The internet and the 2010 election putting the small 'p' back in politics?

Edited by Rachel K. Gibson, Andy Williamson and Stephen Ward

HANSARD SOCIETY

The internet and the 2010 election: Putting the small 'p' back in politics?

Edited by Rachel K. Gibson, Andy Williamson & Stephen Ward

ISBN 978-0-900432-74-3

Cover image: Polling Station by kagey_b. www.flickr.com/photos/kagey_b/18210943/

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors. The Hansard Society, as an independent, non-partisan
organisation, is happy to invite analysis and discussion of these views. For more information about other Hansard Society
publications visit our website at **www.hansardsociety.org.uk**

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE INTERNET?

Rachel K. Gibson
University of Manchester

Andy Williamson
Hansard Society

Stephen Ward
University of Salford

> Described variously as a non event, the dog that didn't bark and a flop, the UK's first net election shocked all but the wise and sober in failing to refashion the landscape of British electoral politics. [1]

Those were the words of Stephen Coleman back in 2001 and, almost a decade, on it might seem that not much has changed since the Hansard Society first examined the role of the internet in a general election. The recent 2010 campaign was once again hyped as the internet election (just as those elections that took place in 2005 and 2001 were). Against the backdrop of the rapid rise of social media tools like Twitter and Facebook and the excitement generated by Obama's successful, high-profile internet campaign, many commentators breathlessly proclaimed the UK was heading towards some sort of internet dominated campaign.[2] Yet, within three weeks of the internet being declared a potential game-changer in the election, it was already being written-off, in some of the same newspapers, as a disappointment or even useless for campaigning.[3] Often as not, though,

---

[1] Coleman, S. (ed). (2001). *Cyberspace Odyssey: Elections in the age of the Internet*, London: Hansard Society, p.5.

[2] See for example: Jon Harris, 'Welcome to the first internet election', *Guardian.co.uk*, 17 March 2010; Patrick Wintour 'The internet will be a giant force in election campaign says Lord Gould', *Guardian.co.uk*, 1 April 2010; Jon Swaine ' Facebook and Twitter to have unprecedented impact', *Telegraph.co.uk*, 6 April 2010; Matt Wardman, 'Never underestimate the power of the internet', *Telegraph.co.uk*, 7 April 2010;

[3] See for example: 'The shock of the old', *The Economist*, 22 April 2010; Iain Dale, 'This was meant to be the internet election – so what happened?' *Telegraph.co.uk*, 27 April 2010; Jon Snow, 'The internet election that

little supporting evidence was provided that pinpointed the internet's 'failure'. Moreover, as many of the contributors to this volume note, by framing the story in this way the internet was almost bound 'to fail'; continuing a dialectic in which the mainstream media, on the one hand, builds up and then, on the other, destroys this digital deity.

Blogs too were never likely to dominate the media agenda, not least because of the novelty of the first televised leaders' debates but their lack of bite was exacerbated by their authors' unwillingness to step out over the parapet, just in case, as Williamson suggests, the party they supported should be embarrassed by them. And we were never going to see the same level of mobilisation generated by the Obama campaign. This was largely because the political and media environment are so different. Moreover, the crude idea that voters, (especially young voters), were likely to mobilised in large numbers by Twitter or Facebook flies in the face of previous research. In fact, as the chapters in this book argue well, the rush to look for game-changing moments or, indeed, write off the internet arguably misses the point that the internet has now become part of the everyday political (and social) landscape of Britain.

A general election creates a sense of public interest, even excitement and anticipation beyond daily politics. In a sense then, the potential of the internet is that it could be used to channel this interest, moving the political debate closer to the grassroots; back into conversations where politics begins with a small 'p'. However, as a number of the contributors to this volume suggest, whilst the potential for this was occasionally glimpsed, we have not yet arrived and the digital space remains largely dominated by the old political elites and the digerati.

One of the objectives of this short volume, therefore, is to cut through some of the hype to provide some empirical evidence of the internet's place in the election and also assess what realistically we might expect from the internet. Hence, Gibson et al's contribution provides some of the first concerted evidence on the public's engagement with the internet during the election. The data presented indicates significant rises, since 2005, in internet use across a range of election activities that cannot simply be explained by the growth of the technology alone.

Andy Williamson's chapter contextualises the role of the internet and social media into longer term changes. One of the suggestions here is that we might not even be looking in the right places to see the influence of the internet, that its real effects are more subtle and away from traditional political arenas in a wider range of online social spaces. The internet is relevant to a campaign because it is an important medium in the lives of so many.

