

The digital election

#digitalelection

The impact of digital communications on the 2010 Election, and the lessons brands can learn



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Introduction



Stuart Aitken
 Editorial Manager, Internet Advertising Bureau (IAB) UK

Of the people, by the people, for the people

“As more mainstream politicians take to the web, with their carefully calculated YouTube channels and social-network profiles, so they could diminish its radical potential. The web could become a tool for politics as usual. And even if the web does not benefit the old elite it could well create a new elite to take its place, the technorati who are adept at using the web for political purposes” - Charlie Leadbeater, We Think (2008)

Digital is a much misunderstood, and consequently misused, term. Examine for example this picture (right) taken outside the IAB's local hairdressers advertising a Japanese Digital Perm - look it up. In the rush to embrace all things digital, we find companies keen to apply the term to any range of activities.

And so, we can only imagine the frenzied conversations at party HQs in Westminster as strategists discussed the need to "do digital" in the run up to this year's Election.

For my part I saw this at first hand when I was recently asked to assess a certain party's digital strategy for the upcoming local council elections. To my surprise, what I discovered was a highly effective local government campaign team struggling to get to grips with the basics of digital communication.



We've all read about how this is the first "Digital Election". This is of course not exactly accurate given that this is the fifth Election since Tim Berners-Lee invented the web and the fourth since the formation of the IAB. More accurately, this is the first UK election since facilities like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have been firmly established, allowing us to so publicly air our views on all aspects of modern society.

So now that we are used to commenting on (and influencing) everything from the Iranian election to the Christmas number one, how has this impacted on this election campaign? In the immediate aftermath of bigotgate, the BBC's technology correspondent Rory Celland-Jones quipped on Twitter: "So technology has changed this campaign - the radio mic". Joking aside though, just how have the major technological developments that we've lived through in the five years since the last election affected both our collective experience of the Election and the individual parties' attempts to win our votes?

A striking symbol of how politics has changed since 2005 is the popularity of the Facebook group "We got Rage Against the Machine to #1, we can get the Lib Dems into office!" – the most visible example of social networking in action in this election. And this has clearly not happened in isolation. The day after Rage Against the Machine topped the UK charts, an article appeared on LabourList under the heading '[Rage: this campaign can teach us something](#)', proclaiming: "What

we on the left should take from this campaign is that if we can reconnect and use people power through Labour Party based issues - utilising social media outlets as we did with the We Love The NHS campaign earlier this year - then anything is possible.”

But, social media is only one aspect of digital communications. Not surprisingly, the main parties have been using the whole range of online marketing techniques to communicate their message – with varying effects. We at the IAB have long been aware for example that the Conservatives have been shrewdly bidding on key search terms for a long time now – a fact confirmed recently by Rishi Saha, Head of New Media at the Conservative Party, in [a recent Wired article](#).

Brands have of course been engaged in techniques like this for some time now. But, have the main parties learned anything from these brands' experiences? Conversely, are there any lessons that brands can take from the parties' attempts to engage their online audience?

Back in July of last year at the Guardian's Activate summit, Blue State Digital's Thomas Gensemer and tweeting MP Tom Watson warned us not to expect too much from the parties' digital campaigns in the run up to this election. Were they right? In the aftermath of the Obama campaign, any number of brands were lining up to ask a variety of digital experts to help them "do what Obama did". Come May 7th, will they be parked outside No 10 asking the Election winner for their top tips?

We can find some clues about how the parties have performed by examining the numbers. [Google stats](#), [blogging trends](#) and [Twitter data](#) all tell us something about the peaks and troughs of popularity and infamy during the course of this election. The UKOM figures in the table below also reveal key data in the run up to the Election, showing the popularity of the Conservatives online – and a growing interest in the BNP's digital offering.

All Websites	Unique Audience (000)	Time Per Person (hh:mm:ss)	Web Pages Per Person
Conservative Party	150	00:04:36	8
Liberal Democrats	115	00:11:07	20
The Labour Party	114	00:05:58	11
British National Party	60	00:13:31	16

UKOM: Web popularity of UK major political parties, March 2010

But of course data can tell only part of the story. To help us fill in much more of the detail, we've assembled a collection of thought pieces from a variety of experts in the fields of politics and digital. Throughout the course of this IAB report, you'll find commentary on a range of issues such as the way the parties have slowly begun to embrace mobile technology; how brands can learn from the way small parties like the Greens have used social media to punch above their budget; and how the increasingly connected nature of our culture has impacted both the reporting on, and our reaction to, this Election.

But we must remember not to get carried away with all this talk of digital. Many of us live in the media village where Twitter and Facebook are necessary - and often inescapable - tools of our everyday lives. For many more, these tools - and even more basic online resources - remain a long way out of reach.

It's estimated that one quarter of the UK population is not online and even less have access to social media. Martha Lane Fox's Race Online 2012 initiative is doing much to counter this, but while this election has helped to highlight the importance of digital technology, it should also draw attention to the growing divides within society. Inclusion is a key issue for political parties and brands alike. If this election has done nothing else, perhaps it has helped the wider public to realise this.

An open and transparent world



Emily Bell
Director of Digital Content, Guardian News and Media

In terms of modernized electioneering, the British political system has finally entered the 20th Century with its reluctant embrace of the live televised leadership debate. Fifty years after Nixon famously lost it to Kennedy in the first live presidential TV debate in the US, our party leaders stiffly took the parallel podia and shouted answers at the studio audience and the viewers at home. It now has another five decades to go to catch up with the more significant changes wrought by web enabled media.

The first TV debate was interesting in that it revealed how little distance we have traveled from the soap box era of political address, in terms of presentation style, but how fast the world is changing in terms of engagement and dissemination of publicly shared opinion.

The use of first names and casual anecdotes dropped with clunking regularity showed that our leaders get the theory of modern communication, but the wooden delivery suggests they are finding the practice of it harder to grasp. Meanwhile the debate bust the 9 million audience barrier for ITV, and created a groundswell of opinion and commentary from social networks and sites like Facebook and Twitter. Nick Clegg's spike in popularity came arguably as the result of that approval being visible and human, the visible endorsement of others, in a public conversation, reinforces and accelerates the way political opinions are formed.

