

**Curtin University of Technology**

**Nick Pendergrast**

**Australian Media Hegemony and the Internet**

### **Abstract**

The Internet has emerged as a potentially important site of resistance to media hegemony. The Internet has been celebrated as the place to go for alternative information and ideas; a place which breaks free from the narrow framework offered by the traditional media (which includes media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television). Nonetheless, while there has been some success in the Internet being used to present ideas and topics that have been marginalised by the traditional media, the most visited websites in Australia are increasingly owned by traditional media companies, whose content is limited by the same constraints present in other forms of media. Australian media hegemony is partly due to the production of media content, including corporate ownership and commercial constraints. Websites with alternative content exist; however, it is hard to compete with the resources of traditional media companies and other large companies. Using the recent example of the framing of the 2007 Australian Federal election, this paper examines the extent to which the Internet is currently being used to frame issues in a counter-hegemonic manner. The effectiveness of such a potential challenge is also considered, in an online media environment increasingly dominated by large-scale media companies.

### **Introduction**

The Internet has emerged as a potentially important site of resistance to media hegemony in Australia. Hegemony refers to “the manufacturing of consent” through “excluding alternative visions and discourses” (Scott & Marshall 2005). While debate and disagreement occurs, this is only within a limited framework beneficial to dominant interests (Artz & Murphy 2000, p. 254). This limited framework is particularly clear when it comes to the dominant ideologies of capitalism and neoliberalism. Capitalism involves wage-labour and commodity production aimed at profit (Scott & Marshall 2005). Neoliberalism is a specific form of capitalism that has become dominant in Western countries such as Australia from the 1980s onwards. One aspect of neoliberalism involves a market-orientated theory based on general notions of “the efficiency of the private market” and “the inefficiency of government”

(Herman 1997, p. 11). The other element of neoliberalism is an actual set of policies which facilitate the free movement of capital; this is referred to as ‘actually existing neoliberalism’. Actually existing neoliberalism involves policies that prioritise capital over labour (Cahill 2007, p. 221) and that place business over civil society, or “profit over people” (Chomsky 1999). The exclusion of voices opposed to the dominant ideologies of capitalism and neoliberalism which benefit elite classes (McMichael 2004, pp. 152, 154), confines debates to the best way of implementing these ideologies. Without oppositional content, capitalism and neoliberalism are assumed to be ‘common sense’.

The media can move away from a narrow, hegemonic framework by functioning more like an optimum public sphere. In its optimal form the public sphere, a concept developed by Jürgen Habermas, functions as an integral part of the “political consciousness and a vibrant site of resistance” to ‘common sense’ political discourse (Marden 2003, p. 89). It is a sphere where the public can hear all views on an issue (Schiller 1989, p. 53). The extent to which this ideal is achieved is seen as a good measure of the state of the media (Bolton 2006). The Internet can be used to present a challenge to the hegemony of the Australian media through content that contributes to an optimum public sphere.

The political economic approach used in this paper will address both hegemony in the Australian media and the extent to which the Internet has presented a challenge to this hegemony. This involves examining how power relations are expressed through the media’s processes of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption and how they are encompassed in forms of economic relationships, ownership, and government policy (Bolton 2006). This perspective on the production of media content is important in identifying the constraints which limit content. The paper will examine the way that political economic forces shape the use of the Internet at a time when contemporary rhetoric about the Internet often refers to the creation of a “level playing field” between large media companies and ‘ordinary citizens’ (Hill & Hughes cited in Goot 2008, p. 99).

The political economic approach is useful in identifying why certain frames dominate the news discourse while others are marginalised (Carragee & Roefs 2004, pp. 220,

225). Framing is the way that the news is packaged. This includes what is covered and what is left out; the amount of coverage given to particular issues; the tone (positive or negative); and whether the content is given prominent placement and visual effects (Parenti 1993, p. 201). Framing significantly influences the way audiences interpret issues and events. The extent to which consent is secured to dominant frames is a measure of the success of hegemony (King & deYoung 2008, pp. 124, 134; Carragee & Roefs 2004, pp. 216, 223).

The following outline of media hegemony in Australia reveals some of the structural constraints involved in the production of media content that limit the frames presented, and the potential for the Internet to be used in Australia to contribute alternative and oppositional frames to the public sphere. These ideas are then evaluated through a case study that focuses on a content analysis of the 2007 Australian federal election. Content analysis is useful because it can successfully link the media hegemony thesis with framing research, as well as providing real-life examples to support media hegemony research (Carragee & Roefs 2004, p. 228).

The case study will assist in analysing the extent to which Australian media hegemony is being challenged by the use of the Internet. It is clear that the Internet has shown some positive signs of challenging Australian media hegemony, however it does not appear to have been used for such a purpose on a large-scale. It is particularly important to critically investigate claims emphasising the democratic nature of the Internet in Australia, as these claims are being used to justify a relaxation of media ownership laws. Helen Coonan, when Federal Communications Minister, argued that the Internet “is resulting in the emergence of new players, new content, new services and new platforms” (cited in Bolton 2006). These laws, introduced in 2006 (Tiffen 2007, pp. 12-15), allow for further commercialisation, trivialisation, and concentration of ownership in the Australian media.

