

Monitoring the Australian Blogosphere through the 2007 Australian Federal Election

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Abstract

This paper examines the observable patterns of content creation by Australian political bloggers during the 2007 election and its aftermath, thereby providing insight into the level and nature of activity in the Australian political blogosphere during that time. The performance indicators which are identified through this process enable us to target for further in-depth research, to be reported in subsequent papers, those individual blogs and blog clusters showing especially high or unusual activity as compared to the overall baseline. This research forms the first stage in a larger project to investigate the shape and internal dynamics of the Australian political blogosphere. In this first stage, we tracked the activities of some 230 political blogs and related Websites in Australia from 2 November 2007 (the final month of the federal election campaign, with the election itself taking place on 24 November) to 24 January 2008. We harvested more than 65,000 articles for this study.

1 Introduction

Mainstream and niche online media have played an important role in recent election campaigns both in Australia and abroad. The new US president's social network *my.barackobama.com* alone is reported to have attracted more than 1.5 million members during the drawn-out US campaign season (Stirland 2008), and Obama is likely to attempt to utilise this network of supporters (which exists at arms' length from Democrat party organisations) as leverage in the difficult political negotiations ahead. The Australian election campaign of 2007 similarly saw widespread – if perhaps somewhat less sophisticated or successful – use of *Facebook*, *YouTube*, and home-grown sites such as *Kevin07*, and the Rudd Labor government has begun to explore the use of department blogs for citizen consultation (see e.g. Bruns 2008a for an early analysis).

The role in these campaigns of third-party commentary and analysis Websites, ranging from partisan bloggers to bipartisan citizen journalism sites and from campaign reporting to issues analysis, should also be stressed. Well-known political bloggers in the United States, such as Ariana Huffington or Ann Coulter, were frequently called upon as pundits in televised discussions, while a number of Australian bloggers had part- or full-time roles in the print and online media – *Larvatus Prodeo's* Mark Bahnisch, for example, was a commenter for *New Matilda* and *Crikey*, and *Road to Surfdom's* Tim Dunlop operated *Blogocracy* as one of News Ltd.'s in-house blogger/commenters. At the same time, the blogosphere also successfully provided an important corrective to mainstream news reporting, and a number of specialist bloggers rose to significant prominence as a result of their work – perhaps the best example for this trend has been the emergence of psephologist blogs such as *Possums Pollytics*, *The Poll Bludger*, or *Mumble* as fixtures of Australian political analysis. During the campaign, a well-publicised running feud between commentators in *The Australian* and the pseph-bloggers over the veracity of *The Australian's* analysis of polling results highlighted political blogging's challenge to the

mainstream media's opinion leadership (see e.g. Bruns 2008b/c), while post-election, both *Pollytics* and *Poll Bludger* found a permanent home in *Crikey's* stable of independent political commentators.

In spite of the increasing visibility of political blogging and other social media practices in such recent political campaigns, however, clear evidence documenting the real impact of these phenomena remains hard to come by. Four years later, Adamic & Glance's observation from the 2004 US presidential campaign that the blogosphere was deeply divided into 'red' and 'blue' camps which only rarely interconnected with one another may no longer apply, partly also due to the impact of many other social networking tools which serve to interconnect these political blogging networks at least indirectly; today, a much more mature blogosphere combined with tools such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *YouTube*, *Digg*, and other social networks may mean that active online users are exposed to a far greater variety of political news and commentary than previously.

Fundamental questions which arise from such considerations are these: how does information travel across the political blogosphere and its ancillary networks? Who are the central nodes in this network of practitioners, and to what extent do they act as influencers and opinion leaders, perhaps even in a traditional framework as articulated by Katz & Lazarsfeld (1955)? Due to the digital nature of blog-based communication, such questions can now be approached at a new level of scale and detail, using mixed quantitative and qualitative approaches: where previous research had to extrapolate from limited case studies, it is now becoming possible to use large-scale datagathering tools to cover national blogospheres virtually in their entirety (see e.g. Kelly & Etling's study of the Iranian blogosphere, 2008).

Exploring these possibilities, this paper reports on early findings from the first stage in a larger project to investigate the shape and internal dynamics of the Australian political blogosphere. This first stage tracked the activities of some 230 political blogs and related Websites in Australia from 2 November 2007 (the final month of the federal election campaign, with the election itself taking place on 24 November) to 24 January 2008. In an effort to generate high-quality data, we improved upon the tools for data-gathering used by earlier research projects, focussing specifically on the content of blog *posts* rather than including the entire contents of blog pages in our analysis or focussing only on mapping the networks of hyperlinks contained in such pages. We harvested more than 65,000 articles for this study.

Where previous papers from this project have discussed this methodology (Bruns *et al.* 2008a) or investigated the thematic preoccupations of leading political bloggers (Bruns *et al.* 2008b), in the present paper we will examine the observable patterns of content creation by Australian bloggers during the 2007 election and its aftermath, thereby providing insight into the level and nature of activity in the Australian political blogosphere during that time. The performance indicators which are identified through this process enable us to target for further in-depth research, to be reported in subsequent papers, those individual blogs and blog clusters showing especially high or unusual activity as compared to the overall baseline.

2 Methodology

In existing studies of blogging networks, there remain a number of significant methodological shortcomings. Our project highlights and addresses such shortcomings (also see Bruns *et al.* 2008a/b):

1. **Distinguishing between different types of links.** Most current network analysis tools treat all hyperlinks on a Web page as equal. In the context of blogs, for example, links within a blog post are treated no differently from links in blogrolls, headers, footers, or sidebars, or even from links provided in commentary threads attached to a post. This misses crucial distinctions between static links (e.g. blogroll links which may or may not provide an up-to-date reflection of a blogger's longer-term affiliations and interests), discursive links provided by the

blogger (which indicate the blogger's current interests in relation to the topic at hand), and discursive links provided by commenters (which, conversely, indicate readers' interests).

2. **Distinguishing between different types of content.** Similarly, most network crawling and scraping tools make no distinction between different genres of content on the same page – they simply add the entire page to the crawl dataset. This misses crucial distinctions between the blog post itself (containing the blogger's thoughts on a particular topic, and thus the most salient content for further analysis), any comments by readers which may be attached to the post, and static content elsewhere on the page (generic site information and other material which is irrelevant for subsequent analysis).
3. **Tracing change over time.** Most existing blog network analyses use generic network crawlers to provide long-term pictures of interconnections in the blogosphere. While interesting in their own right, these offer no information on *when* (and in what sequence) particular blog posts were made – that is, on how individual clusters and regions of the blogosphere may respond to specific topics of the day, and how the centre of such activity shifts between different regions on the map over time as topics change. Long-term analyses provide only a generic picture of which blogs may act as opinion leaders for the wider network; instead, it would be desirable to track opinion formation virtually in real time, and to generate shorter-term snapshots of activity that identify a range of opinion leaders on *specific* issues.

Our work addresses these shortcomings in a number of ways. First, we track blogging activity as it occurs, by scraping the content of new blog posts when such posts are announced through RSS feeds, rather than by crawling existing content in the blogosphere after the fact. Second, we utilise custom-made tools that distinguish between the different types of content and links found in blog sites and thus allow us to analyse only the salient discursive content provided by bloggers, without contaminating our data with static links and ancillary content. Finally, we are able to examine these better-quality data by using both link network mapping and textual analysis tools, to produce both cumulative longer-term maps of interlinkages and themes across the blogosphere, and specific shorter-term snapshots of current activity which indicate clusters of heavy interlinkage and highlight key themes and topics being discussed within these clusters in the wider network.