So the idea that 2010 would be 'an internet election' from the point of view of slick, networked electioneering seems somewhat wide of the mark. In fact for those of us who live very 'online' lives, where we sometimes over share information about our locations, our interests, our families and our concerns, it is remarkable how little political parties have taken advantage of the opportunities open to them. A friend commented that they had felt more involved in the election of Barack Obama than they had in the UK's democratic process. If you have been courted by your MP through your Facebook page then you are the exception not the rule.

But what the political parties have found out through the 2010 election is that command and control political communication is in a critical condition, if not actually dead. Your constituents, the electorate, even the press, have migrated their habits already. What the 'internet election' has proved is how social media and the real time delivery of news is an incredible amplification tool. It escalates the smallest blip, if the Prime Minister calling a pensioner 'a bigot' can be regarded as 'a blip', into a national story which moves at ferocious speed. Our own live blogging of the political campaign at guardian.co.uk has both pushed traffic to higher levels and proved to be a very popular format for users who want to follow every twist of the campaign in 'real time'. The reaction of mainstream media has had to keep abreast of this tide or, again, you risk simply being left out of the conversation.

Newsnight's economics editor Paul Mason wrote an excellent blog post devoted just to the effect of Twitter in the election. He said Twitter '...has the potential to partially or completely neutralise the ability of the corporate media to transmit the dominant ideology. This has implications for the practice of professional journalism...' to which one could add and therefore the practice of political communications.

The web metrics of the campaign will make fascinating reading on May 7th, as the social media effect has certainly stoked the appetite for the leader debates, and, by extension, deeper policy issues, which have proved extremely popular with web audiences. It is an X Factor moment

which has demonstrated how live, broadcast events are made more 'social' by the new media around them and therefore become more compelling, often than the actual content would suggest.

The visible fracturing of the world between how institutionalized media and politics works and how audiences consume and share their own views and news, has rarely been more clear. The issue for both the established media and the political communicators is how to become part of the wider national conversation. Politics, like media, derives its authority from the ability to represent various constituencies which lack a voice. As this national constituency now has the tools to vocalize for itself, it is remarkable how far different the tenor of the conversation can be.

What is more, this effect is not just a plume of froth of fashionability. The world is not yet on Facebook, but 400 million people are, and whether it is this or another future site, people will only increase their desire to live and communicate in a different way. Intellectually politicians might 'get it', but practically they are still behind the curve.

Being 'part of the conversation' used to be a rather glib phrase, often thrown around by those who liked dictating but not listening. Politicians (and media) have discovered that it means something more practical. This can also be applied to the wider world of how any company or corporate body communicates with its consumers or the wider world.

Marketing is more effective when you are part of a networked conversation rather than part of a monologue. The ability to pick up on the concerns of voters and consumers, respond clearly and directly, with authority and authenticity builds your reputation in this new world.

If you are Toyota and there is a recall problem with your vehicles, but you don't participate and react as the public conversation about your cars spread, then your PR and consumer strategy needs adjustment. If you are David Cameron and you relay slightly altered anecdotes about members of the public you met, you will look foolish and your reputation will suffer. If you are the Sun and you try and suggest that opinion polls are reflecting a different reality to the one on display, you are exposed.

The same rules apply for politicians, brands and media. In the open and transparent world of the web, and particularly in the real time conversations and link economy of social media, there is nowhere to hide. This is why, before joining the conversation, you might want to make sure you know what you are saying.

Emily Bell set up mediaguardian.co.uk in 2000 and became Editor-in-Chief of Guardian Unlimited in 2001. In September 2006, Emily was promoted to the new position of Director of Digital Content for Guardian News and Media.

Learning the lessons of Obama



Matthew McGregor
 London Director, Blue State Digital

Much of the pre-election debate focused on whether the 2010 vote would be an “internet election”. While the question was always a straw man – elections are almost always focused around what the Democrats called “the economy, stupid” in 1992 – even the digital element of the question missed the point.

The debate has focused on social media, and the way in which people consume their information. Indeed, the online interaction between voters and the parties on social networks is where the media has focused its attention. It is impossible to tune in to an election broadcast without seeing a correspondent reading out tweets – the new media equivalent of the vox pop. But is that really what “the internet election” looks like?

Helping to tip the scales?

There is an interesting discussion to be had about the transition from television to peer-to-peer networking as a decisive means of sharing news and views. But that’s not the lesson from the US elections in 2008. The rise of new media as a set of tools for winning elections is clear. By using new media tools to build an online community, and using those same tools to sustain and energise its members, Barack Obama’s campaign focused the enthusiasm of this community into what would be seen as traditional campaigning methods. Knocking on doors, leaflets at transport hubs, targeted phone calls to voters in swing states.

The extent to which the UK parties have learned those lessons and are acting on them in this election is too difficult to ascertain before the votes are cast and an analysis of the ground campaigns can be made, but early indications are that the impact of new media driven campaigning is limited. This election is proving to be a very close one, and if used appropriately, new media could be effective in helping to tip the scales.



Labour, the Tories and the Liberal Democrats have all invested in technology, and provided their supporters with means to connect online. All have active Twitter feeds, and all host busy Facebook pages. Individual politicians are getting in on the act – most interestingly Tom Watson and John Prescott for Labour, and Eric Pickles for the Conservatives.

All the parties have had some success in harnessing the internet for campaign purposes. The Lib Dems have said they received £120,000 in online donations in the 24 hours after the first debate. The Conservatives have cleverly used online search advertising to drive traffic to their site. Labour’s use of an online phone bank, modelled on one used by Barack Obama’s campaign, has helped the party up its “contact rate” of voters to over 300,000 a week, according to campaign director Douglas Alexander.

Whether these are bright points in otherwise run of the mill online campaigns or whether the parties, beneath the radar, are connecting with new supporters, and persuading existing supporters to participate in three sessions of door knocking instead of one in a given weekend – remains to be seen.

What can brands learn?

The very same lessons apply outside of election time, as well. What if you're a charity or a brand working to harness the power of new media?

Whether you are Gordon Brown, a poverty charity, a large theatre or a company with a new product, the principles that drove Obama For America are the same: engage people by lowering the barriers to entry, use content and conversation to sustain a relationship, and provide the tools and traditional channels to turn your enthusiasts into an army of advocates.

