

Annual Report National Forum 2010

National Forum General

During the last 12 months The National Forum and *On Line Opinion*, have maintained themselves as a major feature on the landscape of politics and political action with our sites being popular and influential. Financially our position has not been as strong with conditions, particularly for advertising, deteriorating significantly during the year.

Highlights of the year include:

- Publication of our 9,000th article (with article 10,000 due in January)
- Turnover of \$179, 752 (down from \$246,069 last year)
- Site visits of 1,955,761 and page views of 4,784,469
- Building a petition site for use by Brisbane City Council

The year has been one of “sticking to our knitting” and doing what we do as well as we can, but not taking on any new projects.

Corporate

The forum had eight directors during the year. They were Peter Jonson, Dale Spender, Tony Coady, Terry Flew, Greg Barns, Lionel Hogg, Nicholas Gruen and Graham Young.

Nicholas Gruen is Chair and I thank him for his generous advice and assistance during the year, along with the rest of the board.

Tony Coady is not re-nominating as a director. Tony has had a long and distinguished career which he is now winding back. He has been a valuable contributor to *On Line Opinion* and was largely responsible for Melbourne University’s involvement in the Forum, starting with an initial corporate membership by the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics. Tony was first recruited to the board by Fr Michael Kelly, our second chair, who said that you couldn’t “start a social revolution, particularly not in Victoria, unless you had Tony Coady involved”.

Peter Baume is our patron. Peter was one of our earliest supporters – long before The National Forum was constituted to put *On Line Opinion* into a corporate not-for-profit structure – and I have always valued his advice and counsel.

Divisions

This is probably too grand a term for what are in effect all things that I run or coordinate.

The National Forum is active in three major areas:

1. Publishing and syndication – mostly via *On Line Opinion*
2. Web design – in a joint venture with Internet Thinking
3. Market research – an extension of our online qualitative polling eventually done as part of our journalism.

Publishing and Syndication - On Line Opinion

On Line Opinion has been under competitive pressure for a few years now. While we pioneered online opinion, News, Fairfax and now the ABC have since published their own online opinion sites.

Earlier this year Eric Beecher, publisher of Crikey, saying it was like “tanks on our lawn”. I’m not sure about tanks on his lawn, because Crikey isn’t much like The Drum at all, but it is certainly like tanks on our lawn, because it is virtually identical to *On Line Opinion* in format. It is somewhat different in content because of the nature of its commentary which tends to be from the left and less broad-based than ours but it has intrinsic institutional advantages that we don’t including the ability to pay contributors and more than one staff member.

While I don’t intend to go into a diatribe against the ABC here (which appears to me to have lost its way) The Drum undoubtedly has had a bigger impact on us than any of the other sites. Our audience is very similar to the ABC’s and we lack the ability to cross promote to a huge range of audiences that they have. Because they can pay their material is more current. They also tend towards the trivial and titillating end of the spectrum with a number of writers apparently hired for their ability to shock despite their ideas being relatively trite.

However, as there is little chance that the ABC will junk this site, we need to adapt our model to deal with it and our other competitors. In our case, in the short term this means becoming even leaner and meaner. While Susan Prior was hugely productive as an editor we actually need to become even more productive. As I am now the hands-on editor, that is a direct challenge to me.

During most of the last twelve months Susan Prior edited *On Line Opinion* while I was Chief Editor. About three months ago it became evident that we needed to cut costs. Advertising has not recovered since the Global Financial Crisis (although it may be improving), and my interests are not in a position to support the journal with cash.

Reluctantly Susan left five weeks ago and I am now doing the work she was doing as well as the other work which I already did, which includes moderating the forum, looking after the business affairs of the organisation, writing articles, supervising web design and conducting market research..

Susan was with *On Line Opinion* for six years, which is more than half the life of the journal, and was a vital part of our operation. She was also a good friend to me and it was very helpful to have someone in the office, or at the other end of Skype to bounce ideas off.

To many contributors Susan was their only point of contact and they appreciated her professional, friendly and caring approach. So much so that one nominated her for the Sydney Freelance Journalist Group's Best Editor Award, for which she was runner-up. She was also appointed to the editorial advisory board of Eureka Street.

Susan is still doing some contract work for *On Line Opinion* so that I get some extra time to perform the other roles that I have to undertake.

The board is considering ways of maintaining and improving the performance of the journal under these circumstances, and to date we have managed to continue to produce a minimum of six, and sometimes seven, articles per day.

Continuing the trend from last year site traffic has decreased slightly, although the major decrease was in the first half of the calendar year, with traffic at the moment close to its levels last year.

So as to use the latest possible data I have used a twelve month period from November 22, 2009 to November 21, 2010. In that period we had unique views of 2,446,306 a decline of 11% and page views of 4,114,154 a decline of 7%. The board is considering ways of arresting that decline, some of which are in this report.