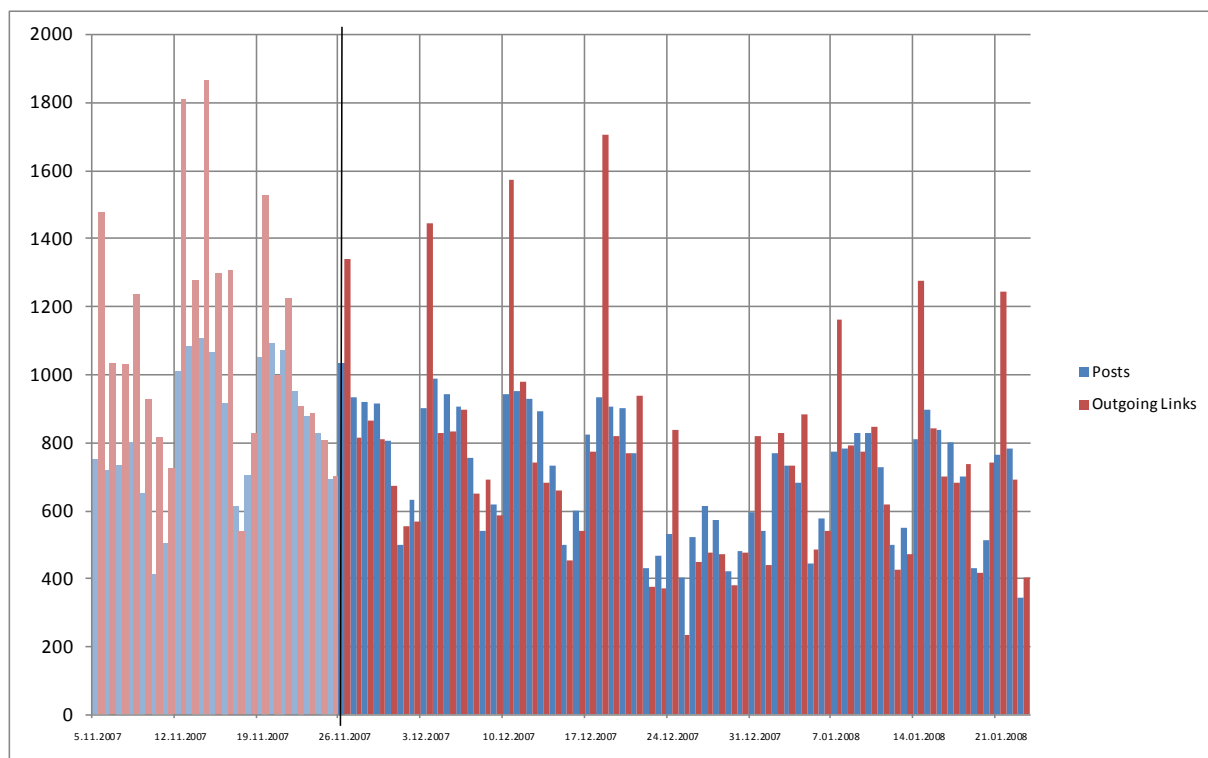
For the first stage of this research project, we followed a snowball discovery process to identify as many Australian-based political blogs as possible: we iteratively traced links from known political blogs to identify the blogs they linked to, and added those blogs to our sample population if they were found to be both Australian-based and (in a broad sense) concerned with political topics at least for a substantial proportion of their posts. Where necessary, we erred on the side of inclusivity – including also blogs which appeared largely dormant, made political comments only occasionally, or focussed mainly on topics which had a political dimension only secondarily. We also included a number of the major 'blog'-style opinion columns on major newspaper sites, even though bloggers themselves tend to regard these not as blogs in an orthodox sense of the word. Additionally, as a separately tagged category of sites, we also tracked content in a number of major and minor Australian and international mainstream news sites, from the *ABC News Online* 'Just In' RSS feed to *BBC News Online* and *Crikey*.

A second stage of the project, informed by this first trial of our methodology, began in January 2009 and will continue through the year, but is not discussed in this paper.

3 Results

3.1 Overall Publishing and Linking Activity

Overall figures for the content publication and linking activity in our population of sites (including both blogs and mainstream news sites) prove to be unsurprising (figs. 1 and 2): a regular weekly cycle which sees weekend publishing rates drop to around 60% of the weekday average can readily be observed. Generally, too, publishing activity is relatively steady, with the notable and expected exception of the Christmas/New Year period where weekday publishing drops down nearly to weekend levels. We can also identify a somewhat heightened level of activity in the weeks preceding the election on Saturday 24 November 2007, however; this is even more pronounced especially for the election day itself, for which publishing activity almost reaches weekday levels (a further spike on the following Monday is also noteworthy, and the Sundays of 18 and 25 November similarly reach the highest levels of Sunday posting activity we recorded during the three months of our study; see fig. 1).



*Fig. 1: Posts and outgoing links per day across all sites during the sample period.
(Period up to and including 25 Nov. 2007 indicated in lighter colour.
Grid lines indicate the start of a new week.)*

Figure 2, which condenses these data into weekly averages, shows that in the two fortnights preceding the election weekend, an average of well over 900 posts were published per day, while during the following fortnights this rate barely reached 800 posts per day, declining markedly towards the Christmas week – a reduction in publishing activity from the last pre-election to the first post-election week by 13 percent. This may be interpreted as reflecting content creators' anticipation of the election; with the election decided (in this case, decisively, and thus requiring less coverage of recounts, challenges, and other uncertainties than may otherwise have been the case), their activity drops down to a slightly lower level as they return to following the overall political process. (A longer period of study, beyond the three months of this first stage of the project, will be able to establish a more general baseline level for such activity, also taking into account seasonal variation. For example, it is likely that publishing activity during December 2007 would still have been higher than in comparable periods during non-election years.)

What remains less explicable for now is why *linking* activity already declined markedly in the last *pre-election* week (from an average of 1275 to 1007 outgoing links per day – a reduction by 21%. It is possible to suggest that this close to election day, bloggers were comparatively more likely to state their own opinions about the election campaign and its likely outcomes, without necessarily supporting such opinions by linking to external material as is otherwise common practice. A more intriguing possibility (which will need to be investigated in further stages of this research project) is that linking activity is a leading indicator for posting activity: many bloggers tend to follow (through server logs and trackback mechanisms) whether other sites talk about and link to them, and – where necessary – respond in turn with a new blog post of their own. A marked drop in linking activity, therefore, could lead to a subsequent drop in posting activity, as it means that there are fewer cues for subsequent responses through new blog posts.

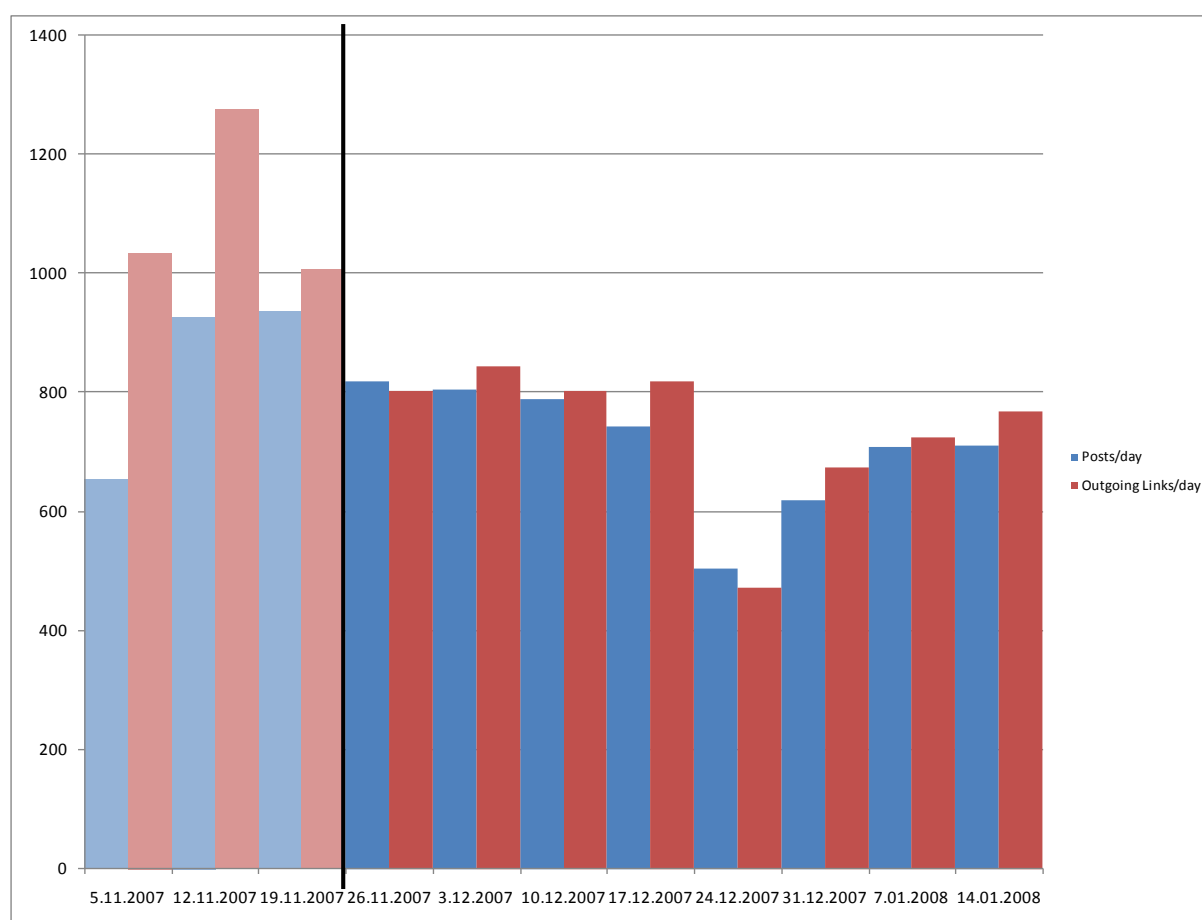


Fig. 2: Average number of posts and links per week across all sites during the sample period. (Period up to and including 25 Nov. 2007 indicated in lighter colour.)