### **Background to Media Hegemony in Australia**

The political economic structure of the Australian media helps to support a narrow range of frames. The Internet could be used to challenge media hegemony in Australia through providing a wider range of viewpoints than presented through

traditional media forms and therefore contributing “alternative visions and discourses” to the public sphere (Scott & Marshall 2005). It is important to critically analyse whether or not this contribution to the public sphere is occurring, in order to counter the lingering utopianism surrounding the Internet (Bolton 2006).

The ownership of the media in Australia is one of the most concentrated in the industrialised world. Recent laws (introduced 18 October 2006) have made media ownership even more permissive, which is likely to further concentrate this ownership in the hands of even fewer companies (Tiffen 2007, p. 12). Rupert Murdoch’s dominance of the Australian media is a clear example. Murdoch’s News Limited owns almost 70 percent of Australian newspapers, which has flow-on effects. These papers, including 7 out of 12 daily papers and Australia’s only national paper (*The Australian*) (Holmes 2003, p. 441), help set the agenda for other forms of media, including talkback radio, and play a vital role in determining the way millions of Australians see the world (Manne in Bolton 2006). Murdoch is very frank about his political bias:

Rupert Murdoch was once asked: “You’re considered to be politically conservative. To what extent do you influence the editorial posture of your newspapers?” He responded: “Considerably. The buck stops on my desk. My editors have input, but I make final decisions.” Murdoch added that he thought of himself not as a mere conservative but a “radical conservative”. (Parenti 1993, p. 33)

Concentrated media ownership is significant because it has the potential for the abuse of political power by media owners, the under-representation of some viewpoints, and because it works against the development of a media system that supplies a wide range of ideas, viewpoints, and different forms of cultural expression (Doyle 2002, p. 171). According to many journalists, these potential threats are occurring in the Australian media. A survey conducted by Roy Morgan Research in 2004 found that 73 per cent of journalists believe that media proprietors use their outlets to “push their own business and or political interests to influence the national debate” (cited in Bolton 2006). The organisation Reporters Sans Frontieres is also aware of the impact

of concentrated media ownership. Their 2004 press freedom index ranked Australia 41<sup>st</sup> out of 167 countries, down from 12<sup>th</sup> position just two years earlier. This drop was based on concerns over the anticipated 2006 changes to cross-media ownership, and reflects the belief that the easing of such restrictions was a threat to press freedom and diversity (Bolton 2006). It is clear that concentrated media ownership is damaging to the public sphere and is a significant factor in producing hegemony in the Australian media.

The corporate ownership of the media also leads to commercial constraints, which further limit the content of the Australian media. Dominant media corporations are like other businesses, in that they sell a product to buyers. Their market is advertisers, and the 'product' is audiences, with a bias towards wealthier audiences, who improve advertising rates (Chomsky 1989, pp. 8-9). Roy Morgan Research (2006) explains that: "The "Top 1%" of the market—some 173,000 Australians who are the most senior Executives and Directors, all earning \$120 000 or more per annum—are crucial to the success of newspapers". Therefore it comes as no surprise that the picture of the world the commercial media presents generally reflects the perspectives and interests of the sellers, the buyers, and the product (Chomsky 1989, pp. 8-9), with other points of view often being silenced due to these constraints.

The commercial nature and the influence of advertising on the media means that "projects unsuitable for corporate sponsorship tend to die on the vine" (The London Economist in Chomsky 1989, p. 8), as "advertisers do not want media content to interfere with the 'buying mood' of the public" (Croteau & Hoynes 2002, p. 223). This commercial influence on the media can also help to explain why dissident voices are generally lacking from the Australian media. Confronting power is costly and difficult, due to the high standard of evidence and argument required (Chomsky 1989, pp. 8-9), and therefore is unlikely to occur, as it is not in the economic interests of media businesses.

Time and space constraints serve to further marginalise different, new, and critical voices from the public sphere. The scarcity of space (in print media) and time (in broadcast media) is significant (Flew 2008, p. 11) in creating conformity in media content and limiting oppositional voices. "In a three-minute stretch between

commercials, or in seven hundred words, it is impossible to present unfamiliar thoughts or surprising conclusions with the argument and evidence required to afford them some credibility” (Chomsky 1989, p. 10). Repeating familiar information that does not depart too far from dominant ideologies and understandings does not face these problems (Chomsky 1989, p. 10). This is because such understandings are accepted as ‘common sense’ and therefore require little or no explanation. Time and space constraints serve to reduce counter-hegemonic content and reinforce dominant understandings.