What's more, it's vitally important to retain a strong level of transparency and to build and maintain these relationships with organizations beyond just their major moments. For example, Blue State Digital works with the Tate to strengthen its engagement with existing audiences, to help generate income and to capture new audiences and visitors. Similarly, with the American Red Cross in the US, we have worked to develop a donor base that is more sustained and engaged year-round, not just when disasters strike.

There are common challenges that many organisations and causes across the globe are facing. The question ceases to be, "what can our supporters/customers give us?" and becomes, "what is the experience of being an advocate for this campaign and what will our supporters/customers get out of it?" That's a counter-intuitive leap for some – but the party or brand that embraces that approach first will reap the rewards.

Matthew McGregor is London Director of Blue State Digital, the new media agency that provided the technology for Barack Obama's successful online presidential campaign

Social media - getting it good and hard



Ciarán Norris
Global Head of Social Marketing, Mindshare

“Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard.” H.L. Mencken, 1916

The commentators are all agreed: this will be our Obama moment; digital will be the defining channel in 2010; it’s going to be the Mumsnet election.

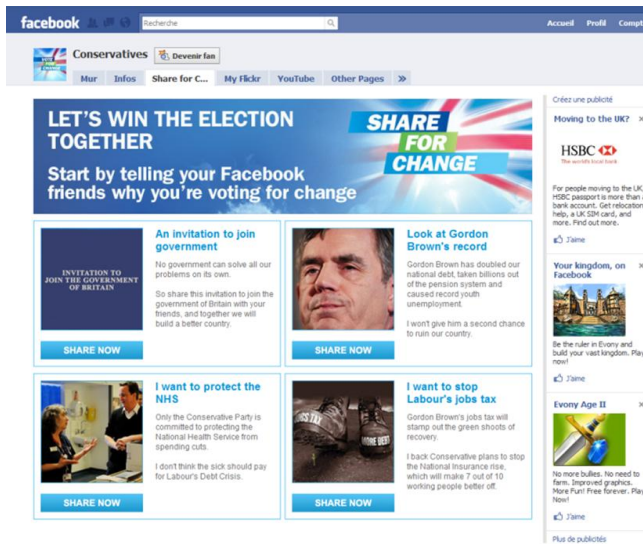
While we’ll have to wait for all the votes to be counted to see if they’re right, there’s no doubt that all three main parties have (finally) woken up to the internet and the fact that voters are using it to talk to each other and share things that make them think/laugh/cry/reach for the whisky. What’s less sure is how well they’re making use of this. Certainly it seems that, like many brands, their budgets are still designed for an analogue world.

Nearly 80% of the population now has access to the internet and yet it still feels like the majority of budget goes into PR and outdoor (as political ads are not allowed on TV). And yet if you look at where people spend the most time, the web should be taking a much larger chunk of the parties’ budgets.

If we just take Facebook as an example, every day nearly 12.5 million people log in, and spend about half an hour on the site: those are the sort of figures that Coronation Street would kill for. Having said that, it’s clear a significant percentage of people are still not connected to the web, let alone engaged with social media – there is a danger that any party obsessed with the twitterati, might ignore those who probably need the most help from government.

However, if elections were decided on how many Facebook fans a party has, the Camerons would have been ordering the removal lorries in April. Unfortunately (for them), it’s not. But just because fans don’t directly equate to votes, does this mean that they have no value?

The Conservatives have used their strength on Facebook to encourage supporters to turn their feeds into virtual billboards. Due to Facebook’s organic nature, each of these ‘messages’ will have been displayed to around 10% of each supporter’s network. The Conservatives have over 50,000 Facebook fans, and the average number of friends for users of the site is 130, potentially connecting them with 650,000 people.



So if the Conservatives are winning on Facebook, who’s dominating Twitter? Despite Cameron’s “too many tweets make a twat” comment, Tweetminster suggests that the Tories have more

mentions on Twitter, but Labour and the Lib Dems have more influential accounts. But are either of the parties making use of this advantage?

Labour seems to have understood quickly that the topics and issues that tend to take-off on Twitter are more often decided by voters than parties. While some of its own attempts to start memes have fallen flat, it was quick to embrace the #welovethenhs campaign for example.

Latest #cashgordon tweets

RT @Niaccurshi: Will #cashgordon campaigners be asking for reform of party funding, and return #cashcrofts money? Didn't think so...
03/22/2010 [Read More](#)

Can you get any old crap to feature on <http://www.cash-gordon.com/> if you say #cashgordon? Or do they filter out words like crap?
03/22/2010 [Read More](#)

However, both Labour and the Tories have been bitten when trying to piggy-back user generated content. Labour's attempt to mimic the MyDavidCameron phenomenon, which spoofs Conservative ads, was turned on its head when a crowd-sourced poster was used by their opponents. And the Conservatives' Cash Gordon meme resulted in the associated micro-site being 'hacked' by bored Twitter users with a better grasp of web development than the Conservatives.

For their part the Lib Dems have recognised that the viral nature of social media enables a limited advertising budget to be stretched much further than traditional media ever would. Realising that the best virals are built on entertainment or utility, and with all the qualities of a classic challenger brand, they've

tried to distinguish themselves from the competition using wit and humour, illustrated through a site, and associated videos, about The Labservatives. While the papers may be obsessed with SamCam, the Labservatives video got twice as many views as her YouTube debut.

So what lesson can brands take from how the parties have attempted to use social media to win the 2010 election?

The first (unsurprising) lesson is that the majority of the most inventive and effective digital electioneering has been user generated. The best jokes in the first leaders' debate came from Twitter. The best ads have been those created by the aforementioned MyDavidCameron. The biggest political grouping on Facebook is the one by the same people who got Rage Against The Machine to number 1 at Christmas. The best response to the bias of the British press was the #nickleggfault hashtag.

The second is that, in the UK at least, politicians might have more to learn from brands than the other way round. From the use of Facebook Connect in the promotional campaign for the game Prototype, to Ikea tapping into our addiction to tagging photos, to Orange's success at getting students to organise themselves, there are plenty of brands that David, Gordon and Nick could all learn from.

