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Blogging comes alive

With more than half of Australia now online, the new media had a better grasp of the shifting trends than mainstream media. USHA M. RODRIGUES

Pre-election polls and blogging were the flavour of the recent Federal elections in Australia, so much so that the country’s traditional media was competing with what is called the psephological blogosphere where psephologists — specialist electoral statisticians — analysed every available audience survey to predict the election result.

Although the official campaign ran for six weeks after the announcement of the elections to be held on November 24, the unofficial campaign was on when Kevin Rudd, then the leader of the main opposition Australian Labour Party, was elected a year ago to take the fight to the long reigning Prime Minister John Howard.

Since December 2006, poll after poll showed that Kevin Rudd was popular with the electorate and could defeat the eleven-and-a-half-year-old coalition government, made up of the customary alliance between the Liberal and National parties. But, sceptics kept expecting John Howard to turn around the bad pre-election polls and win the elections a fourth time.

In modern times, public surveys are not unusual, be it to test the suitability of a product or a service or a political party. But, in these elections, the popularity contest between the two leaders of the main parties in Australia, and the historic outcome of elections kept everyone’s interest alive in the pre-election polls and the election campaign.

Predictable analysis

As a result, the four main pollsters, Roy Morgan Research, Newspoll, A.C. Nielsen and Galaxy, and their polls became “the story of the week” during the long campaign. One of the bloggers in an online commentary on Crikey.com wrote that there was nothing interesting happening during this election campaign, “another day, another poll, another massive lead to the ALP. You can almost hear the sighs of frustration from the media…”

Seems like there was no big idea or controversy to report on — the ruling party could not orchestrate the “comeback” as expected and the opposition leader kept neutralising the points of difference between the two parties, especially on the coalition’s strong record on economic growth, by agreeing to
do everything that the ruling party promised to do. But, some positive differences remained between the two parties in favour of the challenger, including the much promised "education revolution' and the scrapping of the employer favoured "work choices" laws.

The desperation of having something to talk about was so much that some commentators and bloggers even began questioning people's views expressed in pre-election polls, and of course the methodologies adopted by the pollsters.

At this time a second trend emerged — statisticians-turned-political bloggers began tracking the polls to show a long term decline in the ruling party's popularity. With more than half the population online in Australia, the Internet is becoming a useful citizens' tool to express their reactions and comments on various issues. The last Federal elections provided many of these social, cultural and political commentators a common ground and an audience to focus on.

A number of professionals such as economists, ex-journalists, politicians and academics began using existing web sites or launched their own special election sites to participate in the online discussion that began as the political contest heated up. Blogging became a form of consultative media platform for a portion of the population.

Of course, some of the blogs were just a reflection of what was covered in the traditional media and party politics, but there were others, including sites such as Possums Pollytics, Larvatus Prodeo, the Pollbludger, Crikey.com, News.com.au’s Blogcracy, The Australian’s Meganomics Blog, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Unleashed and Club Bloggery, and Youdecide2007 which analysed polls and electoral behaviour.

In fact, this election was the first YouTube election where leaders of both the parties used the new media chat sites to appeal to their potential voters, in essence cutting out the middle-person in their bid to reach the population. Even the 68-year-old John Howard was uploading his video messages on YouTube and MySpace. Minor parties such as Greens and the Democrats did better than the main parties in using the interactive capabilities of the online media to remain relevant in the essentially two-horse race.

Getting interactive

Web sites such as Youdecide2007 were specifically launched to allow citizens from around Australia to report local election stories. Surprisingly, it was the older generation which used this opportunity to exercise their journalistic talent.

In an analysis on the eve of the elections, Youdecide2007 founders Barry Saunders, Jason Wilson and Alex Burns declared the ruling Liberal party the "loser" in their use of the online media. Their analysis illustrated that the traditional media too failed to pick up the population's mood and over-estimated Howard’s capacity to win this election.

The rivalry between traditional media and the new media was demonstrated by the contrasting position taken by The Australian and the psephologist bloggers. The national newspaper kept expecting a "bounce" back by the ruling party, and a correction in people's voting intentions, whereas the psephologists demonstrated a long term decline in the Howard government’s popularity.

During the election campaign, Howard very smartly declined to comment on the pre-election polls, stating that the only poll that mattered was the one on November 24. At the same time, Rudd too kept reminding the media that despite good opinion polls, election results could be too-close-to-call feeding into traditional media’s presumptions about Howard’s come back possibility. Well, Rudd was wrong.

Kevin Rudd and his Australian Labour Party won a landslide victory which unseated even the former Prime Minister from his own safe seat of Bennelong.

And, the psephologists of the blogosphere were on the mark.