The potential for the Internet to be used to overcome the myriad of constraints outlined above have often been exaggerated. Utopian visions, or what Vincent Mosco (2004) refers to as the ‘digital sublime,’ pervade perceptions about the democratic nature of the Internet. Many argue that “there is a boundless utopia to be reached via the information superhighway” (Hirst & Harrison 2007, p. 214). The rhetoric about the democratic nature of the Internet has been occurring since its earliest inception. The introduction of new technologies is typically accompanied by claims that they will drastically transform the world for the better. For example, the introduction of both radio and television were accompanied with promises that they would bring about revolutionary changes in society. Even Cable TV, it was typically concluded, had the potential to connect people like no other technology (Mosco 2004, p. 1). The Internet is no different; it is championed by various groups from all sides of politics, including media owners, neoliberal governments, and alternative social and political organisations (Bolton 2006).

As Martin Hirst and John Harrison (2007, p. 213) note, the “view that the Internet has had (or is having) a ‘Golden Age’ must be read in historical context and with some scepticism”. While utopian claims regarding the Internet are highly questionable, the medium does present some opportunities for alternative media content. The Internet is decentralised in comparison to other forms of media—it has put media tools in the hands of ‘ordinary people’ and it is relatively cheap and easy for people to create content. It has led to new media practices and forms, new ways of consuming and using media, and the creation of new, alternative spaces for a variety of communities and interests that are not well catered for or represented in traditional media forms (Goggin 2006, pp. 259-276).

The power that is “shaping the new media landscape” (Mansell 2004, pp. 96, 97) is a major constraint to these opportunities. “The present political economy of the media ensures that wealthy mainstream media outlets are best positioned to invest in the Internet” (Turner 2005, p. 140). Companies that own traditional media outlets in Australia (and elsewhere) have also developed Internet ventures, and have used the Internet to increase their audiences as part of a comprehensive media strategy. These existing brand names provide a reassuring familiarity to new users of the Internet and it is traditional media interests that dominate Internet use in Australia (Goggin 2006, p. 259). Over 70 percent of Internet sites in Australia are controlled by just three traditional media companies, including: Fairfax (35 percent), News Corp (25 percent), and PBL (13 percent) (Kohler cited in Bolton 2006). As Table 1 demonstrates, sites such as *News Interactive* (for News Limited newspapers), and *NineMSN* (owned by Channel Nine and Microsoft) are among the most visited websites, with *NineMSN* being the most popular website in Australia (Goggin 2006, p. 267). Acknowledging the dominance of traditional media interests over the Internet is useful in avoiding a lapse into the technological determinist mythology of seeing the Internet as inherently democratic (Redden, Caldwell & Nguyen cited in Bolton 2006).

*Table 1 (Goggin 2006, p. 260): Top 10 Australian online brands by unique audience, March 2005.*

<b>Online brand</b>	<b>Unique Audience (000).</b>	<b>Web page views (000).</b>	<b>Visits per person (hh:mm)</b>	<b>Web pages per Person</b>	<b>Time per person (hh:mm:ss)</b>
<b>Nine MSN/MSN</b>	6 374	602 061	11:26	94	0:49:16
<b>Google</b>	6 109	504 462	9:52	83	0:31:34
<b>Microsoft</b>	5 264	137 588	7:18	26	0:08:34
<b>Yahoo!</b>	4 130	414 284	9:11	100	1:01:44
<b>eBay</b>	3 071	761 010	9:04	248	2:07:17
<b>News Interactive</b>	2 182	129 769	4:50	59	0:36:51

<b>Telstra BigPond</b>	1 758	65 814	7:24	37	0:21:48
<b>Commonwealth Bank</b>	1 598	87 083	5:28	54	0:48:07
<b>Optus Net</b>	1 448	81 766	12:29	56	0:41:47
<b>ABC Online</b>	1 406	25 845	3:33	18	0:13:34
<b>Overall online population (Mar 05)</b>	9 168	9 213 406	28.5.	1005	9:27:19

The dominance of sites owned by traditional media companies seems likely to continue and even increase. As the creation and maintenance of web pages becomes increasingly complex and expensive, fewer people are able to create viable content on the Internet. There are some worrying trends that are compromising the Internet's democratising features (Barton 2005, pp. 177-178). These include the end of free web hosting and increasing costs for web-hosting and bandwidth services (with such fees increasingly being proportionate to the popularity of the site), as well as search engines giving premium placement in search lists in exchange for premium payments (Bolton 2006). It is certainly difficult for citizens to compete viably without the resources and institutional support of corporations (McChesney 2001). Although theoretically 'citizen journalists' can create original news for the Internet, a lack of resources means that this is difficult and unlikely to be viewed by a significant number of people even if it is produced. As a result, information from the Internet is increasingly becoming "controlled from above by powerful multinational corporations", exactly like other media (Barton 2005, p. 177).