Thirdly, it's become clear that while social media is an incredible way to connect with voters, TV still has a massive role to play: 90 minutes on ITV1 transformed this election. Again, this shouldn't come as a surprise. After all, the one thing that Obama did better than anyone was to use digital, and especially social, to raise money, which he then spent on hours of airtime - an option not open to the British parties. Those who think of social media as a silo risk being left behind by those who understand that, nowadays, all media is social and all channels interconnect.



And finally, the greatest lesson is that no matter how much you spend, or how much you embrace social media, if you really don't have anything to say, all the conversations you try to start will be one-sided and won't do anything for you. What's more, where, in the past, good advertising could distract from a bad product for a while, nowadays there really is nowhere to hide.

The Green Party – the ultimate challenger brand

If the Liberals are trying to act like a challenger brand, then the Greens are being forced to. Their budgets would barely pay for the make-up bills of Brown, Clegg or Cameron and this is forcing them to box clever. Rather than blanket bomb advertising, they're targeting voters on particular issues, and using social media to do this.



How? By making Facebook, Twitter and YouTube integral parts of their campaign and getting the voters to tell them what issues interest them and then remixing their TV broadcasts accordingly: supporters are then encouraged to format the ads to highlight issues their friends are interested in and send them on, again using a mix of Twitter, Facebook and email. And to make these work even harder, they're carefully targeting poster sites and using mobile short-codes to tie all the channels together. In this way they're looking to make all of their content, and their messages, social, shareable and, ideally viral.

Whilst it appears highly unlikely that we'll wake up on May 7th to find 10 Downing St's door painted green, it's quite possible that their clever integration of traditional and social media could see a swing their way. And if there is, there will be plenty of plucky brands taking notes on how they did it.

Ciarán Norris is the Global Head of Social at Mindshare. Prior to this he was the Head of Search & Social Media at digital agency Altogether

Additional research by Elisa Meier

The Twitter Election



Ruth Barnett
Online Politics Producer and Former Social Media / Twitter Correspondent at Sky News

Twitter wasn't even a twinkle in the eye of its inventors during the last election in 2005 but as a political journalist in 2010, it's a tool I use every day.

There can be no denying that the site has played a significant role. It has changed the way we interact and increased the speed of the news cycle. But it remains a minority pursuit, albeit a minority that contains some of the biggest figures in politics and journalism.

It is hard to overstate the change it has made to our newsroom. Tweetdeck is on all computers; @SkyNewsBreak is the first place we post breaking headlines; and Twitter has been the source of dozens of stories. Twitter is one of the 'newswires' we simply have to stay across.

It has brought the campaign closer to our audience. Sky's correspondents, such as Niall Paterson, use it 24/7 to break lines or share anecdotes from the back of the battlebus. If you're interested in this election, you don't need to miss a second of it. We break news as soon as we get it.

Engagement and targeting

Twitter engagement is taking place on two levels. There is the national discussion, where members of the public interact with politicians and journalists about the biggest lines of the day and share watercooler television moments such as the leaders' debates.

But there are also local conversations, below the radar. Around 402 constituencies are represented on Twitter, according to Tweetminster (an online service that connects users directly to key politicians and commentators). Our daily Election Buzz liveblog pulls in candidates' tweets, from the Conservatives to Plaid Cymru. It reveals how many target only their constituents by highlighting local people, businesses and events. Boring to read if you live elsewhere, perhaps, but arguably these candidates are speaking to the people who matter – their own potential voters. The politicians who use Twitter "best" may well be ones many of us have never heard of.

Winners and losers

Some have become high-profile due to their use of the web. Kerry McCarthy is Labour's "Twitter tsar"; Jo Swinson regularly tweets Prime Minister's Questions and Eric Pickles has become a must-follow for Tories. But this is untested. We don't yet know if Twitter translates into votes.

For some, online prominence may have harmed their election chances. A handful of online spats led to McCarthy becoming the target of #KerryOut, a campaign by right-wing bloggers to raise money to oust her. It added £2,000 to the coffers of her rival in Bristol East.

Twitter has also claimed its first political scalp – Moray candidate Stuart MacLennan was dropped when a newspaper discovered offensive remarks he had made about politicians and members of the public on his account.

For every casualty, a Twitter star has been born, too. Ellie Gellard's (@BevaniteEllie) support for Labour on Twitter turned her from student to warm-up act for the Prime Minister at the manifesto launch. By the next day, she was front-page news. Unusually, she achieved this without being

well-known first. Despite its grassroots reputation, most people who have influence on Twitter had it offline to begin with.

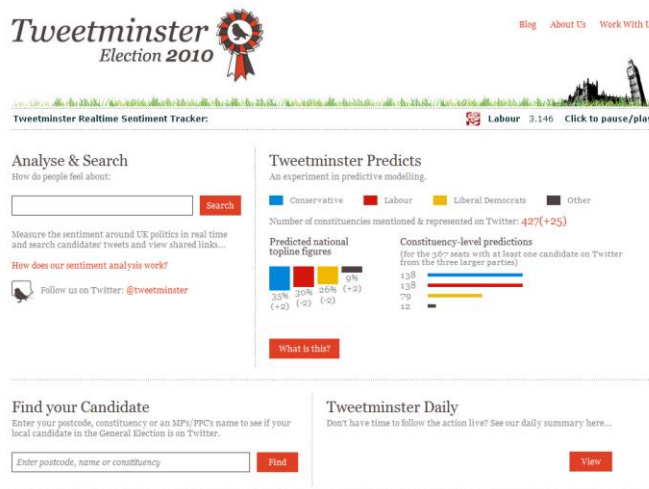
How things have changed since 2005

However, can it be the “Twitter election” if the site isn’t mainstream? It has 105m users worldwide, but just a fraction of these will be active UK members. The number of UK Facebook users is far higher. A high-profile minority use Twitter, the vast majority of voters don’t.

What it has become is a central hub for discussion and underlines how differently we interact with news and politics. The leaders’ debates are a historic feature of this campaign and have changed its course and the internet is part of this.

