Retaking the Information Commons? Labour, New Media & the 2007 election

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to understand the extent to which new media offers alternative forms of information dissemination, in particular ways to counter mass media images of labour and Labor. It focuses on election campaigning in Australia throughout 2007 drawing on two analytical frameworks, based on the concepts of *media framing* and *the commons*. It is argued that where the mass media had "enclosed" the information dissemination commons by the end of the twentieth century, the new media, when well organised not only offered opportunities to counter mass media framing but also enabled greater citizen participation. In this respect it appears that pro-labour groups had some success in retaking the information dissemination commons.

INTRODUCTION

By the end of the twentieth century public information dissemination was significantly constrained and shaped by the mass media, which, in shaping news and information, gave most weight to business ideals and values. For those with alternative ideas and ideals, including trade unions and the labour movement, such privatisation of information dissemination meant severely restricted means of publicly promoting their case. Indeed, trade unions, long the butt of mass media derision, were portrayed as greedy, oafish and anachronistic. Thus unions and the labour movement, and even mildly labourist parties had little capacity to promote and purvey their values and policies in the public sphere.

MASS MEDIA AND FRAMING

By the beginning of the twentieth century, news dissemination was already a commodity although ownership was with a few exceptions fragmented, and information dissemination while commodified was still relatively open. Increasingly however during twentieth century, oligopolistic and monopoly ownership mean information dissemination was in the hands of fewer and fewer. Those taking a pro-employee (labour) perspective increasingly found it difficult to present perspectives and principles. Information was disseminated through increasingly rigidified channels – rigidified, insofar as certain worldviews were legitimated and the agenda for public discussion set. The proponents of such legitimated views had easy access to information dissemination. By the 1980s in Australia – where concentration of information dissemination was one of the highest in the OECD (Jackson, 2003; Sheehan, 2002) – the information commons was extremely weak and fragile, with only a few publications and public broadcasting providing some opportunity for heterodox views. In other words the information commons had not only been commodified (which in the early days of diffuse ownership had still given broad access to dissenting sections of the polity) but by late twentieth century had privatised information flows. This was particularly true of the print media which is the focus of this paper. Decisions about what was to be disseminated were in the hands of a very few – and that very few were emboldened to frame information in increasingly neo-liberal values (Chomsky and Herman, 2008; Winter, 2008). Politics scholars have long investigated the role of the mass media in 'serving as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace [in order to] amuse, entertain inform and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society' (Herman and Chomsky 2008, 1; see also Herman and Chomsky 1988). The patterns of selection of issues, of exclusion and emphasis, of what is covered and how much coverage is given to an issue or concept or value frame, what is seen and what is hidden, and what is important - all of these define what becomes legitimate or desirable in the public discourse. Framing is thus a twofold process – it offers (selected) information or ideas and indicates the ways in which these should be evaluated. In these ways, the media can regulate the range of public discourse precisely because mass media operates in the consumer sphere.

Changing media

The latter twentieth century also witnessed major changes in access to information and information flows. In the early 1950s, for example, citizens had access to only a very few radio stations and no television while newspapers were much thinner and their writing much more discursive. In the following decades these media grew rapidly with increased access to phones, multiple television stations, and the expansion of talkback radio as a commodity. What developed then, was a society and polity making use of, and depending on, multiple information flows, while in the same decades the means of information dissemination was increasingly concentrated. Access to public information flows via mass media was thus restricted.

All of this began to change in the 1960s and 1970s as computing power and communication technology began to develop rapidly, although not experienced by most people until the 1990s. Yet there is no doubt that arrival of accessible computing power changed much of the way in which work, production and communication were done. Information initially had little impact – computers were toys – mainly for the middle class – then word processing, spreadsheets. (ah visicalc!!) Business began to use the new technology widely but for its first two decades, it was primarily for business and for elites. By 1990s however computers were becoming more accessible. In Australia for example, the number of home computers doubled in the first years of the twenty-first century, while ownership of mobile phones tripled from 24 per cent in 1996 to 72 per cent 10 years later. However, the greatest change in the last decade has been home access to the internet which was a mere 4 per cent in 1996 and grew to over 60 per cent by 2005-6, and with a concomitant increase in the intensity of use (ABS 2007; Flew, 2008; Chester, 2007)

