



Issue No. 16, 2008

Democracy Under Fire: the uses and abuses of democracy in the public sphere

GetUp! for what? Issues Driven Democracy in a Transforming Public Sphere

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Introduction

The term *democracy* is increasingly becoming an empty signifier in the context of western political discourse [1]. Politicians from across the political spectrum appear to be appropriating the concept at will, to justify wide-ranging political agendas. From the war in Iraq to local council amalgamations and everything in between, “democracy” serves as the fundamental principle to justify almost any political argument. This is both its strength and its weakness, and it has major implications for the way we conceptualise the contemporary public sphere and the role of the media within that public sphere. For politicians, invoking democracy is a fireproof way to frame their arguments, as it is very difficult to argue against its basic premise. In other words, democracy is not something one can easily disagree with, without opening oneself up to labels like “fundamentalist”, “anarchist” or that other perhaps even emptier signifier, “terrorist”. Conversely, this flexibility in its applications is also its main weakness, for this renders the concept essentially meaningless and hence devoid of any power. Derrida’s (*Specters of Marx*) challenge to engage with democracy as an ongoing project whose time is always “yet to come” is therefore timely, in that it forces us to engage with democracy in terms of its potential, rather than approaching it as static and “already there”. This also affords the recognition that it can never truly be achieved, but rather that it needs to be continuously redefined, as its parameters are always subject to change. In this context, it is timely and urgent to review its parameters in such a way as to expose dominant power relations, which in turn is a prerequisite for meaningful change. We take a specific context within contemporary Australia as our venue for this project, written as it is in weeks after a change of government and in recognition of the role of media in influencing such change.

It is no coincidence that the contested state and status of democracy is paralleled by debates about the media and the public sphere, for these concepts are intimately interwoven and interdependent. The increasing fragmentation of the media, accelerated by technological change and new media environments, is often seen as an important cause of a simultaneous fragmentation of the public sphere into “public sphericules” (Hartley *Key Concepts*). In this context, *GetUp!* provides an interesting case study, as it can be seen as being implicated in such developments. *GetUp!* (<http://www.getup.org.au/>) is “an independent, grass-roots community advocacy organisation giving everyday Australians opportunities to get involved and hold politicians accountable on important issues”, primarily via email campaigns. *GetUp!* can be seen as at once a consequence of media fragmentation and a disintegrating public sphere, and a driver of a new form of democracy that we might call “issues-based”, rather than dependent on membership of, and loyalty to, traditional political parties. It thus appeals to distinct public sphericules, rather than a unified public sphere. This paper will explore the potential of this new manifestation of democracy, as well as its limits. For if democracy is an idea that is “yet to arrive”, then surely we have a duty to ensure that it arrives at a desirable destination, if only momentarily.

The public sphere, democracy and political participation

In the Habermasian sense of the concept, the public sphere is intimately linked to democracy and political participation, and the public sphere is seen as “a domain of our social life where such a thing as public opinion can be formed” (Habermas quoted in McKee *The Public Sphere* 4). The media play a central role in this process, as it is “only in the mass media that vast populations of people can come together to exchange ideas” (McKee 5). It is no coincidence then that arguments about the media and the public sphere often run along similar tracks. As McKee notes, “academics worry about trivialisation, spectacle and fragmentation of “the public sphere”, while popular commentators say the same things about “the media” (5). He adds commercialisation as a fourth concern, and together these are seen as leading to apathy. “Citizens no longer engage with politics or their own governance. They become lazy and passive. They don’t care about issues any more” (McKee 3). The name *GetUp!* is interesting in this respect, as it appears to react to precisely that concern: the exclamation mark suggests a call to arms of sorts, a demand to come out of apathetic hibernation. New media are crucial to this, but we will return to that shortly.

