
New Media and Australia's National Security Debate

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Over the last decade there has emerged in Australia a small but fertile and occasionally influential group of blogs devoted to international security and foreign policy. This is not the romantic grass-roots story that beguiled US media watchers in the mid-2000s, in which a handful of lone enthusiasts pioneered a new publishing form, building their part-time passion into influential outlets for punditry, and sometimes creating successful media businesses. In Australia, the major international-policy-themed blogs emerged quite late in the short history of blogging, and they are all supported to varying degrees by non-profit institutions. Notable in this regard are *The Interpreter* (established 2007 by the Lowy Institute for International Policy; covers world politics from an Australian perspective, with a focus on Asia), *The Strategist* (established in 2012 by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI); focused mainly on defence and national security); *East Asia Forum* (established in 2006 by Peter Drysdale and Shiro Armstrong, based in the Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University; focused on Asia Pacific politics and economy). and *New Mandala*, which is focused on political analysis of Southeast Asia. Like East Asia Forum, it was established by two academics in 2006 and is partly supported by the Australian National University.

Some 'grass roots' sites have had an impact on Australia's online international-policy scene too. Notable examples include Andrew Zammit's counter-terrorism site *The Murphy Raid*, Leah Farrell's *All Things Counter-Terrorism*, the defence-focused group blog *Pnyx*, Andrew Carr's *Chasing the Norm* and *Security Scholar* by Natalie Sambhi and Nic Jenzen-Jones (the last three sites are no longer active).

But on its face, it is odd that this subject area has not generated more grass-roots online activity. Granted, the audience for a site dedicated to this policy area in Australia is relatively small. But that is typically not a disincentive for bloggers who are passionate about a topic. And given the popularity of international studies degrees in Australia, one might have expected that more students frustrated by the difficulty of getting their opinions past the gatekeepers of the mainstream media would have recognised blogs as an easy and cheap alternative.

But although starting a blog is easy, maintaining it is hard, especially when study gives way to full time work. Institutions, by contrast, can devote

resources to such projects over a sustained period of time. A second explanation is that, since Australia is seldom a decisive player in international affairs and foreign policy is rarely prominent in the national political debate, these issues have less cachet among the aspiring policy commentators, who may believe that they are more likely to make an impression on readers and their peers by focusing on aspects of domestic policy. A third possibility is that potential bloggers are put off because there is so little chance of them ever decisively influencing policy. The foreign-policy-making system in Australia is relatively closed, being almost the sole preserve of a tightly disciplined executive. In contrast to the United States, for instance, where Congress plays an independent role and party discipline is relatively loose, Australia's parliament has little role in the formation or oversight of foreign and national security policy. There are thus few avenues for influencing Australian foreign and defence policy. Or, to put it another way, there are not many people whom it is worth trying to persuade.

Influencing the National Debate

Yet the major international-policy-themed sites have had a measure of success over the years. They tend to be read by academics, students, policy professionals and journalists with an interest in foreign affairs, so their influence is elite rather than popular. But they have chalked up some notable achievements. ASPI's *The Strategist* and the Lowy *Interpreter*, for instance, are cited regularly in the Australian media and elsewhere. *New Mandala* has a strong readership in Southeast Asia, and its coverage of last year's Indonesian election got widespread media attention there. The site was particularly strong on presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto's anti-democratic stances and on the underhanded tactics used by his supporters during the election. The Indonesian election was important for *The Interpreter* too. The site was the first to report on the fact that some pro-Jokowi institutions which had commissioned opinion polling on the election were delaying publication of the results because of Prabowo's strong showing.

In fact, these sites have achieved a number of 'scoops' over the years. But they don't break news in the usual way, and this illustrates something important about how specialist sites can enrich media coverage and the broader debate on foreign and national security policy.

The mainstream media tends to be very good at what we might call traditional news scoops, where journalists reveal information that those in positions of power would prefer to keep secret—think Woodward and Bernstein with Watergate or Chris Masters' work on Queensland corruption in the 1980s. By contrast, specialist websites tend to be better at what the media analyst Jay Rosen calls 'thought scoops', which have nothing to do with uncovering secrets. Rather, they require an analyst to impart new meaning to information that is already public. The *Interpreter's* first scoop, for instance, came in 2007 when I wrote a piece highlighting some video footage from the Pakistani

military which showed the test-launch of a new nuclear-capable cruise missile. As an aviation enthusiast with some professional background in regional nuclear proliferation, I recognised the launch aircraft as being the same type that Australia sold second-hand to Pakistan in the late 1980s, which meant there was strong reason to believe Australia had abetted Pakistan's nuclear program. The piece was noticed by *The Age*, which wrote it up as a front-page story with a reaction from the Defence Minister. This illustrates that, when it comes to niche areas (such as weapons technology), specialists have an advantage over journalists, who tend to be generalists. This has always been the case, but the internet now gives specialists the ability to exploit that advantage.