Building on Williamson's argument, Mark Pack tells us that the internet has now become an organisational necessity for election campaigning but that it has not brought about that strategic change that some have argued we should expect. He argues that the internet has not removed hierarchies or elites. Instead it has created new elites. Pack further suggests

never happened', *The Sunday Times*, 1 May 2010; Pat Kane, 'The TV election', *Glasgow Herald*, 2 May 2010; Matt Wardman 'The online election strayed off-message', *Telegraph.co.uk*, 13 May 2010.

that more dramatic changes are likely to occur to the business of governing partly as a result public sharing of information and the opening up of public data.

Matthew McGregor and Will Straw's chapters focus on aspects of the parties online campaigns. Whilst direct transfer of US style campaigns might not work in the UK, Straw notes that lessons from the 2008 US campaigns were learnt by both Labour and the Conservatives and did play an active part in their 2010 campaigns. He goes further, concentrating in particular on Labour's use of online tools to help generate local mobilisation and how this might also be taken forward in the context of the current leadership election.

Although much of the media excitement was around social media, one of the key lessons of the Obama campaign was the value of the less sexy email databases and of developing on-going communication strategies. McGregor highlights differences in the main parties' strategic approach to new media and suggests that whilst the UK parties arguably began to understand some of the significance of e-campaigning they still failed to fully buy into concept. They still either operated on old-fashioned, top-down broadcasting principles (Conservatives) or only sporadically linked online mobilisation to offline activity (Labour).

Introduction: Whatever happened to the internet?

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE E-CAMPAIGN

Rachel K. Gibson
University of Manchester

Marta Cantijoch
University of Manchester

Stephen Ward
University of Salford

This chapter examines citizen involvement in the recent UK General Election campaign via online technologies. Using original data[1] from a post-election opinion survey we present an overview of individuals' web use during the campaign and particularly how far this involved visits to official campaign sites as well as non-official sites and resources such as blogs and social networking sites. We then examine the question of who engaged in these practices, focusing particularly on comparing the party affiliation of these individuals and assessing how far the parties (major and minor) were able to harness citizen e-activism. We conclude with an assessment of how far people's online activities were linked to their levels of offline activity and whether ultimately it made any difference to their likelihood of voting. However, in order to place our findings in context we first review earlier research from the 2005 UK election and the supposedly ground breaking 2008 US presidential campaign.

Voters and online engagement: 2005 and beyond

Data from previous UK elections has tended to be fairly limited, but in 2005 there were a handful of studies that looked at online engagement (Ward and Lusoli, 2005; Curtice and Norris, 2008; Schifferes et al, 2009). Most of these painted a fairly conservative picture, where the internet played a marginal role in the election. The key findings included:

- Relatively small numbers of people going online for electoral information – around 15% of the public looked for information online with only around three percent used it as their major source of information (Ward and Lusoli, 2005);

- The dominance of mainstream media websites rather than alternative web sources. The BBC news website was the single most dominant website accounting for around half of those who went online. Furthermore, a significant number of those who accessed electoral information did so only to get the results not take part in the campaign (Schifferes et al, 2009);

- Official e-campaigning from parties and candidates barely penetrated the public consciousness – three percent of voters visited party sites; one percent visited candidates' websites; whilst only four percent could remember receiving any email from the parties (Ward, 2005);

- Online participation largely reinforced traditional participatory divides. The profile of those going online were predominantly well-educated, male, middle class, politically interested and often news junkies (consumers of large amount of news from a range of media sources) (Ward and Lusoli, 2005; Schifferes et al, 2009).

It is worth noting, though, that these rather underwhelming findings came on the back of an extremely dull election campaign where the outcome was predicted well in advance of polling day and there were few campaign events of any note. Moreover, there were several underlying features surrounding online participation which hinted that it was not completely politics as usual:

- the internet was the only media source not in decline and those accessing information had increased significantly since 2001 election;

- the internet had significantly more appeal to some younger voters with the expectation that in the future it would become one of the norms of electoral communication;

- perhaps most intriguingly, Curtice and Norris (2008) noted the possibility of a classic indirect effects model in operation, whereby the internet could be used to mobilise activists who then went out and communicated and relayed information offline to other voters. Hence, the potential effect of the internet could have been greater than the simple (low) numbers accessing it suggested.