The 1998 wharf dispute in Australia had shown some potential for new media as a form of activism (see e.g. *Bastard Boys* 2007; Rice 1999), but in the proceeding years many more vehicles for dissemination had developed and their use expanded. Email traffic has increased significantly, while forms of blogging, e-journals and bulletins have enabled more complex ideas and issues to be conveyed ('It's the Links Stupid' 2007; 'Howard Makes Final Pitch' 2007). Blogging is a method for individuals to argue opinions or present ideas on a personal or shared website. (Glaser 2006, Chadwick, 2006). What has made the new forms of interaction like blogging a potentially very important factor in politics, is the capacity to disseminate ideas and information very rapidly and extensively. Anyone can become a 'published author, although in some cases material may be moderated or refereed according to a site's standards or perspectives. For example, public opinion sites like *New Matilda* and *Crikey* offer lengthy pieces and considered perspectives that are often excluded from print, television and radio mass media. Most organisations have their own websites where they seek to frame their priorities and activities. The newest forms of social interaction and dissemination of ideas have occurred in the twenty-first century with the growth of networking sites such as Facebook and Bebo, and the video-sharing site, YouTube which started in 2005. All played a role in the 2007 election campaign, albeit not all effectively. Nevertheless, it seems a prima facie case might be made that this plethora of forms of open access, instant communication might be considered as a potential information commons. (Dolsak and Ostrom, 2003; Boyle, 2008; Chester2007)

THE COMMONS

Historically the notion of the commons came from the islands of common land in feudal times which were held in common by all the locals. Where land ownership allowed the ruling elite to ensure only their private gain, it was on commons that serfs – and later workers – could graze animals and so have some opportunity for improvements or at least a better quality of life. [In the seventeenth century many of the commons were enclosed (the enclosures) removing this option for non-landholders – the majority of the population. The enclosures led to considerable difficulties for rural and urban poor. The notion of the commons came to the forefront again in 1960s when Hardin (1968) wrote of the tragedy of the commons, not referring to the enclosures, but rather offering a model that supported the notion that the commons were inefficient because the land would be naturally overgrazed because all the users would put personal interest ahead of common interests. In this logic the land would become useless and of no benefit to anyone. Debates that have followed have called the assertions and logic into question. Certainly in Australia evidence suggests that commons have been generally treated well – except where landholders have encroached on commons in a manner akin to squatters' rights. (Maddison, 2008

The information commons

The notion of the information commons draws from the material example of the commons – common lands and common resources including rivers, fisheries which are accessible to all. While this notion of the commons had been extended to non-material resources such information, it was only with the advent of the internet that such ideas came under scholarly scrutiny. At the same time the notion of libraries came to be seen as information commons – that was readily accessible resources available to all members of a community. Similarly the creative commons was the development of accessible resource centres of creative work. (Bollier, 2004,

Extending the concepts toward information commons is also apposite for illuminating the resources for information dissemination. What the internet made available was a voice for the voiceless – a resource whereby ideas. Values and views could be shared and discussed without fear or favour. This contrasts markedly with the mass media, where media owners and editors could decide on content and, perhaps more importantly how principles issues or events were framed. In the mass media, a call for a pay increase could be framed as anathema to business, economic growth and national well-being, where such calls may well have been founded on recognition of poverty in inequity. Thus the notion of the information commons could represent the pool of resources available to local, national or epistemic communities But it can also represent the capacity to share or elaborate on ideas for those who do have access to sympathetic mass media. In this way like the commons of old where the poor and unlanded could have grazing access, the internet offered access to information dissemination.

So far then an investigation of the ways that the mass media have privatised (or enclosed) information have revealed that information dissemination has not only been commodified, but indeed become consumption products – pre-packed, and framed in ways which assume that the audience are passive consumers. In Australia concentrated media ownership gave evident capacity in orchestrating agenda for public debate. The parallels with the enclosures of the Commons are evident in these processes (Boyle, 2008). At the same time however, the internet still appeared to offer a way to retake the information common and an opportunity to actively participate. In turn such participation offered a legitimation of those ideas that found no favour in the mass media. In order to explore these assertions more fully, this paper will first turn briefly to the mass media in the 2007 election campaign and then to the ways in which the YRAW online campaign might demonstrate that voters did indeed retake the information commons.

MASS MEDIA IN THE 2007 ELECTION CAMPAIGNS.

As Leach has noted, election campaigns generally turn more on images than issues, certainly true of the 2007 campaign in Australia, a campaign which began well before the official announcement in October. While Prime Minister John Howard had long espoused publically the importance of continuous election campaigns, it is clear that serious campaigning began with the election of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard to Labor Party leadership in December 2006. The subsequent reshuffle of the Liberal cabinet offered evidence that the Liberal Party saw industrial relations as a major issue, with the more hardline Kevin Andrews being replaced as Minister for Workplace Relations by the seemingly more benign and ebullient Joe Hockey.

