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## Politics and the Media in Australia Today\*

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As I was wondering what to focus on for this lecture—so many interesting things happened during the 2007 election—I was also writing two academic papers and the contradictions between these two papers struck me as symptomatic of the changing nature of media/politics in Australia and led me to what I would like to talk about today.

The first paper I was writing was about Sky News.<sup>1</sup> Before the 2007 election, Sky promised ‘the most comprehensive coverage Australian viewers have ever witnessed’ and I think, in terms of TV, it achieved that. Aside from dedicated programmes, news bulletins and breaking news headlines, programs were interrupted to broadcast—usually live and in full—media conferences, policy announcements and other key events. There were multiple hours of election-related content every day during the election.

But, at the same time, I was writing a paper where I presented the results of a study into how free-to-air TV news covers election campaigns.<sup>2</sup> Analysing primetime TV news stories, I found that the average election-news story is only two minutes long—and during this story, the reporter and host speak for more than half the time while politicians speak only in 7 second soundbites. The average news story about the 2007 election devoted less than 30 seconds to letting politicians speak in their own words. For example, on the 12 November, the day of the Coalition’s campaign launch, John Howard delivered a speech for 42 minutes but that night on the evening news, voters heard only 10.4 seconds of it. We know from American research that the soundbite has shrunk over time, keeps on shrinking and that they have less soundbites on their news compared to ours. So, if we follow American trends in news production—and we often seem to—this will happen here as well.

This led me to start thinking about the contradictions between the growing options for political junkies (as epitomised by a 24 hour news channel) versus the 7 second soundbite on commercial TV news. It also got me thinking about how this fits with

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<sup>1</sup> Sally Young, ‘Tradition and innovation in the reporting of election campaigns: Sky News and the 2007 election’, *Communication, Politics & Culture*, vol 41, no.2, 2008, pp. 47–61.

<sup>2</sup> Sally Young, ‘Political discourse in the age of the soundbite’, Australasian Political Science Association Annual Conference, University of Queensland., Brisbane, 7–9 July 2008.

the internet because so often we hear that it is going to revolutionise democracy and expand political participation. We hear these claims in Australia, as in 2007, an election that was dubbed ‘the internet election’.

But before I come to look at specific media, I need to sketch a better map of who I’m talking about in terms of politics and news audiences.

### **Who are the media audience for politics in Australia?**

An experienced political pollster estimated a few years ago that only around 10 per cent of the population in Australia takes an active interest in politics. A lot of what we know about Australian attitudes to politics comes from work performed at the Research School of Social Sciences (RSSS) at the Australian National University including the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes and the Australian Election Studies.

These studies show that indicators of extensive (or deep) formal political participation are low—only about 4 per cent of Australians are members of a political party for example, compared to the 45 per cent who belong to a sport or recreation group.<sup>3</sup> Or, another example—during an election campaign, usually less than 5 per cent of Australians will attend a political meeting or rally.<sup>4</sup> If measured in terms of wider civic engagement (such as membership of auto associations or voluntary associations), Australians are not disengaged from civic life. However, this seems to me to be quite a different measure than involvement in formal politics or the political process.

Although people have a tendency to overestimate ‘good’ qualities such as civic involvement in surveys, 17 per cent were willing to admit in 2007 that they had ‘not much’ or ‘no’ interest in politics and 12 per cent surveyed in 2007 said they wouldn’t vote at all if it were voluntary.<sup>5</sup>

This builds up a broad picture of the two extremes of the spectrum—about 5–10 per cent of people who are highly interested in politics while 12–17 per cent are so uninterested that they freely admit it and might not vote if not for compulsory voting. Given that people may be reluctant to acknowledge a lack of interest in politics in an election or politics survey, this number may actually be larger. What we can say then, very broadly, is that for every Australian who is highly engaged with politics, there are at least two who aren’t interested much at all. In the middle of these extremes are the rest: the majority.

Now that we have this very broad sense of the proportion of dedicated ‘seekers’ of politics news versus the indifferent we can consider where (if at all) these groups get political news and information via the media.

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Passey and Mark Lyons, ‘Voluntary associations and political participation’ in Shaun Wilson and Gabrielle Meagher, Rachel Gibson, David Denmark and Mark Western (eds) *Australian Social Attitudes: The First Report*. Sydney, UNSW Press, 2005, p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> Ian McAllister and Juliet Clark, *Trends in Australian Political Opinion: Results from the Australian Election Study 1987–2007*. Canberra, Australian National University, 2007, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 21.

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## The news and politics junkies

Just as political interest divides us, when it comes to how we use media to get political news and information, we are also a nation divided.

If we are interested in politics and political news, there are a now host of options available. There are still traditional places including ABC and SBS news and current affairs programs, broadsheet newspapers and public radio, but two other major options have opened up—pay TV and the internet.

Let's look at pay TV first. In terms of political content pay TV has Australia's only locally-produced 24 hour news channel. But by international standards, the take-up of pay TV in Australia has been very slow. It's growing but at 2005, only about 23 per cent of Australian households had pay TV compared to around 88 per cent in the US and 50 per cent in the UK.<sup>6</sup> Even taking this into account, Sky News' viewing figures are small. As an overall percentage of TV viewing, Sky News captures only around 0.5 per cent of the Australian TV viewing audience.<sup>7</sup> It's a fantastic resource for anyone interested in politics but this is what and who it is for—news junkies and political junkies.