During the first debate, 36,483 people sent 184,396 tweets about it, Tweetminster figures suggest. Post-match analysis is no longer left to the professional media elite, we’re all taking part. The boost in support for Nick Clegg was instantly evident online, it did not take opinion polls to flag up who many viewers believed was the winner.

Twitter is reminder of how much has changed since 2005. Back then, Facebook had only just begun to spread to UK universities and there were no iPhones. Our access to news has never been greater and this has arguably contributed to greater levels of engagement in this tight contest. What this means for turnout and democracy is for academics to tell us in years to come.



Lessons for brands

My advice for brands is the same as it would be for politicians. Be authentic and target the right people and topics. While Twitter is a useful tool for being part of a wider conversation there can be pitfalls.

The main lesson for all of us is, whenever you write something, imagine a journalist is reading it, because we probably are.

Ruth Barnett joined Sky News in 2007. She became the media’s first Twitter correspondent in 2009 and now works on www.skynews.com’s politics coverage. You can find her on Twitter as @RuthBarnett

Politics in the palm of your hand



Peter Fyfe
Head of Mobile & Emerging Platforms, MediaCom Beyond Advertising

This election campaign is shaping up to be the closest in decades, with all the major parties vying for a share of your attention in an increasingly cluttered marketplace. With the developments in digital media since the last general election, there are many new routes for politicians to get their message across, but are any of them doing this effectively?

Mobile is a good barometer of how digitally savvy the parties have been during the campaign trail, so is there anything brands can learn from our political parties' mobile strategies?

The Conservatives

Overall the Conservatives seem to have their mobile infrastructure right. They are the only party to develop web content optimised for mobile (tested on iPhone and Blackberry), which renders well and allows easy navigation of the key content. They advertise a text alert service, via Twitter and the website, but there is no fulfilment of text updates - I'm still to receive anything a full 48 hours later. They also have an iPhone app, which looks nice and functions well including some nice mobile only features, but actually reading the content is difficult due to the choice of font and colours.



The Labour Party



Labour have neglected to optimise their web content for mobile, (tested on iPhone and Blackberry) and their use of flash video on the web version means that the mobile versions are lacking important headline content.

They too have an iPhone app, which follows a familiar lay out, providing content and assets to mobilise grass roots supporters, and it performs in a reasonable fashion.

The Liberal Democrats

The Lib Dems have also neglected to optimise their web content for mobile. It can be navigated, but requires a lot of effort, and is not likely to encourage dwell time, nor a repeat visit.

They also have an iPhone app, and of the three, it delivers content in the most interactive way via a video mixing option – you choose the subjects, and it plays the relevant content.



What have they done well?

Optimising web content for mobile is not an expensive process, and by making this investment, the Conservatives have gained an instant advantage over their main rivals who haven't bothered. Similarly, optimising application content is also a very basic process; the Conservatives have worked on keywords that make their app appear on appstore searches for their rivals, again giving them an advantage over the other parties.

In terms of the content being served up, the Lib Dems have delivered theirs in a much more engaging way. Their use of interactive video in their iPhone app delivers them standout against the others, albeit with a limited shelf life.

Labour on the other hand, thought about tools and assets deliverable through their iPhone app that encourage user participation with the aim of promoting advocacy. Grass roots activists can track party activity in their area and get involved by using their location to find events and candidates to follow.

What have they done wrong?

The reality is, the parties are just making the same mistakes that many brands and marketers make when approaching mobile solutions - the most common being the redistribution of assets from other channels and not directing consumers to mobile content. Both of these errors are easily addressed, and with a bit more thought and coordination upfront, the parties could have delivered much better activations, and ones that were much more effective.

On the whole no one party has got it right, and if brands are looking to politics for guidance on how to run their campaigns, then they should take another look at Obama's winning election campaign, and how mobile (and digital) was integrated effectively throughout. The calibre of Obama's mobile work was no doubt something all the UK political parties aspired to, though the disparity between the US and UK in the quality of execution is pretty clear to see.

Undoubtedly the use of mobile in this election has delivered benefits to the parties, but it is questionable how much value the investment has delivered to their supporters, or the public at large. Perhaps in the future they should think less about "doing something on mobile", and just about the most appropriate way to enhance consumers' views of their respective brands.

If you took the constituent parts of the three main parties campaigns and formed some kind of coalition mobile campaign, there might have been quite a successful solution for this election. But sadly we ended up with a hung parliament with three separate solutions that don't quite make the grade.

Exposure levels

But has anyone actually seen any of this mobile activity? To try and discover the parties' relative (mobile) exposure to the public, we conducted a survey of 500 MediaCom London staff to find out whether they had been exposed to any of the activity. Surely with agencies' propensity toward iPhone ownership, and higher engagement with politics than your average man in the street, we would see a significant level of engagement with the parties' mobile campaigns?

From the 103 responses, only three people had actually seen or interacted with the mobile content compared with 28 who had read about it in the trade press. This is clear evidence that the parties have failed to adequately sign post their mobile content – as a result potential voters have simply not been able to find it.

What the political parties can learn from the way brands are using mobile

The political parties could learn from the experiences of big brands, and take on some key guidelines to turn their current solutions into much better ones:

1. Content is king

Regardless of the platform, if the content isn't compelling or appropriate for the medium, then it's just not going to work.

2. Tell consumers about your content, and help them find it

If you don't sign post your mobile content, people will not be able to find it. That means including a mobile call to action alongside a web URL on door drops, posters, web sites and social media.

3. Don't just repurpose existing assets

Content that has been created specifically for mobile is always going to work better; if it's unique, location based, or just more compelling because you're not tethered to a desk, then all the better.

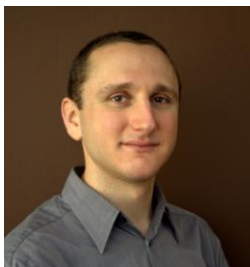
4. Build content that works cross platform (not just for iPhone)

iPhone penetration is relatively low, particularly when you are talking about electioneering, so mobile content ideas should work cross platform, on Blackberry, Android, Symbian, etc as well as non smartphones.

5. Leverage your investment in other channels by making mobile work as a complement to it

Mobile works well with most media for data collection, or instant fulfilment, so use it as a path to engagement.