Of course, people can visit 'alternative' websites, rather than choosing to access these mainstream sources. However, looking at alternative and mainstream media in the form of opposing binaries and totally isolated entities is problematic. For example, there is a crossover of journalists, ideas, content, and style between these two supposedly oppositional media forms (Harcup 2005, cited in Bolton 2006). Even more radical, alternative media are often forced to rely on better-resourced media companies for most of their information, as original news is expensive to gather and produce. Boyd-Barrett (2006, p. 205) is aware of this significant constraint, but is still optimistic about the Internet's ability to challenge hegemony in the media. He believes that despite their reliance on mainstream sources for information, many



alternative websites are able to provide new, original, and critical information, as well as oppose hegemonic institutions and ideologies. This is achieved through reframing stories from the mainstream media to support alternative positions and ideologies. Reframing involves placing the original article, often from a mainstream source, into a new context. Now the article may be accompanied by an added introduction or discussion, be positioned with other texts or links that were not in the story's original environment, and be read with a far greater knowledge of the subject (due to the high volume of information that is typical of these sites).

The existence of counter-hegemonic content alone does not challenge Australian media hegemony, at least on a large scale. Even if alternative websites are able to overcome the multitude of constraints in achieving alternative or oppositional content, they often lack sufficient audience reach to have a significant impact. Currently, only about one per cent of Australians access alternative media providers for news and current affairs (Downie & McIntosh 2006). This statistic points to the Internet being used by already committed political individuals and groups taking advantage of this technology. In contrast, other people are no more interested in alternative or oppositional media coverage online than they are with its offline equivalent (Bolton 2006).

The Internet in Australia has generally operated 'alongside', rather than in opposition to, traditional media. The presence of this new media form has not led to a fundamental shift from 'corporate media to 'citizen media' as it is dominated by traditional media companies. It is clear that the Internet is already being used to provide alternative ideas and challenge Australian media hegemony, but whether sites producing such content have had a significant influence is far less certain.

### **Methodology**

As a comparative tool, the case study is a theoretical as well as empirical exploration of the differences in the framing of the 2007 Australian federal election between the traditional Australian media and Australian websites. Traditional coverage is represented by the following newspapers: *The Australian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and *The West Australian* and the Australian websites are represented by *New*

*Matilda* and *GetUp*. The comparison between the frames presented by different forms of media will give some indication of the extent to which the Internet is being used to challenge Australian media hegemony. The case study will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What were the dominant news frames for the 2007 federal election amongst the Australian traditional media and online sources?
2. Were the frames significantly different between the traditional media and online sources?
3. Was the framing of the election by the traditional media consistent with hegemony, with debate confined to narrow limits?
4. Did the online sources cover the election in a broader way, drawing on alternative voices and opinions that were not represented in the traditional media, as well as challenging hegemonic ideologies and institutions?

The limitations of a study by Murray Goot (2008) have been considered in this analysis. Goot compared the number of times political candidates were mentioned in the election coverage of various media, but did not cover the entire election period. To overcome this limitation, all coverage, whether newspapers or online, has been analysed for the entire election period: from 14 October 2007 until 24 November 2007.<sup>1</sup> This means that the study, unlike Goot's, covered the entire campaigning period of the election, from the day the election was called until the day the election took place.

An additional limitation of Goot's statistical analysis is that it did not analyse 'the prominence given to different news items' nor did it find 'ways of separating "positive" and "negative" stories' (2008, p. 107). This study does address the prominence of the election coverage by paying particular attention to the front page of each newspaper. All election-related articles that featured in this prominent position were analysed. The newspaper coverage was represented by all of the front pages for dates within the time period chosen, for each paper, as well as some of the other articles in each paper.

Further newspaper coverage for this study was obtained through a *Factiva* search for the terms ‘2007 election’, restricted to the chosen time period and to Australian newspapers only. From this search, all of the articles from the three relevant newspapers were accessed and analysed. For both the front page coverage and the coverage for the whole newspaper, there are statistics on the frames of the articles, as well as a thorough discussion on these statistics and the articles that fell within each frame. Thus the study can move beyond Goot’s analysis of the statistics to include specific examples from the articles and provides a way ‘of separating “positive” and “negative” stories’ (Ibid.). Not only does the study note the amount of times that minor parties were featured, but, unlike Goot’s study, it also addresses the type of coverage they received.

Newspapers have been chosen to represent traditional media coverage partly due to their agenda setting role, which is created through the influence they exert over other media (Manne in Bolton 2006).<sup>ii</sup> The front page of the newspaper is particularly influential in this regard.<sup>iii</sup> Multiple newspapers have been chosen to address the differences that exist between various mainstream media (JingJing 2006, p. 5). The two major media companies in Australia are News Limited and Fairfax, and one paper has been chosen for each of these companies. *The Australian* is the News Limited paper with the highest readership amongst the top 1 percent of Australians “who really count” as they are “crucial to the success of newspapers”, that is, the “most senior Executives and Directors” who have a large amount of power and influence (Roy Morgan Research 2006, p. 1). It also represents a nation-wide paper. *The Sydney Morning Herald* is the state-wide Fairfax newspaper with the highest readership amongst this top 1 percent (Roy Morgan Research 2006, p. 1).<sup>iv</sup> *The West Australian* represents a newspaper that is not owned by either of these companies.