Now let's turn to the internet. It's true that the amount and variety of political information on the internet has dramatically increased over the past few years. Let me illustrate by imagining an extreme caricature of a political junkie, someone who has a dedicated interest in politics, and his average day (we'll make him male as research shows the online political junkie is more likely to be male) and we'll call him Johnny.

Johnny begins early in the morning by reading all of the major newspapers online, then he listens to the *AM* program (through his PC of course). Because he likes to get an alternative view as well though he also goes on indymedia to check how others are reporting the day's top story or to see what news stories aren't being covered in the mainstream media. At 10am, there is a parliamentary inquiry on political donations that he's interested in so he goes to the [aph.gov.au](http://aph.gov.au) website and watches live as a witness gives evidence. While he's there he also reads a few of the written submissions to the inquiry. He's on the email list of three political parties so he then reads the emails they sent him that morning including their press releases. Then, to catch up, because he missed yesterday's Question Time, he goes on to the ABC newsradio website and downloads the podcast which he listens to on his ipod while he goes for a walk. When he gets back he reads Crikey which has just arrived in his email inbox. After that he goes onto the ABC website or Sky News Active and watches Question Time live. An MP answers a question about education policy which makes him curious so he visits four different political party websites so he can compare their policies. He makes up a list of how they differ and posts this on his blog and emails it to his friends (yes, he has some!). Then he emails his local MP and asks her a question about a new road that's proposed in his electorate.

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<sup>6</sup> AFC, 'What Australians are watching: Pay TV: Analysis', Updated November 2005, <http://www.afc.gov.au/gtp/wptvanalysis.html>, viewed 28 November 2007.

<sup>7</sup> OzTam 'National subscription TV report: Week 29, July 15–21 2007', [http://www.oztam.com.au/documents%5C2007%5CB1\\_20070715.pdf](http://www.oztam.com.au/documents%5C2007%5CB1_20070715.pdf), viewed 3 January 2008.

Throughout the day, he checks back with his favourite online newspaper to see the latest breaking news. In between, he reads OnlineOpinion, New Matilda and Australian Policy Online. When these get a bit too serious, he logs on to Youtube and watches a funny satirical clip about the prime minister. When he opens his FaceBook profile he has two new messages from other politically interested friends who are part of a lobby group and tell him about a meeting they're holding. This makes him nostalgic for the times when political meetings and rallies were more standard fare so he looks up some political history resources including the National Library's PANDORA archive and the University of Melbourne's Soapbox of election materials. By 8pm, he's watched the primetime TV news and current affairs programs (which disappoint him), so, because he likes psephology, he reads the latest posts at his favourite political blogs including mumble.com.au and the poll bludger. Then he goes to bed.

This, of course, is *not* the average Australian. My point in imagining him is to show just how many options there are to the modern media/politics citizen. But it's also to illustrate how, on the one hand, there are more and more options for engaging with politics and political news—particularly on the internet—but on the other hand, these options are predominantly for the deliberate, dedicated seeker of political information. You have to seek them out—they are unlikely to be options that you just happen across while on the internet.

While there are now these many different resources, are Australians using any/many of them?

Things move fast in new media use but back in 2003 when asked what medium they used to get news and information—and this is general news so including sport, weather and entertainment—only 11 per cent in Australia said they used the internet daily to get news.<sup>8</sup> Since then, more people are likely to have turned to online news and online newspapers specifically. The figures can be hard to capture accurately but the Australian Press Council reports that online newspaper use is growing fast.<sup>9</sup> Still, the 2008 ACMA report indicated that when Australians are on the internet, accessing news is fifth on the list of things they're doing online, behind e-mail, banking and paying bills.<sup>10</sup>

When we're talking more specifically about politics or election news, the figures are even lower. Data from the 2007 election suggests about 5 per cent used the internet to get election news.<sup>11</sup> And this statistic included people who said they used the internet only 'once or twice' to seek information on the election so it's a fairly generous estimation.

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<sup>8</sup> David Denemark, 'Mass Media and Media Power in Australia' in Shaun Wilson et al, op. cit., 2005, pp. 222–3.

<sup>9</sup> APC '2007 Supplement', p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> ACMA, *Communications Report 2006–07*. ACMA: Canberra, ACMA, 2008. [http://www.acma.gov.au/WEB/STANDARD/pc=PC\\_310950](http://www.acma.gov.au/WEB/STANDARD/pc=PC_310950)

<sup>11</sup> McAllister and Clark, op. cit., p. 3.

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There is still a digital divide in Australia in terms of income, age, gender, education and geographical location. Not surprisingly, Australian research has found that the younger a person is, the more likely they'll use the internet for news and information. Being male and having a university degree also more than doubles the likelihood of relying on the internet for news.<sup>12</sup>

So despite all the focus on the internet, at this point in time, TV is still by far the most popular medium in Australia and it's the place where the accidental audience is most likely to come across political news. TV is in a transition phase. Its audience has declined (or fragmented depending upon how you look at) and there are other worrying signs for the future. Yet, for the moment, it still remains immensely popular with nine out of ten Australians watching TV every week.<sup>13</sup> On average, Australians watch over three hours of television a day.<sup>14</sup> As David Denemark notes, it 'dominates Australians' lives at home'.<sup>15</sup> By comparison, although it's growing, when it comes to getting information and news about politics or a federal election, the internet is still a niche medium in Australia. This is changing but, at the moment, far more people rely on the traditional media.<sup>16</sup>

### **Traditional media use and the loss of the accidental audience?**

Given the lack of political junkies, we know that most people don't actively seek out political content. In fact, many try to avoid it and choose other options. When surveyed about what sort of media content they prefer, 'political analysis' was ranked last after other categories such as news, sports, entertainment and music.<sup>17</sup> In my study of soundbites, I found that the more popular a TV channel is, the less election news stories it has on its primetime news program—which suggests something important about why the soundbite is so short and particularly on the commercial channels. In terms of media use, people vote with their feet (or eyeballs in this case). The top rating programs each year are sporting events and reality TV shows. The best selling newspapers are not those with the weightier, longer politics sections but tabloids. The same is true of online news. While mainstream newspapers have attracted audiences it is ninemsn—with its lighter approach to news—that is the most visited website.<sup>18</sup>

But the traditional media contained places where people came across politics even if they didn't deliberately seek it out.