Who says it's all about social media? Ignore your website at your peril



Trenton Moss
 Director, Webcredible

The 2010 General Election has repeatedly been billed as the “digital election”. Despite this, many political parties have not fully considered the role their websites will play in the election - and this could end up costing them votes.

To look more closely at this issue, Webcredible investigated the usability of the websites of all 10 UK political parties with parliamentary representation in the House of Commons. The results of the report offer lessons for brands in all sectors about the importance of an easy-to-use website and an effective online presence that meets user needs.

In order to assess the usability of the sites, we first developed some key guidelines based on a consumer research survey carried out with Loudhouse Research which sought to determine how web users use political party websites. The resulting guidelines assessed key areas of usability including site and homepage priorities; the way in which the site supports key user tasks; engagement; transactional capabilities; and navigation and orientation.

Below you will find a league table which shows the relative performances of each party based on these guidelines. Following this is an analysis of the Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrats, SNP and Plaid Cymru websites. On the following page, we provide a full explanation of the guidelines we developed, alongside a chart displaying where the parties did well. And finally, we offer some suggestions for brands looking to learn lessons from the online election.

Digital Election Usability League Table

Political party	Website	Total score /100
Liberal Democrats	http://www.libdems.org.uk/	80
Conservatives	http://www.conservatives.com/	67
Scottish National Party	http://www.snp.org/	56
Sinn Fein	http://www.sinnfein.ie/	55
Labour	http://www.labour.org.uk/home	48
SDLP	http://www.sdip.ie/	48
Ulster Unionist Party	http://www.uup.org/	45
Plaid Cymru	http://www.plaidcymru.org/	45
Respect	http://www.therespectparty.net/	32
Democratic Unionist Party	http://www.dup.org.uk/default.htm	26
Average score		50

The usability winners and losers

Liberal Democrats – Position: 1st – Score: 80%

The Liberal Democrats website set the bar for the other parties, scoring five out of five in 12 of the 20 usability guidelines in the report. This begins with the homepage where there is a prominent 'contact us' link and the key user tasks are easy to find as they occupy important areas of the homepage. The key user tasks that were identified by our initial consumer research are well catered for on the Liberal Democrats website with information on why to vote for the party, policies, key party figures and party news all easy to find. The only areas the site really failed on were the ability to resize text and on opportunities to contribute content.

Conservatives – Position: 2nd – Score: 67%

The website of the Conservative Party fared well, but failed to match up to the Liberal Democrats site mainly on site and homepage priorities. The Conservatives' site also performed well on the key user tasks, scoring five out of five for most guidelines here. The site also scored well on offering opportunities to contribute content and engaging delivery of content, including video content of the party leader, subscription to the leader's weekly email, microsites for women and youth, and an official blog with a tag cloud to organise blog content. The Conservatives however, have clear room for improvement on the prominence of the homepage 'contact us' link, text resizing controls and in providing a clear 'home' link on every page.

Labour – Position: 5th – Score: 48%

The Labour Party website scored surprisingly low on its usability, only scoring five out of five for one guideline. Like the Lib Dems and Conservatives, the Labour website does score well on most of the key user tasks like making it clear why you should vote for the party. However, it does fall back on making it easy to get party news and find out how to join the party, scoring just two out of five for these key guidelines. It's real downfall though is on its navigation and orientation. Here the site scores zero for four of the guidelines as it does not let users know where in the site they are or get back to the homepage easily, and the site doesn't offer a search function. By failing to deliver on this area, Labour is really risking users growing frustrated and dropping off the site as they're not able to find what they're looking for.

SNP – Position: 4th – Score: 56%

The SNP website performs reasonably on usability, doing well on the key user tasks, except making it easy to find out about policies, and most of the navigation and orientation guidelines. The real room for improvement for the SNP comes in offering the ability to resize text, opportunities to contribute content, and error handling on forms, where the site scored zero on each guideline.

Plaid Cymru – Position: 8th – Score: 45%

The Plaid Cymru website scores towards the bottom of the study, largely because it does address most of the key usability issues but not extensively enough. While it scores five out of five for allowing users to find information on key figures, it scores three or less on all other key user tasks. It also does not offer a site search function.

An explanation of the Webcredible guidelines

Site and homepage priorities

1. Prominent 'Contact us' link with useful details
2. Clear text resizing controls at top of the page
3. Clearly marked home link on every page
4. Homepage lists key tasks that are easy to locate and understand

Site supports key user tasks

5. It's easy to find out about policies
6. It's easy to find out why to vote for the party
7. It's easy to find out about key party figures
8. It's easy to get party news
9. It's easy to find out about campaigning/fundraising/volunteering
10. It's easy to find out how to join the party

Engagement

11. Engaging delivery of content
12. Opportunities to contribute content

Transactional capabilities

13. Forms clearly labelled and laid out
14. Error handling on forms is useful and clear

Navigation and orientation

15. Site offers a simple site map that's easy to find and use
16. It's easy to know where you are within a given section
17. It's easy to get back to where you were
18. Navigation style is consistently applied and simple to understand
19. Search is easy to use
20. Search results are simple to interpret and useful

The full results

Political party	Guideline number																				TOTAL
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
Liberal Democrats	5	0	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	0	4	5	3	4	5	5	3	2	80
Conservative Party	2	0	0	3	5	5	5	5	3	4	4	5	4	3	3	3	3	4	4	2	67
Labour Party	1	0	4	3	4	4	3	2	5	2	3	4	4	4	3	0	0	2	0	0	48
Scottish National Party	3	0	5	3	2	4	5	3	3	4	1	0	2	0	2	5	5	4	3	2	56
Plaid Cymru	3	0	5	4	2	1	5	3	2	0	1	1	2	2	3	4	3	4	0	0	45

The key learnings

Many sectors are becoming more and more advanced when it comes to website usability, but it seems that on the whole political parties are really not considering what voters want and expect from their websites, despite the upcoming election being billed as the online election. Political websites could learn a lot about usability from the ecommerce sector where many brands understand that users will grow frustrated and drop off sites easily. They should also look to these sites to learn about the importance of providing the easiest online journey for users.