The online coverage in this study comprised an analysis of the content provided by the political activist website *GetUp* and the news site *New Matilda*. These two websites were chosen partly because they score highly as far as Boyd-Barrett’s (2006, pp. 206-207) criteria for alternative media, in contrast to the newspapers studied.<sup>v</sup> While it is problematic to see alternative and mainstream media as opposing binaries, it is useful to compare the content of more alternative websites with traditional media that scores very poorly as far as being alternative.

Another reason these sites were chosen relates to their popularity and influence on Australian society. *GetUp* currently has over 283,000 members (*GetUp* 2008) and in an article by Peter Hartcher, published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* just days before the election, *GetUp* was included as one of only six unique features for that election (Hartcher 2007a, p. 6). Flew in his article, 'Not Yet the Internet Election: Online Media, Political Commentary and the 2007 Australian Federal Election', listed *New Matilda* as one of only three Australian online-only sites with which mainstream media organisations are having to compete (2008, p. 11). *New Matilda* only has 9,600 registered users, however, 80% of these users are professionals who work in media, education, health, science, and political advisory roles. A further 10% are in senior business or management positions (*New Matilda* 2008a), meaning that *New Matilda* has a relatively small but influential readership.

*New Matilda* also claims to "publish a vibrant mix of views and voices, actively seeking out new information and perspectives to broaden the political debate" (*New Matilda* 2008b). It is important to critically investigate the extent to which these goals have been achieved, as they are clearly consistent with challenging hegemony. These websites can challenge the hegemony of mainstream media coverage if their content opposes hegemonic institutions and ideologies or supports alternative positions and ideologies (Boyd-Barrett 2006, p. 205).

*New Matilda* articles were accessed through their website, as they have past content available. All articles under the section on the website called 'Australian Politics' were accessed, if they fell within the time period. Then, those labelled 'Federal Election' were analysed. *GetUp* content was also accessed from their website through the 'Past Campaigns' link. Further information on *GetUp's* campaigns that fell within the time frame was found in various other media.

All coverage was analysed through the seven categories of news frames chosen for this study, which give some indication of the diversity or hegemony of the coverage:

1. *Two-party hegemony*: involves framing the election as a choice between just the Labor party and the Coalition. This can be achieved through not including voices or opinions from outside of this frame, such as minor parties. Articles

that only mentioned one or both of the major parties, without making reference to any other party, are included in this frame.

2. *Horse-race*: includes articles whose main focus is on who will win the election. This involves aspects such as polls and betting odds, rather than other considerations such as the parties' policies.
3. *Policy-focussed*: involves articles whose main focus is on the policies of the political parties, rather than other aspects such as: poll results indicating the popularity of the parties; discussion on the likelihood of various parties winning the election; and the performance, personality, and experience of candidates.<sup>vi</sup>
4. *Neoliberal/pro-business*: includes articles promoting either neoliberalism or actually existing neoliberalism.
5. *Minor party*: involves articles that merely mention any other political party or candidate outside of the two major parties. The discussion on the statistics will explain whether the articles in this frame included merely a token mention of minor parties, but focussed primarily on the majors, or whether a significant amount of the article was dedicated to the minor parties or Independents.
6. *Challenge hegemonic institutions or ideologies*: involves articles containing content that challenges hegemonic ideologies or institutions, such as neoliberalism, capitalism, or elections.
7. *Offering alternatives*: involves articles that contain content that advocates an alternative to voting for one of the two major parties. Articles that would fall within this frame include those that contain content mentioning voting for a minor party, not voting, or advocating an alternative ideology to dominant ideologies.

## **Findings**

### ***Overall Frames of Traditional Media***

A total of 274 election-related articles from the traditional media were analysed, including all of the relevant front page articles from each paper, as well as additional articles from a *Factiva* search. This included: 152 articles from *The Australian* (131

from the front pages and 21 from the *Factiva* search); 79 articles from *The Sydney Morning Herald* (70 from the front pages and 9 from the *Factiva* search); and 43 from *The West Australian* (37 from the front pages and 6 from the *Factiva* search).<sup>vii</sup>

*Table 3.3: Frames of all election-related articles.*

<b><u>FRAMES OF ELECTION-RELATED ARTICLES</u></b>	<b><u>Number of articles</u></b>
<b>Two-party hegemony</b>	253
<b>Horse race frame</b>	118
<b>Policy-focussed</b>	124
<b>Neoliberal/pro-business</b>	59
<b>Minor parties</b>	20
<b>Challenge hegemonic institutions/ideologies</b>	0
<b>Offering alternatives</b>	3

The two-party hegemony frame dominated the coverage from all newspapers, with only 7.3 percent of articles even mentioning minor parties or Independent candidates. The minor parties were particularly marginalised from the front pages, with only 5.5 percent of front page articles across all papers being in the minor party frame. Minor parties generally only received brief and ‘token’ mentions, which was the case for 16 out of the 20 articles in this frame.

