and concentrated among those already engaged with the political process rather than deliberative and attracting those who are less politically engaged. Future work in this field will need to consider the models of democracy and participation that inform independent online media initiatives, and whether there are trade-offs between being a news site and a site for citizen engagement.

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ⁱⁱ This team had three full-time, or near-full-time contributors in On Line Opinion's director Graham Young, Barry Saunders, a QUT PhD candidate with extensive experience as a journalist, and Jason Wilson (one of the authors) as project manager. Additional important day-to-day contributions came from Kelly Hussey-Smith, a part-time worker on the project with skills in photojournalism, and Chris Maj, the web developer at OLO, who continued to maintain and modify the site throughout the campaign. Further contributions, especially in the planning stages, were made by senior project team members from QUT CIF – Terry Flew, Axel Bruns, Stuart Cunningham – and SBS – Georgie McLean, Bruce Meagher and Heidi Lenffer –

though this latter group largely took a “hands-off” approach to the day-to-day running of the site during the election.

ⁱⁱⁱ Other evaluations of *Youdecide2007* can be found in Bruns 2008c and Wilson *et. al.* 2008.

^{iv} The *youdecide2007.org* site did in fact carry commercial advertising, which was a modest generator of revenue, and raised the interesting question of how the Australian Research Council deals with research projects that not only involve spending money, but also making money.