In terms of the concerns about apathy, it is important to recognise that there has never been a “golden age” when “public communication was generally ‘quality’, serious and rational. For as long as we can trace the record of a public sphere, it has been too commercialised, too trivial and too spectacular for the tastes of educated commentators” (McKee 25). This is not a coincidence, for the public sphere in Habermas’ sense is an “ideal”, rather than an ontological reality. It is thus a process to be worked towards, but the ideal can never quite be reached. This shows clear parallels to Derrida’s argument about democracy as “yet to arrive”. How these ideals are to be envisaged then becomes a matter which is always up for debate. Consequently, these debates often centre on what should be

included and excluded from the public sphere, which logically leads to value judgements about what is “important” and what is “too trivial”. For Habermas, the political function of the public sphere lies primarily in “its ability to challenge, determine or deflect the course of state policy” (McKee 191). But deflecting the course of state policy, for example by voting, is only a logical outcome in Habermas’ view, not the fundamental element that drives democracy, which is public discussion itself. Again, what should be part of this public discussion is under continuous debate and depends on one’s point of view, for on a basic level, and with an ever increasing array of media channels, there has never been more “public discussion”, nor more opportunities for more people to express their opinions in public fora, at least in a western context. The concerns are thus not so much about the volume of discussion, but rather about *what* is being discussed, and perhaps more importantly, about what the *effects* of these discussions are, or rather the perceived *lack* of effects: the neo-liberal juggernaut shows no signs of slowing down, and a common critical response is to decry the perceived lack of political engagement, lack of political alternatives, and yes, apathy. The role of the mass media in this perceived “erosion” of democracy and/or the public sphere is central to many of these arguments, as the mass media smothers us with entertainment, in turn causing us to “amuse ourselves to death” (Postman *Amusing Ourselves to Death*), where we should be engaging in serious discussion.

Perhaps the most influential voice of concern with regards to the role of the mass media in the erosion of democracy and the public sphere is that of Noam Chomsky (*Chomsky on Democracy*), who argues that democracy is under attack.

The leading doctrine is that the wave of the future is democracy and markets, a future for which America [sic] is “the gatekeeper and the model”. That’s the doctrine. The reality is that the world, including our own society, is moving toward a more autocratic and absolutist structure. The scope of the public arena is narrowing. The opportunities for popular participation in it are also declining. In short, the realities are that democracy is under attack (Chomsky 236).

The basis of Chomsky’s argument (borrowing from Thomas Jefferson and John Dewey), is that “institutions of private power undermine freedom and democracy” (243), because their decision making happens essentially in secret, and without accountability. In short, the influence of corporate business casts a shadow over politics, with the mass media as the primary vehicle, and in Chomsky’s view, “democracy requires that the shadow of big business be removed so that the political system can function” (243). This reinforces Chomsky’s views in his earlier collaboration with Edward Herman on *Manufacturing Consent*, in which they outline their propaganda model of the mass media, based on five filters: 1. size, ownership, and profit orientation of the mass media; 2. advertising; 3. sourcing mass-media news; 4. managing “flak” and the enforcers; and 5. anti-communism (or anti-terrorism) as a control mechanism. The unfortunate choice of the word “propaganda” has led to the often easy dismissal of the book as “paranoid conspiracy theory”, but it still stands as a very convincing and well-researched analysis of the interconnections between corporate capital and power, the mass media, and democracy

and politics. Indeed, with regards to the role of the mass media, its arguments have only become more convincing since the book was written.

The propaganda model suggests that the “societal purpose” of the media is to inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state, [rather than what its societal purpose *should* be, which is to] enable the public to assert meaningful control over the political process by providing them with the information needed for the intelligent discharge of political responsibilities. (Herman & Chomsky 298 our emphasis)

To come back to our earlier point, it is clear that these authors take a firm position on what constitutes “worthwhile” public discussion through the use of words like “meaningful” and “intelligent”. Of course their arguments are not “value-free” in this sense, but they nevertheless provide a strong and enduring argument about diversity of information and access, as well as management of information in the mass media, to serve particular non-accountable interests. According to Derrida, the intersection between the mass media and traditional politics renders politicians as mere shadows of themselves, emptied of any meaning, and structurally incompetent.