Nevertheless, the general belief was that the internet in 2005 played at best a minor role and was mainly used by the political interested class.

Lessons from the US – An Obama effect?

Some five years later, in the build up to the 2010 election, significant excitement was again generated around the possible impact of the internet in the campaign. There was an expectancy that the internet would play a much more prominent role this time around. In part, this was based on the rapid growth of web 2.0 tools, notably, social networking phenomena such as Facebook and Twitter. But what further excited political commentators

was the expectation that the British parties would draw upon the experience of 2008 US presidential race, where Obama's savvy use of the internet was seen as making a significant contribution to his electoral success. Obama's campaign team subsequently claimed that in the course of the 2008 race they had: signed up 13.5 million email supporters; seen two million active profiles created on the MyBO site; gained two million SMS subscribers; attracted 1.75 million Facebook supporters and raised $500,000,000 from 3.2 million online donors. The Pew internet and American Life project further confirmed the internet's breakthrough in the 2008 Presidential campaign, highlighting the following findings from their study (Smith, 2009):

- The rapidly increasing importance of online sources of news with 60% of internet users (44% US population) going online to looking for political electoral news. Significantly, the internet was now on par with newspapers as a major source of news in the campaign;

- Internet users were beginning to go beyond the usual (mainstream) news sources into more partisan online content from blogs and campaign sites;

- Sizeable increases in online engagement with the official campaigns (visiting websites, receiving texts and emails, forwarding messages) especially amongst Obama supporters. Around one in five internet users (some 15% population) also posted comments about the election on discussion sites, social networking fora and blogs.

- Online engagement was becoming more widely dispersed throughout the electorate. Though the youngest age cohorts were still the most active online, all generations were now engaged to some extent.

At the start of the 2010 UK campaign, many newspapers were predicting similar patterns of online activity. For example, some over-excitedly, declared that Twitter and Facebook would be major forces in the election (Daily Telegraph, 4 April, 2010). Yet, just three weeks after heralding the internet as a potential game changer, web tools were written-off as useless (Daily Telegraph, 27 April, 2010). Whilst it may be obvious that the internet failed to live up to the hype, little hard evidence has been produced as to what role it actually played amongst the electorate in the campaign. Our objective here, therefore, is to provide some of that evidence.

Participation in the 2010 online election

We turn first to examine some basic findings about levels and type of activities individuals engaged in during the 2010 general election. To do this we asked about a range of activities that focused on engagement with the official campaign of the parties and a further set of items that measured involvement in more informal behaviours and use of non-official sources of information. Table 1 below presents the basic frequencies for each type of activity by internet users only and for the sample as a whole (i.e. including non-internet users).

Table 1: Online election activities of UK voters in the 2010 General Election

TYPE OF ACTIVITY	Total Sample (%)	Internet users (%)	N
Official Campaign			
Read/accessed official sites	15.5	20.6	301
Signed up as supporter/for e-news	4.6	6.1	89
Used online tools to campaign /promote parties	3.3	4.3	63
Total official campaign engagement	18.6	24.8	363
Non-Official Campaign			
Read/accessed mainstream news sites	27.6	36.7	539
Viewed/accessed non-official online video	5.7	7.6	112
Joined/started political group on a SNS	3.2	4.2	62
Posted political comments to own/other blog/SNS	4.5	6.0	88
Forwarded non-official content (jokes, news items)	2.6	3.4	50
Embedded/reposted non-official content	1.1	1.4	21
Total non-official campaign engagement	31.4	41.7	613
Overall Activity	33.4	44.4	651

Source: BMRB National Face to Face Survey of 1,960 UK adults May 20th-26th 2010.

Official Campaign Question: Please could you tell me, whether you have done any of the following activities in relation to official parties or candidates online?

Non-official Campaign Question: Which, if any, of the following activities did you do online during the election campaign over the last month?

We can see that overall the most popular type of activity engaged in was consultation of mainstream news media content, with over one third of internet users turning to such sources during the election. This is followed by accessing party produced sites, which one fifth of internet users reported doing at some point in the campaign. Other more active types of involvement with the official campaigns such as signing up as a Twitter follower or Facebook fan of a party or candidate were less common, with only six percent of internet users engaging in such practices. Actually helping to promote the parties' message or online profile via various tools such as email or texts or posting supportive links and messages on Facebook or Twitter also attracted a more limited pool of individuals online (4%). Beyond the official campaign, individuals displayed similarly lower levels of engagement in the more active types of e-participation, with posting general political content to social networks walls and blogs attracting four and six percent respectively. Watching non-official YouTube videos attracted just under one in ten of internet users. Notably, the more active forms of unofficial involvement (as with official campaign led initiatives) such as starting or joining a political social networking group or forwarding and reposting political material were less popular than more passive acquisition of online election material. Taking all these activities together we can see that fully one third of the UK population and just under half of internet users engaged in some form of online political activity during the election.

