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Online Election Forums: The Voice Of The People?

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The Australian Federal election in October 1998 will go down in history for its contrasts. Australia has rarely confronted such a wide range of challenges as we do today, on the eve of the third millennium. Yet the candidates who took part in this election were astonishingly reluctant to face them. Whereas parties big and small have traditionally parried with policies on any area where they thought their opponents were vulnerable, debate in 1998 was narrowly confined to a mere handful of topics, with taxation and employment singled out as the only issues covered in depth by the Australian media. Despite this, there was still a lack of genuinely active discourse between the major parties on these points. The single "great debate" between the Australian Prime Minister John Howard and Labor Opposition leader, Kim Beazley was shunned by television viewers in favour of Australia's performance at the Commonwealth Games. It is not unreasonable to suggest that this was what some political planners had hoped for.

Coinciding with this lack of official discourse, the 1998 election is also noteworthy for being the first election to be held at a time when the Internet was a true mass medium. Admittedly, the Internet was already being used by large numbers of Australians when the 1996 Federal election was called, but the Net then was still in its early growth phase in terms of applications and its user base. The Liberal Party, for example, did not even feature an official home page on the Web when this election was called. Two years later, this situation had changed dramatically. The Internet hosted a variety of online forums relating to Australian politics, giving social researchers a worthwhile opportunity to witness free discourse by the general public. The fact that serious debate was relatively deficient in other forums provides an interesting context for evaluating the significance of the online environment. The results of a study performed on these forums is presented here.

Usenet's Tidal Wave

Aside from mailing lists, the oldest form of mass discourse available to Internet users are newsgroups, otherwise known as news or Usenet groups. The technically pedantic would note that newsgroups were not officially a part of the early Internet, but they have grown to become an integral part of the Internet experience. Today, most people have access to newsgroups through their Internet service provider.

It's worth reflecting on the nature of newsgroups, as many new Internet users aren't as familiar with Usenet as they are with the World Wide Web. Newsgroups are bulletin-board style forums containing text-only messages. Postings to a newsgroup can be read by anyone who can access a news feed, allowing people to drop in and out of newsgroups without the formalities of filling out subscription details. Messages in a particular group circulate on news feeds between various service providers, with no central server or point of control. Naturally, most newsgroups lack any form of editorial moderation. Gradually, as new messages appear, older messages drop out of the archive of postings a particular site will retain: thus, the "lifespan" of a message posted to a newsgroup will vary between sites, and also with the rate of postings to the group. Generally, it is reasonable to expect a message to remain visible to other users for around two weeks.

Messages can be added at any time by readers of a newsgroup, often in response to previous postings. This results in a form of discourse that is not as instantaneous as a live chat forum (such as Internet Relay Chat), but one that still manages to preserve some of the structure of a conversation, even if days pass between replies. A series of postings on the same topic is usually known as a "thread". Some "threads" can be sustained over several weeks with dozens of postings.

The newsgroup *aus.politics* has been an active, vibrant forum for political debate amongst Australian Internet users for years, and pre-dates the invention of the World Wide Web. Monitoring this forum in the lead-up and the aftermath of the election has provided interesting insights into the way people are prepared to take part in civic debate.

The very age of *aus.politics*, along with the traditional culture of any news group as a relaxed place for communal discourse, have naturally given rise to a strong sense of community and a steady level of participation. During periods of relative political inactivity, *aus.politics* still manages to attract between 200 and 400 distinct postings per day. Lurking on this newsgroup quickly reveals some clear sociological trends. The most prolific contributors to *aus.politics* are as regular in their routines as a pub crowd. The political orientations of most of these people are well-known, and discussion in what is ostensibly a public forum often

seems to take on a personal quality. The issues discussed in this newsgroup are sometimes reactions to media-reported events or the actions of Australia's politicians, but these events are discussed within the context of existing viewpoints or existing topics of discussion in the group. The classic model of agenda-setting by the media maintains that while the media may be able to tell people what to think about, it cannot specify what people will think about of any particular issue in question. Discussions on this newsgroup give weight to this argument.

