

Citizen Consultation from Above and Below: The Australian Perspective

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E-Democracy in Australia

- Current environment:
 - Change of government (conservative → Labor) in late 2007
 - exploration of social media during election campaign
 - Reshaping of ministries
 - new Department of Broadband, Communication, and the Digital Economy (DBCDE)
 - New policy initiatives
 - plans for A\$43b National Broadband Network (NBN)
 - plans for compulsory 'cleanfeed' Internet filter
 - support for new e-government / e-democracy initiatives – establishment of Government 2.0 Task Force
 - Growing role of NGOs
 - e.g. GetUp!, modelled on US-based MoveOn

Models for Citizen Consultation

- Three categories observable in Australia:
 - government-run initiatives – top-down consultation
 - e.g. DBCDE *Digital Economy* blog
 - NGO-run initiatives – bottom-up activism
 - e.g. GetUp!'s *Project Democracy* site
 - individual social media initiatives – middle ground
 - personal blogs / *Twitter* feeds / ... of politicians
- each with its own pitfalls...

Top-Down Consultation: The DBDE Blog

- [Digital Economy blog](#):
 - launched 8 December 2008 for two-week trial
 - operated by DBCDE minister Senator Stephen Conroy and his staff
 - building on 2008 report into online government consultation by Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO), commissioned by previous government
 - foreshadowed by Finance Minister Linday Tanner in *The Age* newspaper article, and launched with a guest post by Tanner



You are in the DBCDE Archive website | [Go to the DBCDE website](#)

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Minister Tanner's welcome

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08 Dec 2008

I'm pleased to be able to join with the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy in welcoming you to the Government's first online consultation trial. There is a happy synergy in government using its first blog trial to deal with the important questions of the future of the digital economy, and Minister Conroy and his department deserve credit for their initiative in getting this consultation established.

As some of you may be aware, I've been talking about our plans to [trial consultation blogs](#) for some time now. This is the first of what will be several consultations taking place over the next six months, supplementing existing policy development processes.

While the primary aim of this blog is to get your feedback on aspects of the digital economy, we also want to use this opportunity to explore the mechanics of government blogging and hear your thoughts on how we should interact with you online.

We realise we're not trail blazers here—we know that there's nothing new about governments blogging, and that many jurisdictions have been doing so for some time. But instead of simply copying overseas models we are keen to gather as much evidence as we possibly can about how Australians want to engage online. My department has been active in this task all year (see for example our [Consulting with Government—report](#)). These trials are the next step in that process.

In this section

- ▶ [About this blog](#)
- ▶ [Terms of use](#)
- ▶ [Moderation policy](#)

Related links

- [Media release: Feedback welcome on Digital Economy Blog](#)
- [Media release: Rudd Government trial for e-democracy future](#)

Digital Economy and Its Aims

- Lindsay Tanner in *The Age* (2 Sep. 2008):
 - Should we set up our own blogs or just pop up on blogs that are already operating?
 - How much leeway should we give public servants to express opinions on behalf of the government?
 - Should we have public servants blogging as informed private citizens or official representatives of government?
 - How much additional resources should be provided to fund government participation?
 - Should our blogging focus on specific areas of government activity?
 - These questions involve genuine dilemmas. To be worth the time and effort, government blogging will need to be genuine, relevant and meaningful.
- Tanner's post launching Digital Economy (8 Dec. 2008):
 - While the primary aim of this blog is to get your feedback on aspects of the digital economy, we also want to use this opportunity to explore the mechanics of government blogging and hear your thoughts on how we should interact with you online.

Comments (787)

(Excerpt from comments to first DBCDE blog post, archived at http://www.archive.dbcde.gov.au/2009/july/future_directions_blog/topics/minister_tanners_welcome)

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I really have nothing positive to say about Conroy or his filter plan but hopefully take a break from saving the children and read my thoughts. I think the religious brigade should take their "think of the children" agenda and...how should I put this...politely stick it where the sun don't shine. There is no mandate for this policy (except within religious community) no matter how much Conroy would like to believe so. I am completely against this filter and would appreciate if Conroy would stop courting the Hillsong vote under the guise of protecting the children. The majority of the population doesn't want this and it is my belief that Conroy is being disingenuous in pursuing a failed policy while continuing to waste tax-payers money. It is also my belief that Rudd should take Conroy to task over this ill-concieved furphy.