Media power accuses, produces and amplifies *at the same time* this incompetence of traditional politicians: on the one hand, it takes away the legitimate power they held in the former political space (party, parliament, and so forth), but, on the other hand, it obliges them to become mere silhouettes, if not marionettes, on the stage of televisual rhetoric. They were thought to be actors of politics, they now often risk, as everyone knows, being no more than TV actors. (Derrida 80)

Paradoxically then, following this argument, the mass media as a vehicle for political engagement and conduit of political messages, could be seen as increasingly *powerless* or ineffective, at the same time as their power to control and manage political messages (aided by political PR machines) increases (Rushkoff, *Open Source Democracy*). The crux of this argument rests on the way one envisages the audience, and in particular audience *agency*. The aforementioned apathy in relation to politics is seen as part of widespread disillusionment with politics proper (Hartley, *Short History*) and this is often taken to mean a disillusionment with politics *as a whole*. However, judging from the rapid rise in popularity of new media “political organisations” such as *GetUp!*, this “apathy” may just be confined to traditional politics (and its “marionettes”). Overall then, while the propaganda model is convincing when applied to the mass media, the new media environment may provide an important parallel or alternative political space or public sphere, with different types of political participation. As Boler (*The Transmission of Political Critique*) argues, “the access and use of new media to transmit dissenting political commentary is arguably a sign of new counter-public spaces that coincide with increased mainstream media control and erosion of civil liberties surrounding free speech”.

Impact of new media

While the propaganda model implies an all powerful corporate/media/state apparatus, Herman and Chomsky recognised pre-www that this system is never fully closed. They argued back then that grass-roots and public-interest organisations need to recognise and try to avail themselves of new media as they are developed (Herman & Chomsky 307). One of the main impacts of the rapid spread of the Internet and the World Wide Web is that it has widened access to “the media” on a massive scale. Boler notes that “the new media terrain of access and distribution enables transmissions that arguably construct significant new public spheres around a desire for truthfulness and accountability”. Similarly, Rowland argues that “the Internet constitutes a “public space” that is “owned” and “governed” by its users, and is thus fundamentally anarchic” (quoted in Capling & Nossal, *Death of Distance* 5). Overall, studies on Internet use consistently suggest wide(ning) participation and development of an alternative public sphere, apparently driven by disillusionment with mainstream media. Bruns (*Wikinews*) notes for example that “if there has been a growing disenchantment with news reporting in the mainstream media, then this is not so much due to a diminishing interest in news as such, but has much more to do with the popular realisation of the shortcomings of professional journalism especially in an increasingly agglomerated commercial environment”. He cites the popularity of dedicated online news websites like *Indymedia* and *Slashdot*, as well as an explosion of blogs, as evidence against the flawed notion that political engagement and participation is diminishing in “increasingly apathetic and entertainment-driven Western societies”. Indeed, the nature and rise of online political participation can be seen as more “active” than ever before in the sense that it requires participants to engage more directly than was the case with traditional media and politics. Elsewhere, Bruns (*Gatewatching*) has called these types of participants “producers”, whereby audience members are simultaneously information gatherers, reporters and evaluators”. Ironically, this apparent increase in political participation, and the changing nature of such participation, is at the same time characterised by increasing fragmentation of audiences and/or “producers”, something which proponents of the traditional public sphere decry, as we have seen before. This raises a number of important questions, which relate to the effectiveness of online political action. For example, “to what extent can collaborative and open news come to speak to more than the already converted – the *Slashdot* nerds and *Indymedia* activists – and address, involve, bring to participate the silent majority of media users?” (Bruns *Gatewatching* 311). More generally, Meikle (*Future Active* 14) simply asks: “How effective is it? Does Internet activism ‘work’?” In other words, is there any overlap and cross-fertilisation between neatly segmented public sphericules of like-minded participants and the wider public sphere? Is such cross-fertilisation a pre-requisite for political change to occur?