Although a small number of articles did have some positive coverage of minor parties (Hannan 2007, p. 1), the coverage of these parties was overwhelmingly trivial, negative, and rarely policy-focussed. In the main the policies of the minor parties were only mentioned to highlight how ‘crazy’ the parties were. An example is Damien Murphy (2007b, p. 9) describing The Liberty and Democracy Party or their candidates as: “droll, eccentric, quirky and wacky”; embracing guns, suicide, and incest; and “not appearing to take politics at all seriously”.<sup>viii</sup> Such coverage and the way that more coverage was given to scandals within the minor parties served to further marginalise them as serious parties.<sup>ix</sup>

There were a roughly equal number of articles in the horse race frame (43.1 percent) and the policy-focussed frame (45.3 percent). Even those articles that were policy-focussed often did little to inform people of the issues involved,<sup>x</sup> as well as generally being confined to quite narrow limits: confined to the policies of the two major parties and supporting the ‘status quo’. Often the articles in this frame were predominantly made up of the statements of political figures such as John Howard or Kevin Rudd, with little questioning or critical commentary on such statements or policies.

The coverage included a high 21.5 percent of articles in the neoliberal/pro-business frame. One article in this frame praised Rudd for his anti-union approach (Shanahan 2007, p. 16) and another argued that tax relief should go to business rather than the public (Wright 2007, p. 6). However, the articles in this frame overwhelmingly concentrated on one issue: almost all articles criticised the public spending of Howard, praised Rudd for putting an end to such spending, and in some cases criticised both leaders for their previous public spending announcements.<sup>xi</sup> Though many articles entered the neoliberal/pro-business frame, there were no comments against neoliberalism or business, or voices challenging other dominant institutions or ideologies.

There were also very few articles that offered alternatives to voting for the two major parties. *The Australian* had two front page articles in the offering alternatives frame, both with content advocating a vote for the Greens. The article ‘Fireys’ Union Axes ALP, Backs the Greens’ contained content that went beyond merely criticising Labor and featured a union which was supporting the Greens. The firefighters’ union not only criticised Labor as being full of “out-of-touch careerists” but also donated to the Greens campaign and urged people to vote for the Greens, as “they were the only party genuinely committed to scrapping WorkChoices” (cited in Hannan 2007, p. 1). The other article in the offering alternatives frame featured a couple who were “considering voting Labor, or even Greens” (Denhoim 2007, p. 1). An article from *The Sydney Morning Herald* that was accessed through *Factiva* also entered this frame, though only barely. This suggestion of an alternative course of action is merely a mention of the slogan of the Democratic Labor Party for this election, which is “Goodbye Tweedledum and Tweedledee - It's Time to Vote for the DLP” (Murphy

2007b, p. 9). This slogan not only points out the similarities between the two major parties (which is common, even in the newspapers studied), but also urges something different to voting for one of these two parties.

Overall, the total exclusion of any content challenging hegemonic institutions and ideologies and minimal content offering alternatives, demonstrated the lack of critical content that characterised all of the newspapers studied. This compromised the ability of the papers to contribute to informed, critical discussions within the wider polity where the public can hear a diversity of views. A substantial number of articles did enter the policy-focussed frame, which went some way to the coverage functioning as an integral part of the “political consciousness” (Marden 2003, p. 89). This was limited, however, with roughly an equal number of articles falling into the horse race frame. Not only this, but the policy-discussion was often not very informative and confined to narrow limits. There was little questioning of the two major parties or their neoliberal ideology, with an obvious lack of alternative voices outside of this hegemony.

### *Overall Frames of Online Sources*

*Table 3.9: Combined frames of the New Matilda articles and GetUp campaigns.*

<b><u>FRAMES OF CAMPAIGNS OR ARTICLES</u></b>	<b><u>Number of campaigns/articles</u></b>
<b>Two-party hegemony</b>	14
<b>Horse race frame</b>	12
<b>Policy-focussed</b>	15
<b>Neoliberal/pro-business</b>	1
<b>Minor parties</b>	14
<b>Challenge hegemonic institutions/ideologies</b>	11
<b>Offering alternatives</b>	8



A total of 30 *New Matilda* articles and *GetUp*'s 4 campaigns during the chosen time period were analysed according to the way they framed the election. *GetUp*'s campaigns included a public meeting, a how-to-vote website, a Save our Senate campaign, and campaigning on polling day.<sup>xii</sup> The combined frames of the election coverage of these two online sites do suggest some challenge to hegemony. *GetUp* played a role in broadening the framing of the election by including minor parties and offering alternatives to voting for the two major parties, however, their inability to challenge hegemonic institutions and ideologies meant this site only provided a limited challenge to the hegemony of the Australian media. In contrast, *New Matilda* regularly provided challenges to hegemonic institutions and ideologies. This included one article advocating non-participation in the election (Orton 2007), which Artz and Murphy (2000, pp. 254-255) argue is the first step towards counter-hegemonic practices'.