People who thought they weren't particularly interested in formal politics might be reading a newspaper and, in flicking through to get to the weather, cartoons, movies or sport, see a politics story that catches their eye and read it. They might be watching TV news on a commercial channel after work and, while (again) waiting for the weather or sport, see a few news stories on politics. Then, when they leave the TV on

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<sup>12</sup> Denemark, op. cit., p. 223.

<sup>13</sup> ACMA *Communications Report 2006–07*, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> AFC, *Get the Picture*, 2008 <http://www.afc.gov.au/gtp/wftvviewage.html>

<sup>15</sup> Denemark, op. cit., p. 228.

<sup>16</sup> McAllister and Clark, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Productivity Commission, *Inquiry into Broadcasting*. Report No. 11, Melbourne, 2000, p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> APC, *2007 Supplement*, p. 17.

that channel, they might see a current affairs program that had stories on politics or even a political interview with a prime minister of opposition leader.

Now, those ‘accidental’ options are declining. TV news still has stories on politics but less people watch it (especially at the evening news time slot) and there are shorter stories with politicians speaking less often.

Current affairs program on commercial TV once had some ‘incidental’ political content in between other stories—for example, a politician being interviewed or political issues being reported and analysed. But now there’s barely even a pretence that the programs operate that way. Celebrity interviews and the staple fare of neighbourhood disputes, small time con-artists, diet and cosmetic surgery stories have replaced national politics with politicians now increasingly seen as a ‘ratings killer’. When he was host of the program *A Current Affair*, Ray Martin declared that: ‘Anyone who suggests that you get ratings by having the Prime Minister or Leader of the Opposition on is a dope ... Australians don’t want that ... they don’t watch ...’.<sup>19</sup>

On TV, three key factors indicate a changing conception of the audience for political news and a move away from letting politicians talk in their own words: 1) the absence of politics stories and declining emphasis on formal politics; 2) shorter soundbites and 3) greater editorialism with more space given to reporters and experts than politicians. This last feature is epitomised by the practice Ken Inglis dubbed ‘goldfishing’—where politicians are more likely to be seen than heard as ‘the voice heard most is the reporter’s, paraphrasing or analysing or even deriding what the member is saying. ... [so that] we just see his or her mouth moving ...’.<sup>20</sup>

And it’s not just TV, of course. In printed newspapers, where once there were lengthy transcripts of politicians’ speeches or reports on parliamentary debates, there is now more space for lifestyle topics such as travel, cooking and fashion—topics that ‘attract advertising revenue’ and allow for articles to be pre-written so that there can be ‘more advance printing and the use of the same material in many newspapers within the same company.’<sup>21</sup> In online newspapers, the presentation of material is quite different from the hardcopy with more emphasis on celebrity and entertainment and with the ‘most read’ story indicators suggesting that the more ‘tabloidesque’ stories attract more hits.

To me, the way newspapers are presented online, the changing format of TV news and the decline of commercial current affairs programs, are symptoms of how traditional media are ditching politics or, at least, consider it a niche rather than a general interest for their audiences.

As a result, the options for ‘accidental’ engagement with politics seem to be declining and this raises the spectre of an increased division in the future between the politically-informed information seekers and the rest—especially online. Given sufficient neglect, some of these unaddressed may become politically marginalised

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<sup>19</sup> ABC *Four Corners* program, ‘The Uncertain Eye’, 2 February 1998.

<sup>20</sup> K. Inglis ‘Parliamentary speech’, *Australian Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 12, 1996, p. 149.

<sup>21</sup> Australian Press Council, *State of the News Print Media in Australia*. Sydney, 2006, p. 5.

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and alienated, viewing politics as something quite separate from themselves. But is this a likely scenario?

### **The decline of ‘accidentalism’?**

When a new medium comes along there can be a temptation from some quarters to hype it up and overestimate its positive potential or, from others, to demonise it and fear its consequences. Both of these things happened with TV and are now happening with the internet. I’ve used Johnny as an example of the positive potential for engaged citizens so now, at the risk of adding to the demonisation, let’s examine some theories about the potentially negative impact of the internet.

According to one strand of thought, online newspapers represent the problem of a declining ‘accidentalism’. When you go to an online newspaper, you choose which links you click on to read a full story. It’s true that, when reading the hardcopy print version, you might also have flicked straight past the politics section and read only the classifieds or some other section. But, where once an article might have caught your eye while turning the page or while you were reading the article above or below, you now have only a list of headlines in the online version and you choose which ones you read and which you don’t. Your eye doesn’t tend to accidentally stray over other content—text and photos—just over other headlines which can be more easily ignored.