Additionally, it is also possible to distinguish between links to other sites *within* our population, and links to sites *outside* of it (fig. 3). Here, it is notable in general that the vast majority of the links which content publishers in our population included in their posts were to sites outside of our population; what emerges from these data is most likely that generally, most political blogs in Australia engage mainly with the coverage in the mainstream media, not with the commentary in other blogs. They notably diverted from this pattern only during the (otherwise, as noted, curiously linkage-reluctant) week immediately preceding the election date (during which time further analysis may find that they discussed one another's election predictions in some detail), and a few days into the post-election period, when they may have shared post-election commentary. Longer-term and more detailed study is clearly required to further investigate this observation, but it may point to the fact that – compared, for example, to the U.S. blogosphere – Australian bloggers continue mainly to respond to

mainstream media agenda-setting, or that the presence of genuine, persistent counter-publics is restricted to a handful of otherwise unrepresentative spaces in the overall Australian political blogosphere. (Our discussion in the following section points to where those spaces may be located.)

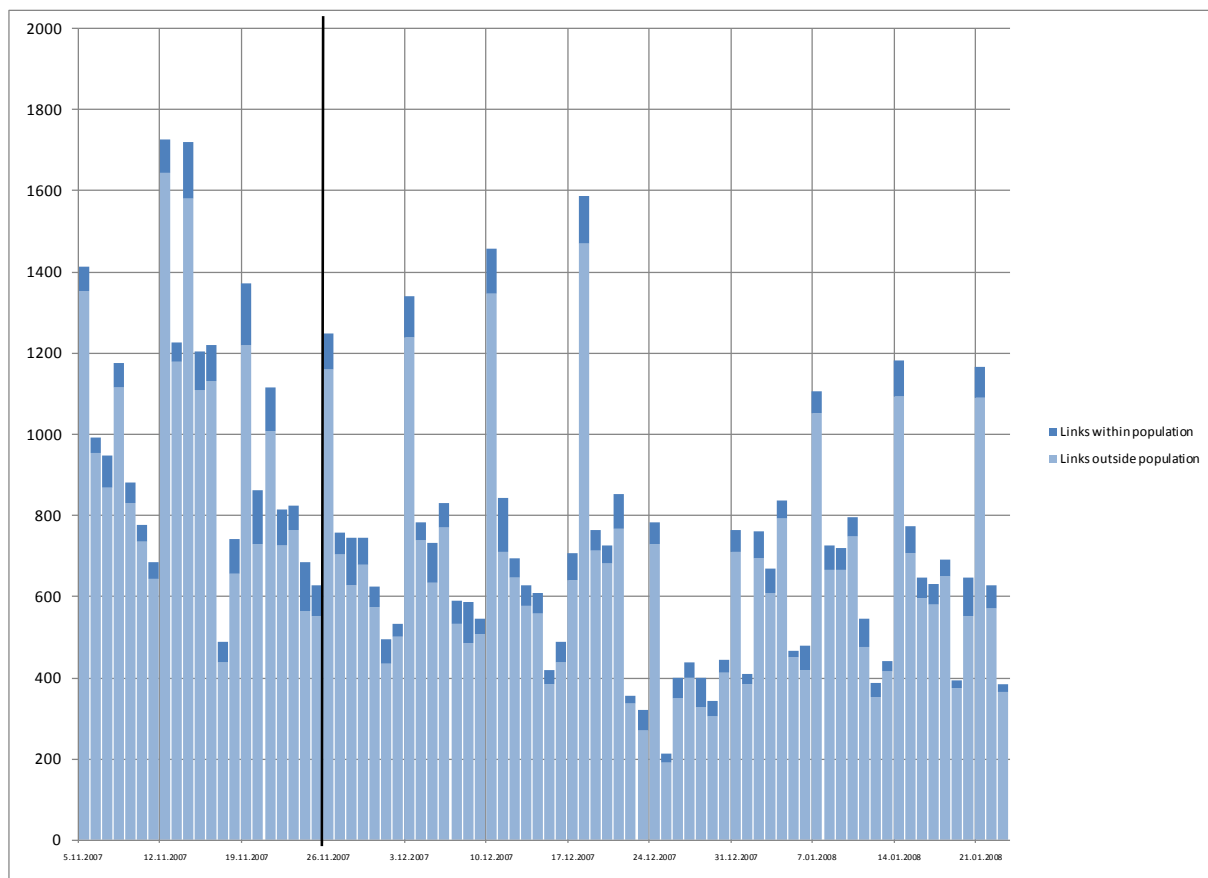


Fig.3: Links to sites within and outside our population during the sample period.

3.2 Distribution of Publishing Activity across the Site Population

The project monitored a set of 236 blogs and news sites. Within this mixed group, it is not surprising that the news sites – with their often substantial journalistic and editorial staff – contributed the bulk of the content published during our sample period. (It should be noted, however, that due to our content gathering approach not all of this content will have been of an immediately political nature. This limitation will be addressed in further iterations of this research.)

Their level of activity becomes evident in figure 4, which shows the total number of posts across our entire population of sites. Australian (dark blue) and international (light blue) news sites dominate publishing activities – led by *ABC News Online*'s "Just In" feed, which covered nearly 8500 news items during these three months –, with blogs (red) and even the staff 'bloggers' in major news organisations (green) only appearing at lower levels of activity. Situated right at the tipping point between news coverage and commentary are Australia's two major sites specialising in political opinion: *Crikey* and *On Line Opinion* (coloured light purple, along with a few similar but minor sites).

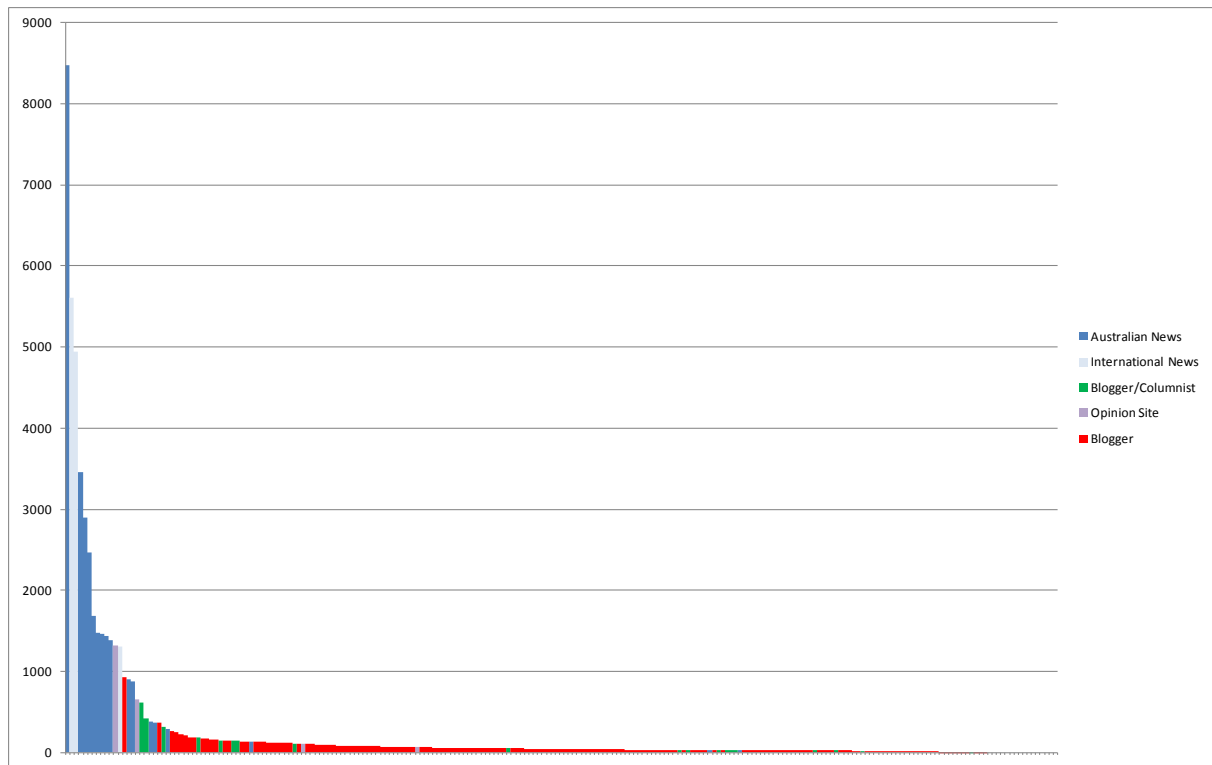


Fig. 4: Publishing activity across the entire site population, by site genre.

