

Aussie rules: the Internet election down under

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Here's my thoughts on the new media aspect of the Australian elections. The liberal media in the UK was thrilled that nasty old John Howard was thrown out and Labour's Kevin Rudd got in. But what I found interesting was how the Internet seemed to play an important role. It didn't swing what was a deep landslide shift in Australian politics but it was used in innovative ways by both the Parties and the people. Here is what I wrote for [Press Gazette](#) with the help of Australian Tim Watts:

With Hillary, Barrack and the rest crowding on to Facebook and YouTube, you might think that America 2008 is going to be the first "internet election".

But the first digitised democratic decision took place down under. Blogs and online video had a real impact on November's Australian general election campaign.

Hundreds of thousands of Australian voters watched footage of the opposition leader eating his own ear wax, the prime minister being portrayed as a "farting fossil fool" and some of the most surreal campaign advertisements in memory. The close cultural ties and political similarities make Australia's experience much more relevant to the UK.

Internet video has changed the dynamics of political advertising – it is much cheaper to put propaganda online. In the past four months, the Australian Labor Party has released 60 videos and the ruling Liberal Party 40.

Lower costs mean that internet video has provided a real-life campaign test bed, where videos can either flop and fade into oblivion or strike a chord and make the jump into paid TV ads.

The results have been quirky to say the least. The Liberal Party went so far as to produce a surreal vignette of Prime Minister John Howard promising AU\$500,000 (£212,000) of taxpayers' money to protect orangutans in Indonesia after he was cornered on the issue by a 10-year-old with cerebral palsy in the Australian rugby union team's dressing room.

Another development has been the use of YouTube videos as an unmediated rapid response to negative attack advertisements. At one point, a negative Liberal Party advertisement on union power provoked an increasingly weird series of tit-for-tat election adverts.

The response opened with the final seconds of the original Liberals' attack ad before panning out to reveal Labor leader Kevin Rudd watching on a computer screen denouncing it as a scare campaign.

Just as quickly, the Liberal Party responded with a further ad showing John Howard watching Kevin Rudd watching John Howard, before stating "it's not a scare campaign to point out the facts".

This particular spiral of ads might have been enough to make viewers' heads spin, but it showed that the internet has established itself as the primary platform for responding to political attacks. All of these video ads were released first (sometimes exclusively) on the internet, attracting tens of thousands of online viewers, and significant follow-up coverage in the mainstream media.

A lot of the online video created during this campaign has been beyond the control of the political parties. Independent election satire and smears have all proliferated. This proved to be something of a double-edged sword for the political parties.

Labor leader Kevin Rudd may have been chuffed to have been portrayed as James Bond in "The Man with the

Golden Jaw”, but he was less pleased that footage of him seemingly eating his own ear wax has been viewed more than 400,000 times.

Similarly, flatulence-dubbed footage of the prime minister Howard talking about climate change in the “farting fossil fool” video might have impressed the 60,000 people who watched the clip, but not the Liberal campaign HQ.

The bloggers have also been running their alternative take on the election race, although much of their material is made up of attacks or commentary on the mainstream media.

In recent years, a group of Australian blogs including The Poll Bludger, Mumble, Possum Comitatus and Larvatus Prodeo have coalesced into a psephological blogosphere of commentators highly critical of the mainstream media’s coverage. The critique has been highly informed but bad-mannered.

This tension boiled over when the Murdoch-owned Australian dedicated its entire editorial column to an assault on the journalistic credentials of the blogosphere. Headlined “Online prejudice no substitute for real work”, the editorial accused the blogosphere of being “woolly-headed”, “smug, self-assured, delusional”, “defamatory”, “blinded by bias” – a home to “sheltered academics and failed journalists who would not get a job on a real newspaper” that had “exhausted its claim to be taken seriously”.

The lesson from Australia is that the internet does not (yet) decide elections, but it has a critical marginal impact. The mainstream media and political parties may despise new media but they can’t ignore it. The blogosphere is playing an increasingly significant role in shaping the political dialogue and the online videos are acting as a political forum that did not exist before.

Rupert Murdoch has famously recognised that “media companies don’t control the conversation anymore” and the message from Australia is that those who fail to understand this new world and insist on living in belligerent isolation will appear increasingly arrogant and shrill, and their content will appear increasingly aloof and stale.

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