There were not a substantially higher proportion of articles in the policy-focussed frame than the newspapers, however the websites framed the discussion on policy in a broader manner. Whereas the newspapers provided little content outside of the two major parties or their dominant neoliberal ideology, the websites regularly brought into the discussion: minor parties, alternatives to voting to the major parties, and voices against such ideologies (in the case of *New Matilda*). Both websites, particularly *New Matilda*, provided election coverage that was much closer to the ideal public sphere than in the newspapers analysed.

Although *New Matilda* was particularly successful in challenging the hegemony of the Australian media, this site has a relatively small (though influential) readership (*New Matilda* 2008a). The content from *New Matilda* was rarely covered in the mainstream media, which would have expanded their influence. In contrast, *GetUp* not only have a much higher membership (*GetUp* 2008) but were also much more successful in receiving coverage in the mainstream media (for example: Hartcher 2007a, p. 6; Stewart 2007; Metherell 2007; *The Sydney Morning Herald* 2007). One reason for this is *GetUp*'s campaigning, which, as opposed to news websites, is more likely to gain attention. Another possible reason is that *GetUp*'s campaigns did not as radically depart from the frames presented in the mainstream media, meaning they could more easily be incorporated into such coverage.

Even *GetUp*'s how-to-vote initiative, despite promotion from *Yahoo7* (Westbury & Wilson 2007), was only used by 150,000 people (approximately 1 per cent of the voting population) (Solomon 2007). Although there is potential for increased usage of such sites—a similar site in the Netherlands (*StemWijzer.nl*) was visited by 4.7 million people, which represents nearly half the electorate, before the last Dutch general election (*GetUp* 2007), currently only a very small proportion of Australians are visiting alternative political websites. *GetUp* was able to increase its influence by regularly gaining coverage in the mainstream media; however, throughout the entire election period there were no examples of sites successful presenting frames to the newspapers studied that challenged hegemonic institutions or ideologies.

## **Conclusion**

The paper has examined the constraints present in traditional mainstream media that limit the frames they present. The potential for the Internet to overcome this limited framing has also been explored, by looking at both constraints and opportunities. The current political economy of the Australian traditional media limits the democratic and alternative credentials of the Internet in Australia. This notion was tested through a content analysis of a large amount of media content on the 2007 Australian federal election, both from traditional and online media.

*GetUp*, and particularly *New Matilda*, are examples of already existing alternative content on the Internet, despite the many constraints there are to achieving such content. Websites like these are being used to broaden the frame of debate and certainly do provide some challenge to Australian media hegemony. The influence of counter-hegemonic content is limited by its current reach, with a relatively small number of people seeking out such content. Both the work of Christian Downie and Andrew McIntosh (2006) and a study of *GetUp*, points to only approximately one percent of Australians accessing alternative media for news and current affairs. Although websites can receive greater coverage by entering the mainstream media, the case study reveals that while this sometimes occurred, no websites were able to present frames that challenged hegemonic institutions or ideologies in the traditional media.

It is a lapse into technological determinism to see the Internet as inherently alternative, radical, or democratic (Redden, Caldwell & Nguyen 2003, p. 71 cited in Bolton 2006). The websites most frequently visited by Australians are no more radical or democratic than mainstream traditional media, and are often owned by exactly the same companies. Some Internet sites certainly do contribute “alternative visions and discourses” (Scott & Marshall 2005) to the public sphere, however, it is hard for those creating such content to compete with the resources and institutional support of large companies (McChesney 2001). This is becoming an increasingly significant obstacle to producing oppositional content, as web pages are becoming ever more costly to maintain. The content produced by websites owned by large companies (often traditional media companies) has many of the same constraints as other media, such as their corporate ownership and commercial nature.

To create a greater understanding of online alternative media, further empirical research on its reach, use and audience would be beneficial (Bolton 2006). Another aspect that could be studied in more detail is the extent to which alternative websites are merely commenting on and reframing the agenda and topics set by the mainstream media, or whether these sites are regularly contributing different topics and news items that are going unreported in the mainstream media.

It is clear that the Internet has not created a utopian, democratic space where everyone is equal and alternative views proliferate. This understanding is important in countering the justification of further concentration of ownership in the traditional Australian media, promoted on the premise that such a space has been created by the Internet. The desire for a more democratic Australian media across all different types of media must not be compromised on the basis of the lingering utopianism surrounding the Internet. While there are certainly ‘pockets of resistance’ on the Internet that do challenge hegemony and bring media coverage closer to an ideal public sphere, in Australia such websites are currently the exception rather than the rule.

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<sup>i</sup> Goot explains in his article on media content during the 2007 Australian federal election that due to the constraints of the database he was using, he analysed the media coverage from the 15<sup>th</sup> of October

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until the 21<sup>st</sup> of November (2008, p. 101). He points out that this time period had “several limitations” as “it does not cover the day the campaign officially got under way and it cuts out three days before the campaign ended” while “campaign news continued through to the day of the election, Saturday 24 November”.

<sup>ii</sup> Newspapers influence over other media is confirmed by Manne (2005 in Bolton 2006), who explains that newspapers help set the agenda for other forms of media, including talkback radio, which leads to their influence extending well beyond their direct readership. Another reason for newspapers being chosen over other media (such as television) is due to the greater availability of information and ability for examiners to check the content referred to.