However, the newsgroup prominently discusses many issues that, while they are relevant to Australian politics, are clearly not given much regular coverage by the media. Gun control, foreign policy and international affairs are prime examples. One interpretation of this phenomenon could be provided by the criteria of newsworthiness developed by Galtung and Ruge (1973), who noted that once a news story achieves coverage, it will continue to be covered. The vigorous efforts of certain users with strong interests in these topics ensures that discussions will remain continuous. Furthermore, the culture of newsgroups, with their emphasis on developing "threaded" discussions on existing topics, further reinforces this trend.

The arrival of an election sends an already busy newsgroup into a frenzy. The most obvious result is an astronomical leap in the level of traffic. The date of the 1998 Federal election was officially named by the Prime Minister on Sunday, August 30, a gesture that essentially heralded the start of the campaign season. Traffic in the newsgroup remained relatively constant until September 23, when the number of postings suddenly escalated from roughly 400 per day to approximately 10,000 (figures were obtained from the *DejaNews* search engine). As the election drew nearer, activity on *aus.politics* continued to grow, reaching what is possibly an all-time record of roughly 19,000 postings on Friday October 2, the day before the poll. The end of the campaign failed to dampen the spirit of the group. Postings did not fall below the 10,000 per day mark until October 10, when a mere 6,900 messages were recorded. However, traffic levels soon recovered from this local minimum, and posting tallies were still oscillating above and below the 10,000 mark more than two weeks after the election.

It's worthwhile asking how the newsgroup managed such an explosive transition. Clearly, the announcement of an election made almost anything political not only newsworthy in a traditional sense but very relevant for public discussion. It was time to dust off issues that may not have been active for weeks and re-evaluate them before the poll. Furthermore, there was a new context for debating specific issues. Much of the discussion on *aus.politics* is policy-oriented in an abstract fashion: people may

discuss solutions to specific problems with no reference to the way any party stands on the issue, or if the issue is being discussed in party circles at all. Participants now had the opportunity, and the obligation, to tack these issues to candidates where possible. Another opportunity for discussion came from simply observing the progress of the election campaign itself, a form of discussion that has parallels in the "horse race" style of political journalism.

Regular contributors to *aus.politics* certainly went into overdrive. It was not unusual for the more vocal denizens to contribute more than 30 postings in a given day, as they added their opinions on practically every matter under discussion. Some of these individuals are registered members of political parties, and were clearly trying to garner votes. Others were merely as vocal as they are in less politically interesting times, but changed the focus of their discussions from more abstract issues to more immediate concerns. Yet it's obvious from empirical studies of the group that much of the traffic inflation came from non-regular posters. People who would rarely or never submit their own comments to *aus.politics* now felt compelled to speak. It's probable that many of these people are "lurkers" who are really traditional participants in the newsgroup, but are normally content to read the opinions of others. Some will also probably have been drawn to the newsgroup for the first time, but the author's experience with Net culture suggests that the activation of previously silent lurkers is the most likely contributor. These "new" posters seemed too familiar with the mores of the newsgroup to have only just discovered it.

Clearly, some of the factors that caused *aus.politics* to explode once an election was called were gone as soon as voting was complete. Yet traffic in the group remained high. The results of the poll provided new fuel for discussion, as the most widespread form of public feedback had now delivered its results. Furthermore, the group could also contemplate the impact that Coalition policies would have on Australia for the next three years. Adding to this, issues that were formerly long-term concerns could be debated in both abstract and Coalition-specific terms.

The newsgroup is certainly a busy place, but it's perfectly clear that even the silently lurking population of *aus.politics* is still a very small sample of the total online population of Australia, and an even smaller proportion of the voting public as a whole. What, then, motivates people to join the fray? Inventories performed on the postings of some of the major contributors to the group reveal two distinct trends. About half of the group's regulars seem to be generally enthusiastic about posting to newsgroups in general, and contribute regularly to roughly half a dozen groups with equal fervor. The remaining regulars seem to

Mastheads Up: Media Discussion Forums

be enthusiastic about *aus.politics*, and little else. These individuals contribute to the newsgroup at rates of approximately ten times that of other regulars, but their comments almost never appear anywhere else. Some of the individuals fitting this description are known to be members and dedicated supporters of specific parties, and one could easily guess that these people have been appointed (or self-appointed) as propaganda merchants for their respective parties.

