Annual Report National Forum 2005

National Forum General

The last 12 months have seen the site continue with its exponential growth. The two biggest changes have been the increasing importance of the forum, particularly in terms of page views, and the new petitions site.

Institutional membership has been gradually increasing. And we have a number of parliamentary members who are using our Politicians Online (POL) package. Development of the Content Aggregation and Management System (CAMS) has given us a new flexibility which makes it easier and cheaper for us to publish online.

The organisation is still heavily dependent on the Young family for its financial viability, although much less than it has been to date.

Corporate

General

National Forum has 8 directors. They are Michael Kelly, Peter Jonson, John Shipp, Tony Coady, Terry Flew, Greg Barns, Lionel Hogg, and Graham Young.

Michael Kelly has continued in the role of Chairman.

On Line Opinion

Susan Prior has been the editor of *On Line Opinion* for the last twelve months. Prior to that she worked as an intern for us while she was completing her communications degree at the University of Southern Queensland.

We also continued to keep two programmers fully-employed during the year making changes to the site. *On Line Opinion* now has its own server as the cost of running it on a third-party server was starting to soar. With approximately 750,000 page views a month we are quite a busy site.

The subscription list stands at approximately 7,410 people, which is 1,800 more than the 5,600 people we had at the last AGM. Growth on the subscription list appears to be more or less straight-line with approximately the same number being added each 12 months. However, user statistics are still growing exponentially. At the time of the last AGM we had 147,512 unique user sessions

per month and page views of 384,264. In August this year we had site visits of 281,235 and page views of 785,308. In terms of site visits, this is 90% growth and 104% for page views. Much of this has been driven by the forum which did not exist at this time last year. It registered 18% of site visits, but 38% of page views.

We have been progressively extending our profiles system beyond our newsletter mailing lists, and we currently have 18,744 profiles on file. A significant proportion of these have come from signatures on petitions on the site, as well as from the journal, the forum and our focus group mailing list.

General

For the last year we have consistently published 5 articles per working day and up to 6 on some occasions. There are now approximately 3,547 articles on the site. Increasingly these articles are unique to us with a large number of unsolicited contributions arriving most days.

Features

We publish a feature every month apart from January. They have been:

September 2005   Can our sporting stars be rich, famous AND virtuous?
August 2005   Global poverty
July 2005   Planes, trains and automobiles
June 2005   In bed with the Panda
May 2005   Balancing work and personal life
April 2005   Happy birthday to us!
March 2005   Was it wrong for Romeo and Juliet?
February 2005   DIY Democracy
December 2004   How much more than blood bonds is family?
November 2004   Where should universities be heading?
October 2004   Do ethics matter?

Profiles

The profile system has been working for over a year now and has proven to be quite robust. While the system for registering is a little complicated we have very little call for support to fix problems for people trying to register. Most of our support requests related to people registering for a profile as part of signing an online petition. As the number on the petition list is very close to the total of weekly subscribers, and as they have been generated by just two petitions over

the last four months, it is not surprising that they would have provided us with some noticeable support issues.

The next move will be to integrate the profiles with our qualitative polling which at the moment is conducted by using spreadsheets. Not only will this make it easier to email appropriate prospects for our polling, but it will give us more opportunities to deepen our understanding of what people believe as we will be able to do longitudinal studies.

Forum

As noted the forum has rapidly become one of the most popular sub-sites. At the moment it is in the form of discussion threads to articles published on *On Line Opinion* which are very much like blog threads. It was originally intended that the forum would also have a bulletin board where participants could post their own threads. So far we haven't seen the necessity to do that as the forum in its current format has been so popular.

There have been a few moderation issues, but our system seems to deal with them fairly well. We have had to ban three posters indefinitely. One was banned because of an inability to accept that what he was attempting to post was defamatory; the other two because of persistent attempts to avoid suspensions for minor infractions by using multiple identities.

Columnists

We have 21 regular contributors. They are Tanveer Ahmed, Greg Barns, Gary Brown, Peter Curson, Daniel Donahoo, Kevin Donnelly, Russ Grayson, Nicholas Gruen, Stephen Hagan, Vern Hughes, Andrew Leigh, Jennifer Marohasy, Bernie Matthews, Peter McMahon, Leanne Piggott, Jane Rankin-Reid, Peter Sellick, Keith Suter, Henry Thornton, Graham Young and Irfan Yusuf.

I'd like to thank them for donating their time and energy to the site. As promised last year we have given each columnist the opportunity to have their own personal website using our Content Aggregation and Management System (CAMS) software. The sites are being retailed at $1,500 to community groups, so while this doesn't represent a full-payment for our columnists' time and effort it is a significant good-will gesture.

Not all of the columnists have actually taken up the offer, but you can see a very active site for one of our columnists at http://danieldonahoo.com/.

Our ultimate plan is to provide a cut-down version of the columnist's page to every user as a profile page.

