The 2007 Australian Federal Election on the Internet

Edgar Crook
Senior Librarian
Web Archiving Section
National Library of Australia

Introduction

Media commentators and Internet evangelists have long been predicting the time when the Internet will become the main conduit not only for information but also the place where the national debate is held. Elections are traditionally a time when the media and its audience are most focussed, and so it is at election times that it is most possible to judge whether the Internet has truly overtaken other media in the role of disseminator and communicator.

The 2001 Federal election was the first election that was expected to be fought online as the Internet had become accessible at some location to a majority of the population by this time. Though there was much activity on the Internet it did not have a leading role in the election battle. The 2004 election was also widely tipped as going to produce the first Internet based election, and whilst again there was a great deal of activity – it was seemingly produced by a relatively small number of very active Internet campaigners and so did not have a major role in delivering the election to the Australian public. It has been estimated that only 5% of voters visited a party campaign website during the 2004 election. However this paucity of users did not detract from the fact that the political parties, lobby groups and official bodies such as the Australian electoral Commission were now using the Internet as the only or primary source for information on policies, candidates and general voting information.

1 Archiving the election
It is clear now that the 2007 federal election can safely be adjudged as the first in which the Internet became not just the repository for information, but also a tool both to communicate policies with the public and to allow potential voters to in return interact in multiple ways with the parties and their candidates. It is impossible to say what effect this may have had on the electoral outcome, and assuredly as in previous elections not every voter would have visited an election website. However, the Internet is now and remains the only medium in which all those involved in elections are present. It is the only place that the general public can examine political parties’ policies as the days of the printed manifesto or policy brochure are long gone. It is also therefore the place of record and as such needs to be preserved. Democracy requires the political process to be open and accountable, maintaining an archive of online election documentation, media statements and policies therefore is a vital component of that process.

PANDORA Australia’s web archive (http://pandora.nla.gov.au) has been preserving websites since 1996. Every election since that date has been archived; the early ones on a basic level (for technological reasons) the later ones more comprehensively. Contributing content to PANDORA is the National Library of Australia, all mainland state libraries and the Northern Territory Library.

The 2007 federal election collection was the biggest thus far attempted. The National Library is responsible for archiving all national resources to do with the election, including party websites, lobby groups, some candidate’s sites, blogs, videos and media websites. The state libraries are responsible for collecting the candidate and party and local media websites in their respective states. Most of the sites named in this article were archived, except for Facebook, which whilst it may be seen to be a campaign tool, is also an essentially private networking and communication site and as such does not fall within the parameters of PANDORA selection criteria.

In total around 350 websites were archived by the National Library and its partner libraries, many of these sites were gathered multiple times to capture changing content. In this way we could record the campaign leading up to election day and the reaction afterwards.

The biggest challenge in archiving this election was the large number of videos, which were not a problem in themselves, but are made so by the same delivery mechanism and embedding technologies that make them so useful for users. Archiving these videos on party websites generally had to be done individually.
and each webpage containing a video had to be re-coded to make it function. The largest websites archived were the Australian Broadcasting Corporation election web pages (http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-76826) and the Google Australia Votes site (http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-76644) which was about 5Gb in size and had over 700 videos linked to it.

2 Election videos

Television may continue to be the place where the vast majority of election expenses are expended in advertising, but the debate, policy analysis and public interaction is now mostly held elsewhere. Television companies were also traditionally the only source for broadcast video, with the abundant opportunity and broad access to online narrowcast videos this monopoly is now seemingly less important.

In the 2007 election all media, lobby groups and political parties used video as a campaign tool. This medium had been sparingly used in the past, due to technical difficulty, lack of a viable delivery platform and an awareness of average Australian home Internet bandwidth restrictions; in 2007 however video became ubiquitous. Two factors have coalesced to make video so widespread. Digital cameras with the ability to film short videos, with good resolution, have become affordable and thus accessible to most households. The emergence of YouTube and other sites such as Googlevideo have also made the process of posting and hosting videos free and simple. The technology developed by YouTube has also revolutionised the ability to seamlessly embed and playback video on its own site as well as on any other website, blog or social networking page.

Australians now see video as a viable means to communicate and be entertained. The immense popularity in Australia of video both watched and uploaded on YouTube and related sites attests to this. Reflecting this popularity, during the election period there was launched a designated YouTube Australia portal (http://au.youtube.com/).

While there was a new opportunity here, the Labor and Liberal parties in the main did not seem to utilise video in a new way. Essentially they created television electoral advertisements which were traditionally broadcast and also posted
online. There were some videos produced exclusively for an online audience, such as Julia Gillard’s appeal to overseas voters\textsuperscript{i}, but in general they followed the same basic format.