It is perhaps not surprising then, that the Liberal Party and many print media commentators framed labour and industrial relations, especially the marginalisation of trade unions, as of positive and enduring national economic benefits In this portrayal in the print media, and it was frequently repeated, the economy was in excellent shape and unemployment was at record low, largely, it was asserted as a consequence of the 2005 WorkChoices legislation. From this readers could infer – and were told frequently as well - if a new government were to change the levers which enabled these positive national gains, then the economy would fail and unemployment would rise. Certainly Prime Minister Howard stayed firmly convinced of this logic throughout the campaign. Indeed, in March 2007 he noted famously that 'Working families in Australia have never been better off', (*Hansard*, Australian Parliament March 26 2007; see also 'IR Agenda "not that unpopular"' 2007) and proceeded to reinforce such assertions.

By contrast the examples of framing of trade unions, and industrial relations, more broadly, (Martin, (2004) were manifold in the 2007 election. Certainly, the national newspaper, *The Australian,* was strongly critical of Labor and labour throughout the campaign. With two-three major articles on industrial relations most weeks, the national newspaper presented a few clear messages, frequently repeated. At the heart of the debate was the complex and prescriptive WorkChoices legislation which had been passed in 2005 and come into effect in March 2006.

Moreover, it was not only widely conveyed that , under Labor, unions would have excessive power but also within this kind of framing it was presumed that "union thugs" were endemic in the trade union movement. ('Fear of Union Violence' 2007; Masanuskas 2007). For example, the activist and militant unionist, Dean Mighell, was mentioned in over 200 articles in *The Australian* over the campaign period, in many of which he was the primary subject. The logic appeared that if unions were peopled by union thugs, and the Labor Party was beholden to the trade union movement, itself undesirable, then Australia would be run by union thugs. This was a theme to which the Liberal Party would return in the latter stages, with campaign images of Labor's front bench as being union-dominated ('Hysterical Claims' 2007).

All of these notions were well encapsulated in the *Bulletin* in January 2007.

Yet Labor is embarking on a march into the past, not a vision for the future. It reflects a party still dictated to by union "mates" more concerned about their own survival... In this sense, being forced to go back to the ACTU's 1970s-style collective bargaining will not only stifle major productivity improvements but confirm the puppet status, and weakness, of the new Labor leader. The signs are ominous. Earlier this month, ACTU president Sharan Burrow asserted: "The Labor leadership has committed themselves to tearing up [WorkChoices] ..." Rudd and Gillard tugged the forelock.... ('Hit the road' 2007).

It is evident then that much of the mass media took up the Liberal Party framing of industrial relations, and enhanced it. Such ideas were neatly encapsulated in an editorial in *The Australian* in May 2007

Once Labor was in power unions would be able to get whatever they wanted, including the reintroduction of pattern bargaining, which allows the highest-won pay deals to flow through to areas less able, or unable, to pay. This is exactly what *The Australian* has been concerned about. It is a mindset that has in the past fostered industrial thuggery on the waterfront and in the construction industry and for decades held the nation to ransom. The personal enrichment of union thugs comes at great cost, not only to employers, but the economic wellbeing of the nation.

National well-being was conflated with the need to uphold business priorities, and the rights of business to self-determination were accorded greater weight than employee, labour or social priorities The complexities of employment relations were eschewed in favour of polarisation; 'flexibility' was superior to 'rigidity', economic wellbeing was more desirable than 'back to the bad old days of union power'. Mass media, even those seemingly sympathetic with Labor, stayed largely within these agenda

THE ELECTION, LABOUR AND NEW MEDIA

However, while much of the mass media sought to promote individual and business economic well-being as a core value, and the Liberal Coalition as the best means to achieving that core value, there were other voices which, by 2007, were increasingly well articulated and heard. What appears to differentiate the 2007 election from prior elections in Australia was the extensive use of new media, and concomitantly the role played by non-party actors. While there has already been good analysis on this especially in terms of the work undertaken by parties and candidates (see for example, Flew, 2008; Flew and Wilson, 2008 Macnamara, 2008), this paper focuses on efforts by trade unions and those sympathetic to labour.

