Confrontation and Cooptation: A Brief History of Australian Political Blogs

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Abstract

The history of political blogging in Australia does not entirely match the development of blogospheres in other countries. Even at its beginning, blogging was not an entirely alternative endeavour – one of the first news or political blogs was Margo Kingston's *Webdiary*, hosted by the *Sydney Morning Herald*. In the United States, whose political blogosphere has been examined most comprehensively in the literature (see e.g. Adamic & Glance, 2005; Drezner & Farrell, 2008; Shaw & Benkler, 2012; Tremayne, 2007; Wallsten, 2008), blogging had a clear historical trajectory from alternative to mainstream medium. The Australian blogosphere, by contrast, has seen early and continued involvement from representatives of the mainstream media, blogging both for their employers and independently (Garden, 2010). Coupled with the incorporation of blog-like technologies into news websites, as well as with obvious differences in the size of the available talent pool and potential audience for political blogging in Australia, this recognition of blogging by the mainstream media may be one reason why, in political and news discussions at least, Australian bloggers did not bring about their own, local equivalents to the resignations of Dan Rather or Trent Lott in the U.S. – events which were commonly attributed in part to the work of bloggers (Simons, 2007). However, the acceptance of the blogging concept by the mainstream media has been accompanied by a comparative lack of acceptance towards individual bloggers. Analyses and commentary published by bloggers have been attacked by journalists, creating an at times antagonistic relationship between the mainstream media and bloggers (Flew & Wilson, 2010; Young, 2011).

In this article, we examine the historical development of blogging in Australia,

focussing primarily on political and news blogs. In particular, we review who the bloggers are and how the connections between different blogs and other titles have changed over the past decade. The paper tracks the evolution of individual and group blogs, independent and mainstream media-hosted opinion sites, and the gradual convergence of these platforms and their associated contributing authors. We conclude by examining the current state of the Australian blogosphere and its likely future development, taking into account the rise of social media, and in particular *Twitter*, as additional spaces for public commentary.

Introduction

Blogs are amongst the earliest of the recent generation of self-publishing platforms, predating even the 'Web 2.0' buzzword itself by several years. As they gained popular recognition, they were heralded as a potential revolution for content creation and sharing: users could create their own sites, for free, and publish their thoughts without needing any knowledge of the HTML supporting each page. Not least, this was also seen as an opportunity to circumvent the gatekeepers of traditional media, allowing bloggers to post their own news and opinion, instantly accessible without having to wait for a set broadcast time or print deadline, and enabling anyone reading to leave immediate feedback through comments (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Blogs were new, independent, alternative media, and would change how news was presented and who could report it. Eventually the mainstream media would adapt to the new format, but not without bloggers having an impact in breaking news and changing the focus of stories. To some extent, this happened – at least, it did in the United States, whose political blogosphere has been examined most comprehensively in the literature (see, for example, Adamic & Glance, 2005; Drezner & Farrell, 2008; Shaw & Benkler, 2012; Tremayne, 2007; Wallsten, 2008).

In Australia, due in part to the more limited talent pool and potential audience available for political blogging, the same clear historical trajectory of blogging from new alternative to accepted mainstream medium did not eventuate. The participant base for sustained political discussion in Australia is comparatively small and – for all its ideological and institutional divisions – relatively strongly interconnected; as a result, rather than being initially driven by newly emerging, independent commentators, some Australian blogs had mainstream media backing early on, and involved authors who had already established themselves as media personalities. One of the first prominent sites, *Webdiary*, was launched by journalist Margo Kingston in July 2000, and originally hosted on *The Sydney Morning Herald*'s website (Kingston, 2005), for instance. Bloggers working for the mainstream media (and established columnists rebadging their online columns as 'blogs') have remained prominent voices within the blogosphere, making a description of blogs as 'alternative' media misleading: Australian blogging was never completely new or separate from the traditional mediasphere. While comparative international studies of

political blogging are still lacking (but see Russell & Echchaibi, 2009, for a first attempt to address this gap in the literature), we suggest that the Australian experience here may match that in other smaller nations more closely than the trajectory of U.S. political blogging.