There is also the technological capacity with online news sites and search engines to ‘personalise’ your news content. This can be done voluntarily. You can ask for your news to be customised—for example, just to have sport news—or it can be done surreptitiously by the website proprietor who keeps track of your reading and selectively funnels content to you. (This is similar to what Amazon does in keeping track of what books you buy and then, when you logon, it suggests new ones in the same topic area for you). Yahoo news and Google News—now some of the most popular online news sources—work like this already (see <http://cm.my.yahoo.com/?rd=nux> and <http://news.google.com/nwshp?hl=en&tab=wn>) so that you select what sort of news you want and they filter out content that you haven’t indicated a preference for.

Fragmentation compounds this. Let me give a Victorian example. Where once someone who was interested in sport might have bought the *Herald-Sun* or the *Age* and gone to the back sports section (with the option of perhaps stopping to read the general or politics news on the way), they can now just go straight to [sports.yahoo.com](http://sports.yahoo.com), the AFL website, ESPN.com or other sports-news-only sites.

### **Should we just let them go?**

There are some uncomfortable choices in here. Part of the ‘problem’ I’ve just described is due to greater media choices. Whereas once there were just five free-to-air TV channels all of which broadcast the news at roughly the same time, now there will be more choices available at different times, in different formats and with different content. And, given the option of having news without politics, many people may well take it. Therefore, if people are given a choice and they don’t want politics news, then who am I to suggest that they should? In response, I’d suggest that people haven’t really been given an adequate choice in the past. Lack of diversity in media

ownership, the commercialisation of news and its imperatives, the standardised format of TV and newspaper news and the lack of imagination and change in recent years in relation to these formats have meant, arguably, that few good choices have been available.

I could also point to the one area where there has been growth in TV audience share as a sign of hope—a sign that if there is well-presented political news, people may choose it—the rise in audience share for the ABC and SBS (which I discuss more below).

Finally, I could suggest a proverb: ‘What interests people is not always good for them. What’s good for people does not always interest them.’ This is very paternalistic but I fear the opposite stance may be worse. You do the politically disengaged no favours by supporting their exclusion (whether self-chosen or not) and, on balance, a democracy without politically aware citizens is more dangerous.

If I was at a media or cultural studies conference, among academics who argue that *Australian Idol* and *Big Brother* are representations of real democracy and just as valid as formal politics, I’d have to justify and explain this argument about audience choice in far more detail but I think it’s safe to assume that I’m among people who believe that participating in, and knowing about, formal politics is important.

I’d like to now think about the future and consider how realistic or unlikely scenarios of a dwindling accidental audience are. For the sake of analysis, I’ve divided the following discussion into two parts: signs of concern and signs of hope for the future. But the dichotomy isn’t as clear cut as this, of course. As we’re in the midst of all of these changes (and still in an ‘apprenticeship’ phase of using the internet), some of these trends are very difficult to interpret and I’ve indicated where I think the difficulties lie.

### **Signs of concern**

If we take as our premise that printed newspapers have been a bedrock of political news, whereas the shape of online news is far more ambiguous, there are signs of concern. A 2006 Australian Press Council report noted that ‘[n]early half of those who read Australian metropolitan newspapers are over fifty’ which doesn’t bode well for the future.<sup>22</sup> Nearly 70 per cent of metropolitan newspapers’ readers are now aged over 35 years.<sup>23</sup> In the four years between 2000 and 2004, the biggest decline in audience share for newspapers was in the 18–24 year old group.<sup>24</sup> *The Economist* argued in August 2006 that newspapers are ‘on the way out [and that] half the world’s newspapers [are] likely to close in the foreseeable future.’<sup>25</sup> Eric Beecher, co-owner of Crikey and former newspaper editor has argued that the money that has underpinned

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<sup>22</sup> APC report, 2006, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 21.

<sup>24</sup> Jason Sternberg, ‘Youth Media’ in Stuart Cunningham and Graeme Turner (eds), *The Media and Communications in Australia*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Crows Nest, NSW, Allen and Unwin, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in APC report 2006, p. 1.

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quality journalism in Australia is no longer available and new models will have to be found.<sup>26</sup>

The majority of Australians still rely on free-to-air TV and especially commercial TV news to get political information.<sup>27</sup> But, as I've said, use of free-to-air TV is declining, news and current affairs audiences are declining (or fragmenting) and these programs devote very little time to politics. Young people are turning away from TV in general but also TV news and current affairs. Despite moral panics about young people watching too much TV, adults over 55 years are the heaviest viewers, averaging 4 hours and 17 minutes of viewing per day, while young adults, teens and children are now the lightest users, averaging under 2.5 hours per day. In sum, people under 40 are watching less TV now than they were in 1991.<sup>28</sup>

Young people are moving to other media including music, cinema, magazines, the internet, TV, radio and video games, that don't necessarily emphasise formal politics.<sup>29</sup> They're turning away, in particular, from free-to-air TV news and current affairs.<sup>30</sup> These are genres that have been derided, by young people, as 'boring', 'complex', 'distant' and unrelated to their own lives but also as lacking context or background that they can use when stories, events or individuals are unfamiliar to them.<sup>31</sup>

Young people seem to be especially abandoning conventional journalism in the form of printed newspapers and TV news and current affairs.<sup>32</sup> Jason Sternberg found that commercial prime time news and current affairs seem never to have attracted more than 18 or 19 per cent of under 24 year olds.<sup>33</sup> Much has also been made of how media-savvy young people are now and, in light of their knowledge about media formats (including from programs such as *Frontline*), they are aware of how patronising, sensational, unethical and nonsensical some current affairs program content is.

