

## Celebs in cyberspace

BARACK OBAMA HAS ONE AND SO DOES Hillary Clinton. Kevin Rudd is there and so are John Howard's eyebrows. Having a Facebook presence is certainly the hottest trend in '07 for those trying to reach a generation of computer-savvy young people.

Of course, amid the real online networking politicians and occasional celebs are also the fans, the posers, the pranksters and the wannabes. After all, anyone can claim to be anyone else on social-networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, and more than a few people also genuinely share names with famous people.

Still, if impersonation is the highest form of flattery, Australians really love Ian Thorpe, Rove McManus and Shane Warne. Kevin Rudd and John Howard also boast a number of seemingly genuine-looking profiles on Facebook.

At first glance it may be tricky to know who is the real politician behind all the different entities. Answer: None – at best a politician's profile or political group at Facebook is generated by staffers, such as the ALP's official "Kevin Rudd for Prime Minister of Australia" entry.

At worst, a complete stranger is enjoying playing the fame game – although a fake can be relatively easily detected if you look for it, says Dr Tama Leaver, a University of WA lecturer who follows digital media trends.

"Part of the appeal is being able to make famous people appear to say things they didn't really say," he says. "Very few people are good at faking profiles. Most really famous people would simply never have a profile which lists their phone number, for example.

"Likewise, few politicians are frank about past mistakes. These sort of tell-tale signs are fairly easy to spot. Most people are fairly cynical about online identities anyway, I think. Why would Nicole Kidman use Facebook – she wouldn't!"

In addition to the more subtle fakes, Howard has many obviously unofficial Facebook groups dedicated to him, ranging from affectionate eyebrow analysis – Radical of Eyebrow (46 members) – to If John Howard Gets Re-elected I Will Self-Immolate (125 members). Rudd's claims to quirky Facebook fandom come from Does Anyone Else Think That Kevin Rudd Looks Like James Spader? (47 members) and I Partied With Kevin at Scores (20 members).

But if this all seems like just a bit of harmless, albeit juvenile, fun, the potential for real damage also exists.

Mariska Hargitay, who plays a sex-crimes detective on TV's *Law and Order: SVU*, was appalled to find a fan had not only adopted her profile and image on MySpace but was gaily dispensing amateur rape-counselling advice to fellow fans.

Those who signed on as friends to fawn over the "star" clearly hadn't spotted their fake Mariska mentor had managed to spell her own husband's name wrong on the site. Or that on Hargitay's official site she has a spray about her MySpace impersonator.

Celebs are not the only ones who can feel aggrieved by such sites. New reports speculate up to \$5 billion a year in lost productivity can be attributed to Facebook, giving employers cause for concern. Channel 7 and Kerry Stokes' publishing arm Pacific Publications reportedly have now banned all employees from using the site.

But given there were 30.6 million Facebook visitors in July, 230,000 users in Australia and Aussies are reportedly joining at a rate of 100 users an hour, this cyber-horse may well and truly have bolted.

"Social networking isn't going to disappear any time soon," says Dr Leaver. "Facebook is growing rapidly. The amount of MySpace users who now also have a Facebook profile and use Facebook more shows that people are happy to migrate to using the next big social software platform, whatever it might be.

"MySpace and Facebook are (only) as good as the next competitor to emerge. Social networking, by contrast, is definitely here to stay."

**SHERYL-LEE KERR**



**FROM TOP: JOHN HOWARD; KEVIN RUDD; AND MARISKA HARGITAY.**