Instead of Australian blogging undergoing a transition from a grassroots movement of independent writers across the political spectrum, making their voices heard, to eventual and reluctant adoption by the mainstream media as a platform which they could no longer ignore, there is a more circular pattern of flows. Bloggers move from independent sites to the mainstream media and back again, and authors contribute to group blogs and opinion sites run by different organisations. Behind all this is a complex relationship between bloggers and the mainstream media which ranges from collaboration to outright antagonism.

In this article, we examine key moments in the developing of blogging in Australia. Our focus here is on political and news blogs as some of the most prominent sites within the Australian blogosphere. However, coverage of politics is by no means the only approach to blogging, nor is it necessarily the most popular topic among Australian bloggers. Indeed, the 'political' blogs in Australia which we have studied (see Bruns, Burgess, *et al.* 2011; Bruns, Wilson, *et al.* 2008) often also cover other, non-political subjects in their posts, and may at times bridge one or several topical areas in their activities. Similarly, political subjects appear in posts on sites dedicated to economics, parenting, health, craft, sport, and personal journals, and these thematic groups remain active sections of the Australian blogosphere.

The sites and authors contributing to the Australian political blogosphere have changed over the past decade as blogs were launched, rebranded, spun off, and closed for various reasons. While an exhaustive list of Australian political blogs is beyond the scope of this article, a brief overview of some of the prominent sites, and types of blog, present within the blogosphere is provided to show the range of perspectives contributing to political debate online. Individual blogs from across the political spectrum appeared within the Australian political blogosphere, from the socialist *En Passant* and left-leaning *The Piping Shrike*, *Grog's Gamut*, and Robert Corr, to the conservative blogs of Tim Blair, Kev Gillett, Iain Hall, and Andrew

Landeryou*,* Group blogs and multiple-contributor sites, featuring posts on a variety of political and social topics, have also been long-standing participants to Australian blogging, including such sites as *Larvatus Prodeo*, *Club Troppo*, *The Catallaxy Files*, and *On Line Opinion.*

Alongside these sites are subject-specific blogs, which are mainly devoted to one central theme. Among these topical groups are blogs dedicated to economic matters, such as the work of Joshua Gans and fellow authors on *Core Economics*, John Quiggin on his eponymous blog (and in additional contributions to *On Line Opinion* and the international site *Crooked Timber*), and academic and current MP Andrew Leigh, Elsewhere, analysis of polling data and election results is carried out on several psephology-focussed blogs, from the *Crikey*-hosted sites *Pollytics* and *The Poll Bludger* (and their respective pre-*Crikey* incarnations) to *The Tally Room*, *Mumble* (originally independent, now hosted by *The Australian*), and the ABC's *Antony Green.* A further group is centred around feminist views, and operated by female bloggers (for example, *Hoyden about Town*, *crazybrave*, and *Blogger on the Cast Iron Balcony*).

The shape of the blogosphere

As it did elsewhere, blogging emerged from obscurity in Australia as a greater number of blogging platforms and ancillary Web 2.0 services became widely available. Some of the earliest independent Australian political blogs, such as *The Catallaxy Files* and *Club Troppo*, moved from site to site, changing names several times, before settling on a title and style. Conservative media commentator Andrew Bolt's blog evolved from a Web forum on the *Herald Sun*'s Website to a more conventional blog format, while fellow commentator Tim Blair's blog initially modelled itself strongly on successful neoconservative blogs in the United States (and itself gained a substantial international audience by addressing U.S. political talking points; see Bruns, 2007), before moving from *TimBlair.net* to a space on the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper site in May 2008, and shifting to a more domestic political focus. Further blogs developed in part from the audience for these initial sites, as regular commenters decided to set up their own blogs. Not all of these blogs were focussed (entirely) on politics; while a number of distinct topical communities and

blogging genres gradually formed, early blogs in particular exhibited a wide range of approaches to blogging. This diversification of blogging types and topics within the Australian blogosphere had some impact on the shape of political discussions; while a lead group of prominent blogs responded to most issues, other bloggers dedicated their coverage primarily to topics of personal or professional interest. However, this did not necessarily result in a fragmentation of political discussions: rather, through cross-linking, political exchanges take place across these thematic groups, drawing on or responding to the views of bloggers with different interests and specialisations (Highfield, 2011).