<sup>iii</sup> In an interview conducted by the author with a Channel Nine editor, they explained that the Perth television news will always cover the story on the front page of *The West Australian* newspaper. The front page has a large influence over other media and in “setting the tone” for thought and debate in Australian society. Even those who do not read the newspaper often see the front page, which makes this front page particularly important.

<sup>iv</sup> *The Australian Financial Review*, despite having a higher readership for this group than *The Sydney Morning Herald*, was not chosen as the Fairfax paper to analyse, as *The Australian* already gives an example of a nation-wide newspaper.

<sup>v</sup> *New Matilda* and *GetUp* both score highly according to Boyd-Barrett’s (2006, p. 206-207) list of the characteristics that alternative sites are more likely to have than mainstream media, including: originating from small, ideologically or artistically committed groups; having cheap and accessible distribution; and containing a diversity of sources and perspectives. *GetUp* does not score as well in regard to being politically oppositional and *New Matilda* does not score so well at promoting activism, relying on funding from users, exhibiting non-commercial behaviour (due to their reliance on advertising), and having audiences made up of classes and ideologies not well represented in the mainstream media (due to their wealthy and powerful readership) (New Matilda 2008a). In contrast to these sites, which score highly in some alternative characteristics, all of the newspapers score very highly in Boyd-Barrett’s (2006, p. 206-207) description of the characteristics alternative media are less likely to have, including: being component parts of media or other conglomerates; carrying advertising; conforming to professional conventional standards as far as operation, job specialisation, and content; and addressing members as a mass, white or middle-class collectivity.

<sup>vi</sup> Articles that merely mention a policy, but then are more focussed on the implications for who will win the election are not included in the policy-focussed frame, as policy is not the main emphasis.

<sup>vii</sup> For detailed statistics of each individual newspaper, see Pendergrast, N 2008, ‘Australian Media Hegemony and the Internet’ Hons Thesis, Curtin University of Technology.

<sup>viii</sup> Highlighting guns, suicide, and incest is certainly a very negative way to ‘sell’ the Liberty and Democracy Party’s small government policies.

<sup>ix</sup> Examples of the trivial content of minor parties includes articles about the scandal involving Family First candidates being exposed in incriminating photos on the Internet (The Australian 2007, p. 7; Hartcher 2007a, p. 6; Murphy 2007a, p. 1) and a scandal within the Greens, with some candidates breaching the party’s principles of transparency in government by voting to keep official documents secret (Burke & Murphy 2007, p. 1).

<sup>x</sup> An example of the lack of information in the newspaper articles is Andrew Probyn (2007, p. 21) listing a number of policies on which both of the major parties agree, however, giving virtually no information or analysis on any of these policies. Ironically, Probyn highlights voter ignorance on climate change: “As a Daily Telegraph straw poll on Kyoto found mid-week, almost half of those surveyed thought Kyoto was either a Korean car, a Japanese banquet dish or a treaty that ended World War II”. He added that “most people have no idea what Messrs Rudd and Howard have been squabbling about, let alone have an in-depth knowledge of the intricacies of binding emissions targets

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and treaty ratification”. Yet this lack of knowledge is unsurprising given articles such as Probyn’s, given that he does little to inform readers on the issues or policies he speaks about.

<sup>xi</sup> Rudd’s decision to put an end to public spending was praised as: “smarter”; “bold”; receiving “positive media attention” (Kelly et al. 2007b, p. 9); neutralising “the Coalition’s supposedly strongest selling point, economic management” (Burrell 2007, p. 19); confident; “his first serious effort to give meaning to his claim to be an economic conservative”; good policy; restoring “economic sanity to federal politics”; improving “the chances that this boom can continue to run”; “responding to the times”; outmanoeuvring Howard, casting Rudd as “the restrained custodian of the public purse”; reducing “the perceived riskiness of voting Labor”; giving “real meaning to Rudd’s promise of ‘new leadership’”; and showing “real leadership” (Hartcher 2007c, p. 1).

In contrast, previous announcements of increased public spending (outside the dominant neoliberal ideology) from both parties are labelled as “the crazed auction of Australia’s future” with both leaders “engaged in a deranged bidding war” (Hartcher 2007c, p. 1). Rudd’s reduced spending is also not considered adequate in some articles, with Steve Burrell (2007, p. 19) arguing that “too much is being promised in spending handouts and tax cuts” and “neither side is innocent here” as “both sides agree” on the “\$30 billion-plus in tax cuts”, which is “the biggest single contributor”. Burrell criticises both parties “fiscal irresponsibility” and “largesse”, as well as highlighting “the need for some counter-cyclical fiscal policy”.

<sup>xii</sup> For a detailed description of *GetUp*’s campaigns and an individual analysis of the frames presented by *GetUp* and *New Matilda*, see Pendergrast, N 2008, ‘Australian Media Hegemony and the Internet’ Hons Thesis, Curtin University of Technology.

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