Posted by **Christopher Bell** / 24 Dec 2008 1:47pm / [Permalink](#)

Freedom of speech means a lot to me personally. I have voted Labour all my life. Even though it may sound like a drastic step to take my family and I will be leaving Australia if the filter is implemented. Obviously I will never vote labour again. The impact will most certainly be felt come next election there is NO DOUBT ABOUT THAT.

Posted by **master huang** / 24 Dec 2008 11:48am / [Permalink](#)

What a great idea (not). It could be good for all those vanishing adult book stores to get back on every street corner though. Maybe it would be easier to controll all those under the counter transactions that were so common. I think not. Surely there is another, cheaper way to stop these sites from appearing on the net in the first place.

Posted by **Grant** / 24 Dec 2008 11:14am / [Permalink](#)

I can't help but feel ashamed of my country now. I will be leaving Australia - the only country I've known as "home" - if this proposal goes though. If I were to stay, not only would I be circumventing this filter, but I would never vote Labor again - even if the proposal doesn't go through - and I have voted Labor my whole life

Timing Is Everything

- Responses to *Digital Economy*:
 - 750 comments on first post within ten days
 - mostly discussion NBN and ‘cleanfeed’ filter
 - limited engagement with blog entry topics
- Success or failure?
 - significant user engagement,
 - but not with proposed topics
 - tapping rich vein of citizen sentiment,
 - but not in a way immediately useful to the government

Build It, and They Will Comment

- Problems with *Digital Economy* approach:
 - initial attempts to avoid hot-button issues
 - only belated engagement with user interests
 - DBCDE staff apparently overwhelmed by level of response
 - ‘cold’ launch – commenters failed to act as community
 - first government blog always likely to be swamped with submissions (on- and off-topic)
 - limited timeframe – no chance for development of self-organising social structures in user community
 - seeking out existing online expert communities may have been preferable – e.g. Whirlpool.net.au

Political Informatics: *Project Democracy*

- NGO-supported bottom-up citizen engagement:
 - new services to track the political process
 - UK: MySociety's *TheyWorkForYou.com*
 - automated processing of the parliamentary record (Hansard)
 - access to representatives' speeches, voting records, etc.
 - recognised as influencing parliamentarians' actions
 - Australia: GetUp!'s *Project Democracy*
 - focus on federal Senate (upper house)

Project Democracy

- GetUp! initiative *Project Democracy*:
 - Tracking the Senate (Australia's federal upper house)
 - Information about Senators
 - Comprehensive access to all Senate speeches
 - Aggregation of online media reports on Senate and Senators
 - Blogs and fora for discussions between participants
 - Possibilities:
 - More direct citizen participation in political discussions
 - May force Senators to respond to comments and criticism
 - Discovery and sharing of new political ideas
 - Emergence of new political talent

Welcome to GetUp's Project Democracy

Click on your state or territory below to see all the senators who represent you:

Block



Visit **Tasmania**

Latest Comments

yes, we need a comprehensive solution to combat greed and ignorance! I am for the...
Bridie on Silent Night on the Murray

Barnaby you are a legend! We need to move forward and too few ppl know this is...
Joe on Senator Barnaby Joyce - Home is where the heart is.

It is very annoying that politicians in the parliament keep point scoring and do...
pamela tan on Bishop Rick on unresponsive politicians

Senator Boswell epitomises the "Unrepresentative Swill" statement made famous by...
George on Important notice - You can follow any Senator

While I understand the sentiment the lines above are actually quite dishonest...
James on Around the blogs - 29th September

Your Senate



Senator Barnaby Joyce

From the floor

Here's what Senator Joyce has been up to on the floor of the Senate.

The following are Senator Joyce's most recent statements in the Senate according to the Hansard, the official transcript of Senate deliberations.

If you want, you can [set a watch on this senator](#) to receive a weekly email with all of this Senator's parliamentary statements and media appearances.

This page is powered by software from the good people at [Open Australia](#).

Recent Statements

[next »](#)

Environmental and Natural Resource Management Guidelines: (24 Sep 2008)

I move: That the Senate— (a) calls on the Government to amend the Environmental and Natural Resource Management Guidelines in relation to the establishment of trees for the purposes of carbon sequestration, made under subsection 40-1010(3) of the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997, in order: (i) to avert the use of prime...

Questions without Notice: Take Note of Answers: Age Pensions (24 Sep 2008)

Let us start with the comment on stunts. The first stunt I will talk about is Senator Lundy standing up and saying that the Liberal and Nationals coalition did not have speakers. There was an agreement in this place that there was to be one speaker each. She should acknowledge that, and Senator Evans should acknowledge that. That was completely misleading this chamber.