Indeed, not all of the blogs participating in such exchanges may consider themselves as 'political' in a narrow sense of the term. A 2009 episode within the Australian blogosphere, for example, highlighted both the different interpretations of 'politics' and the demographics of the bloggers concerned. A post on the *Crikey* blog *Pollytics* which asked 'where are Australia's female political bloggers?' (Possum Comitatus, 2009) attracted lengthy comments and responses on several other blogs, including *Larvatus Prodeo*, *Hoyden about Town*, and *The Memes of Production*. Commenters on these sites pointed out that women were frequent contributors to the blogosphere, but that their posts focussed on topics other than the latest news from Canberra. It is true that some of the best-known Australian political blogs (in the narrow sense of the term) are run by men, or attract a particular audience of educated, white, male readers (Young, 2011, 217). However, it would be incorrect to generalise from this subset of 'orthodox' politics blogs to the general Australian political blogosphere: within its overlapping thematic groups, there is a far greater diversity of voices, professional backgrounds, and personal interests.

Amidst this diversity, however, one group has remained underrepresented – despite being the subject, explicit or otherwise, of many of the discussions taking place on political blogs: politicians. Beyond a few notable exceptions (former Australian Democrats Senator Andrew Bartlett, current Senators Kate Lundy and Cory Bernardi, former leader of the Liberal Party Malcolm Turnbull – who also hosted a blog for his dogs on his website), Australian politicians have not taken to blogging in significant numbers. (The websites for both the ALP and the Greens host blog sections with contributions from key ministers and MPs, but these posts are mainly

PR-style statements receiving only a very limited number of user comments. The Liberal and National party websites also include similar content within their respective news pages.) For the most part, then, the Australian political blogosphere responds to, but does not feature contributions from, politicians.

Among the most popular political blogs in Australia are prominent, outspoken voices from both the political left and right. There is a general spread of blogs across the main ideological groups present in Australian politics, including left-leaning supporters of the Australian Labor Party and Greens, centrists and libertarians, and bloggers from the conservative right with sympathies for the Coalition parties (Bahnisch, 2005, 143). However, while individual blogs may have a declared political affiliation, Simons (2007) notes that this does not preclude interactions between blogs holding different views (221). Forming a comparatively small network of sites, with less intractable ideological divisions than exhibited in the U.S. political blogosphere (Adamic and Glance, 2005), Australian bloggers do pay attention to what others are writing, linking to sites with opposing views to highlight alternative, or possibly 'wrong', interpretations of issues.

Indeed, political ideology is of limited use for categorising Australian political bloggers (Parish, in Garden, 2010). Compared to the situation in countries such as France which have genuine multi-party political systems, where blogs are set up to explicitly support (or oppose) a specific political group or politician, Australian bloggers more often position themselves as commentators or analysts: rather than actively and fervently promoting a set party agenda, indeed, they may well devote considerable attention to critiquing the activities of the politicians whom they nominally support (Highfield, 2011). Such comparative lack of partisan fervour may indicate a corresponding lack commitment by bloggers to the respective ideological *nostrums* of Australian politics, or even the relative absence of polarising divides between mainstream political parties.

Some notable bloggers do take strongly partisan stances, but it is more often in the comment threads of major blogs that the talking points promoted by the different party machines are espoused. This is not to say that there is no antagonism between bloggers, of course; at times, bloggers and their respective readers will incite, and

attack, other commentators, while some sites – such as the watchdog blogs monitoring conservative bloggers Andrew Bolt and Tim Blair – were set up as clear reflections on these rivalries. However, the opposition between individual bloggers cannot be simply reduced to their respective parties of choice; like the long-running feud between Andrew Bolt and academic and *The Monthly* blogger Robert Manne (and the bloggers and commenters who support them) about the correct historical interpretation of the Stolen Generations, they are driven by fundamental political disagreements, as well as by the personal animosities which fuel and are fuelled by such disagreements. Especially where such feuds are heated and ongoing, they have sometimes also led to a profusion of *ad hominem* attacks, campaigns to smear and discredit the opponent, and attempts to involve third parties (such as the respective employers of the protagonists) in the conflict.