These questions are important and they relate to broader questions of social and political change. In this context, Marchart (*Acting and the Act*) appropriates the Machiavellian categories of *occasione* and *fortuna*. “It is *fortuna*- in other words, contingency as a condition of possibility of all political action- which provides for *occasione* as the

favourable historical or political conditions within which we act” (Marchart 107). This is closely linked to Gramsci’s (*A Gramsci Reader*) idea of organising a “collective will” through organic intellectuals: “to be organised forms a necessary precondition for the ‘fortunate moments’ to be seized in the protracted process of building up a counter-hegemonic formation” (Marchart 106). This is timing as it relates to Gramsci’s “war of position”, as opposed to “war of manoeuvre”. It is in Žižek’s words, “the art of seizing the right moment, of aggravating the conflict *before* the System can accommodate to our demand” (quoted in Marchart 117). If we apply this to the Australian political context, we could argue that the establishment and rise of *GetUp!*, in terms of its timing, can be seen as part of a Gramscian “war of position” to shift the counter-hegemonic formation in time for the 2007 federal election, and judging by the election result, with considerable success. An important aspect of its overall strategy was to create wider awareness of specific issues and shifting public opinion by forging links to the mainstream media by organising off-line actions close to the “media pack”, in addition to email information campaigns and online petitions. This strategy thus has a clear objective to move beyond the converted, by branching out to the wider public sphere, in contrast to some other Internet activist groups that tend to stay within the confines of their particular “interest group”, and as “nostalgians of the war of manoeuvre” consider “storming the Winter Palace” the only possible strategy (Marchart 113). However, as Meikle argues, “Internet activism is largely about raising awareness of the issues concerned, and this means getting more coverage than the purely online” (26). *Getup!* appears to have taken this suggestion squarely on board.

GetUp! and popular power

GetUp! formed in 2005 after the Coalition’s Federal Election win a year earlier (*Wikipedia*). The organisation could be said to have seized a “fortunate moment”, in Marchart’s terms, by the time of the Australian Federal Election on November 24, 2007. By then, its registered membership had reached 230, 000, and its donated campaign funds about half a million dollars (*GetUp!, Australia GetsUp! ’07*). These human and monetary resources enabled the dissemination of information on pressing “grassroots” issues of climate change, industrial relations laws, Indigenous affairs, the Iraq war, same sex equality, and voter enrolment to a broader audience. It did so through strategies that could be observed, following Herman and Chomsky, as making timely and tactical use of new media in/around the corporate/media/state apparatus (307). The choosing of the moment, in terms of new media and its contingency in grassroots activism, is complementary with the Habermasian theory of communicative action: the enabling of interrogation, and often subversion of, the hegemonic discourses of the public sphere through the generation of shared conscience and conversation. The widely email-circulated [Climate Clever-er](#) television commercial, funded through a *GetUp!* targeted member donation drive, made lampooning the government line look easy. “Climate Clever-er” aired on prime time TV as one of few examples of pre-poll advertising to step away from the “me too-ism” saturating mainstream media. *GetUp!* was selling a chance to sink the boot into the former Federal Government’s lack of action (or intent) on climate change. The alternative campaign did so without pushing a party line or personality, even if it did make tactical use of both for its

Senate advertisement. *GetUp!* merely parodied something a growing sector of the Australian public was tolerating less and less: the scripting of the Howard Government's official talk on everything from trees to terror. By reading *GetUp!*'s numbers alone, it seemed apparent that the facile government rhetoric had moved a broader audience, not just the converted online activist community, to assume at least some degree of personal responsibility for affecting change. The Climate Clever-er advertisement's representation of a family donning floaties in the face of rising sea levels seemed to hark back to the days of the terrorist hotline fridge magnet and questioned, at least indirectly, implied "official" assumptions about community disinterest in the significant national issues underlying both.