In a presidential style election where the focus is on the leaders, it is not surprising that all the major parties used their websites to promote party leaders and senior contenders. The Liberal Party offered extensive material seeking to counter Labor claims. Imagery was important to both parties. The cover of one Liberal publication offered a particularly unflattering picture of Labor Deputy Julia Gillard, while the Labor Party offered innuendos on the ageing Prime Minister Howard. This was little different from previous elections however, and relied on voters seeking out the party websites. What was new in 2007 was the use made by both parties of social networking sites, as well as YouTube presentations by leaders. These were clearly directed at younger voters, the group which had perhaps been most negatively affected by WorkChoices. While not entirely effective – neither John Howard nor Kevin Rudd appeared comfortable – YouTube, Facebook and the like offered a form of reaching out to particular groups of voters.

However, perhaps the most effective use of new media came through the progressivist and activist sites such as GetUp and the ACTU directed Your Rights at Work (YRAW). These offered opportunities not only to express ideas, debate and discuss issues, describe personal experiences, but most notably to be engaged in the election process, rather than as passive

recipients of information.   This is not new – the process of blogging came about claimed one of its earliest exponents because 'it was better than kicking the television'. What was most notable about Your Rights at Work was that it assumed that visitors to the site wanted to be engaged and active. Thus it offered activities ranging from email campaigns, opportunities for fund-raising and space to describe personal stories, upload photos, explain their concerns and seek advice. Of themselves, these were neither new nor novel. Indeed the prevalent Your Rights at Work stickers and posters were old methods – but they were purveyed through the YRAW site and became an effective and instantly recognisable logo.   Moreover, by its comprehensiveness, enduring enthusiasm and inclusivity, YRAW offered opportunities for even the most cautious of participants to become involved. As some analysts have noted, the capacity for anonymity, can empower people, since they can express doubts, concerns or opinions with some impunity. Certainly, several hundred individuals sought advice on Rights Watch over 2007 while comments from participants in the YRAW campaigns required more than 70 pages of printing. Such involvement was integrated with other public activity so that alongside the November 2006 Day of Action, a site seeking a Thousand Good Reasons (TGR) (to vote Labor) achieved nearly 300 postings in a few days (Muir, 2008, 1990).   In other words, these activities drew on revitalised union organising campaigns, where engagement and involvement of participants was a central strategy.

But it was not only union members who participated in the various websites, or activities. As Muir has noted, the YRAW reflected a "passionate subterranean stream of engagement (Muir p.190) and those engaged in commentary or debate included numbers of people who had previously had little to do with unions.   In some cases they were parents or grandparents concerned for family working conditions. Muir cites the small business owner who on the Thousand Good Reasons site asserted that the WorkChoices "undermine our way of life and ... makes us a lackey to so called global forces" (cited in Mur 2008, p.191. While elsewhere she quotes an organiser of a community web campaign who told the YRAW organisers "thank you so much for creating this campaign and making it what it is because you've allowed us to have our voice [even those of us] who were never tied to the unions." (Muir, 2008, p.120. Parents expressed concern for the working future of their children or grandchildren, and young workers questioned their working futures. Increasing access to, and use of, the new media enabled a channel and a community building capacity through which ideas could be conveyed and debated. Indeed Muir who followed the YRAW campaign as a participant-observer had the overwhelming impression that ".... the best aspects were the development of people who had never been activist before who now have the skills ..... so for me the best bit has been to see people growing in confidence and stature, knowing that 'what I did' made a difference' (Muir 2008, p206).

In the parlance of 1970s feminism, internet campaigns such as YRAW and GetUp enabled a consciousness raising exercise which in turn changed perceptions, approaches and actions. As Solomon (2007) argued on the Centre for Policy Development (CPD) website shortly after the election,

Emboldened by the empowerment of a truly democratic internet, political movements can flourish on their ideas and momentum alone. The internet can also undermine and invert traditional power structures'. This effectiveness lies in the very actions that individuals can take and the ways in which they can express their concerns. The …. effects of political party 'spin' could be deconstructed and analysed, the images of ugly unions or thuggish unionists countermanded….

What the new media offered to individuals and groups who developed and participated in the YRAW and GetUp campaigns were clear alternatives for discussion and dissemination of ideas and concepts, well beyond the repeated and carefully framed depictions in the mass media. Previously much of the public discourse during an election – over the parties, the issues, the developments - had been shaped by the predominant purveyors of ideas, the mass media (print, television and radio). With the advent and growing effective use of the new media, mass media images and projections could now be diluted by the multiple, albeit sometimes fragmented, vehicles of the new media, which, in turn, gave voice to those previously excluded or marginalised. In this way they surely began a retaking of the information dissemination commons.