While antagonism between Australian bloggers espousing opposing political views is not uncommon, however, the stakes in such conflicts are highest when they involve one or more parties which are backed by mainstream news organisations. Based on a series of events over the last decade, then, there is another way of viewing opposition within the Australian political blogosphere. Instead of the liberal/conservative split seen amongst U.S. political blogs, the more volatile faultlines within the Australian network lie not in the first place between different political camps, but between 'professional' and 'amateur' commentators. With the gradual convergence between these two realms, however, this is also an increasingly messy, even phony conflict.

The 'alternative' blogosphere

Blogging has often been seen as an opportunity for voices outside the mainstream media to make themselves heard; indeed, the emergence of the Australian political blogosphere as a space for original commentary and analysis was described by one of its participants as stimulating a new group of 'public intellectuals' (Dunlop, in Bahnisch, 2005). The growth of the Australian political blogosphere also coincided with the development of a range of alternative news websites, including *Crikey*, *On Line Opinion*, and *New Matilda*. These sites share some characteristics of blogging, including the ability to leave comments on posts and the publication of news and

opinion pieces at arm's length from the mainstream media. But while many independent blogs and even some of these alternative opinion sites were initially set up without corporate backing, the blogosphere did not remain inherently separate from the mainstream media: Fairfax made early inroads by hosting Margo Kingston's *Webdiary*, while News Limited developed a prominent stable of in-house bloggers (or blogger/columnists), including Andrew Bolt and Tim Blair. In addition to these conservative voices, News Limited also hired the more left-leaning Tim Dunlop, formerly of *Road to Surfdom*, in 2006, as independent commentators became accepted and prominent contributors to political debate. At the same time, concessions to the blogging format also shaped the presentation of news on mainstream media websites: some articles began to include commenting options and in-text links to other relevant stories.

Arguably, mainstream media involvement was critical to some blogs' survival, giving the bloggers more exposure than they might have had on their own sites. In 2005, Fairfax decided not to continue its support for *Webdiary*, and an attempt to sustain the site independently struggled financially without the institutional backing it had previously enjoyed (Ward & Cahill, 2007). Alternative media also recruited established blogs to operate under their masthead; in 2008, psephologist blogs *The Poll Bludger* and *Possums Pollytics* moved from their own domains to the *Crikey* stable of blogs (the latter renamed to just *Pollytics*). Another *Crikey* blog, *Pure Poison*, was the successor to the *BoltWatch* and *Blair/BoltWatch* blogs (the former of which was originally a side project associated with the *An Onymous Lefty* blog).

Mainstream media blogs met with varying success. Some blogs, including those of Bolt and Blair, featured regular posts and attracted a large audience that would repeatedly comment on both the work of the bloggers and the responses from fellow readers. Other 'blogs', though, amounted to little more than republications of newspaper columns, and failed to take advantage of the affordances of the blog format, such as providing further links or inviting (and responding to) reader commentary (Bruns & Wilson, 2010). However, this is not true of all mainstream media-run blogs, and Garden (2010) argues that 'several of the blogs of mainstream journalists outshine their alternative counterparts in terms of blogger-audience interactivity' (29).

Bloggers as media commentators

Blogs were originally seen, at least in part, as a medium for anyone to post their own commentary, to break and cover news as citizen journalists (see for example Gillmor, 2006). In the U.S., some bloggers were successful in affecting news stories as they unfolded: most notably, bloggers contributed to the resignation of Senate Majority leader Trent Lott in 2004, by highlighting his seemingly pro-segregation comments; they also helped expose forged documents about George W. Bush's National Guard service record which had been used by current affairs programme *60 Minutes* (Drezner & Farrell, 2008). In Australia, bloggers have not had the same impact in breaking or changing the news. Here, the political blogosphere is not positioned as a domain of citizen journalists, but as a space providing additional, alternative analysis of political issues and media coverage.