According to its post election report (*GetUp!, Australia GetsUp! '07*), *GetUp!* altered the Australian political landscape by "shifting the national issues agenda, enrolling thousands of voters, and enabling the largest independent election campaign in Australian history". Modelled on the American online lobby group [MoveOn.org](http://www.moveon.org), *GetUp!* represents the first non-partisan Australian application of "new technologies to facilitate meaningful and effective political action" sustained and directed successfully to influence an election outcome. Relying on member email subscriptions that disseminated information and mobilised public disaffection with official policy, *GetUp!* members lobbied on causes such as:-

- The Know Where I Stand anti-Work Choices campaign, where members stuck Post-it notes over former Workplace Relations Minister Joe Hockey's office. At the time of writing, 23,700 e-signatories appeared on a petition to the newly elected Rudd Government to keep its promise to scrap the laws, with a nominated target of 25,000.
- A global "pictition" to APEC leaders during the September 2007 meeting in Sydney, with "live" demonstrations across the country in support of calls for binding targets to stop climate change. A petition containing 96,000 signatures was given to Federal Climate Minister Penny Wong to take to the December UN climate meeting in Bali. (<http://www.getup.org.au/campaign/APEC&id=90>).

Recent and current campaigns listed at *GetUp!* focus mainly on holding the Rudd Government to its election promises, including those of saying "sorry" to Indigenous Australia, cutting the \$200 million taxpayer-funded government advertising bill, withdrawing Australian troops from Iraq, and taking radical action on climate change. At a practical level, the arrangement of click-here causes and petitions is appealing to people who may not see direct activism as part of their public or community lives, but who seek privately some form of interaction and dialogue with the social and political world. According to *GetUp!* Executive Director Brett Solomon, social and political consciousness expressed, in this way, online, can be seen as an extension of other aspects of lifestyles altered by new media:-

New media has changed the way that people activate. Technology has changed the way we do everything from shop, to communicate. Now it is transforming the way we do politics. Online

you can mobilise, inform, channel, and influence. Most importantly, new technology allows us to unite on issues that are important to us (Solomon *Re: Journal Article*).

The role of new media in establishing the groundwork for such interactivity and dialogue has, in this sense, an interdependent relationship with conceptual apprehensions of democracy in the specific context of Australia. There may be a sense of geographical or, indeed, cultural disparity at merely historical levels of experience for one group, for example. However, the immediacy and interactivity of *GetUp!* enables that group to identify shared interests and objectives with others, and at important moments in the brokerage of decision-making power. Last year's Federal Election, according to Brett Solomon, demonstrated how such identification formed around a few key issues for *GetUp!* subscribers:

GetUp! chose issues that resonated with the public - issues they felt strongly about and ones that could be shifted significantly if there was a change of 'management'. The war in Iraq, climate change, [and] education [were] fundamental (Solomon *Re: Journal Article*).

Individual activists had to have a notion that their voice, and their vote, amounted to something more than a conceptual, democratic ideal – that something “could be shifted significantly” – for the online group to grow.

GetUp! and “bite-sized” individual agency

At *GetUp!'s* homepage, the non-partisan lobby group's call for public donations appears with a short introduction to *GetUp!* as “a new independent political movement to build a progressive Australia. *GetUp!* brings together like-minded people who want to bring participation back into our democracy.” The charter should be read in full view of a broader Australian ideological narrative, told for 11 years through a market-driven form of facile rhetoric, spun over the surface of insidious projects of domination and exclusion. Just in case we risk downplaying what happened, or why online activism extended its morale-boosting contingency beyond the computer nerd to the “silent majority”, Mungo MacCallum's (*Federal Politics*) take on things seems appropriate. “For more than eleven years, John Howard led us on a voyage driven by greed and fear, into parochialism and paranoia, selfishness and racism, bigotry and corruption, and other dark places in the Australian psyche where we never should have gone. It was a mean and ugly trip, and it will take us all a long time to recover.”

In such a context, “progressive” and “participation” suggest relief and lightness - an idea that the feeling of being dragged through a place we did not want to visit is not peculiar to us, alone, as democracy in its traditional sense also envisions. Finding virtual spaces like *GetUp!'s* homepage and clicking through its various signs of doing *something* brings, then, a sense of recuperative social consciousness articulated far enough from the mainstream

media for it to sound like something might possibly give. Democracy's moment, in the spirit of Derrida, might well arrive yet.