While these levels of participation do not quite match that of the overall engagement of US public in the online election in 2008 (see above) (Smith, 2009), levels have clearly increased

significantly in the UK since 2005. And while mainstream news sites remain among the most commonly accessed sources, one striking increase from Ward and Lusoli's findings has been the rise of those utilising official campaign sites, with up to seven times as many individuals reportedly having sought out party or candidate produced material this time around. Whether this was due to the parties producing more interesting and stimulating websites, or simply the result of higher levels of interest in the election is not clear from these figures.

Who were the online participators?

Having established that levels of interest in internet political sources in general and in the online campaign in particular had grown significantly since the previous election, we now turn to the question of who these people were. Table 2 reports the engagement of various social groups in any of the nine types of activity and then for each one separately.

Table 2: Online election activities of UK voters in the 2010 General Election by socio-demographic characteristics (internet users)

TYPE OF ACTIVITY	Sex		Age						Education		
	M	F	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	None/ Trade	Secon dary	Ter-tiary
Official Campaign											
Read/accessed official sites	25.2	15.9	32.0	27.9	24.3	8.4	14.3	12.0	11.9	17.7	29.7
Signed up as supporter/for e-news	8.4	3.7	9.4	8.1	4.4	5.0	3.7	6.6	3.7	5.3	8.4
Used online tools to campaign /promote parties	5.3	3.3	7.2	5.7	2.8	3.4	3.2	3.3	1.5	3.4	7.2
Total official campaign engagement	29.8	19.8	36.8	33.3	26.9	13.0	16.6	17.9	14.1	21.5	35.5
Non-Official Campaign											
Read/accessed mainstream news sites	43.5	29.7	39.9	44.6	40.1	28.9	33.9	27.2	19.9	31.1	54.5
Viewed/accessed non-official online video	11.2	4.0	13.5	7.0	9.1	6.1	4.6	2.7	2.2	5.8	13.5
Joined/started political group on a SNS	5.2	3.2	13.0	4.4	3.5	1.5	1.8	0.0	1.5	4.3	4.8
Posted political comments to own/other blog/SNS	7.9	4.0	11.2	8.4	4.7	4.9	2.3	3.3	1.5	5.3	8.9
Forwarded non-official content (jokes, news items)	3.4	3.6	5.0	3.7	5.7	1.1	2.8	1.3	1.5	2.0	7.5
Embedded/reposted non-official content	2.3	0.6	3.1	2.3	1.6	0.0	0.9	0.7	0.0	1.2	2.4
Total non-official campaign engagement	48.7	34.6	48.2	48.7	47.0	32.7	36.2	31.1	23.0	36.2	60.2
Overall Activity	51.0	37.7	51.1	50.2	50.2	34.7	38.7	36.0	24.4	39.6	61.4
N	748	728	224	299	319	265	218	151	137	923	416

Source: BMRB National Face to Face Survey of 1,960 UK adults May 20th-26th 2010

We look first at the standard socio-demographic predictors of involvement in politics including age, sex, and levels of education. The table reveals some interesting findings in that in general men were considerably more likely to engage in the online campaign compared with women. The only area of apparent parity between the sexes was in the forwarding on of unofficial political content. In activities such as posting to blogs, signing up as an official supporter and watching YouTube videos the differences were particularly pronounced with twice as many men as women involved in these aspects of the campaign. Comparing age groups we can see that there were very clear differences between the youngest and oldest cohorts in terms of their e-participation levels with those under 24 years old being twice as likely as those 55 and older to have any involvement in web-based forms of political behaviour. Interestingly, however, there does seem to be a slight curvilinear relationship operating for involvement with the official campaign, with those 65 years and older (i.e. retirees) exhibiting generally slightly higher levels of engagement in the official online campaign politics than the preceding age cohorts (i.e. those 45-55 and 55-64 years old). On the whole, then, it would appear that again, contrary to much of the evidence regarding engagement in more conventional forms of offline politics (Henn et al, 2005) younger citizens were more actively engaged in e-politics during the election than their parents and grandparents generation. Finally, if we look at the influence of educational attainment on e-participation in the election we see a strong connection, with tertiary educated individuals displaying a far higher level of enthusiasm for all the new tools of political engagement.