Taken as a whole, Australian political bloggers act as watchdogs and commentators, promoting and critiquing the work of politicians and journalists. This role is not carried out by all bloggers in the same way, but is developed through the cumulative, linked discussions taking place across blogs, in posts and comments. Coverage of a federal government policy, for example, might draw on original analysis of opinion polls and economic reports in addition to press releases and comments made in Parliament or in the press.

In doing so, Australian political bloggers do not necessarily follow the agendas set by the mainstream media. Just because a story is leading on news websites or in other media channels, does not mean that blogs will also cover it in detail: the 2009 'Utegate' scandal, for example, while a major news story, was of minor interest to the blogosphere (Highfield, 2011; Bruns, Burgess, *et al.*, 2011); when posts were made on the subject, bloggers focussed less on whether accusations made against the Prime Minister and Treasurer were accurate, and more on the media coverage of the scandal, on how it distracted from debate on key policies, and on the ethical standards of the journalists covering the story. In the process, bloggers placed the media frenzy about the 'scandal' (which was front page news across all major newspapers) in context, exhibiting a remarkably different perspective on what was

important in Australian politics than the Canberra press gallery.

Where such differences in the interpretation and evaluation of Australian political events have been pronounced, and explicitly stated, they have also served as a source of conflict between political bloggers and their mainstream media counterparts. This has manifested at times in very concrete hostilities: in 2006, an inebriated Glenn Milne physically attacked *Crikey* founder Stephen Mayne while the latter was presenting an award on stage at the Walkley Awards, in response to *Crikey* earlier posting a link to a site making false claims about Milne (Milne, 2006; Flew, 2008). Beyond the specific personal aspects of this incident, however, it can also be seen as a symptom of the wider discontent amongst a number of mainstream journalists with this new category of media outlets whose views and attitudes towards Australian politics were often markedly at odds with those of the seasoned media commentariat.

A year later, *The Australian* launched its own unexpected and extreme attack on blogging, describing in an editorial the Australian political blogosphere as a whole as a partisan left-leaning group 'masquerading as serious online political commentary' (*The Australian*, 2007). The paper was stung into action by Australian psephologist bloggers' widely circulated analysis of polling data, the results of which differed markedly from those of *The Australian*. Culminating in the bold statement "we understand Newspoll because we own it" (referring to News Limited's ownership of both polling company and newspaper), the editorial categorically rejected the psephologists' alternative interpretations, particularly when they came to a different result:

> On almost every issue it is difficult not to conclude that most of the electronic offerings that feed off the work of *The Australian* to create their own content are a waste of time. They contribute only defamatory comments and politically coloured analysis. (*The Australian*, 2007)[1]

At the time, Tim Dunlop published *Blogocracy* for News Limited's *news.com.au* site,

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[1] Three years later, *The Australian* hired one of the psephology bloggers criticised in the editorial, Peter Brent of *Mumble*, moving the blog to the newspaper's website.

offering a more left-leaning perspective by comparison with his more conservative fellow bloggers and columnists on the site. However, when Dunlop criticised *The Australian*'s editorial in a post on *Blogocracy*, the post was removed from the site by *news.com.au* editors (Flew, 2008). This censorship of an in-house blogger and critic, the effects of which were negated by the republishing of a cached version of the post on *Larvatus Prodeo*[2], further highlighted the uneasy relationship between the mainstream media, and in particular News Limited, and parts of the Australian political blogosphere. *The Australian*, most centrally, remains a lightning-rod for criticism by Australian bloggers.