However, as Annabel Crabb\textsuperscript{ii}, political sketch writer on the *Sydney Morning Herald*, pointed out, John Howard may not have used video in a particularly creative way, but he did nonetheless use his video messages effectively as multimedia policy and press releases, which when released on YouTube very early each morning, provided sound and vision bites for that day’s mainstream media consumption.

The smaller parties and independent candidates (who in general could not afford large scale television advertising) more often used video in a far more original way (though not always successfully) in an attempt to speak directly to voters.

It is impossible to judge how many users of YouTube there are in Australia, but it is certainly in the many millions, however even the most popular of political videos only received direct viewership figures in the tens of thousands. However it remains the case that online videos may supersede the local meeting as the place whereby voters can get access to their politicians. An example of this was the use of video employed by the Gungahlin (A.C.T.) Community Council who recorded its ‘meet the candidates’ function, and then uploaded the videos onto YouTube (http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-79284). While less than a handful of actual voters were in attendance at the meeting, the videos of the event allowed many residents and interested parties to view the candidate’s performances at their convenience

Lobby groups, such as GetUp! (http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-51827) also used video as a cheap means to place their views on multiple sites or platforms, by placing their videos on YouTube and getting supporters to post the video link wherever they could.

As most political parties used YouTube almost exclusively to host and deliver their videos, those videos whilst on the YouTube site, became just one part of a larger election resource where party finances were not able to determine prominence, as the videos were not separated from each other or from those of the general public. Users were therefore able to select when and what to view, as opposed to television channels where their choices were mediated by media organisations and advertising cost.

YouTube did create election channels, which at the start of the election only contained 7 channels representing the major parties, but by the election’s end the number of channels, each having the same prominence, had grown to 65. Most users of YouTube were unlikely however to have accessed videos from this point
of entry as they invariably navigate themselves from either a video that they have linked through to, or from, the normal YouTube homepage.

It has been argued by Axel Bruns and others that the most important use of video in the election was not by the parties but by individuals. It is a fact that a great many individuals took the opportunity in this election’s new media landscape to take part in the debate by creating and uploading their questions to politicians, sharing their opinions or to just voicing their support. These videos though in general not highly viewed have some value. More successful and popular were the video ‘mash-ups’ whereby content was sourced from political party advertisements or from televised interviews and then re-used in creative and imaginative ways to make often humorous or politically divergent points. Leading examples of these videos can be viewed at: http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-79081. Some of these videos were so creative that the main parties late in the election adopted the same tactic and began to re-use their opponent’s videos to attack them.

Attack videos generally did not appear on party websites but were uploaded and linked to by partisan supporters. The Kevin Rudd ear wax eating video, though having no obvious political context, received around a million views on YouTube and other websites and even made it on to Australian and US television. More creative and less partisan videos such as the Chinese propaganda video by Hugh Atkin (http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-79081) received a great deal of media attention and praise (including winning the ABC Sledge award) but received a lot less views.
YouTube and its owners Google aside from hosting all this content also entered into the election themselves as content or access providers with their Australia Votes website and widgets (http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-76644). Launched in September 2007 by the MPs Peter Garrett and Joe Hockey the aim of the enterprise was to “allow a conversation with voters which has never been possible before.” Available on the site were not only the YouTube videos uploaded by the political parties, their candidates and the public, but also applications and tools ranging from maps, news feeds, poll trends and a dedicated application for searching across electoral candidates’ websites, public statements and Hansard. This was Google’s first election mini-site and presumably will be seen as a test site for the larger and upcoming 2008 US election.

3 Social Networking websites
Facebook (http://www.facebook.com) is a US based social networking website and community, with a membership in excess of 50 million (as of Nov. 2007). During 2007 it was the fastest growing social networking site and in November 2007 there were over 1.2 million users of the website who identified themselves as part of the Australian network.

Within Facebook, users interact within a network of ‘friends’. Friend relationships can only be formed by mutual agreement. Kevin Rudd very quickly filled up his allowable quota of friends (5000 is the limit) and so had to create a group for failed friends which was joined by thousands more. Later during the election those who had requested friendship but had been disallowed were automatically put into a group of ‘fans’ rather than friends – this group comprised of another 20,000+ people. Kevin Rudd (or more realistically his staffers) was therefore in direct communication with over 30,000 potential voters.
John Howard also created a Facebook identity, however this was not activated until the election was called and not having links from other Liberal party websites did not attract the same extent of users. By the time of the election’s call he had only gained a few hundred friends. This figure later rose to over three thousand and various support groups were also formed, but the numbers were never as high as those for Labor. This may reflect the current political make-up of the social networking community in Australia or represent the failure of the Liberal Party to galvanise and use this medium effectively.