If the major national and international news sources are removed from the sample, a familiar long-tail distribution (cf. Anderson 2004) of activity emerges (fig. 5).

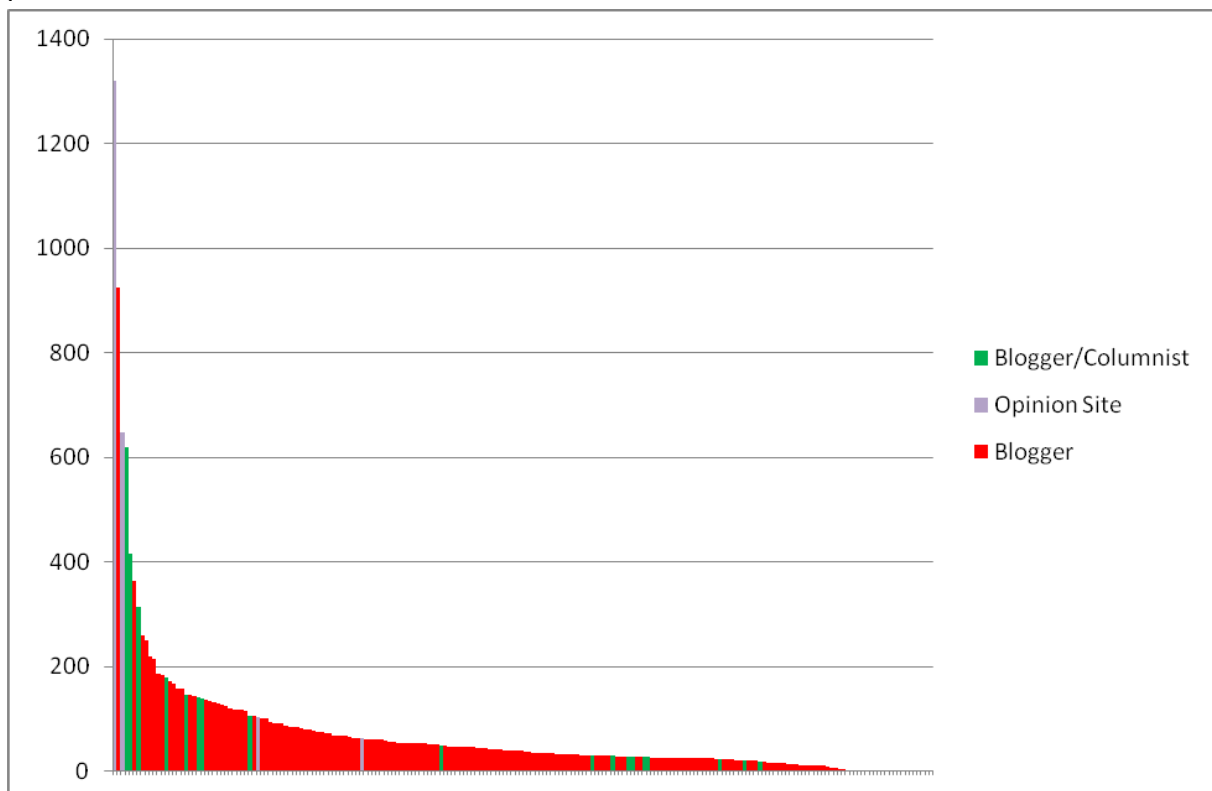


Fig. 5: Publishing activity by amateur and professional bloggers and online opinion sites.

As fig. 6 shows in greater detail, this group is led by the commercial Australian-based commentary and opinion site *Crikey*, which we chose to retain in this reduced population as its practices are simi-

lar to and influenced by the *bona fide* Australian political blogosphere (several major Australian political bloggers publish occasional columns in *Crikey*, and *Crikey* incorporated prominent blogs *Possums Pollytics*, *The Poll Bludger*, and outgoing Senator Andrew Bartlett's blog into the site after the election). More surprisingly, second in terms of publishing activity is the lesser-known *Craig's Blog* (<http://creative2567.blogspot.com/>), covering political and religious themes, which appears in a prominent position here as a typical example of the 'link blog' style of blogging: frequently posting very small items, sometimes consisting only of a headline and a link to an article published elsewhere. Such publishing hyperactivity should not necessarily be mistaken for popularity, however.

Also prominent are *Herald Sun* blogger/columnist Andrew Bolt and public intellectualism site *On Line Opinion*, as well as the *West Australian* newspaper's combined opinion 'blogs'. Beyond these leaders, however, the remaining professional opinion bloggers and the leading independent political blogs in Australia are no longer clearly distinguishable in their level of activity; well-known independent blogs *Andrew Landeryou*, *Club Troppo*, and *Larvatus Prodeo* appear in prominent positions (ranked 10th, 11th and 13th) in this group. (It should also be noted that due to persistent technical problems with its site, *Larvatus Prodeo* was published at two separate locations during part of our research time-frame, with these two sites ranked as the 13th and 14th most active sites in this group; when combined, *Larvatus Prodeo's* publishing activity would be ranked fifth in the list.)

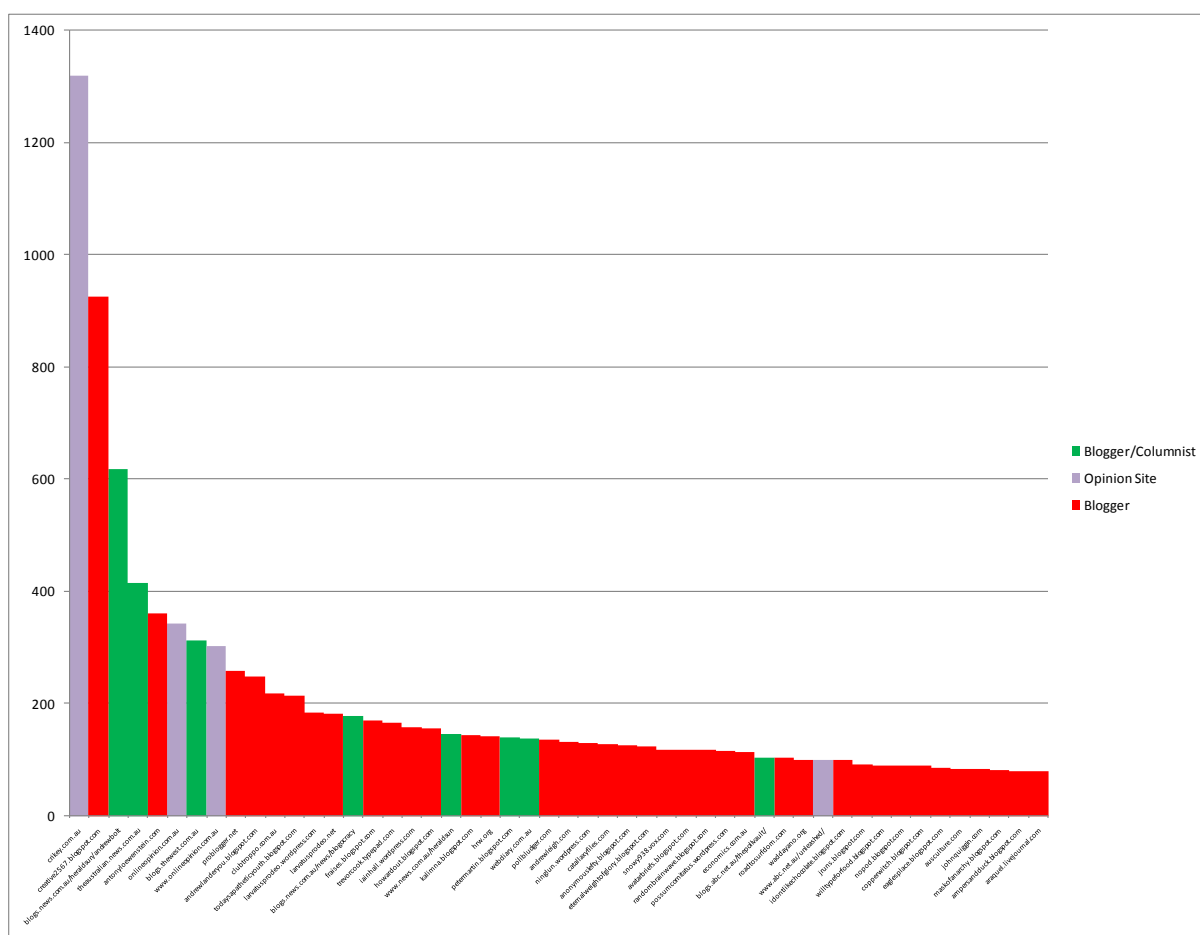


Fig. 6: 50 most active amateur and professional bloggers and online opinion sites.