Media convergence

Such confrontation, however, has not prevented the ongoing cooptation of blogging functionality and genre features (as well as of some blogging identities) by the mainstream media, as formats of online news and commentary continued to change. What began with the rebadging of opinion columns as blogs has led to a gradual convergence between mainstream and alternative media styles: so, for example, sites resembling blogs in format and operational approaches, featuring contributions from guest writers as well as members of in-house editorial teams, have been launched by the ABC (*The Drum*, a revamp of its *Unleashed* site), News Limited (*The Punch*), and Fairfax (*The National Times*) during 2009.

This convergence of formats for presenting news and opinion on sites from *New Matilda* to *The Punch* has been accompanied by a similar blurring of the position of commentators themselves. In addition to posting to their own sites, a number of prominent bloggers now also contribute frequently to the opinion sites operated by mainstream media, where their work sits alongside that of professional journalists and public figures, and where Stephen Mayne peaceably rubs shoulders with Glenn Milne. Another entry into this increasingly congested field, *The Conversation*, which launched in 2011, hosts articles by academics and provides a space specifically for voices not always heard in full or in their own words in political debates. This, then,

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[2] At the time of writing, this post was no longer available on *Larvatus Prodeo* itself, but a cached version including Dunlop's text can be found via the Internet Archive's *Wayback Machine*: http://web.archive.org/web/20081004235848/http://larvatusprodeo.net/2007/07/11/government-gazette-fights-back/#comment-384146

borrows the original intentions of political blogging, and connects it with the editorial framework of mainstream media opinion columns.

If the blogosphere played some part in diversifying Australian political debate online, it has been supplemented (but to some extent also supplanted) by social media in providing more Australians with the opportunity to share their opinions on political events and issues. In particular, as a more open and public network, *Twitter* is becoming a platform of choice for instant reactions to news stories and commentary on political issues. Australian politicians, and their staff, have adopted *Twitter* for promoting their views and press releases to a far greater extent than they ever took to blogging; the same is true for journalists. While the 140 character limit means that tweets are not well-suited to in-depth analysis, *Twitter* can be a useful promotional medium for bloggers and journalists alike: long-form commentary is posted on blogs, and then publicised – amplified – via *Twitter*.

The use of hashtags to connect tweets and *Twitter* users with shared topical interests (Bruns & Burgess, 2011), and the co-presence of journalists, politicians, activists, bloggers, and other commenters on *Twitter*, combine to create an extended, neutral space for discussing and commenting on political events, mainstream media articles, opinion pieces, blog posts, and press releases alike; indeed, it is possible that in future, some of the commentary traditionally attached to individual blog posts may increasingly play out on *Twitter* instead (Bruns, 2012). The widespread adoption of *Twitter* for political debate in Australia – a network of largely news-, journalism-, and politics-focussed *Twitter* accounts forms by far the most significant cluster of follower/followee connections in the Australian Twittersphere (Bruns *et al.*, 2012) – does not in itself point to the end of blogging; it may also be seen as an extension of the existing interlinkages between news media, political sites, and the political blogosphere into a new, complementary online space. At the same time, the impact of social media on the shape of Australian political debate was cited as a contributing factor to the closing of one of Australia's leading political blogs, *Larvatus Prodeo*, in April 2012 (Bahnisch, 2012). Overall, then, the rise of additional discussion platforms simply highlights the changing approaches to reading and contributing to political commentary and debate online.

References on *Twitter* generate greater visibility for relevant blog posts than they would ordinarily have achieved, resulting in a greater impact on public discussion. However, this may also amplify the continued antagonism between some professional journalists and their independent critics, as an episode from the 2010 federal election campaign highlights. Two weeks into the campaign, a blogger using the pseudonym Grog criticised the mainstream media's campaign coverage, and particularly its lack of focus on policy (Jericho, 2010). After these views were posted on Grog's blog, *Grog's Gamut*, the wide circulation of links to the post also sparked a spirited debate among *Twitter* users, including journalists. Initially, the overall tenor of that debate remained markedly different from the 'blog wars' of the previous election campaign: while ignoring the substantive critique expressed in Grog's post, a surprisingly sympathetic article in *The Australian* claimed that 'such a public conversation about journalism was unimaginable five years ago. If for no other reason, the incident demonstrated why *Twitter*, and blogs, matter' (Massola, 2010).