There were some individual Liberal candidates, who did effectively utilise Facebook to create community and to discuss issues, but the main John Howard Facebook entity was rarely maintained by staffers, was sometimes alarmingly off-message and due to a lack of obvious responsibility or authenticity was made difficult for users to even divine whether the John Howard identity was in fact his.
All the major political parties used Facebook to create Groups – groups are formed by individuals to discuss, promote or share like interests. Using Groups for political activity did not appear to be a very effective way of operating. However, while the Groups could not by their mere presence actively engage non-aligned voters, they did allow current supporters to coalesce and create community. They also served as a portal to advertise media releases, videos and live events.

MySpace (http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-77823) has been the leading Australian used social networking website and at its peak had an estimated Australian usership of over 3.5 million. The site allows users to create their own pages, which can contain music, videos, images, blogs and personal information. Users can also befriend other users thus creating a community over common interests.

Kevin Rudd had over 18,000 friends on MySpace by the time that the election was called. MySpace has been seen as traditionally a networking site primarily for young adults and teenagers; this is seemingly borne out by many of the commenters on Rudd’s page, for though they were numerous, many were apparently not of an age to be able to show their support at the ballot box. MySpace is also often associated with amateurish profile page design (primarily because users maintain their own spaces), Rudd’s Kevin07 pages however were extremely well put together and thus contained very little of the features of traditional MySpace pages. This detracted somewhat from its aim as it ceased to look like a MySpace page, but rather what it was – an adjunct to the main Kevin07 website.

MySpace was also used extensively by other parties and candidates, many adding videos, blog entries and press releases. MySpace provided a common entry point for election related pages (at: http://impact.myspace.com) here were listed a number of candidates and links to other multimedia users. The television station Channel 10 was also active on this site. The politics programme Meet the Press, hosted by Paul Bongiorno, had a section of the site wherein users could post their videos posing questions to leading politicians, who would then answer in similar format.
As with Facebook the number of friends for Labor politicians far exceeded the number for those of the Coalition. Again this was seemingly due to more involvement in the promotion of this medium by the Labor party, including direct links from its websites and more frequent updating of their pages. As early as July 2007 MySpace general manager Rebekah Horne was reported to have said that she was "very disappointed" with the Liberal Party's attitude to MySpace.\textsuperscript{vi}

Social networking sites allowed for communication with the voting public in a way that was not possible before. The party leaders and candidates have held public meetings and rallies and descended on schools and shopping centres with a media entourage, but this type of forum rarely gives voters a chance to actually communicate. The ability to befriend (in however a shallow way) is a factor not to be lightly dismissed. Arguably this has been the first time whereby a voter could interact on an ongoing and personal basis with a politician. The media during the election concentrated on senior politician’s use of social networking sites, but their
usage was not symptomatic of all candidates. Unsuccessful and essentially pointless use of social networking was that by politicians who did not actually themselves create or maintain their profiles instead letting party staffers intermittently update them. The only benefit that ‘friends’ got from these sources was an occasional press release. However, many other less high profile candidates, particularly those who were not sitting, used the opportunity to create networks, communicate their views and motivate supporters. Successful social networking involves giving over something of your self, sharing interests and activities. Thus a candidate who was prepared to converse, take quizzes, play scrabble games and other quotidian activities on Facebook, was far more likely to develop friendships which could translate into votes. The Democrats and to a lesser extent the Greens, who fielded a number of younger candidates, demonstrated this attitude most ably. Andrew Bartlett, the Democrat Senator, who has been blogging for a number of years, did not have as many friends as Howard or Rudd on MySpace or Facebook, but it would be safe to assume that each friend that he made over the election, could actually be one in real life.

A strong Internet election campaign can certainly be said to have helped the Labor party and a weak campaign damaged the Liberals, however as Andrew Bartlett’s Senate loss demonstrates, Internet popularity does not yet make or break elections. As John Howard confirmed in an interview "When you sort of strip away everything about Facebook and all of that, I mean all of that’s important. But in the end the thing that still matters most to people are jobs, careers, families of all generations."

4 Political Party websites

Every registered Australian political party produced a website for the election. The Liberal Party replaced its normal website with a new campaign website on the day the election was called. The previous party website consisted of standard policy items, but was mainly a portal linking to the speeches and activities of Government ministers on their official sites. The new website contained candidate profiles, election policies, press releases and videos.
The defining website of the election however, was the opposition party site Kevin07 (http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-75521) produced by the Australian Labor Party. The site emerged in early August 2007 giving it a good run before the election was called to become known to users. What made the site at once distinctive was its presidential style branding, utilising the profile of the lead candidate rather than the party. It was also extremely well designed and had the goal of not just distributing information, but of creating community. The site contained all the basic necessary elements such as policies and candidate information, but also videos, open discussion, comment and blog facilities as well as a shop. Most effectively it also seamlessly linked through to YouTube and to the social networking sites Facebook and MySpace.