ELEMENTS OF COMMONS – FOR ANALYSIS AND FOR PUBLIC DISCOURSE
This paper has in part sought to use the conceptual framework of the information commons as a

means for investigating and understanding the role of the internet in the 2007 Australian election. As noted above, media concentration in Australia is not only greater than many OECD countries, but also a significant section was strongly allied to the radical conservative agendas being promulgated by the then US government. These perspectives and processes augmented and enhanced the atmosphere engendered by the Howard government which had consistently sought to marginalise those views contrary to their own, and to dismiss or demean those who propounded such views or ideas. In other words, by 2007 it was more difficult than ever for pro-labour and pro-Labor to access the mass media except within very constrained frames. In this respect, an information commons allowed ideas not on the government's agenda to be expressed, discussed and developed. Just as the landless had once had an opportunity raise their hopes through grazing cattle, it is argued in this paper that in 2007 the voiceless appeared to have an opportunity to participate, debate and have their ideas legitimated, rather than be passive consumers of the mass media.

There maybe some difficulties with the analogy of the commons. The original commons were legally circumscribed as to who were commoners – there were requirements of residency and on what could be considered appropriate activities that could be undertaken on the Commons, and the Commons were only small islands of common ground in large swathes of private land. It is important therefore not to take too close an analogy. [refs]

As well – as Hardin (1968) passionately argued, albeit in a flawed argument – the original notions of the commons were based on resources that could be exhausted. It is precisely because the commons were an exhaustible resource that the notions of the commons have been a significant basis for research by environmentalists analysing water, fisheries, bushland and the like. At present, a prima facie case could be made that there are virtually no limits to the information commons – seemingly it is an inexhaustible resource. Thus the analogy of the commons is one in which we should take the broad ideal-type basis of the notion of the commons – a common resource which is not in the hands of private ownership, and which is controlled by neither state nor market. .

The metaphor of the commons, then, not only advances our understanding of the non-mass media election activities of YRAW and GetUp, it also highlights the threats and challenges that deserve further analysis. What made the commons campaigns of 2007 effective were the structures and wider allied events and processes which showed the campaigns to be open to all sorts of participation. Those did not want to comment on a Thousand Good Reasons or YRAW could make donations – sometimes raising significant funding in a short time – or participate in a wealth of other activities at regional or community level. In other words, the campaigns were open accessible and participative – new experiences for some voters – but at the same time they avoided the dangers of fragmentation or dilution which some analysts have highlighted as a weakness of internet campaigns, blogging and the like. On the other hand as scholars have noted reliance on the internet for citizen involvement needs to be tempered with an awareness of the potential for limits and control by the state or the market. There has already been an array of attempts to control blogging, or limit union activities on Facebook. (Chadwick, 2006; Chester, 2007; Boyle, 2008), Given the evident gains from unions and citizens alike from structured campaigns such as GetUp and YRAW, the potential limits and controls of the information dissemination commons by state and market deserve closer analysis within the commons literature

CONCLUSION

In December 2007 Brian Loughnane, National Director of the Liberal Party somewhat acerbically noted in reference to the YRAW campaign that "for the first time in our history, a third external force has intervened in our political process with resources greater than either of the major political parties. ....." and also that, "This development has profound significance for the Australian democracy and has been largely ignored in the commentary on the election since 24 November." (Loughnane, 2007) While some might quibble over the bases for Loughnane's concern there is little doubt that he and many others acknowledged early in the post-election analyses the effect of the YRAW campaign in the 2007 election. (See also What Loughnane perhaps underestimated was not simply the campaign *per se* but the ways in which YRAW, GetUp and the like engaged and empowered citizens, and gave them opportunities to consider agenda and issues not readily evident in the print media.

That much media framed unions as social problems, and particularly as a Labor Party problem, was evident throughout the election and forced the Labor leaders to take defensive stances, particularly when images of "thuggish" unionists were conveyed as normal inhabitants of unions. They are also difficult to counter through the mass media, even when it appeared that there was some sympathy for employees and unions as a consequence of effects of the labour legislation, WorkChoices.

Paradoxically, what the 2005 WorkChoices legislation appeared to do was galvanise the unions and the labour and progressivist movements into concerted and strategic action which maximised the potential of the internet. GetUp and YRAW offered ordinary citizens opportunities to engage in campaigns in a way that had not been available for decades. The structured but open spaces for commentary and blogs took the form of an information dissemination commons where participants could create and expand public knowledge, controlled by neither state nor market. Unions and pro-labour social movements need to continue to expand their understanding of the information commons – not only the limits and threats , although these are looming, but also structures, ideas and processes for countering distorted images of trade unions and enhancing democratic participation. For in the 2007 many voters were no longer disempowered recipients of mass media – rather engaged and participative as they worked to lay claim to the information commons. .

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