General

As of last Friday we have now published 11,260 articles by 3,696 separate people. That's quite a crowd. The archive continues to be the most read part of the site while the most recent articles also gather healthy levels of interest.

Features

We published 12 features over the last 12 months. These were:

October 2010	Shoring-up the Australian polity
September 2010	Some free advice
August 2010	The token woman
July 2010	To dare or die?
June 2010	Australia in the mirror
May 2010	A big Australia
April 2010	Australia, a clever country?
March 2010	The luxury of wilderness?
February 2010	China

January 2010	Best Blog Posts of 2009
December 2009	Plucking the goose
November 2009	A roof over our heads

Below I have listed the 10 most popular articles published in the last calendar year. The average article published on *On Line Opinion* last year was read 1,589 times (about 25% down on the average last year). As total article reads were only down 11% it tells us how much extra work the archive is doing in terms of site views.

Perhaps one reason page views were down is because there was no one issue that galvanized readers as climate change did the previous year. The top two slots were taken by Melinda Tankard Reist with articles in her trademark area of exploitation of women, and women's issues dominated the top ten this year.

There was only one global warming article in the top 10 – an article by Christopher Monckton at number seven. Third most popular was an article by Kellie Tranter on improving democracy. Next on the list was Mark Poynter's debunking of an ABC Australian Story claiming contamination of the George River. It's not often we are at the leading edge in something like this, but the article probably deserved more reads given the ABC's shoddy journalism in this instance.

Ken Macnab from Sydney Uni was next with a look at dog whistle politics from the Rudd government, while in a similar vein to Mark Poynter, Ross Barnett exposed some draconian provisions referring to photography and national parks. Lydia Turner wrote the next most popular article, about The Biggest Loser. Lydia originally wrote this article for Melinda Tankard Reist's blog, so that gives Melinda a vicarious three top tens.

The Super Profits Tax certainly generated some heat. The youngest article on the list was Troy Schwensen's article on this tax. And at number ten was Angie Jackson's account of aborting her own child.

Date	Views	Title
11/03/2010	15129	Facebook's new slut page: a monument to girl hatred
06/01/2010	8594	Shock horror: nude supermodel has dimple on thigh
23/02/2010	7519	How can community democracy be strengthened in your local area?
05/03/2010	6965	Something's in the water at the ABC
12/02/2010	5647	Dog-whistle politics and déjà vu
29/03/2010	5398	Landscape photographers, including you, are losing rights
11/01/2010	5345	The 'global warming' scam: a crime against humanity
05/03/2010	4553	The Biggest Bully: TV show a loser for weight loss
27/05/2010	4548	Australia's 'super' mining tax
02/03/2010	4442	Why I'm having an abortion

Columnists

We have a number of very regular contributors which include Peter Sellick, Greg Barns, Nicholas Gruen, Peter Curson, Andrew Leigh, Melinda Tankard Reist, Michael Lardelli, Chris Lewis, Henry Thornton, Mirko Bagaric, Mark Lawson, Walter Brasch, Graham Cooke, Bruce Haigh, Kellie Tranter, Brian Hennessy, Brian Holden, Peter West, Brendon O'Connor, Scott Prasser, Helen Pringle, Melinda Tankard Reist, Sasha Usinov and Graham Young. There are also others who contribute and offer support frequently and it is almost invidious not to mention them, but even more invidious not to mention any at all. So if I have missed anyone, my apologies.

Editorial

One of the changes that I have made since taking over from Susan is to involve a small group in the editing process. We discuss potential articles via Google groups and a number of the members of this group have taken on the task of commissioning contributions. Once I am happy that this group is working well I intend to extend it. Entering articles into our system is the easiest part of the editing process (although my sub-editing standards are not as good as Susan's).

At the moment the group consists of me, Susan Prior, Jason Wilson, Geoffrey Fawthrop, Michelle Fahy, Jed Barker, Mark Lawson, Jane Sullivan, Brian Holden, Peter West and Lydia Halapir. Some of these have been chosen for particular expertise or contacts in areas where we want to expand – Michelle Fahy for example is connected in indigenous affairs. In contentious areas, like climate change I am trying to have a variety of views. Mark Lawson has just published a skeptical book in the area, and Jed Barker supports the IPCC view of the science.

We have also been publishing edited versions of speeches. Since Susan left, the adaptation has been undertaken by volunteer Brian Holden.

We also have an Editorial Advisory Board, chaired by Brian JohnsAO, and with members Dame Leonie Kramer AC DBE, Fr Michael Kelly SJ, Peter Donoghue, Ray Evans, Michael Williams, Hon Kathy Sullivan, Tom Worthington FACS FLM, Julian Cribb AO and Prof Peter Spearritt.