So, while such programs have increasingly taken politicians off in an attempt to retain or attract audiences, it hasn't necessarily worked. In 2007, *A Current Affair* averaged its lowest audience for this decade and both *Today Tonight* and *A Current Affair* are stagnating or declining in terms of ratings.

This is one of the trends that I'm not sure how to read. On one hand, I'm tempted to say that the commercial news and current affairs programs are so bad that it's a good thing that they're dying. Optimistically, I could wonder whether this might even herald a new dawn of a different type of programming that could include engagement

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<sup>26</sup> Eric Beecher, 'Crumbling pillars?' *Media International Australia*, vol. 122, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Denmark, op. cit., pp. 222–3.

<sup>28</sup> AFC, 2008, <http://www.afc.gov.au/gtp/wftvviewage.html>

<sup>29</sup> Sternberg, op. cit., and Denmark, op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> Vanessa Evans and Jason Sternberg, 'Young people, politics and television current affairs in Australia', *JAS, Australia's Public Intellectual Forum* no. 63, 1999, p. 103. See also Ward, op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> Eg. see Ward, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> Jason Sternberg, 'Rating youth: A statistical review of young Australians' news media use', *Australian Studies in Journalism*, vol.7, 1998, p. 101.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 105–6.

with politics in a way younger viewers find appealing. But, on the other hand, I still worry that nothing (or worse) may fill the void of ‘incidental’ or ‘accidental’ political news that such programs used to provide. On balance, at least for the moment, I’ll choose to interpret it as a sign of hope that they’ll need to reinvent their tired and unpopular format.

As evidence of my more optimistic interpretation I’ll offer again as a sign of hope the fact that the ABC—with its focus on substantive political news and current affairs—is doing well in the current media climate. Its audience share has increased over the past three decades (and so has SBS) as other channels have declined (Table 1). Perhaps this indicates that there is an audience for ‘quality’ political news and current affairs? But I’ll also note a different interpretation of this trend that’s less favourable: the ABC is doing well because TV is now an ‘old people’s medium’ and older people like the ABC. (This is an interpretation that I’m investigating in more depth by examining ratings by program type and demographic over time.)

**Table 1**

Audience share by TV station, 1983, 2003 and 2007

	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>ABC</b>	<b>SBS</b>
1983	30.8	30.9	24.9	11.9	1.5
2003	25.6	31.2	23.2	15.6	4.5
2007	29.1	26.9	21.9	16.7	5.5

Source: AFC, *Get the Picture*, 2004 and 2007.

I’ve focused on news and journalism so far which means that one of the main ways that people ‘accidentally’ come across political content is one that I haven’t yet mentioned—through political parties’ advertising. Presuming that a viewer watches only one TV news program in the evening, s/he will see about two minutes of political news. But if, during an election, they keep watching TV until bedtime, they will likely see several minutes (in total) of political advertising over the course of the night. Depending upon where they live and how sought-after they are in terms of marginal seats/swinging voters, they may also get direct mail letters, telephone voice-recorded messages, emails and SMS messages. If political content in journalism forms reduces, these methods will become even more central ways in which voters access political material. I’ve put this as a sign of concern because I think this raises issues about the content of such advertisements as well as their costs (social, political and economic).

### **The changing media landscape**

What of the online audience? Is the Internet the solution? As we’ve noted, internet use for political purposes is an area where we in Australia lag behind the US considerably. This is due to a range of factors but perhaps we will narrow the gap. The Pew Internet and American Life Project found that, during the 2008 US primary campaign for the presidential election, 40 per cent of Americans had used the internet to get political

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news.<sup>34</sup> This had grown rapidly in 8 years, from 16 per cent of all adults in 2000 to 40 per cent during 2008.

The extent of detailed research in the US is useful to pointing where trends in Australia are likely to head although we're moving at a much slower pace in terms of political news use. The American research suggests that the number of people using TV and newspapers to learn about politics will continue to decline while the proportion of people using the internet to learn about election campaigns will increase (in the US it more than doubled between 2000 and 2008).<sup>35</sup> In particular, young people will continue to abandon TV and instead turn to the internet. This phenomenon is happening very fast. In the US, the internet now takes up 30 per cent of the media consumption hours of young people aged 12–24 years.<sup>36</sup> Table 2 shows the trend in young people's media use for election news in the US from 2004 to 2007.

**Table 2**

Young people (18–29 years) media use for election news in the US  
2004 and 2007

Get most election news from ...	2004 per cent	2007 per cent	Change
Television	75	60	-15
Newspapers	30	24	-6
Internet	21	46	+25
Radio	10	10	0
Magazines	1	4	+3
Other	4	6	+2

Source: The Pew Research Centre, 'Social Networking and Online Videos take Off: Internet's Broader Role in Campaign 2008', 11 January 2008, p. 4.

Clearly, the internet will play a central role in the future. But will it be able to capture the 'accidental' political audience or will it push them further away from formal politics?

### **Signs of hope: will there be a new accidental audience?**

If we believe that political news can be interesting and can find a wide audience then there are some hopeful indicators. In particular, there are some signs of hope for an 'accidental' audience to be found online. In the US, a majority of internet users said they didn't go online for the sole purpose of learning about the 2008 election

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<sup>34</sup> Aaron Smith and Lee Raine, *The Internet and the 2008 Election*, Pew Internet and American Life Project, Washington D.C., 15 June, 2008, p. i.