Aside from their main sites both major parties also produced separate sites to denigrate each other, Labor produced Howardfacts.com to attack the record of John Howard, and the Liberal party had StateFailure.com.au which was used to show how the Labor federal leadership had links to supposedly unsuccessful state governments.
In general, websites for candidates from the major parties were not dissimilar to those of previous elections. Some of these are actually organised by the local parties and this ensures that the graphics and styles are consistent with the party’s branding and the content is organised and accessible. Many candidates however employ local web design firms to produce their websites, which unfortunately often makes the sites very busy and decidedly non user-friendly. Where there is design over functionality, this is often missed by the candidate, but not by anyone wishing to cite with a link, view with a non-standard browser or indeed archive the site. Many candidates for the smaller parties also have their own websites, but as they often have a smaller budget, they generally get a simpler and more functional site. Other independent candidates either personally created their own websites (of variable quality) or used free webspace such as on MySpace or on blog sites such as Wordpress to promote themselves.

One political party, Senator On-Line (http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-77515), existed and campaigned solely on the Internet. This party, which was formed for this election, fielded candidates in all mainland states but had no policies and offered candidates in essentially name only, as all undertook to vote in parliament, should they be elected, only as mandated by online polling of the public on each issue. Working in this way it posited itself as the only ‘truly democratic party’.

5 Electoral commentary and psephology websites and blogs

Blogs have been a feature of the Australian Internet landscape for a number of years. The blogosphere is now a mature feature of political discourse. However being mature has meant that political affiliations on most influential or popular blogs have become fixed and it is made very clear on most of them which political
persuasion is dominant. On some of these blogs comment facilities exist only for those who agree with the blog’s political line and discussion or dispute is treating as emanating from ‘trolls’- trolls being the popular term for generally pseudonymous online agitators who enjoy causing controversy and baiting other users. However, it is also the case that a number of open forum websites and blogs are used not as a place for debate, but somewhere where interested parties (often un-disclosed party staffers) try to score points. Consequently, the more open arena for balanced and non-partisan comment and analysis was on the psephology blogs.

There are a number of amateur and professional psephologists in Australia, most of whom seem to have websites and blogs. Some such as Possum Comitatus (http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-77602), Peter Brent (http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-42909) and William Bowe (http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-42908) maintain large sites continuously and have been doing so for a number of years. These sites cater both for those interested in elections and for the media, they don’t necessarily direct voters or offer policy guidance but primarily provide election predictions and analysis of other’s predictions and of other opinion poll derived data.

Online national newspaper sites in particular The Australian and The Sydney Morning Herald, as would be expected, covered the election extensively. Both newspaper websites used multimedia elements to engage their readers and both also created blog like spaces in which to host their opinion columnists, in this way allowing for a more direct conversation with readers.

The media entities that span the Internet and television such as NineMSN (http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-79288) and Yahoo7 also created election mini-sites for their coverage. These sites hosted polls and various online gadgets and also used video which was sourced directly from their television coverage.

There were a number of projects undertaken by academics for the election. Dr’s Lucas Walsh and Peter Chen compiled a web archive containing screen shots of election websites (http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-77508). Axel Bruns (http://gatewatching.org) amongst others studied the election via their research into the phenomenon of citizen journalism. Their website created for the election, YouDecide2007 (http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-76144) was a citizen journalism initiative led and produced by the Creative Industries faculty at the Queensland University of Technology, and supported by SBS, On Line Opinion and the Brisbane Institute. This site produced their own election panel programmes on video and provided a forum for voters to express their opinions and post their videos.
Apart from the extensive use of video, the other major change from the 2004 election in Internet usage was the lack of virulently anti-Howard websites, forums and blogs. In 2004 a number of independently produced ‘hate’ sites appeared containing caricatures, impersonating John Howard or inviting negative comment. This has not been repeated, primarily it is assumed with the realization that attack or ‘hate’ sites may generate applause amongst fellow believers, but detract rather than gain non-aligned supporters for your cause. Another difference from prior elections was an increase in online party electoral advertising. While the Australian Greens may not have been able to spend as much on television advertising as the major parties, they were apparently able to match them in online advertising (see http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-79471). The major parties advertised extensively on national news and newspaper websites, the Greens did likewise as well as on social networking sites.

The 2007 Australian Federal Election collection can be viewed at the following locations:

2007 Australian federal election campaign - media, comment and video web sites

2007 Australian federal election campaign - electoral study and research web sites


2007 Australian federal election campaign - interest and lobby group web sites

2007 Australian federal election campaign - political party web sites

2007 Australian federal election campaign - Senate election candidate web sites
http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-c9141