Forum

Our forum consists of all discussion of any articles on the site as well as a more traditional forum where posters are free to discuss threads that any of them can suggest, subject to approval by the moderator.

Traditionally three-eighths of our page views come from this source.

Moderating forums is not easy. You want to be as inclusive as possible whilst maintaining order. Maintaining order is made more difficult by anonymous posters. Recently I have decided that our forum has become too unruly and have been more active in moderating threads.

This has created problems for me as some of the bullies who were in effect running some of the debates, and involving themselves in arguments with others of a like-disposition but different opinion, try to thwart moderation. One group even set themselves up in opposition on a site they called Cyberia. It attracted little traffic, and almost predictably, as soon as it was set-up they fell-out with each other over moderation decisions.

When these people do challenge a moderation decision it is generally not on the basis of what they said, but on the basis of alleged political bias on the part of the moderator. This does seem to result in commenters from some political points of view being less prevalent on the site for a while.

We are winning the battle, with one recent author of an article commenting to me that our commenters were much more civil than last time he wrote for us. It is important that we win the battle. Our site has potential to be a place for what you might call “middle-level” discussion of issues, but it won’t be if commenters can get away with bullying others.

The forum has the potential to be a key difference between us and our competitors.

Operational

On Line Opinion is built on a proprietary system which was built from the ground-up originally by Lachlan Kuhn, and subsequently by David Young (no relation).

After David left a couple of years ago the site received very little maintenance and around this time last year was in danger of breaking entirely.

Around then I employed my son Andrew who is studying engineering at the University of Queensland to figure out the problems and fix them. Together with Jay Tucker, who works in my web design business, Andrew has managed to bring *On Line Opinion* back to a reasonable standard of operation. Andrew also had help from Russell Stuart, one of our readers, who spent some considerable hours in the office and online working out the issues. I’m also very grateful to Russell.

The site is running well at the moment, but there is a limit to what our technology can do at a reasonable price. I’m therefore looking at ways of moving *On Line Opinion* across to either WordPress or Joomla. Both of these are open source and offer a wide range of plug-ins that allow sites to grow in line with developments in the Internet.

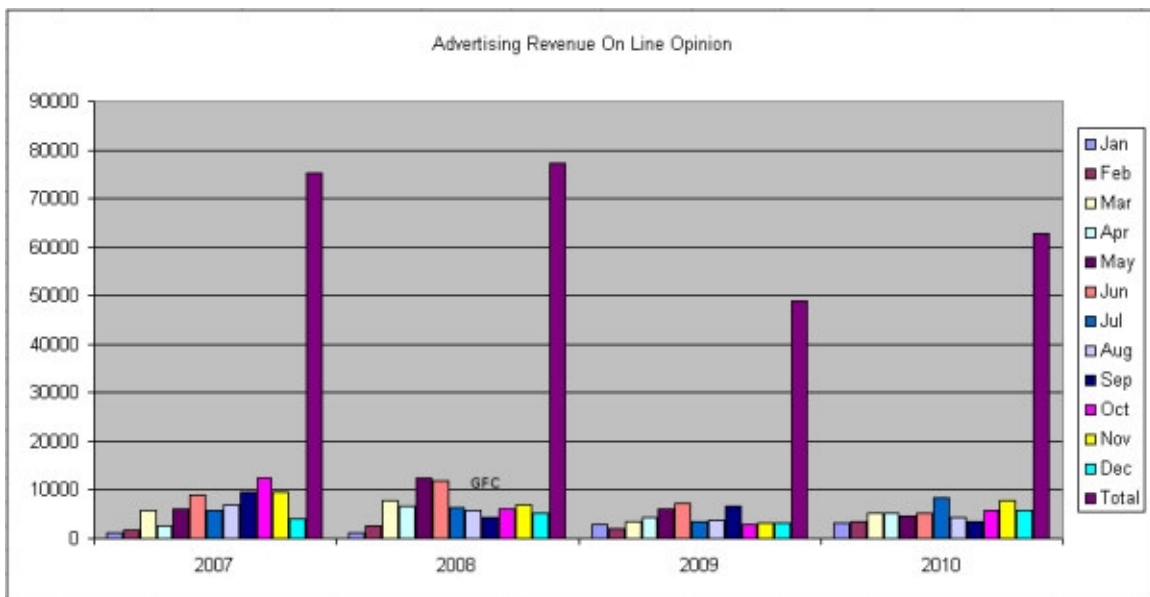
An example of this is the way that social media has exploded and that sites now need to interact and interface with sites like Facebook and Twitter.

Of course this constant need to innovate brings with it a financial cost.

