



DOWNLOADING DEMOCRACY

AUSTRALIA'S YOUTH ARE USING THE INTERNET TO KEEP UP WITH POLITICS. BUT CAN POLITICS KEEP UP WITH AUSTRALIA'S YOUTH?

It took radio some 38 years to reach 50 million people, while TV had the same audience within 13. By comparison, the internet connected with more than twice as many users in just six years. Access to the world of incessant online chatter is, according to many media analysts, the best thing to have happened for participatory democracy since the ancient Greeks first devised the idea of rule by the people.

Participatory is the key word here, says Margo Kingston, a journalist for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Kingston runs the newspaper's web diary – which specialises in interactive reportage – and she passionately believes in 'participatory journalism', which unlike regular journalism allows reporters and readers to work together to get the truth.

Such innovations suggest the media will be predominantly internet based in future, according to Joanne Jacobs, a lecturer in the MBA programme at the University of Queensland. "Young people prefer the internet because it's cheap and widely accessible," she says. "And as access becomes cheaper, it seems likely that more and more users will opt for a digital medium for consumption of information services."

Nevertheless, Jacobs – who specialises in the study of democracy and its interaction with technology – is not writing off traditional forms of media. "While print media may still decline in circulation figures, there will always be a need for a print-media product, as it remains the most comfortable format to consume."

As an advisor to the *Executive of Online Opinion*, an 'e-journal' for social and political debate, Jacobs is excited about the development of the website's new feature, 'iParliament'.

"It allows politicians the opportunity to connect with their electorate directly, rather than through the black hole of mainstream media," Jacobs explains. "Filtration systems aggregate content delivered by politicians in a manner tailored for the interests of subscribers." She believes it is a logical "maximisation of the unique features of the internet and thus would clearly target specific markets such as the young, or particular interest groups."

According to Hitwise, a Melbourne company that analyses internet statistics, 32.6 per cent of visitors to Australian political websites are aged between 25 and 34. But the true extent of the internet's effectiveness in capturing the interest of Generations X and Y is unclear – anecdotal evidence suggests many young people are either too busy to be politically active, or simply find politics boring.

Because of dwindling membership numbers, many political parties now pay inordinate amounts of attention to voters in marginal seats. But for the most part, their message to young voters is clear: if you don't live in a marginal seat, we're not particularly interested in you.

This year, voters aged 18 to 24 represented more than 12 per cent of the electorate. On October 9, more than 850,000 first-time voters were enrolled to vote. Although the secret ballot system conceals exactly how the demographics were spread, surveys show that young people are generally likely to favour the Greens over Labor, and Labor over Liberal.

Antony Green, election analyst for the ABC, argues that mainstream political parties do little to appeal to young people. He says that although the youth vote is critical to parties like the Greens, the major parties tend to "shrug their shoulders a bit". With voters under 25 the biggest supporters of small parties such as the Greens, it seems Bob Brown and friends are among the only ones successfully portraying themselves as web savvy and youth friendly.

The number of hits for the Greens' website peaked at almost 1.4 million the day before the election. On election day itself, the site had over one million hits. The average number per day throughout the election period was about 375,000, starting at about 330,000 and building to around 710,000 a day in the last week of the campaign. It's worth noting that hits can make for misleading stats, as a 'hit' doesn't equate to a person or a page load, but rather a combination of page load, image load and so on. More accurate stats are based on 'visitors', and the Greens were getting as many as 8000 unique visitors a day for most of the election period.

"Young people are really active around cultural issues but politics as a process has turned them off," says Tom Dawkins, one of the co-ordinators of the national youth website Electiontracker.net (www.electiontracker.net). For the federal election, Electiontracker.net enlisted a couple of young journalists and plopped them onto the campaign trail along with the professional media who trailed John Howard and Mark Latham. The success of this initiative should pave the way for more young people to be able to report meaningfully on events of interest to their peers, according to Dawkins.

"By sending four young 'trackers' on the campaign trail we went far beyond any previous attempt to create alternative youth coverage of an election campaign," he says. "This unique approach meant we were able to generate significant media coverage of the project, which not only drove traffic to the site but also broadcast the insights and experiences of the 'trackers' and countered the 'apathetic youth' stereotype so widely propagated."

The Queensland Government's pioneering youth site GENERATE (www.generate.qld.gov.au), which regularly hosts live chats between Queensland government ministers and young people, is another such initiative. Dawkins believes such sites are a step forward because they recognise that most newspaper columns, journals, conferences and talk-back radio shows fail to connect with, or are inaccessible to, younger audiences.

American politicians have embraced online activism and campaigning. Governor Howard Dean was able to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars via the internet, and his websites garnered much youth support in his favour. Japan's Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has an email address book containing 1.7 million names, and he sends a weekly message to every cyber pal on his list. Koizumi writes to subscribers about his personal life, political and economic vision, and even about his inability to sleep, which he blames on the Tokyo summer heat. Meanwhile, it remains to be seen whether our own leaders will ever wake up to political communication on such a grassroots level.

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