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Political Big Brother Site Masks Curious Agenda

BY PETER CHEN (profile) |
October 10, 2001

On first glance, the launch of Political Big Brother by the ALP has all the hallmarks of a half-baked political stunt. Taking what was a rather primative reality TV concept, and applying the "vote them out" formula to the Federal cabinet has little to do with policy debate as Australia approaches the election deadline of November 10. While the new website may reflect on how contrived media campaigns can be, it does illustrate how political parties are still struggling to use the Internet in campaigning and market segmentation.

What is interesting about the site is the carefully-targeted polling value the site provides the ALP. Launched by the net-savvy Senator for Sport, Youth Affairs, and assisting on Information Technology, Kate Lundy described the site as "about trying to engage younger voters and provide them with information in a form that interests them and hopefully gets them coming back again and again". By staging the voting over a number of rounds, the party can collect voter preferences about given politicians that can be used to target "under performers" in the government, as perceived by younger voters. The ALP's strategy is revealed in the voting form: to vote you must provide the ALP with age, gender, and postcode information, allowing data received from the site to be divided by demographic and electorate.

Leveraging the Big Brother brand is a clever approach by the ALP. While the original television program was not the highest rating show for its timeslot, it did garner incredible attention from the fickle under-30s demographic, an age group not well represented in major party ranks. For the majors, the lack of party loyalty among the 18 to 25s remains a problem in bedding down support. Indeed there seems to be a tendency for this demographic to favour parties with more youthful appeal to environmental and social issues that tend to be the domain of the Greens and Democrats.

With the first round closed, we saw John Anderson, not surprisingly, voted from the 'house'. What was interesting was the strong voting in favour of evicting Senator Robert Hill. Unlike Anderson, still vulnerable over the Ansett collapse, Hill has maintained a very low media profile in the current campaign. What is not surprising, therefore, is the ALP's decision this week to announce their environmental policy on the back of the round one voting, with ratification of the Kyoto treaty high on the agenda to exploit Hill's electoral weaknesses.

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The ALP needs to play a cautious game with these kinds of online political promotional activities. When Jeff Kennet attempted an online self-promotional strategy in 1999, his www.jeff.com.au site was quickly copied and parodied, with www.realjeff.com and www.jeffed.com.au leveraging off the Victorian Liberal's marketing to deliver some low cost, high impact jabs at the government.

The construction of the Political Big Brother site may moderate this possibility, however, aimed at attacking the government rather than as a transparent political vehicle for the Opposition. If Labor was really concerned about the possibility of a damaging parody they should consider establishing a proxy parody site aimed at opposition members. While this may reveal the ignorance of most Australian youth about the shadow cabinet's composition, strategically it would allow the ALP to identify their own "weakest link".

Looking at Kim Beazley's current polling, however, this might not be an insight they want to receive.

Peter Chen is an IT consultant based in Melbourne. He holds a PhD in Politics and Public Policy from the Australian National University. You may contact Peter via email at chen@webprophets.net.au

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