Advertising

Advertising has picked-up again this year, most noticeably in the second half. While it still only goes part way to meeting our costs it is likely to be 50% or so up on last year.

The graph below shows our advertising income since our first full calendar year in 2007. While this year it looks better than it has previously it has to be borne in mind that the blog network on The Domain was not originally part of our sales network and contributes roughly one-third of our income. (Note: November and December 2010 is a guess based on advertising revenue so far for November).



Postclick, the agency that we use to sell our advertising, recently merged with Komli Media, which claims to be India's largest "digital media network platform". This seems to have resulted in a better level of service, and may reflect in the increased advertising sales.

We have also been successful at selling advertising in our newsletters which go out to more than 13,000 subscribers each week. This doesn't offer a huge boost to our online advertising, but does amount to several thousand dollars each year and has the potential to add much more. I have been pushing this opportunity to readers via our newsletters.

We have also leveraged our advertising to provide in-kind benefits. A good example of this is that we are a sponsor of the Human Rights Commission's Human Rights Awards this year by providing them with \$5,000 worth of advertising on the site.

Web design

The National Forum provides web design to the not-for-profit sector. We also host websites, which provides some ongoing income which helps to pay for maintenance costs on *On Line Opinion*.

Our original offering was a website specifically designed for politicians. We continue to offer websites to politicians with clients from all the three major parties (counting the Greens). Our clients include Julie Bishop, federal Liberal Deputy Leader, and Paul Lucas, Deputy Premier of Queensland.

We also maintain a petition site for the LGAQ and as a result of that have been employed by the Brisbane City Council to build a petition site for them. We intend to extend this side of our operation, but we're a little frustrated because the Brisbane City Council has yet to launch their petition site, which is the best demonstration of our capability in this area.

Griffith Review is our largest community client, but we have also built a number of smaller community websites with one for Gippsland Carers Association being a good example of an effective, good value site.

Andrew Young runs our servers and does some of the web design work. Rebecca Appleton works full-time on web design and Jay Tucker has been working part-time. Jay is a web designer but also has good programming skills and has been responsible for some of the more complicated work to do with the petition site and also eCommerce for Griffith Review.

All these staff are actually hired by Internet Thinking as The National Forum does not have enough demand for full-time staff. Internet Thinking does work for commercial clients but passes the not-for-profit clients through to The National Forum.

Market Research

We currently have almost 12,744 people on our research panel which we use for political and social analysis. We analyse this research on our What the people want site and publish as many of the results as we can in The Australian.

This part of our operation receives sponsorship from Leximancer who provide us with software which can analyse large amounts of qualitative responses.

We also provide market research for individual clients. During the year we have conducted online research for the LGAQ and the State Library of Victoria. We have also provided access to our database for academics wanting to pursue online projects, such as one run during the last election by Peter Chen.

Funding

There are two issues with funding. One is the operational cost of funding the business, and the second is the capital cost of expanding and revamping the site.

There are two ways to fix the operational funding.

One is to improve the performance of *On Line Opinion* to deliver more page views or a larger audience. The other is to increase our income from sales of technology solutions.

Given the income from advertising and memberships as well as income from hosting and supporting various websites, the operational funding is not such a large issue.

However, some of the potential improvement in audience reach and frequency of use depends on finding some capital to build a fresh site. I am suggesting that early in the New Year we undertake a fundraising drive to raise the funds to rebuild our network of sites.

This should be undertaken as part of a public redesign of the sites where we involve our readers in the redesign. I have already started that process informally on our discussion forum and some of our members have made donations.

Membership

Membership has decreased over the year with a number of former members unfinancial at the moment. I'm proposing a new membership drive at the same time as we appeal to rebuild the websites.

Current financial members are the LGAQ, AEF, Oxfam, QUT and CEFA.

I'd like to acknowledge the support of the LGAQ in particular which is outstanding.

Other projects

The Domain

This is our blog aggregator site and we mail out a daily and weekly email from it. I'm currently looking to add blogs to it. One of the conditions of being on The Domain is that the blogger becomes part of our advertising network. It's a financial benefit to both parties. The ten sites on The Domain generate around 125% as much gross ad revenue as *On Line Opinion* on its own.

Australian eDemocracy

This site is about to be reinvigorated. Allison Orr will be doing some contract editing for *On Line Opinion* after Christmas. Along with that she will be doing some volunteer work on this site. I'd also like to convert it to WordPress or Joomla to allow a greater range of interactions on it.

Conclusion

On Line Opinion is at a cross roads. Tighter financial constraints are forcing us to look at what we do and how we do it. At the same time advertising revenue appears to be recovering. We face greater competition than ever before, but our audience appears to be holding-up. The challenge will be to grow it over the next 12 months.

GRAHAM YOUNG
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
THE NATIONAL FORUM
27th November, 2010