3.3 Incoming Links to Sites across the Population

Publishing activity is a poor measure of impact, however – while sites may be publishing a significant amount of content, the question remains whether anybody reads that content and finds it useful. A more useful measure of user interest in the content published by a site is the number of incoming links it receives: such links are a clear indicator that another content publisher has not only read a

post, but also found it interesting enough to write about and linking to it. (Indirectly, therefore, they are also an indicator of readership: while conversion levels are likely to vary, we may assume that only a certain percentage of readers of a post will have the interest and ability to add a link to that post to their own site. Each incoming link we have identified therefore represents a larger number of incoming readers finding the linked-to post through this – and other – links.) We focus in this and the following sections on linking *within* our population (*from* sites in our population, *to* sites in our population – in other words, *not* including links to sites which are not included in our population itself), in order to understand the internal dynamics of this loose community of practice – the Australian political blogosphere. (In this context, it should be noted again that – as control cases – our population also included a number of mainstream news organisations, which tend not to link to external sites, however.)

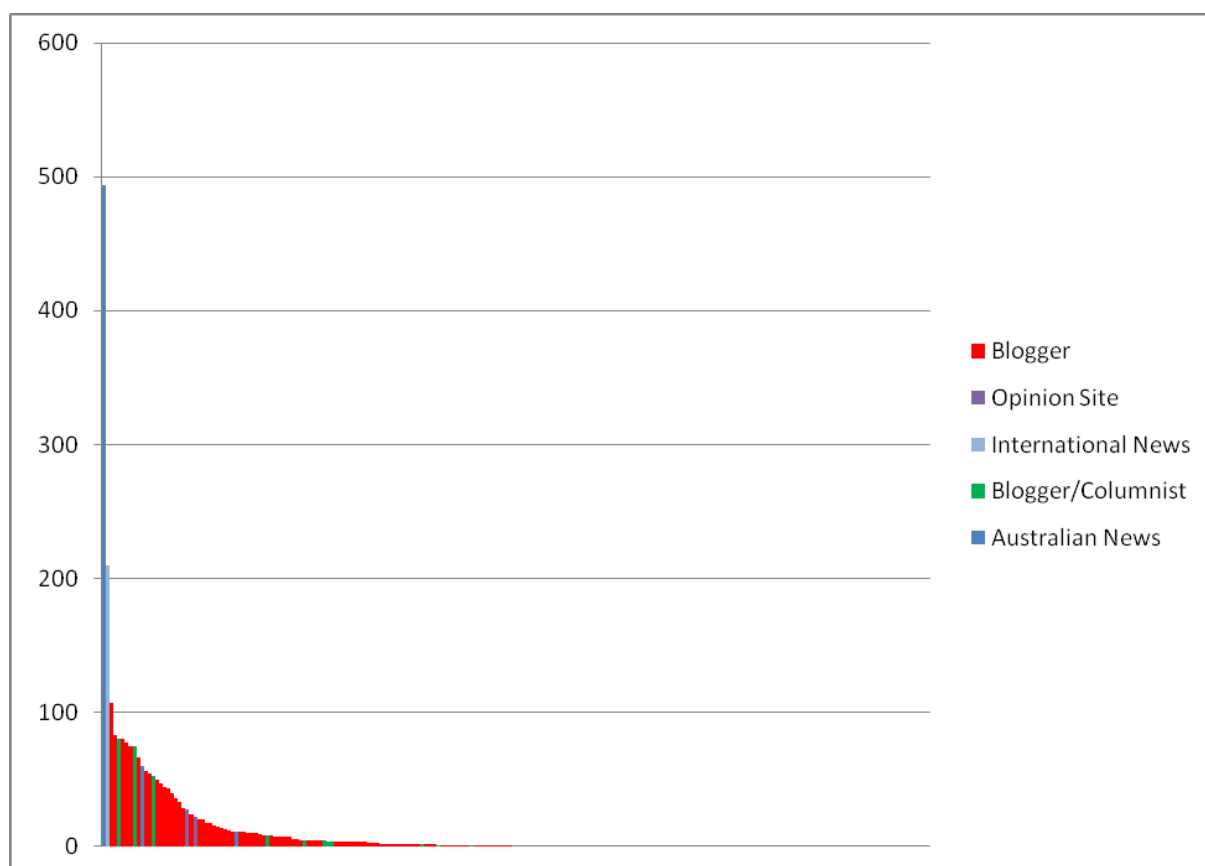
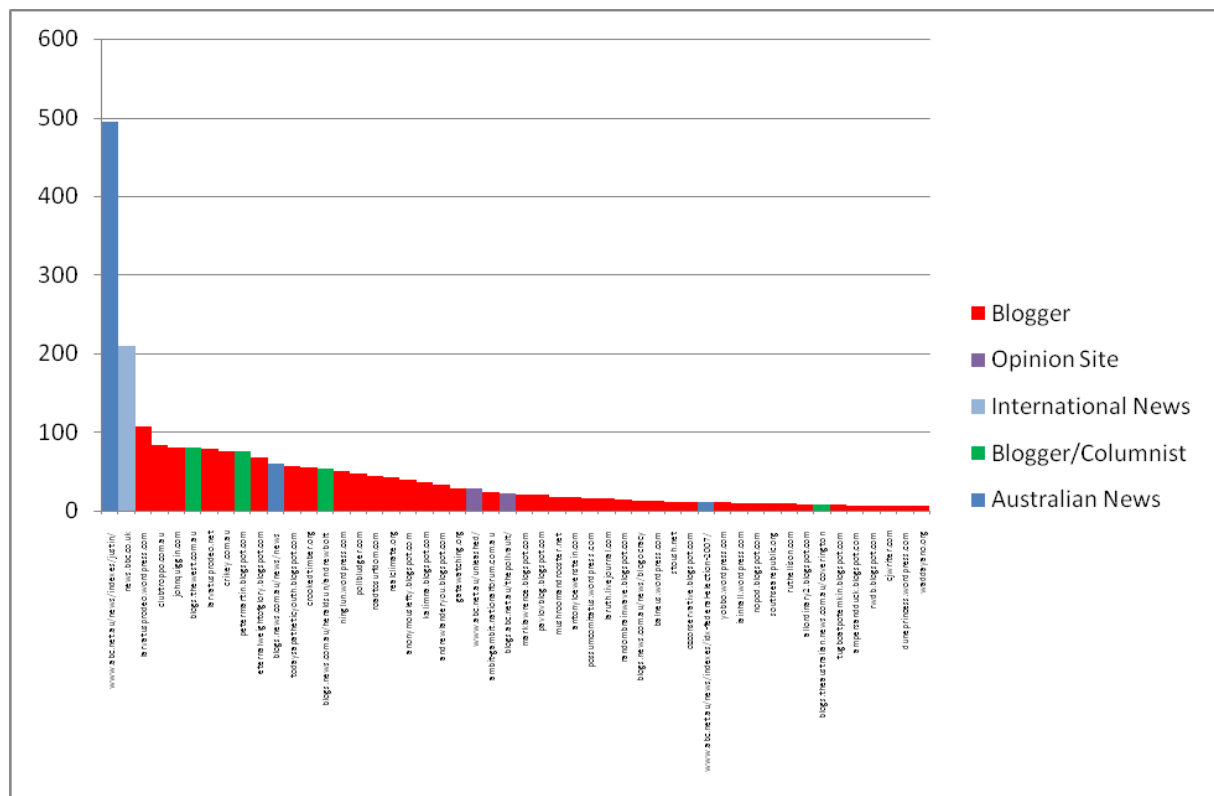


Fig. 7: Most linked-to sites in the full population.

The distribution of incoming links in figure 7 again shows the unsurprising fact that some of the major news sites (*ABC News Online*, *BBC News Online*,) in our population are also major receivers of inlinks; this is the expected result of the fact that many political bloggers tend to link to news reports at least once in their posts, to provide a point of departure for the commentary contained in the posts themselves. However, from figure 8 it also becomes obvious that the vast majority of the top 50 linked-to sites in the population are ‘regular’, independent blogs, rather than professional news or opinion sites; even *Crikey*, for example, reaches only eighth place, and prolific commentator Andrew Bolt’s blog is ranked 14th. This indicates a significant amount of close and continuous interlinkage within the Australian political blogosphere, with a number of sites emerging as candidates to be considered influential opinion leaders.