However, when the ABC's Managing Director, Mark Scott, acknowledged after the election that the comments made by *Twitter* users about the campaign, and Grog's post in particular, had led the ABC to re-evaluate its coverage (Scott, 2010), the tone of the discussion changed. *The Australian* ran a series of articles revealing Grog's identity as a Canberra public servant, claiming in an editorial that the public had a right to know the identity of anyone 'influencing the public debate' (Elliott, 2010). Having stated a month earlier that blogging was a 'natural home for discussion, debate, and opinion' (Massola, 2010), the subsequent resurgence of the paper's animosity towards the blogosphere (as a number of blog posts framing the episode inevitably referred to it as 'Grogsgate') proved that acceptance of blogs as an additional source of opinion and analysis to have been short-lived. If *The Australian*'s interactions with psephology blogs in 2007 underlined 'the sensitivity of some traditional media and their difficulties in coming to grips with the online world' (Young, 2011, 211), then Grogsgate showed that sensitivity to persist even in the present, considerably more converged, media environment. Bloggers are now generally established as contributors to political discussions, both through their own sites and on the pages of the opinion sites operated by the mainstream media. Should they forget their station, however – that is, should their views come to have more impact than those of professional journalists and commentators, and be widely

acknowledged as valid criticisms of the mainstream media – then the instinctual reaction from some of the affronted journalists still appears to be to attempt to put the bloggers back in their place, by any means necessary.

Similarly, if the place of blogs within the mediasphere is still contested by some mainstream media outlets – even after the same publications launched their own blogs, and several years after blogging stopped being the newcomer to public debate – the blogosphere's reaction to *The Australian* naming Grog also showed that bloggers do not have the same expectations of responsibility as journalists. Whether the unmasking of Grog was ethical or not, the actions of *The Australian* were seen as outrageous by bloggers and commentators on sites such as *The Drum*. For Australian bloggers, too, there is an 'us vs. them' aspect to their coverage of media issues, most obviously highlighted in the title of a post by Tim Dunlop, 'One rule for them, one for us...' (Dunlop, 2010). Despite the adoption of blogging, and tweeting, by journalists and editors, and the increasingly significant overlaps between the networks of 'amateur' bloggers and 'professional' journalists, at times the relationship between the two sides again reverts to outright confrontation, rather than collaboration and convergence.

Conclusion

The Australian blogosphere's relationship to the mainstream media remains complicated: while since the early days of political blogging in Australia, independent blogs have always been accompanied by blog-style sites operated by the mainstream media, and while recent trends have pointed strongly towards a convergence of political blogging and mainstream media commentary, an intractable antagonistic streak also persists in their relationship.

Australian bloggers have never impacted on domestic politics by covering controversial news in the same way that their U.S. counterparts have done, on occasion; rather, it is the – at times, disproportional – animosity expressed by some mainstream media journalists and publications which may have raised their profile in political debates. Additionally, the mainstream media's own attempts at operating blogs (or blog-style online columns), especially in the form of the dedicated multi-

contributor opinion sites launched in recent years, have also served to increase popular acceptance of the format, and to provide additional publication outlets for Australia's most prominent bloggers. This acceptance has not been universal, however: for some in the industry, evidently, the idea of blogging is fine in principle, except when bloggers directly criticise or challenge the work of journalists or editors.

Such blogger-critics will be increasingly difficult to dismiss as mere 'armchair journalists', however, the more they are regularly legitimised by the imprints of the mainstream media's own opinion sites. An 'us vs. them' mentality will be impossible to uphold (on either side of that imagined divide) the more all participants in political debates – politicians, journalists, bloggers, and activists – mingle, interconnect, and network as equal debatants on the pages of opinion sites, and in ancillary social networks such as *Twitter*. This shift from the mythical 'blog wars' of yore to the multisided melée of political communication in the digital society will require all actors to rethink their media positioning and communicative activities. Though augmented by other tools, political blogs will continue to play an important role in the mix.

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