But although 'thought scoops' are part of the value that Australia's international-policy sites add to the policy debate, it would be selling them short to judge them solely by the attention they get from the mainstream media for their occasional scoops. Each of these sites produces daily content which covers international politics in greater depth than the quality mainstream media can manage, particularly as media organisations have been forced to retreat from foreign news coverage over the last decade for budgetary reasons. The major media outlets of course do a far better job of covering breaking news, but the international-policy sites follow closely behind with their analysis of the news. And because the contributors and audience tend to be specialists rather than media professionals, these sites also stand at a healthy remove from the news cycle, occasionally puncturing the news media's 'parochialism of the present'.

Structure and Limits of the Online Debate

In format, the major Australian international-policy sites are roughly similar, and each has combined the technical and formatting advances of the online format with traditional magazine-style editorial approaches. Three of them have maintained the reverse-chronological format of the blog, with the most recent post appearing at the top of the homepage; readers scroll down the page to see the rest. Only *New Mandala* has moved to an online magazine-style format with boxes on the homepage which display headlines and some teaser text, but with the article itself appearing on a dedicated page. But all of them adopt a higher degree of editorial control than is common for a blog—authors are commissioned and sometimes paid; drafts go through an editorial process similar to that for a newspaper or magazine—and for that reason it is probably more accurate to refer to all of them as online magazines.

To a degree, they also copy the newspaper op-ed pages in their style and tone. Each tends to focus largely on contemporary issues and the analysis of breaking news, with articles of about 800 words. And many of the pieces published on these sites are stand-alone articles written in a newspaper op-ed voice, which means, among other things, that they tend to be self-contained. The best ones will summarise the news and anticipate counter-arguments so

that readers will be able to understand the issue without reference to other sources.

By contrast, the best blog writing tends to exploit the fact that sources can be cited easily via hyperlinks, and that readers can, with a few clicks, look back at earlier posts in a series, or at responses by other bloggers or from readers. This makes blog writing richer (sources can be cited with ease) and more economical (one can simply hyperlink rather than summarise). It also allows the opportunity for a more equivocal tone. An op-ed tends to present a writer's settled view. In the online world, by contrast, writers have the luxury of not making up their minds, because there is always space for another post. Loyal readers of a blog can see a writer's argument unfold over time as the writer sifts evidence and considers new perspectives.

But this style of writing—more conversational, less declaratory—has never been fully embraced on Australia's international-policy sites. Unfortunately, they remain relatively isolated from one another. You would be hard pressed to find more than an occasional discussion between these sites, despite the considerable overlap in their subject areas. They link to one another's content occasionally, but there is little discussion or debate. In short, although the technology allows it, Australia's international-policy sites have not created a 'commons' for the exchanging and debating of ideas.

On the other hand, one thing readers do see on these sites, which goes some way to explaining the absence of interaction between them, is internal debate. Each of them is a 'group' site with multiple contributors who regularly debate one another. *The Interpreter*, which was conceived as an outlet for Lowy Institute research staff, has become a hub for literally hundreds of Australian and foreign commentators, with Lowy Institute staff making up no more than a large minority of the contributions. *The Interpreter* has become a place for all types of foreign policy professionals—policy-makers, academics, journalists, students—to debate their ideas. In their different ways, *The Strategist*, *East Asia Forum* and *New Mandala* have done the same thing. So we may not have a commons, but each of these sites has created an attractive, lightly walled private garden.

As well as being isolated from each other, Australia's major international-policy sites have also been largely overlooked by the rest of the Australian political blogosphere. Major Australian politics blogs such as *Grog's Gamut*, *Larvatus Prodeo*, and *Road to Surfdom* have rarely engaged with Australian international-policy sites. And the major international-policy sites barely feature in two books charting the rise of Australian online political debate—*The Rise of the Fifth Estate* by Greg Jericho and *The New Front Page* by Tim Dunlop.

The rise of Twitter in Australia's online political debate has alleviated this situation to a large degree. Although Australia's political class did not embrace

blogging in the way Americans or Brits did, Twitter has largely (and somewhat belatedly) filled this space, to the benefit of the major Australian international-policy sites. A recent survey found that there are 2.8 million Twitter accounts in Australia, and although many would not be active and the vast majority are not concerned with politics, the survey also found an unusual concentration of Twitter accounts around Canberra, where Australia's international-policy debate is centred. Australian politicians, journalists and commentators have created a new space for political discussion through Twitter, and it is commonplace to find some of Australia's most prominent political tweeters recommending or critiquing articles appearing on Australian international-policy sites.