<sup>35</sup> The Pew Research Centre, *Social Networking and Online Videos Take Off: Internet's Broader Role in Campaign 2008*, Pew Research Centre, Washington D.C, 2008, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Margaret Simons, *The Content Makers*. Camberwell Vic., Penguin Books, 2007, p. 26.

campaign but instead ‘came across’ campaign news and information ‘when they [were] going online to do something else.’<sup>37</sup> This is promising.

In 2008, this seemed to occur largely because political information was being spread via online social networks—emails from friends, funny videos posted on YouTube and messages through social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook.

Social networking sites are one of those phenomena that media experts are still unsure about (just as they are still unsure what to make of blogs). They could go either way—a flash in the pan or a long-term trend. At the moment, these sites seem to be playing an important role for Americans aged 18–29 years—in 2008, 27 per cent of this age group said they used these sites to get primary campaign information.<sup>38</sup> How does this work? For example, to drum up a crowd for a Hillary Clinton campus visit with only 2 days notice, the president of a Hillary support group at a university sent an online invitation to the meeting to her Facebook friends who then forwarded it on to their friends and, within 24 hours, she estimates 800 students on campus had received the invite with 400 people showing up for the meeting.<sup>39</sup>

We’ve seen some experimentation with the format in Australia. In 2007, the ALP claimed to have had 117,000 unique visitors to the Kevin Rudd MySpace profile.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, we don’t have the same level of public meetings as occur in the US so this holds it back from some potentially very good uses.

One of the other major sources for politics and election news in the US for young people is comedy shows such as *The Daily Show* with, perhaps surprisingly, surveys finding people who watch such shows are as well informed as the audiences of ‘elite news sources’ such as newspapers. This seems to be largely because these audiences seem to be heavy news consumers who use a range of other sources as well but there’s also some academic research on how important these shows are in reaching people who find conventional presentations of politics boring.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, breakfast and light entertainment shows reach audiences who don’t necessarily choose to watch politics. This means that programs that mention formal politics or have politicians on, such as *Good News Week*, *Sunrise*, *Rove*, *The Chaser* etc. seem to play an important role in reaching an accidental audience. Although I’ve focused on TV and newspapers, the same can be said of radio including when politicians go on programs that don’t normally have political content such as on FM radio.

Finally, in terms of pay TV, there is also some hope that more people will watch a 24 hour news channel as pay TV gains more penetration in the Australian market with American research suggesting that young people do turn to 24 hour news channels—particularly when events or crises occur. However, the fact that pay TV is very expensive in Australia probably negates the possibility of it becoming widely available to a broad and ‘accidental’ audience in the near future.

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<sup>37</sup> Pew Research Centre, ‘Social networking ...’, op. cit, p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> Carrie Dann and Ronald Brownstein, ‘Fast-forwarding networked politics’, *National Journal*, 19 April, 2008, [www.nationaljournal.com/njmagazine/cs\\_20080416\\_1054.php](http://www.nationaljournal.com/njmagazine/cs_20080416_1054.php).

<sup>40</sup> ‘Internet not a force for Aussie pollies’, *The Age*, breaking news, [theage.com.au](http://theage.com.au), 1 February 2008.

<sup>41</sup> Pew Research Centre, ‘Social networking ...’, op. cit., p. 5.

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## Conclusion

I don't want to romanticise the past. Just because newspapers used to print long transcripts of parliamentary speeches doesn't mean that everyone read them. Just because there were public meetings and lunchtime rallies, doesn't mean everyone went. Then, as now, there were always people who were highly engaged—attended meetings, read widely or protested—as well as the less-interested who shied away from formal politics.

What I am suggesting though is that if these non-interested people did interact with media (read a newspaper or listened to radio or, later on, watched TV), it seems they were more likely then, as opposed to now, to happen across political content even if they weren't looking for it.

There were a range of factors for this but one of the key ones seems to have been an underlying belief, on the part of journalists and media organisations, that politics was of general interest to citizens and, if it wasn't of interest to them, that it should be. That attitude may now be viewed as either paternalistic—telling people what's good for them—or as being extremely important and socially beneficial with its aim of forging an inclusive public sphere.

While the internet has given us a range of new materials—political websites, YouTube videos, RSS feeds, podcasts and blogs—not all Australians are using them. As we saw with the introduction of television, having more and/or better tools to engage in politics doesn't automatically equal use of those tools. Existing actors, structures, systems and preferences still play a key role.

Beyond the hype and demonisation, it's likely that the internet will be both helpful in transmitting political news as well as a place where there will still be great divisions between us in terms of our levels of political interest and our accessing of political content. In this context, while there has been a lot of focus on the 'quality' of news media outlets and their products, *opportunity* now seems just as important.

Providing outlets for the interested is now comparatively easy. There are a host of options online and these are growing. But reaching and engaging the uninterested is far more challenging. Somehow we also need to have a degree of 'happenstance' about political news and information so that people come across it in their day to day lives and see it as relevant and interesting. Given what we know about media audiences and political interest, this may demand a different approach than conventional journalism has traditionally provided.



**Question** — I should explain before I make this comment that I am a mongrel. I am half French and half English and because of that I am able to compare the way television news is broadcast in France and in Australia. I watch the French television

news every morning on SBS. I lived before that 20 years in France so I was watching it regularly. One thing I notice in France is that politics is made more interesting in the television news by the quality of the presenter. The presenter in Australia I'm afraid to say, is just that, a presenter. In France the presenter has to be able to interrogate, rather in the style of Kerry O'Brien shall we say, and this makes the political section of the French news far more interesting. People are always waiting to see politicians of any party being tripped up by a good interrogator. Isn't it a pity that that isn't the case in Australia?