These raw inlink figures can also be compared to the data on publishing activity we discussed in section 3.2 above, however, resulting in a measure which indicates the impact of a blog's posting activities: the higher the ratio of inlinks to posts, the greater the impact of a site's activities (fig. 9). A blogger who posts relatively little but still receives a large number of inlinks clearly has a significant impact on the surrounding blogosphere, while a blogger who posts frequently but is hardly ever linked to by other sites may be highly active, but nonetheless appears irrelevant to blog-based debate.

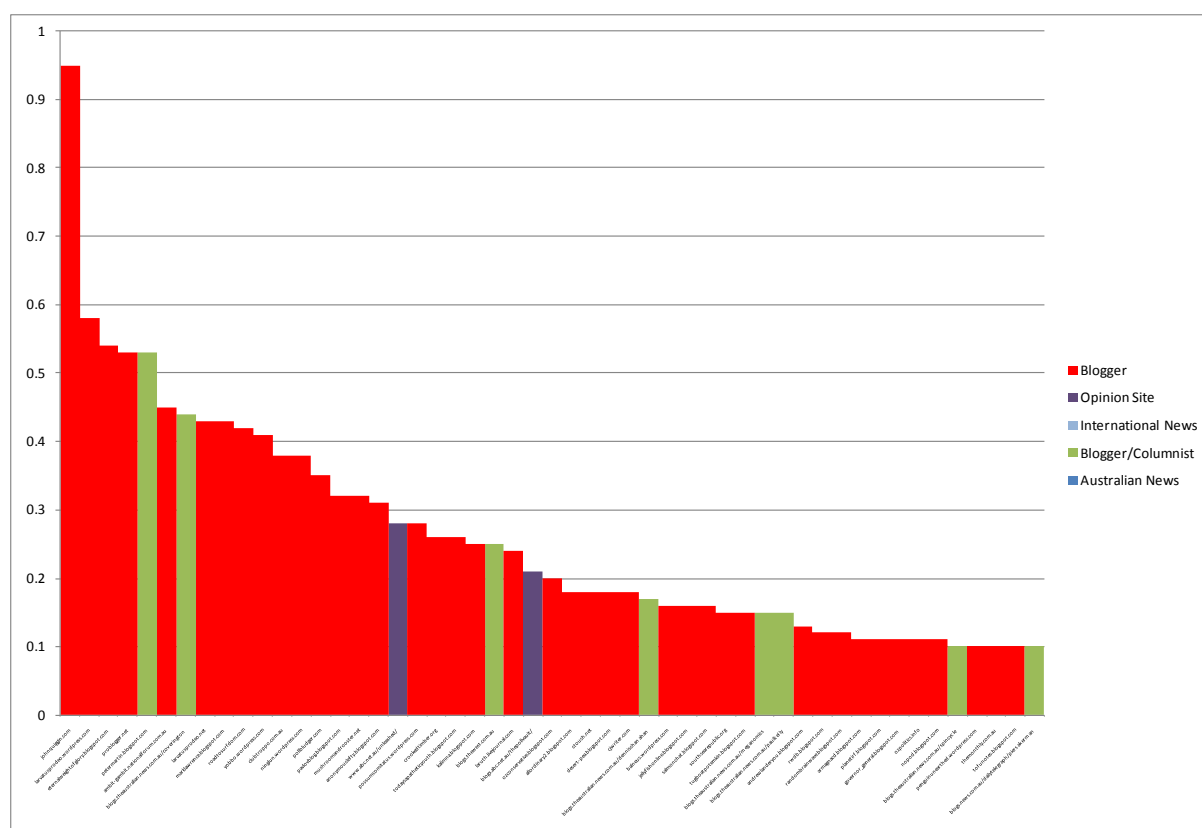


Fig. 9: Sites ranked according to their ratio of inlinks against posts (top 50).

From this perspective, a number of important bloggers emerge. The field is led by University of Queensland-based ARC Federation Fellow and Professor of Economics John Quiggin, a well-known economic and political blogger who publishes occasional columns in the *Australian Financial Review* and other mainstream newspapers. Quiggin averaged about seven posts per week during our sample timeframe, and received 80 incoming links from the blogs we tracked (an inlinks:posts ratio of 0.95). He is followed, at some distance, by left-of-centre Brisbane blog Larvatus Prodeo (0.58), which appears once again, however, in eighth place (0.43), due to the technical problems during our sample period that forced it to set up a temporary home away from home on Wordpress. It would be misleading simply to combine the figures for the two *LP* sites here, however, as post numbers and inlink ratios are inflated in this case by cross-posting and interlinkage between the two sites. Third-placed Christian blog *Eternal Weight of Glory* (0.54) and fifth-placed *Pro Blogger* (0.53) should be dismissed as outliers which cover political issues only very rarely and appear here mainly because they are frequently exchanging links with a small sub-set of other sites in our sample.

More interesting is the group that follows, which provides an insight into Australia's leading political bloggers. This group includes the personal blog of former *Canberra Times* economics editor Peter Martin, *Ambit Gambit* (the blog of *On Line Opinion* publisher Graham Young), Mark Lawrence, *Road to Surfdom*, *Yobbo*, *Club Troppo*, *Ninglun*, and opinion poll analyst *Poll Bludger*. While closer, qualitative analysis reveals one of these not to be a political blog as

Blog	Posts	Inlinks	Ratio
johnquiggin.com	84	80	0.95
larvatusprodeo.wordpress.com	185	107	0.58
eternalweightofglory.blogspot.com	124	67	0.54
problogger.net	259	136	0.53
petermartin.blogspot.com	141	75	0.53
ambit-gambit.nationalforum.com.au	53	24	0.45
blogs.theaustralian.news.com.au/coverington	18	8	0.44
larvatusprodeo.net	183	78	0.43
marklawrence.blogspot.com	47	20	0.43
roadtosurfdom.com	104	44	0.42
yobbo.wordpress.com	27	11	0.41
clubtroppo.com.au	219	83	0.38
ninglun.wordpress.com	131	50	0.38
pollbludger.com	136	47	0.35

Table 1: Sites with the highest inlinks-per-post ratio.

such, the rest do provide regular political commentary and debate, and should be considered to be amongst the A-List of Australian political blogging, at least during our period of study.

Additionally, the presence of a number of mainstream media blogger/commentators (in green) towards the top of the inlinks:posts list should also be noted here. Martin is most prominent, but he is followed (in order) by *The Australian* commentators Caroline Overington, Dennis Shanahan, George Megalogenis, and Paul Kelly, the *Daily Telegraph*'s Piers Akerman, and *The Australian's Spin Cycle*. Andrew Bolt rounds out the list, but (given his high level of posting activity) with an unsurprisingly low ratio of 0.09 (619 posts, 53 inlinks). The presence of these commentators should be seen in part as a result of the Australian political blogosphere's often oppositional and even adversarial stance towards the mainstream media 'commentariat': Caroline Overington, for example, ranks prominently here (0.44: 18 posts, 8 inlinks) because of her highly publicised feud with the Labor candidate in Malcolm Turnbull's electorate of Wentworth, George Newhouse, which culminated in a minor physical altercation on election day (see e.g. Bruns, Wilson, and Saunders 2007); Dennis Shanahan (0.17: 29 posts, 5 inlinks) became the lightning-rod for the blogosphere's criticism of journalistic incompetence in analysing opinion polling, though primarily in the months *preceding* our data collection period (cf. Bruns 2008 b/c); and Paul Kelly and colleagues were similarly criticised persistently for what was perceived as ideologically skewed commentary. Martin and Megalogenis, however, were generally held in higher esteem for their level-headed economic analysis.

The presence of these commentators in this list clearly indicates that political debate in the blogosphere does not operate independently from mainstream journalism, but that it continues to derive substantial impulses from the opinion columns published by major news organisations. At the same time, the comparatively limited take-up (through links) of such commentary posts, compared to better inlinks:posts ratios for the political blogs, also points to the likelihood that many participants in the blogosphere will see such columns not first-hand, but indirectly, when they are discussed (and perhaps criticised) by the leading political bloggers outside the mainstream media. If supported by further in-depth and longer-term studies, this may point to a model not unlike Katz & Lazarsfeld's 'two-step flow' (1955), where the interpretation of mainstream media columns by the leading political bloggers is more influential for their readers than the columns themselves.