Neoconservative Australia's particular version of democracy, owing more to what Raymond Williams observes as an "acting as if" notion of equality – making and delivering policy as if everyone were equal and had started on a level playing field – could be opened up to a newer form of popular power (Williams 96-7). Even if only because many people could click on the *GetUp!* website or into their email inbox and find "like-minded people", this use of new media was strategic and enabling. The fact that members and supporters went on to take action under *GetUp!*'s banner suggested that a larger sector of the Australian electorate was tired of "as if" meaning nothing much at all for intensifying serious issues such as climate change, disappearing workplace rights, and Indigenous health and well-being. Viewed apart from any consideration of whether clicking a mouse or sending a form email constitute genuine individual agency or assumption of political consciousness, the two interdependent activities organised by and around *GetUp!* (especially in the context of the past 11 years) show how new media could be seen as significant in bringing home not just to individual users, but also to their families and community networks, the material implications of making no movement at all toward the participatory, genuine democracy both missed, and imagined, at home.

GetUp!'s look and feel appeals to this communicative impulse because it creates space for communal concern, if not conviction. Importantly, though, the communication medium allows for expression of individual agency without demands for publicly visible, or financial, commitment. Anyone with an email account and a remote inkling that their issues-based interests might indeed cross-fertilise a wider public concern for greater good, would be likely to join *GetUp!*'s mailing list. With their charter influenced by antecedent "self-help and non-commercial computer culture", online activist sites like *GetUp!* operate in the fissures between commercial mass media's contracted news agenda and the blogosphere's fragmented audiences and "producers" (Salter, *Democracy* 127; Bruns, *Gatewatching*). In Habermasian terms, they help to build and direct conversation into the live world by promising an experience of community extended from that already existent through widespread fluency in Internet usage. According to Salter, the Internet's value for online activism is that it strengthens the lifeworld and so "can be seen as a foundational medium for civil society and the informal public sphere" (129). Rather than itself constituting a public sphere, the internet, is "supportive of a foundation on which one can be built" (Salter 136).

GetUp!'s use of the web and email facilities as tools to organise and strategise on-the-ground activities such as public Q&A events with campaigning politicians, polling booth and street pamphlet distributions, and post-election community "get-togethers" are practical instances of the new media utilised for encouragement of actual, bodily engagement in local "sphericules" of public interest. The relative, initial anonymity made possible by *GetUp!*'s listserv subscription system, combined with the representational strength of a clearly defined, well signposted organisation focused on issues and not parties, helped grow a large group of volunteers prepared to trade anonymity for

responsibility at a key point in Australia's national narrative. Habermas saw this balance of anonymity and responsibility in communicative action as dynamic in the negotiation of interest and agency in the public sphere (Salter 138). *GetUp!*'s short life so far can be seen as in some ways a reflection of how that balance was enacted to drive the democratic process back home.

Conclusion

GetUp! has been our particular case study in reviewing the parameters of democracy and its interconnections with communicative action in a specific Australian context. The impact and popularity of *GetUp!* can be seen as at once a consequence of media fragmentation and a disintegrating public sphere, and a driver of a new form of democracy that we might call "issues-based", rather than dependent on membership of, and loyalty to, traditional political parties. While appealing to distinct public sphericules, rather than a unified public sphere, we have illustrated how *GetUp!* enables connectivity within and between these sphericules through its approach to participation and individual agency. Our paper has described some of the manifestations of the use of new media in grassroots activism, suggesting how these manifestations have both questioned and redefined democracy as an idea, and ideal – at least for a significant time in Australia's political and social history. Democracy, as an idea that is "yet to arrive" has delivered at least for those who experienced it, perhaps for the first time, a sense of being able to do *something*, if only momentarily.

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Endnotes

1. We acknowledge the contested meaning of "western" in contemporary global contexts and in critical discourses of culture and identity.

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