Institutional Obstacles

The online discussion of international policy in Australia faces several what might be called 'institutional' obstacles between them and their core audience. Much of this audience resides in the Commonwealth public service, particularly the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Defence, and the intelligence community. While the major Australian international-policy sites are avidly read in these agencies, the readers tend to remain mute. To a degree, this is only proper; the rules relating to public commentary by government officials exist for a reason. But there is also a culture of extreme caution in the federal public service that unnecessarily prevents officials, who are often highly knowledgeable and articulate, from contributing to the public debate through these sites. As editor of *The Interpreter*, I have received emails from officials helpfully and innocently alerting me to an interesting new essay, and suggesting I share the hyperlink with readers. But these emails were accompanied by nervous entreaties to please not publish their names!

If anything, the culture of suspicion about contributing to public debate is even more extreme in Australia's military. As Albert Palazzo has written:

the most striking thing about the debate on the future of war in Australia is its near total absence. The ADF, it appears, is notably cautious about debating openly either its own future or the future of war ... the members of the ADF are constrained by factors that make it nearly impossible to conduct a debate in the style of the US military ... The Department of Defence hierarchy has implemented policies which mean that only the soon-to-be-retired officer dares speak openly on any issue of importance to the profession of arms. Defence Instructions state the limits of external engagement, making it clear to the ranks that they are to remain on message, or even better, say nothing.¹

Academics too face institutional barriers to contributing to the online debate about international policy. Academic voices are reasonably prominent on the major international-policy sites, which is something of a credit to the academic community, given the scarcity of career incentives for publishing in anything

¹ <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/08/16/ADF-silent-in-debates-on-modern-warfare.aspx>

except refereed journals. These sites would be all the stronger if universities created clearer links between career advancement and engagement in public debate.

Some Trends to Watch

The Australian online publications devoted to defence and national security issues have been affected by broader online media trends, and that will continue to be the case. For instance, one prominent industry trend is the emergence of 'clickbait', which is light, trivial, superficial material designed to attract traffic. Clickbait tends to carry teasing, enticing, headlines and often appears in the form of listicles (a portmanteau of 'article' and 'list': e.g. 'Ten reasons you're not losing weight.'). It is a format that has been perfected by pop culture sites such as *Buzzfeed*, but venerable titles such as *Foreign Policy*, *The Atlantic*, *The American Interest*, *The Diplomat* and in Australia the Fairfax news websites (all of which maintain more staid and respectable editorial stances in their print publications) have succumbed to it in their online editions. In some cases it has compromised the respect and esteem in which these historic mastheads are held, but so far, this has not been the case on Australian international-policy sites. Listicles do appear on these sites from time to time, but they are generally well-conceived and well written, and maintain a fairly sober tone.

Another important trend is the rise of social media such as Facebook and Twitter; increasingly, readers find news, analysis and opinion via their social media accounts. But online editors who embrace social media as a source of traffic are learning that such traffic tends to arrive not via the homepage but to specific article pages. In May 2014 this year a leaked New York Times internal memo revealed that traffic to its homepage had dropped by half in the last two years. The Times' overall traffic had increased in that period, but its readers were arriving via 'back doors', links to specific pages which were recommended via social media or email. These readers tend to be less loyal to the masthead; they visit because an article interests them, not because they think highly of the publication. So to maintain traffic growth, editors constantly need to find new ways to entice these readers back, which can increase the incentive to head downmarket. It can also change the way articles are structured and erode the willingness of editors to stage extended debates. Because readers arriving via social media 'helicopter' in, they need self-contained articles rather than pieces which assume sustained attention over time.

Finally, another trend to watch in Australia's small online international-policy scene is the entry of new participants. The online media scene in Australia has been tempestuous in recent years. Unlike the familiar story of slow decline which we hear from print media, online media in Australia has been replete with new entrants such as *The Guardian*, *The Conversation*, the now defunct *Global Post*, and even Australian editions of the *Daily Mail*, *Buzzfeed*

and in the near future *Huffington Post*. None of these entrants has directly challenged the smaller international-policy sites which are the subject here (though increasingly there is competition for the services of the most talented writers), but that situation may not last. Given how unpredictable the online media scene is in Australia, and how relatively inexpensive it would be for a new entrant to launch an online publication in this broad issue space, the quite sudden emergence of a new title cannot be ruled out. It is unlikely that any such title could succeed on commercial terms, but that may not deter wealthy individuals or institutions.

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