Editorial

On Line Opinion is edited by Susan Prior and me. But it could not be produced without the assistance of a large number of volunteers. Eliza Brown and Betsy Fysh have between them been responsible for finding contributors for our monthly features. Judy Cannon does much of the final proof-reading and checking. Once a week at Monday lunch you can find some of us, and occasionally all of us, having our regular editorial meetings at "The Nest", a coffee shop just down the road from our office.

We also have a number of other volunteer editors who subedit occasional articles, as well as editing and extracting speeches into op-ed format. These include (at the risk of missing someone) Natalie Rose, Chris Smith, Julie Marlow, Angela Sassone, Patrick O'Neill, Geoffrey Zygier, Allan Sharp, Margaret Ann Williams, Virginia Tressider, Leah Wedmore, Daniel Macpherson, Peter Coates, and Angus Ibbott.

We are continually recruiting and losing people as their personal circumstances dictate.

We are now regularly publishing five op-ed articles each weekday. This has been sustainable because of the high standard and increased number of contributions that are being received; although we still indepently source and commission work as well.

The current five articles a day is optimal for this particular newsletter. Any expansion would probably have to involve another vehicle. The editor is fully occupied with the present workload, so this would require another staff member or a fully committed volunteer.

Brian Johns has been an enthusiastic Chair of our Editorial Advisory Board, and I would like to thank him and the 11 others for their contributions during the year.

The Editorial Board consists of Brian Johns, Leonie Kramer, Fr Michael Kelly, Peter Donohue, Ray Evans, Michael Williams, Lucy Turnbull, Kathy Sullivan, Tom Worthington, Julian Cribb, Peter Spearritt and Helen O'Neil.

Focus Research

The focus research is now on a site separate from On Line Opinion at http://onlinefocus.nationalforum.com.au/ and has an up-dated look. We have also been collaborating with ABC Radio in Brisbane and Australian Development Strategies on "What the people want" http://whatthepeoplewant.net. We have

done some major research into issues such as the Federal Budget and Industrial Relations Reform, as well as leadership tensions in the Liberal Party. "What the people want" is currently polling on the Bundaberg Hospital Inquiry, and sent a summary of our earlier research to the committee as a submission.

Other Projects

Issues Briefs

Issues Briefs are now a real possibility with the CAMS publishing software. We have set up a new site to be a clearing house for Australian eDemocracy at http://democracy.nationalforum.com.au/. The site is not yet public, but you can access the draft at http://democracy.nationalforum.com.au/index1.php. We have secured some small sponsorship for it, and are hoping to secure some more, so that it can more than pay its way.

Participation in issues briefs is something which comes with an institutional membership, and which will be available to non-members on a fee-for-service/sponsorship basis. Other areas for potential issues briefs under discussion with potential partners are public health, bills of rights and responsible journalism.

Blogging

The Domain, our blog aggregator, has remained unchanged since last time, apart from a change of address to http://domain.nationalforum.com.au/. We have also encouraged a number of other people to set up their own blogs, for which we have been using Movable Type. However, we have taken the decision to adapt our own blogging software from CAMS. As the basic CAMS site has an articles module as standard, all that is required is to allow threads on the bottom as well as providing a classification system for posts. We will use our profile system for verification, and given the technology that we are building for aggregation, posts should be easily captured to be displayed in a variety of contexts.

Advertising

We have retained PostClick to sell advertising on the site for us. We have also increasingly been independently approached by other organizations to carry their advertising. To date PostClick has obtained advertising from Virgin Superannuation, and they have some other prospects. We have also carried advertising for the Monash Business Faculty, Crikey and The Monthly.

With a three-quarters of a million page views each month there is potential to raise a substantial amount of revenue from this source. We have three major

positions for onsite advertising – leaderboard, tower and island – as well as the daily and weekly emails.

We are also going to do a fresh online survey of our readership base asking a range of more detailed demographic questions. In theory, if we sold all of the advertising on our site for the asking price we would have revenue of $1,000,000 p.a. approximately in the next twelve months. This is obviously not going to happen, but even 10% of the total would give handy cashflow. One of the keys to tapping this is a more accurate idea of the demographics of our audience.

The site continues to run Google adsense advertising, and despite this being displaced in the prime positions by the PostClick advertising, we still earned US $229.16 in August, and US$144.38 so far in September.

Software Development

I have alluded to the POL and CAMS software packages above. These products are easy to use but powerful content management and aggregation systems which allow anyone with basic word-processing skills to produce a sophisticated website.

The National Forum is retailing them to politicians and community groups with the intellectual property being held by Internet Thinking which has also incurred the cost of development.

POL is essentially a version of CAMS, although it was developed first.

Both systems are modular so that purchasers can buy a basic system and add more complex modules to it. The basic system has a home page, an about page, contact details and normal legal notices, as well as a search function and an articles module. Other modules which can be added are for media releases, calendars, email subscription lists, speeches, presentations and so on. With a base cost of $250 including hosting for the first year, the sites are very affordable. More so as we will lease them to purchasers for a monthly payment of the purchase price divided by 12.