**Sally Young** — I think partly that has to do with the limitations of the format. Two minutes of election news is not much time to analyse or pick apart or interview people. I think there are great many problems with the way news is presented in Australia. And I think the international comparison is very interesting because if you look overseas there are examples of how this is done better and differently.

**Question** — I have two things to say. The first is a reflection on your point about ABC and SBS attracting more audiences, and I wonder if partly if it has something to do with the fact that those two broadcasters seem to have a slightly more global flavour to them. They are not as parochial in some ways as some commercial channels. Since younger people have a sense of belonging to a more dispersed community, maybe that appeals to them more.

I don't know if there are examples in Australia, but certainly overseas, and one example of this would be the *Telegraph* in the UK, there is a sense of converging media platforms. Radio and broadsheets are increasingly going online, but not just providing written worlds, but they are actually having short presentations from their own journalists. So there is a complete changing of the platform on which media is presented. The way that you will come across things is changing and it's not just going to be statically reading an article and pulling it up; you'll come across clips that you didn't intend to come across.

**Sally Young** — Yes I think that's a good point. In terms of convergence, and they also call it intermediation, about how things are merging, in Australia in our online newspapers there are already examples of that. Sometimes during the election reporters will do blogs or they will post clips on the web sites and so on. So yes, the format of news is changing but I still think that you have to go to those sites to get that so you have to think in the morning when you get up: 'OK, I want to read a paper today' whether it's online or not and when I go there if there is a clip about the election I will watch it. So it needs to have a degree of seeking that information out. And in some sense that was always the case: you always had to go and buy a hard copy of a newspaper. The format is definitely changing, but perhaps that more visual presentation online will be more popular or perhaps it will come across the same sorts of problems that exist on television as well. The one thing I can say as a positive sign about that is that the lack of advertising interspersed between, as you have at the moment with news, creates more space and probably creates the potential to have a different kind of news as well. Thanks, that's an interesting point.

**Question** — Dr Young, looking at the small percentage who are very interested in politics, have you been able to find out whether they follow politics on the media to reinforce their views, their own beliefs in politics, or partisan support? Or are they

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looking for a challenge to their views, are they open minded? What is the purpose of people who are in that small percentage going through the news?

**Sally Young** — Again an interesting question. Not a lot of specific research has been done that I know of, but if we look at the demise of the *Bulletin* for example, commercially these people aren't necessarily enough to keep that afloat if that's what the proprietor's aim is. But in terms of whether they use it to reinforce their own political views or challenge them, the general view would be that people like to read news that agrees with what they are already thinking and doesn't particularly challenge them. But then again, I guess that people who are really interested in politics do seek out different viewpoints. For example, I know that a lot of academics might read political columnists that they don't necessarily agree with but they want to see what they are saying and what sort of agendas are coming up in those columns. That's academics who are particularly interested in left politics for example, and obviously the same thing happens on the other side. My short answer would be that we don't know enough about what sort of media they are using. The people who would know are the media organisations; they must have this sort of research. One study that was done recently looking at terms of preferences was a Roy Morgan survey and it found, for example, that Labor supporters watch the ABC more whereas Coalition supporters watch channel 9 more. They have particular programs that they prefer. So there were some divisions, but that's the only one I have seen and it was a short survey.

**Question** — Dr Young, I am interested in your opinion on [onlineopinion.com](http://onlineopinion.com) and [Crikey.com](http://Crikey.com) and [NewMatilda.com](http://NewMatilda.com) as blog sites, the democratisation of opinion. If you think about what Chomsky said: who gets to say, who gets to know, who gets to decide, that's one of the growth areas that you alluded to, but I just wanted to know if you think that's the difference between the US and the Australian populations and why there is a difference?

**Sally Young** — It's hard to know precisely. There is a different sort of political climate, there's a different political system, there are technological factors going on. In terms of the sites that you are mentioning, I think that these are all great things. The more discussion we have the more different sorts of sites, the more political blogs and so on, the better. The more we have and the more diverse they are the more chance that people will go to them and seek them out. My worry in this presentation as I said was the people who aren't interested already, and they are harder to capture. That doesn't negate the fact that I think some of these sites are doing incredibly good things and providing interesting alternatives to that traditional media format and presentation of politics. Why Australians don't go to them more is an interesting question. Some of the bloggers have posited that the media in Australia being so heavily concentrated in terms of ownership has sort of killed the blogger-sphere. Blogs are far more vibrant and do more interesting things in the US. Sometimes they break news for example, and we haven't seen a lot of that here in Australia. Some of their individuals are better resourced to do that sort of thing. One blogger was suggesting that the mainstream media sites are linking to things like YouTube because they see that as a more controllable space. To get people to watch a clip is very much a part of the sound bite culture. Directing them to really detailed political blogs is something quite different, and one blogger suggested that the mainstream media (because they see blogs as a threat), has co-opted them. So it has cherry picked some

of the bloggers and has put them in their own organisations or it links to some of them and not others. Some of the bloggers think that there might be an element of mainstream media in Australia not doing them any favours.