Party differences

It seems clear that socio-economic factors played a decisive role in stimulating individuals' engagement in these forms of online politics. How far were political characteristics and particularly partisan support important? Given that some of these activities were directly supportive of the parties' own communication efforts we take the further step in Table 3 of grouping activities by the extent to which they related to official or unofficial aspects of the campaign.

Here we see that across the three major parties, Liberal Democrat identifiers were the most active online with over half of those in the sample having engaged in some type of e-participatory activity during the campaign. Labour and Conservative party supporters displayed very similar levels of involvement, with just under a half reporting engagement in the e-election. Interestingly, the levels of involvement in the parties' official campaigns were particularly high for Liberal Democrats, with 35% claiming to have looked at, signed up for or actively promoted party material online, compared to around one quarter of the supporters of the two major parties. Among the smaller parties, the sample sizes are extremely small and so don't allow for highly robust conclusions. However, levels of involvement by UKIP and Green supporters in the official online campaigns appeared to actually be somewhat higher than Labour and the Conservatives. More general political use of the new media was also comparable, particularly for UKIP. BNP supporters, despite the expectations that they might be among the most active users of the online technologies

appeared to be the least likely to have either helped their party in their e-campaign efforts or accessed online political resources more generally.

Table 3: Online election activities of UK voters in the 2010 General Election by party identification (internet users, % column-wise)

TYPE OF ACTIVITY	Labour	Cons	LibDem	UKIP	Green	BNP
Official Campaign						
Read/accessed official sites	22.1	20.0	28.5	20.8	20.7	7.1
Signed up as supporter/for e-news	6.8	6.3	9.7	0.0	10.3	0.0
Used online tools to campaign /promote parties	5.7	2.8	8.4	4.2	3.4	0.0
Total official campaign engagement	26.5	24.8	34.2	28.0	27.6	7.1
Non-Official Campaign						
Read/accessed mainstream news sites	39.4	38.0	46.5	16.0	27.6	20.0
Viewed/accessed non-official online video	9.3	7.2	11.7	0.0	10.0	0.0
Joined/started political group on a SNS	5.7	3.1	5.7	8.3	6.9	0.0
Posted political comments to own/other blog/SNS	5.4	5.9	10.4	0.0	13.8	0.0
Forwarded non-official content (jokes, news items)	4.1	3.1	7.4	8.0	3.4	0.0
Embedded/reposted non-official content	0.3	1.6	3.5	4.2	3.4	0.0
Total non-official campaign engagement	43.3	43.0	53.3	36.0	33.3	20.0
Overall Activity	46.4	45.3	56.4	44.0	33.3	20.0
% N	100 (538)	100 (435)	100 (290)	100 (33)	100 (35)	100 (16)

Source: BMRB National Face to Face Survey of 1,960 UK adults May 20th-26th 2010

Question: In general, do you think of yourself as a little closer to one of the parties than the others? If yes, please can you tell me which party?

As well as user-led engagement in online political activity, we were also interested in the extent of online contact individuals had received, particularly from a party or candidate. In table 4 we report by party the proportion of individuals that said they had received an official online contact about how they voted.

Table 4: Receipt of online contact by UK voters in the 2010 General Election by vote (internet users)

	Labour	Cons	LibDem	UKIP	Green	BNP
Received online contact	3.8	4.3	3.6	4.8	0.0	0.0
N	405	422	332	32	11	12

Source: BMRB National Face to Face Survey of 1,960 UK adults May 20th-26th 2010
Question: In the course of the recent election did anyone from a political party, campaign or political organisation contact you to ask about how you were planning to vote through any of the following methods? Online or internet-based contact (i.e. through email or any internet/web-related technology).

While the overall numbers are low – just over three percent of internet users said they had been exposed to this explicit form of online mobilisation – there does appear to be some variance across parties on this measure, particularly with regard to party size. In general, those voting for the major parties were more likely to have received some type of online stimuli from a political party. UKIP voters, however, are clearly the exception here in that they reported the highest levels of official online contact. Whether this was due to more active efforts on the part of UKIP candidates or the party is not clear from these data. However, UKIP's nationally coordinated use of the 'Votewise' site to put candidates in touch with voters may well have been an important driver in generating this high rate of contact.