After the first year clients who have purchased outright need to pay for hosting, support and upgrades.

The system was designed using the programming language php, and is driven by a database. It can be used to publish a journal like On Line Opinion, a personal site, or an organizational site. Soon it will be able to publish a blog.

Membership

General

We currently have 15 institutional members, an increase of 5 over this time last year. We also have prospects of a number of other members, with two more having made a commitment at this time.

Keystone Members

I think that this category ought to be made redundant in favour of raising money via advertising. The original concept was to effectively sell four spots at the top of the page to sponsors for $25,000 each. At $100,000 total this under-sells the potential considerably, and given my lack of success to-date, is probably harder than selling the equivalent amount of advertising.

Cornerstone Members

I have approaches in train to UNSW, Melbourne Uni, Monash and UQ.

Parliamentary Members

This category has increased. This is due to the success of our Politicians OnLine (POL) website. We now have 5 politicians online with a number of other prospects.

Individual Members

As forecast in my last report we have acquired an ecommerce facility and have been canvassing for donations and memberships. In the five months that it has been operating we have received $4,185 dollars in donations. 56 of these were for $50, 2 for $55 and 6 for $100. We also received one of $210 and another of $250. We will be awarding donors status as Bronze, Silver, Gold and Platinum members based on the amount that they have given. We will also be listing the 66 who have donated $50 or more on a page on the site.

Funding

As noted, the entire operation is still heavily dependent on my family interests, however the journal itself is raising enough income to go close to paying for the editor. Three cornerstone members plus 12 institutional members, donations and advertising more or less equals Susan's wage.

We are also retailing websites which adds to the income.

The business continues to rely on the under-writing agreement with Internet Thinking, which gets some comfort through its ownership of the IP being used by The Forum.

National Forum Site Development

The site is now entirely run from our servers. We have one Windows machine and another Linux one. The Windows machine hosts the journal and the forum, while the Linux machine hosts most other sites. As part of the move to our own servers we also standardized the site addresses as sub-domains of The National Forum.

National Forum Sites

iParliament

The iParliament can be seen at www.iparliament.com.au/. It is under-populated and we cannot claim that it has been a success. We have given up trying to sell a spot on the iParliament to politicians, but are now doing it via the POL software which has aggregation built into it. This is designed to automatically add their material to the iParliament. Because of other pressures on our time that aggregation is not working as far as the iParliament is concerned. It is set down to be completed before the end of this year.

The Domain

The Domain has not changed its form in the last 12 months. There has been some movement of bloggers as a number of blogs have closed down, or become semi-redundant. This site has not been particularly successful, perhaps reflecting the lack of depth in Australian political blogging.

Community Consultation

There are two main sites: http://onlinefocus.nationalforum.com.au/ and http://whatthepeoplewant.net/. There has been limited activity on the main site as we have been putting most effort into "What the people want" which is a collaboration with the ABC and airs in Brisbane once a fortnight.

I have been actively canvassing for some contract work for government on community consultation. We have built a high traffic site as well as software and expertise which enables us to run effective online meetings and to provide resources to inform and support them. As yet I have not secured any work.

OzElections

The OzElections site is at http://ozelections.com/ which redirects to http://elections.nationalforum.com.au/. It lists all state and federal elections since 2004, including every candidate. We are also integrating it with our petitions site and using the databases to generate emails etc. to members of parliament.

Petition Site

This is at http://petitions.nationalforum.com.au/. We have run two petitions to date. The first, on Petro Georgiou's private member's bills for Rights Australia, collected 6,050 signatures in support and 39 against. A second for Anna Burke has collected 1,495 signatures so far.

This site is what The National Forum is ultimately about. While both the petitions deal with refugee issues, this is coincidental. It is intended that the site be non-aligned. What it does is close the loop between the citizen and their elected representatives. As part of the petition process we ask signatories to nominate their electorate, and we then notify their representative of their position by sending them a data file containing all of the responses from their electorate. Because they receive one email with all of the relevant information in a format which can be used in a merge document it allows them to respond to their electors with a form letter rather than treating the email as spam.

I presented on this to the United Nations Conference Sustaining Communities in Brisbane and you can download the presentation from http://graham.nationalforum.com.au/data/Galvanising_the_Fourth_Estate_V1.1.ppt. We have also analysed the response from parliamentarians to the Georgiou petition, and you can download that from http://democracy.nationalforum.com.au/data/Petition_Report_final.doc

Conclusion

On Line Opinion continues to grow and innovate. Our ambitions are frustrated to some degree by lack of monetary resources, but this can be cured via increased memberships, advertising sales and sales of technology. We have reached a size where we are reaching a substantial audience, and the value inherent in this is progressively being unlocked to the benefit of our members.

Graham Young
Executive Director
The National Forum
26th September, 2005