3.4 Outgoing Links across the Population of Sites

Also of interest for our present purposes are data on outgoing links from the sites in our sample. To some extent, such links indicate how much bloggers operate *as* bloggers, rather than as commentators: in the blogosphere, to discuss and respond to content from another site without linking to it is broadly comparable to talking about someone behind their back; by contrast, to discuss external material while linking to it gives the operator of the other site a chance to notice the blogger's post, and to respond to it. This is true especially given that many blogging platforms now incorporate functionality to identify incoming links, making the connection more immediate – to link out to another site means to extend the discussion across multiple sites in the blogosphere and beyond, therefore.

In addition to the entire population's day-to-day linking statistics as outlined in section 3.1 above, what is of most interest here is the extent to which including links in posts is standard practice across the population. It is perhaps unsurprising that almost all of the sites in our sample that link out heavily to other sites (*in our sample*, i.e. within their peer community) are independent blogs rather than sites backed by media organisations (figure 10; here we are using an outlinks:posts ratio to avoid skewing this analysis in favour of sites which simply post more frequently). The presence of two blogs by blogger/columnists employed by the journalism industry is all the more remarkable, then – but it must be noted that these two commentators (Peter Martin and Tim Dunlop) are hardly representative for the rest of the mainstream commentariat: Martin runs his blog as a site independent of *The Canberra Times* or his new employer, *The Age*, and Dunlop was explicitly recruited from the blogosphere to operate a blog on the *News.com.au* site.

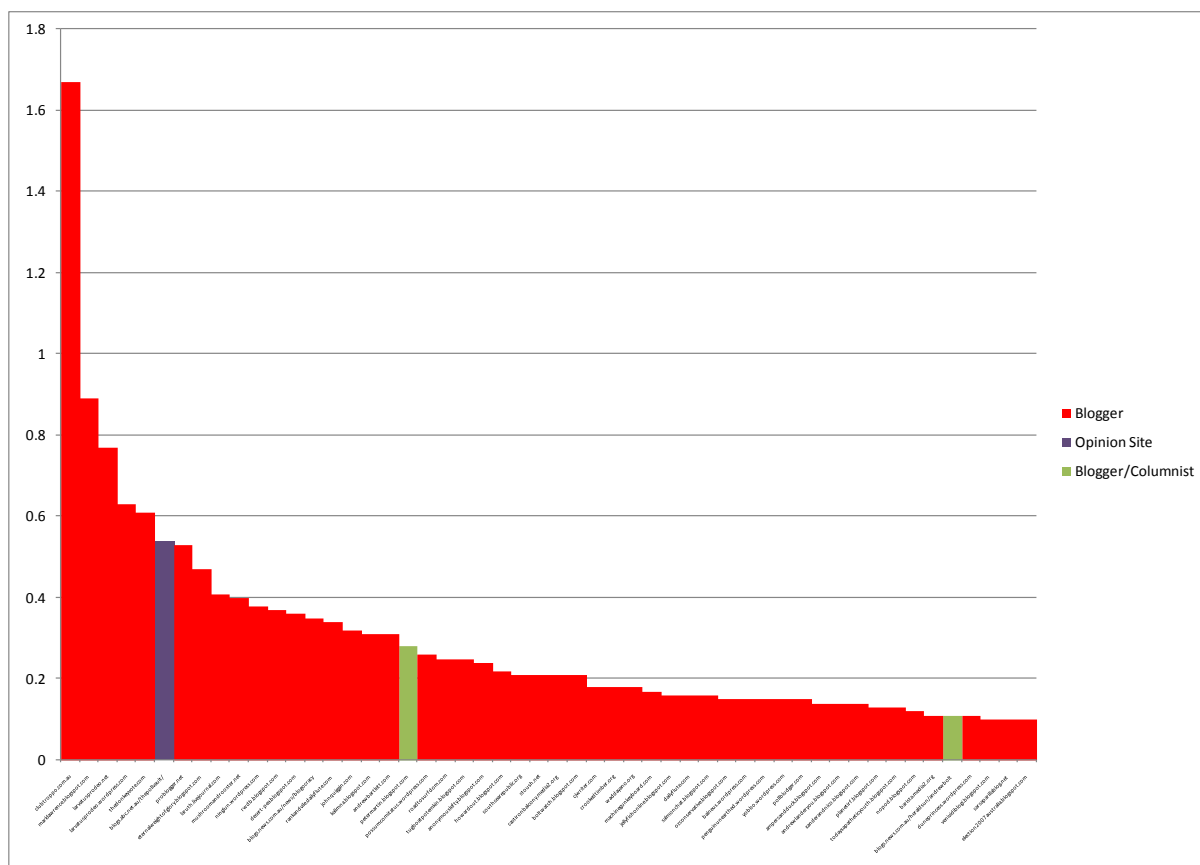


Fig. 10: 50 sites with the most outlinks (per post) to other sites in our sample.

What is notable, however, is that a number of the most active outlinkers are also amongst the most linked-to blogs (as identified in section 3.3). The field is led by *Club Troppo*, whose outlink numbers are somewhat inflated by its practice during our sample period to publish regular “Missing Link” posts which summarised at length what issues other bloggers and mainstream sites had covered over the past few days. Frequent outlinking, therefore, may be seen as an indication that a site is positioning itself as a ‘good citizen’ of the blogosphere, and may in turn help with being linked to more often by raising other bloggers’ awareness of the site; of course the quality of the site’s content will still determine the frequency of such subsequent inlinks, however. The presence of the ABC’s election blogging experiment *The Poll Vault* is particularly notable in this context, then – even if a number of its outgoing links would also have been to other ABC news stories and other content.

Blog	Posts	Outlinks	Ratio
clubtroppo.com.au	219	365	1.67
marklawrence.blogspot.com	47	42	0.89
larvatusprodeo.net	183	140	0.77
larvatusprodeo.wordpress.com	185	116	0.63
thedonkeyvote.com	51	31	0.61
blogs.abc.net.au/thepollvault/	105	57	0.54
problogger.net	259	138	0.53
eternalweightofglory.blogspot.com	124	58	0.47
laruth.livejournal.com	63	26	0.41
mushroomandrooster.net	57	23	0.40
ninglun.wordpress.com	131	50	0.38
rwdb.blogspot.com	60	22	0.37

Table 2: Sites with the highest outlinks-per-post ratio.
(In bold: sites also listed in table 1.)

In keeping with our observation in section 3.1 about the relatively small amount of links to sites within our population, as compared to the overall amount of links included in posts, however, it must also be noted that the overall practice of linking to fellow bloggers remains relatively underdeveloped in the Australian political blogosphere – only a few sites have an outlink:post ratio above 0.5, that is, link to other sites in our population (which, notably, also includes the mainstream *ABC News*

Online and *BBC News Online* newsfeeds) *at least* in every other post. By contrast, some 100 sites in our population were found not to have linked even once to other sites within the same population during the three-month timeframe of the study. (Predictably, this group of non-linkers includes mainstream news sites as well as almost all of the ‘blogs’ run by columnists in the mainstream media, who generally fail to adopt the otherwise common blogging practice of linking to the source materials and statements they discuss.)

For ‘bloggers’ on mainstream news sites this is consistent with their general practice, but for the many independent bloggers included in our population this observation is more surprising. What emerges from these data is the existence of a large number of bloggers with (sometimes only very broadly) political themes who participate on the outer perimeters of the political blogosphere, and (if they link at all) respond directly only to the material published by mainstream media sources, not to the opinions and commentary published by their fellow political bloggers. An increase of our population to include more non-political Australian blogs would enable us to identify the extent to which these blogs belong to (and link to) topical blogger communities other than that interested in politics.

3.5 Average Article Length

Finally, our data also provide a first insight into typical writing standards amongst reasonably well-connected bloggers. Figure 11 shows how the average word count of posts is distributed amongst blogs which receive at least one incoming link from within our population for each 20 posts, and it is obvious that the vast majority of these bloggers tend to write posts averaging at between 200 and 500 words. At the same time, it is also notable that the blogger/columnists for mainstream news organisations tend to write substantially longer pieces (between 500 and 700 words for those whose posts receive at least one link for every 20 articles, with a further outlier even averaging 1000 words), and that a handful of bloggers similarly average substantially above the word length range that is common amongst this subset of our population. (The sole opinion site included here is the ABC’s *Unleashed*, which averages 900 words per post; the other opinion sites did not rate high enough in the inlinks:posts ratio to be included here.)