YOUR
HOUSE



HOME



YOUR
SAY



Latest Comments

Barnaby you are a legend!
We need to move forward
and too few ppl know this is...

*Joe on Senator Barnaby Joyce -
Home is where the heart is.*

Senator Boswell epitomises
the "Unrepresentative Swill"
statement made famous by...

*George on Important notice - You
can follow any Senator*

Phildeerhound, the GST was
inevitable. Face up to it. It is
on record that Keating...

*Bruce Hogben on Why Mungo
McCallum will be watching the
Senate*

I am 'following' the wisdom of
Senator Faulkner, his
greatest contribution to any...

*Angeline on Important notice - You
can follow any Senator*

What a great initiative from
Get Up. I've been allocated
Senator Forshaw to keep...

Anita on Important notice - You

CC AND INNOVATION

Opportunities and Problems

- Political informatics:
 - new forms of access to political process
 - disintermediation – citizens no longer reliant on journalistic reporting
 - valuable resource, more user-friendly than Hansard itself
 - potential for direct engagement with politicians via *Project Democracy*
- Limitations:
 - dependent on availability of parliamentary transcripts in standard formats
 - may speak only to the already converted (Coleman's 'political junkies')
 - no overarching political narratives as provided by journalism
 - limited response from politicians themselves

Middle Ground between Top-Down and Bottom-Up?

- Social media and social networking:
 - successfully used in US election (e.g. *MyBarackObama.com*)
 - exploratory uses in Australia (*YouTube, Facebook, Twitter*)
- Uses beyond major campaigns:
 - politicians' individual social media profiles
 - ability for users to 'follow' or 'friend'
 - potential for direct communication with citizens,
 - but also loss of message control

Australian Politicians' Social Media Styles

- 'Managers':
 - e.g. Prime Minister Rudd, Shadow Treasurer Hockey
 - use of social media as channels for political messages
 - content curated by staffers
 - very limited direct engagement with citizens
- effective for direct, unmediated transmission of messages
 - but disappointing for social media users expecting more genuine engagement

Australian Politicians' Social Media Styles

- 'e-Democrats':
 - e.g. Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull
 - use of social media as channels for political messages
 - content updates often by politicians themselves
 - some engagement in direct dialogue with users
- effective for direct, unmediated transmission of messages,
 - and appreciated by social media users,
 - but difficult to manage for most leading politicians

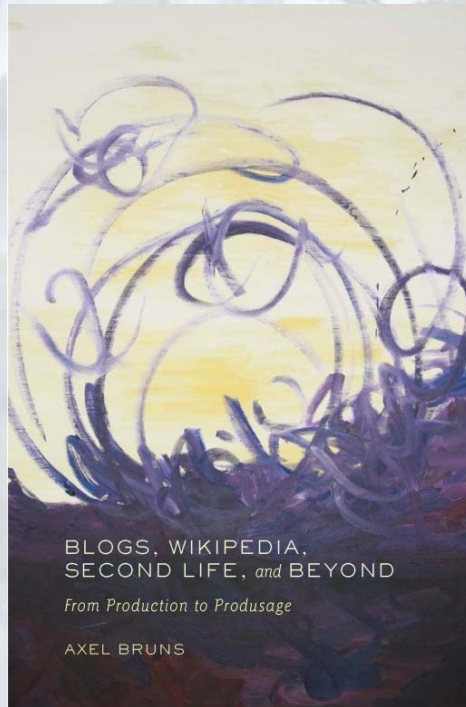
Australian Politicians' Social Media Styles

- 'Social politicians':
 - e.g. Tasmanian Premier David Bartlett
 - use of social media for everyday purposes
 - content updated by politicians themselves
 - direct engagement with users
- effective for portraying politicians as human and authentic,
 - but loss of message control and danger of banality,
 - and potential conflict between personal and professional personae

Futures for Citizen Consultation?

- Top-down:
 - need for further exploration, better preparation
 - government expertise for engagement with online communities is limited
- Bottom-up:
 - highly innovative, but problems in realising full potential
 - may only have real impact in collaboration with media or governments
- Social media:
 - perhaps best chance for real, deep engagement
 - significant problems in scaling up beyond individuals
- Most likely need to interweave all three approaches...

Viral Marketing



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<http://snurb.info/>
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*[Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond:
From Production to Produsage](#)* (Peter
Lang, 2008)

[Uses of Blogs](#), eds. Axel Bruns and Joanne
Jacobs (Peter Lang, 2006)

*[Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News
Production](#)* (Peter Lang, 2005)

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