**Question** — Thanks for a good talk there Dr Young. I was just wondering if your study has factored in the accidental peer to peer exposure of news reports that goes on online specifically in comments pages, forums, messenger services. Young people are very good at informing each other and you can often find issues blow up very quickly on these types of web sites. Say a gaming forum discussing censorship for instance. You do see a lot of politics out there and I was wondering whether that had been factored into the stuff you had been looking at?

**Sally Young** — That's sort of in the realm of those positive signs of hope that we were talking about, that part of the way this is going on is peer to peer and social networking conversations. Family and friend groups are very important, particularly to young people. Even in terms of political news, women often nominate that as a place where they get political news and information, from people they are talking to, and when that is going on on-line, it's replicating that same sort of thing as well. So I think that is all important and valuable. Academics argue a lot amongst themselves about 'what is "politics?"'. Talking about Big Brother and who exited from the house and whether that was rigged or not, for example, could be called politics. Whereas other people say it is only formal politics, to do with policies and parties and parliament and so on. I think those are interesting viewpoints. In terms of what young people are talking about a lot of the time, they are talking about issues rather than perhaps what their local MP just voted on, or what new policy has come out. Whether you judge that to be in the same category, I think it's all important and conversations are an important way this is going to lend itself, and perhaps that's one of the best signs of hope for the internet; this social networking. Its supposedly called Web2. What we have seen so far is a very static internet. It hasn't allowed us to really do the things that we predicted would help democratise politics, whereas a Web2 that is more interactive might allow more for this to occur.

**Question** — My question really follows on from the last point. If you are looking at America vs. Australia certainly the primary elections did seem to engage in politics a lot of people who normally hadn't been engaged in politics, and some have sensed the Obama campaign was predicated on this and certainly used the internet, especially social networking, to achieve that. But it seems to me that this related very much to the American political system, which is a lot more open in terms of individual candidates and individual candidates being able to reach voters than occurs here. My question is, would we expect to see this type of internet environment in politics in Australia directed at formal politics, particularly the major parties, or would we expect it to result in a much greater involvement in, I suppose, protest groups, interest groups, environmental groups, all the rest of it. Noting the rapid speed of GetUp and that type of internet. In other words, I'm suggesting that maybe in Australia formal politics is not where we will see the internet's political impact but rather through a much greater range of activities.

**Sally Young** — That's what a lot of the research suggests as well about the political parties in Australia and how they have used the internet. There has been a lot of criticism that they haven't used it in a way that opens politics up and as we were

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saying with the example I used about Hillary Clinton, they have primaries that stretch out for a long period of time. The candidates can go and sit in a coffee shop one day with three people, the next day they can address a rally of seventy-five thousand. There is a level of interactivity and excitement that goes on around that. Whereas in Australia, politics is presented quite differently, and perhaps, and this is the worrying thing, the internet will mirror that, there will be a lack of interactivity on-line just as there is in real life and maybe that's why we are not seeing such a high takeup in Australia for these sorts of structural factors that you have pointed to. In terms of formal politics people think that the internet is not a place to go, and that's why it hasn't been used in that way. But you have raised some good points. The political system and the attitudes around it and the way it currently works are important in how it is going to be used on-line as well.

**Question** — Dr Young, would you comment on the introduction on editorial content into direct news broadcasts. The sort of thing I have in mind is that, for example, when referring to comments by a premier who is under criticism they will describe him as the embattled premier; or when referring for example to the shadow treasurer they will also refer to him as the leadership contender. An editorial content in a direct news broadcast; would you comment on that?

**Sally Young** — That's an example of how you can see something as both a positive trend or a negative trend at the same time, because on the one hand people might say that pointing out the conflict involved and the background and making it more interesting, using language that opens it up, is an example of how the news can be accessible. But someone else might point to that and say, that's an example of the media not being objective and presenting politics in a superficial sort of gladiatorial contest way. So it's a very interesting example of how you can look at the one thing and come up with two different takes on it. What I can say is that the research that I'm looking at in terms of comparing American news and Australian news found that this is likely to be where we will head. That there will be more editorialism. When I looked at their news clips, American reporters talked for longer, they had more experts and talking heads and commentary even on their news programs, let alone current affairs. The media seems to think that politicians are a turn off, that if you get reporters and commentators and so on talking, that that would draw in an audience. That seems to be a perception that underlies that changing format. So I think we are actually going to see more of that in Australia as well.

**Question** — We haven't talked about the alleged dumbing down effect of the new media. Politicians, it has been argued now, can't present subtle nuanced arguments because they will be accused of not knowing where they stand and flip flopping and so on. What do you think about that?

**Sally Young** — I probably sidestepped the whole question of dumbing down because it's that question of quality news. If you want people to engage with politics, are you going to also demand that they only consult the sources that you think are good? That they are going to go those ones that you call 'quality' news sources? In terms of the dumbing down, what can you say in two minutes, what can you say in 30 seconds on a news clip? That's basically it. If 80 per cent are using television to get their election news, and what they are seeing is a two minute clip with 30 seconds of politicians talking broken down into seven second sound bites, it is going to be a dumbed down

version of something. You can't present a lot of material in that time. Is that better than nothing? I think that's the question we are facing with the internet and what I was talking about with the accidental audience, would we rather people get that two minutes, because in the future, they may be able to skip that all together? You might be able to program your TV: 'just give me the sports news', or 'I'm only going to turn on to this channel and it doesn't have any politics on it, I don't like politics'. I used to worry a lot about declining standards in the media and how politics was presented, but I am starting to get to the point where I think, even dumbed down stuff is better than nothing at all. If that's the choice.