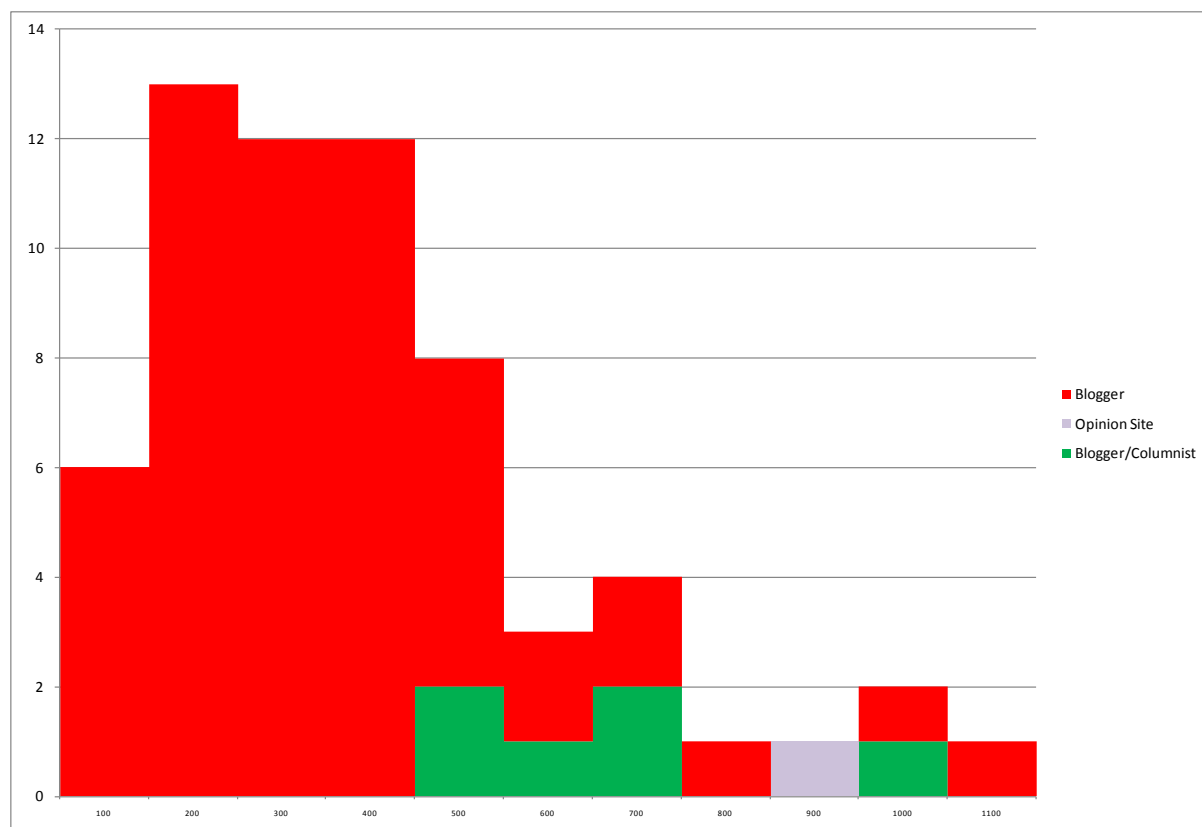


Fig. 11: Number of blogs (with at least one incoming link for every 20 posts) in each word length range.

Such patterns are intriguing, but longer-term and more detailed study is required to investigate whether any causal relationships can be established. While it may appear plausible that shorter, more sharply written blog posts will be more popular with readers (and thus, more regular recipients of incoming links), it is also possible that the concentration of average post lengths around the 200-500 word range is a general pattern throughout the Australian and English-language blogosphere, determined by the typical affordances of the blogging format itself, and that there is therefore no causal relationship between adhering to an 'ideal' post length and receiving a substantial number of incoming links. A scatterplot of average word length against average inlinks:posts ratios for the 50 sites with the greatest inlinks:posts ratio remains inconclusive for now (fig. 11); repeated analysis on the basis of a larger dataset may be more successful in the future.

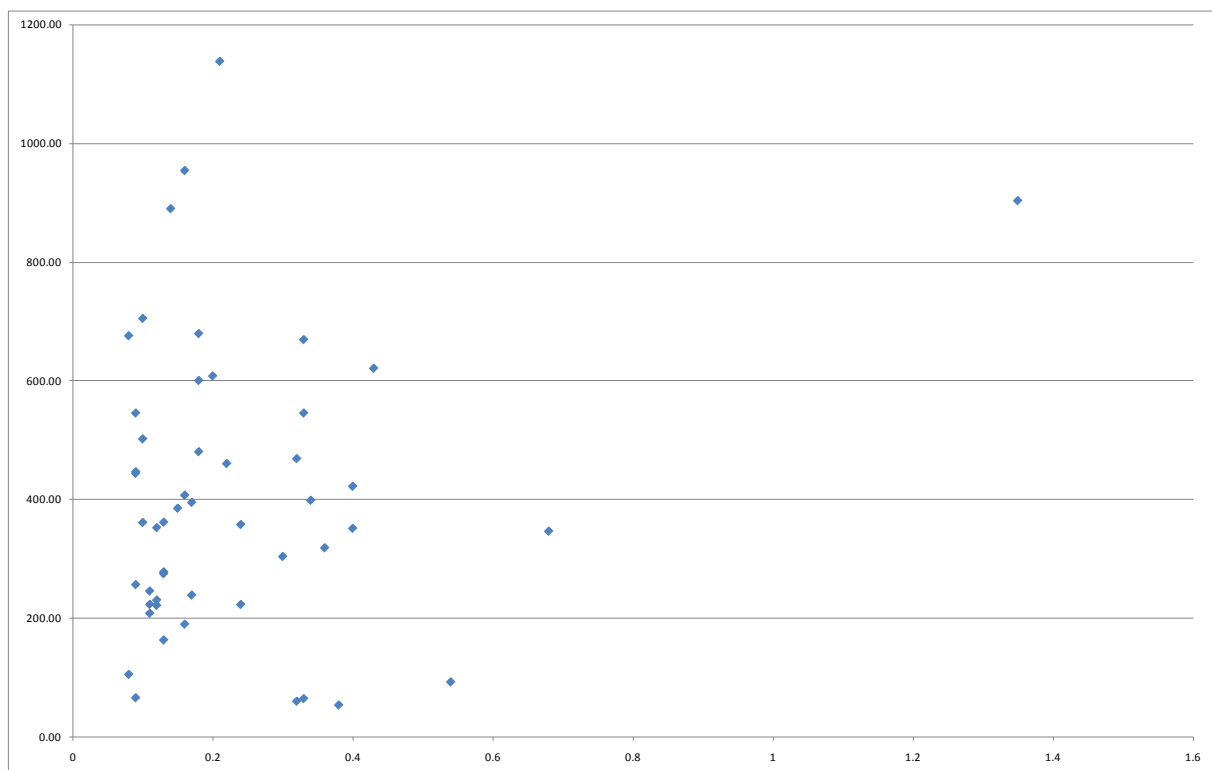


Fig. 10: Comparison of average inlinks:posts (horizontal axis) against average word length (vertical axis) for the 50 sites with the greatest inlinks:posts ratio.

4 Conclusion

This first broad overview of the aggregate data from our study provides a number of interesting insights into the patterns of participation in the Australian political blogosphere before and after the 2007 federal election, and points to a number of areas for further analysis. It will inform the further stages of our research project. Longer-term tracking of the blogosphere's output will also enable us to identify broader seasonal changes in publishing patterns, as well as examine short-term spikes in activity in response to specific national or global events.

Our study shows the Australian political blogosphere to be a diverse and multifaceted community. As is to be expected, publishing activity varies widely across the population of sites which we examined in our research, and a site's level of activity on this count does not act as a reliable predictor of its popularity with its peers (if we accept the amount of links received as an indirect indicator of popu-

larity). Further research is needed to establish whether, and which, aspects exist that are shared by all of the most 'popular' blogs in our population.

Additionally, the relatively limited amount of interlinkage between the sites in our population is also notable; the vast majority of links pointed to resources outside of the Australian political blogosphere (and here, most likely especially to news reports and similar materials). This serves to dispel any myth of political bloggers as a tightly connected clique or echo chamber of commentators talking – or ranting – only amongst themselves, with little factual basis, but may also point to the continuing dependence of political bloggers on the external stimulus of mainstream news reporting, positioning them as an alternative to the mainstream 'commentariat'. Again, further research is needed to examine in more detail the typical linking practices of Australian political bloggers – for example addressing questions such as how diverse the sources are from which bloggers typically draw, and whether source selection is influenced by a blogger's political persuasion.

Finally, a study of longer-term trends in the blogosphere will also be able to address questions about the stability or variability of leadership in the community – it provides information on whether the 'A-list' of Australian political blogs generally remains the same over long periods of time, or whether it changes for example as different political themes (the economy, immigration, foreign conflicts, etc.) dominate political discussion in Australia. The next stage of our research will address such questions.

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