In the run up to this election, there has been huge focus on social media sites like Twitter, but many voters will actually prefer to visit the websites of specific parties to access more in-depth information on why they should vote for that party. Brands in other sectors have realised that social media channels are very useful tools to aid interaction with their audiences - but they are also hugely effective drivers of traffic to their traditional websites. As a result, by neglecting the user experience, parties could be failing to fully sway voters – just as brands who fail to pay adequate attention to their traditional website may be failing their customers.

What's more, it should not be forgotten that even as it grows and evolves, a large percentage of the UK online population still doesn't even use social media. It may seem unlikely to those in the know, but there are still large sections of society who do not engage on a regular basis with resources like Twitter and Facebook. As a result, by failing to provide an adequate user experience on their traditional websites - at the expense of developing a highly evolved social media strategy - political parties and brands alike risk frustrating this large chunk of the online society.

Looking at the election once again then, it seems that many parties have not considered this issue sufficiently and are letting voters down - something which could have a negative effect come polling day.

Trenton Moss is director and founder of user experience consultancy, Webcredible

Searching for answers



Neilson Hall
Associate Director of Search, Tamar

At Tamar, we have been closely monitoring the online campaigns of the three main parties for the past six months. Our findings have pinpointed the sluggish way that the parties have sought to engage voters online - despite the globally publicised success of the Obama team in harnessing online engagement. In particular, we discovered serious issues in the ways the main political parties were using search to communicate their message.

Paid search lacking focus

Of key concern are inconsistencies between the 'paid search' keywords parties bid on and their core policies and issues. Paid search platforms such as PPC enable anyone to drive traffic to their website by bidding on keyword phrases. Many of the major parties' PPC campaigns, and that of the Liberal Democrats in particular, lacked focus and structure when we analysed their engagement in February. Indeed, the Lib Dems were not bidding for any of the popular search terms at that time, and it appeared that they were not actively pursuing a paid campaign in March.

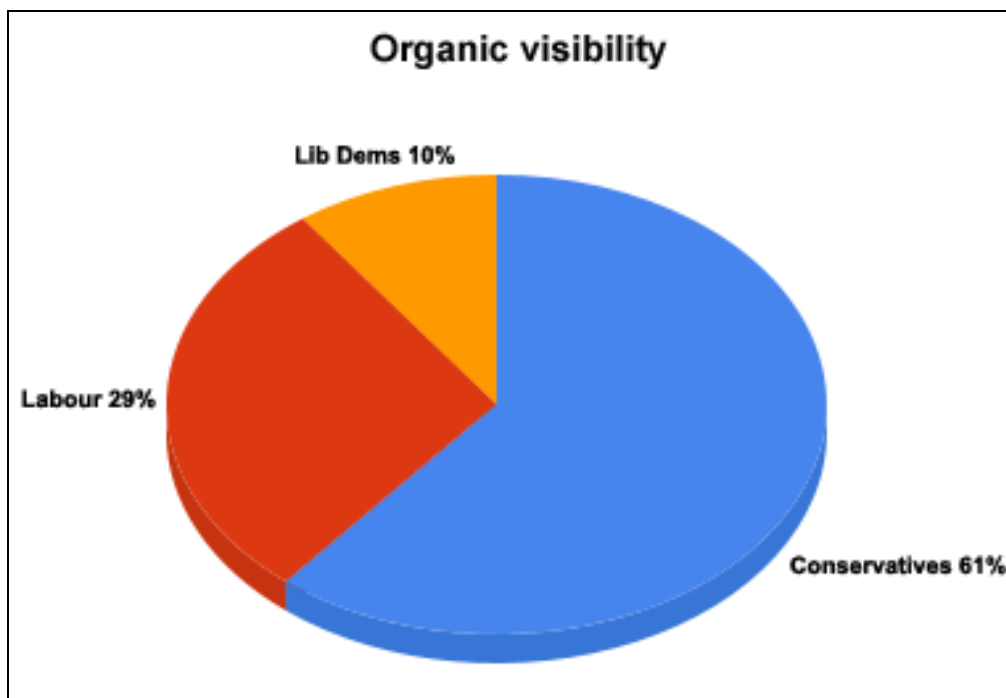
What's more, during January, Labour was bidding on Conservative terms such as 'conservatives', 'blair cameron' and 'conservative party ideology'. Concentrating on taking the opposition's traffic is somewhat short-sighted when the bigger opportunity would have been to buy high traffic generic terms that the electorate would have been genuinely interested in.

Using organic search to reach voters

Looking specifically at organic search, we can learn a lot from analysing the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats' websites to measure their effectiveness at addressing issues that voters were searching for online. We identified the most often used issues-based words and phrases that people are searching for - for example 'transport policy', 'primary schools', 'secondary education', 'health policy' - then used the rankings for these medium to high-volume keywords to create a visibility index. The results can be seen below.

Popular Search terms	Google rank		
	Conservatives	Labour	Liberal Democrats
education policy	12	>30	>30
education policies	7	23	>30
higher education policy	>30	22	>30
policy health	16	>30	>30
health policy	23	>30	>30
transport policy	20	>30	>30
national security	27	>30	>30
policy development	>30	19	>30
national security policy	20	>30	>30
national security	27	>30	>30

Example selection of popular search terms and how well the parties connect (low numbers more successful)



How visible the main parties are on Natural Search

The data clearly shows the Conservatives fare best in matching their content with people's issues-based search queries.

However, while search visibility is very high for the specific queries that include the party name (e.g. 'Labour health', 'Conservatives transport', 'Lib Dems environment'), there are not as many of the broader terms that would deliver interested people to the party websites. It is therefore possible to conclude that the websites of all parties are currently lacking in 'touchpoints' that would match the more general search terms.

Another conclusion to be drawn is that there is still a disconnection between the messages being delivered by the websites, measured by the keywords the sites rank well for and the major issues and policies of the three parties. What's more, the most commonly-used, issues-based search phrases are not mentioned on the homepages of the three main parties' sites. This 'disconnect' between onsite content and what most people are searching for means that the major parties are missing an opportunity to engage more deeply with voters on key policy issues.

Finding official policy information

In October 2009 we also tracked how easy it is for voters to find official policy information from the mainstream political parties online. We looked at fifteen specific policy areas of interest to voters and examined how effectively the political parties have optimised content on their own websites for Google.