The newsgroup is certainly a brawling place at the best of times, but is it worthwhile? In terms of reading vigorous debate, it's arguably the most in-depth public forum on Australian politics that can be found. Where else can a specific "story" evolve and be maintained over the course of months, with almost continuous coverage? Debate sometimes degenerates to the point of name-calling, but there is an impassioned tone to the way people explore how decisions, made by apparently distant politician, influence their daily lives.

Complementing the long-established discussions on *aus.politics*, a small handful of media outlets established their own Web sites to cover the Federal Election. Some of these contained discussion forums aimed at encouraging readers to send their own feedback, yet most online election sites used a typical one-to-many style in their format.

One forum, operated by a commercial news source, made a half-hearted attempt at agenda-setting in its forum by titling its page with a provocative question, such as "Do you think people are voting in protest?". In practice, users just ignored this question and carried on with their own agendas. Galtung and Ruge also identified the way the frequency of a medium affects its news values. In practice, the near-instantaneous response time of a Web chat forum, which operates much more quickly than Usenet, produced a very different sort of discourse. Messages were shorter, simpler, and carried more punch. There was more conversation-style interaction between the people on the forum at a given time, some of it more personal than impersonal. The end result was that much of the discussion resembled pointless chatter, with plenty of name-calling but little serious analysis.

Usenet, by contrast, seems suited to abstract and highly detailed discussions by virtue of its asynchrony. Discussions on this Web site also seemed to be more attuned to issues raised by the media, suggesting that overall media agenda setting works in areas where an overtly stated topic will not. The only stage where this commercial forum achieved any sort of interesting discourse was after the election, when a few sincere posters commented on

the way that employment and taxation issues were directly affecting their lives.

Another commercial forum from a news organisation that could be regarded as more upmarket than the former also tried Web-chat style discussions, albeit with only slight improvements. Gone were the childish insults that made the aforementioned site difficult to sift through on occasion, but the overall pace of discussion was still characterised by relatively short paragraphs. This could be due to the fact that this site was not quite as instantaneous in its entry/display cycles as the former, but the use of a more upmarket masthead could have drawn a more discerning crowd of Net users.

In both of these cases, another factor that has long been observed by Internet mediators affected the way discourse was handled: Communities do not arise overnight, either in the real world or on the Net. A site that has been created barely weeks before the election does not have time to generate the interpersonal relationships and character definitions that make *aus.politics* so richly satisfying for its regular participants. The absence of any long-term issues of discussion could also be another reason why participants were more inclined to take their cues from the media than each other. Nevertheless, the more immediate of the two Web sites discussed here did give rise to a certain level of interpersonal action, even if it was only superficial comments like "see you tomorrow".

One final indictment of our politicians' failure to engage the public on their terms comes from the way the Howard/Beazley debate was covered on the Net. Very little was said about it in any forum, and the few comments that did appear on Usenet merely noted how boring it was!

The ultimate question that could be asked of the online election experience is whether or not the entire process had any constructive output. Torrents of data and discussion apparently failed to generate any amazing breakthroughs that are likely to help this country administer itself, and although there is no direct evidence of this, it seems unlikely that these debates persuaded anyone to change their vote. Political discussions on the Internet are rarely constructive, Socratic dialogues. Those who participate in them are normally fairly secure in their beliefs, and are out to attack dissenters. The result is more of an intellectual gladiatorial match, where the philosophies and the willpowers of regular contributors are tested in open combat.

Sociological studies conducted long before the Internet existed suggest that most voters in democratic societies decide on their voting preferences long before an election is called, and many will never change their party affiliations over their lifetimes. To

expect these attitudes to change with the advent of the Internet is ludicrous. One final question could be asked: Will our politicians listen any more to the people on the Net than they do offline?

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