The results below show the Labour Party trailing badly behind the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, Green Party and the Scottish National Party. And once again, we see that the Conservatives appear to be winning the search battle.

Tamar Political Search Index

Policy issue	Conservative	Lib Dem	Green	SNP	Labour
Economic	2	1	1	1	4
Tax	2	1	2	1	>50
Health	1	5	1	9	1
Education	1	1	1	1	3
Defence	2	3	1	1	>50
Transport	1	1	1	1	>50
Pensions	1	2	1	3	>50
Afghanistan	1	1	26	50	24
Immigration	1	3	1	1	1
Foreign	3	4	3	10	>50
Countryside	1	1	1	1	3
Crime	1	3	1	2	2
Welfare	2	1	1	10	>50
Europe	2	1	1	1	1
Environment	2	1	5	10	>50
Average	1.5	1.9	3.1	6.8	25.9

Conclusions

It would appear from the results outlined above that the Conservatives have a better developed search strategy than their key competitors. Only time will tell exactly how this will translate in the polls – but it certainly can't hurt.

What the 2010 Election has proven is that even very large organizations like political parties still have a lot to learn when it comes to improving their search strategies. No matter what size your brand is though there is much to learn from the experience of the 2010 Election campaigns. Whether you're banging a political drum or selling products or services, search should always be a crucial tool in your arsenal.

Neilson Hall is Associate Director of Search at search and social conversion specialists Tamar

Communicating with a younger audience



Jamie O'Connell
Marketing Director, The Student Room

There has been a huge amount of debate about the role of the internet in this election. One thing that cannot be denied is the fact that it is helping to involve a younger audience. This offers some key learnings for brands who should be taking note of what the parties are doing to engage this young audience.

Research we undertook at The Student Room (TSR) among more than 1,000 members found that two thirds do not feel represented by Westminster and that their views are not heeded. Yet young and first-time voters are an important 'market' for politicians.

This is where the internet can help. Young people talk about politics online but do so amongst themselves. Our election forum and information hub, for instance, has rapidly become the most popular forum on our site, with 2,500 posts per day. Politicians, like brands, need to join in these types of conversations – but do so in an appropriate way.

Bringing politicians to young voters

We have seen a powerful example of this on TSR when we invited the leaders of the three main political parties to take part in a series of online Q&As. The leaders' answers to ten user submitted questions were posted on the site across a two week period, with users invited to debate and discuss them.

Over one week, Nick Clegg's Q&A alone had 12,828 views, with 171 discussion comments. Crucially, a live poll of users found that the Q&As were swaying their voting intentions, thus suggesting that if you engage with an audience in a forum they are comfortable with, then you can influence behaviour.

Learnings for brands

Similar engagement events with young people are scheduled on Facebook and YouTube, reflecting the fact that the best way to reach this audience is to come to them on platforms that they use, rather than trying to get them to you on dedicated microsites.

If brands are seeking to get involved with a younger audience on this type of platform, they must remember - like the politicians who take part in these discussions have done - that communication online is a two-way street: as well as allowing young people to feel like they are being listened to and valued, it also allows you to speak to them directly.



However, a note of caution should be sounded about direct engagement. Politicians were invited into a student-only space for the Q&A. Had they posted in forums without this, response would have been hostile. Brands should similarly look to test the water before diving in.

There were of course other key findings from our Q&A events. Our most successful participants were those who didn't dumb down for a youth audience or provide overly promotional responses. Brands would do well to take note of this when seeking to engage a young audience.

Moreover, the power of third-party advocacy should not be underestimated. Our research found that the way parties are currently using Facebook and Twitter is not swaying young people's opinions. Party Twitter feeds may have become a major part of this election, but the bulk of the retweets the Clegg Q&A achieved came initially from a trusted online news source tweeting, and then as users saw peers retweeting. Had the Lib Dems tweeted by themselves, they would merely have been preaching to the converted – not ideal at election time.

In conclusion, our observations have proven that in a world of online peer to peer support and shared experience, young people do see the benefit - and are enthusiastic about - official sources of information engaging with them. I'd encourage brands to consider where the conversation about them is taking place already and look to get involved in that conversation in a manner that adds value to the users of that site, rather than value to the marketer alone.

Jamie O'Connell is marketing director of The Student Room the UK's largest student website

Conclusion

What this paper has proved is that inclusive digital technologies are capable of transforming for the better the way that we engage with the political process. The internet has long been hailed as a “great democratising force” – this phrase assumes more relevance with each new advance in digital communications.

Beyond the world of politics, these developments have huge implications for the rest of society - not least in the ways in which we as consumers interact with brands. What's clear at the end of this paper is that we're all keen to talk about how digital technology can transform our lives. But are we converting this talk into action?

Looking specifically at the 2010 Election, the political parties have attempted to harness the power of digital to communicate their message. But have they succeeded? Do they actually get it? It seems more accurate to say that certain individuals within the political process have grasped the potential of this new world in spite of their party's ignorance.

We've discovered in this report that it's not enough just to have a mobile presence, to play lip service to usability or to dip your toe in the search ocean. We've also learned how Twitter and social media as a whole can have an influence on events beyond your individual control.

Of course there are techniques that you should be aware of to communicate your message effectively, but we should never forget that we cannot control everything. Nor should we feel threatened by this development. Rather we should embrace it as an opportunity. As Emily Bell points out, “marketing is more effective when you are part of a networked conversation rather than part of a monologue.”

In a decade's time the phrase “It was the Sun wot won it” may well have been replaced by “It was Facebook wot won it” or “It was Twitter wot won it”. Political parties, brands and indeed any organisation that wishes to communicate its message to an increasingly connected audience must keep track of the latest developments to capitalise on this shift.

There is still a lot more work to be done then in the educational process if we are to unlock digital's true potential. At the IAB we work with a range of organisations from charities to large media owners and mobile operators to small digital agencies to help them to understand how the world of digital media is evolving. To learn more about how to make digital communication tools work for your brand, [visit the IAB's website](#) or [get in touch](#) to arrange a meeting.

Thank you to all our contributors without whom this report would not have been possible