Cross-over to offline politics

The evidence of table 3 suggests some challenges to the traditional profile of those participating offline. In particular, the dominance of younger people using social media to engage in the unofficial campaign suggests that this new type of activity may be drawing in new and previously under-mobilised groups. To examine this we looked at the levels of involvement in more conventional types of offline politics in our sample, including activities such as contacting a government official, discussing politics, signing a petition and donating to a political cause, and how far these linked to our different types of online engagement. Table 5 presents a simple test of this linkage through a cross-tabulation of these varying forms of activity. The table shows that, overall, just under half of internet users were entirely politically inactive. Among those that were active in the online election there was clearly a strong tendency to be active offline as well, and this relationship appeared to hold for both involvement in the official and unofficial aspects of the campaign. Just under three quarters of those that had committed an online political act within or outside of the campaign had also undertaken some type offline actions as well. Interestingly, however, there was clearly a small but significant minority (just over one fifth of internet users) who were entirely virtual participators, i.e. were active online during the election but had not engaged in any conventional political activities in the preceding 12 months. While this group was smaller than the 'offline-only' participators (54.1%), the fact that they exist does point to a possible mobilization effect for the e-election in terms of drawing in those who had not participated in politics for up to one year prior to the election.

Table 5: Online election engagement by activity in offline politics among UK Voters in the 2010 General Election (internet users, % calculated row-wise)

	No offline political activity	1-2 offline political activities	3-4 offline political activities	Total
No online election engagement	45.9 (372)	52.4 (424)	1.7 (14)	100% (810)
Engagement in campaign (official) online	22.6 (81)	71.2 (255)	6.1 (22)	100% (358)
Engagement in campaign (non-official) online	22.9 (139)	71.8 (435)	5.3 (32)	100% (606)

Source: BMRB National Face to Face Survey of 1,960 UK adults May 20th-26th 2010

Question: Offline participation: In the past 12 months have you.....? Contacted a politician or national/local government official in person, by phone or by letter; Discussed politics with family or friends in person; Signed a paper petition; Donated money offline to a political party/organisation/cause.

Turning out the vote?

In a final step of the analysis we investigated the question of the extent to which involvement in the e-election was linked to a greater likelihood of voting, controlling for a range of other civic skills and socio-economic resources that are generally seen to promote higher rates of political engagement. This involved regressing our dependent variable (a binary item of vote or not-vote) on a series of predictor variables, one of which was level of online election engagement, measured as an overall scale of zero to nine activities. A wider range of other variables were also included to control for the effects of individual traits that would make one more or less likely to vote. These included the socio-demographic factors profiled in table 3 (age, sex and education) plus important political attitudes that would affect likelihood of voting such as political interest, feelings of internal efficacy or one's sense of competence to understand politics, and trust in politicians. In addition, we included an index of civic skills that have been identified in the wider participation literature as strongly linked to individuals' propensity to vote (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). These included skills such as writing a letter as part of their job or involvement in community affairs, attending or chairing a meeting or giving a speech. Finally we added a measure of internet skills that has been developed by new media scholars to test for any independent effects of individuals' overall competence of internet use on rates of participation, offline and online (Best and Krueger, 2005). The results reported in Table 6 reveal that on the whole, controlling for these other factors' involvement in the online campaign did have a significant effect on an individuals' likelihood of voting. So even after one takes into account the role of educational attainment, civic engagement, interest and understanding of politics as motivating someone to vote, participation in the online campaign was associated with a significant increase in the probability that they actually turned up at polling station on May 6.

Table 6: Binary logistic regression model predicting electoral participation in the 2010 General Election (internet and non-internet users)

	Est	St. error	Sig
Socio-demographic factors			
Sex	0.176	0.128	
Age	0.045	0.004	**
Education	0.201	0.050	**
Political attitudes			
Interest in politics	0.627	0.065	**
Internal efficacy	0.055	0.024	*
Trust in politicians	0.103	0.029	**
Civic Skills	0.138	0.058	**
Internet Skills	0.055	0.060	
Engagement in online electoral activities	0.154	0.071	*
Constant	-3.794	0.358	**
Pseudo R-square	0.213		
N	1861		

Source: BMRB National Face to Face Survey of 1,960 UK adults May 20th-26th 2010

* p< 0.05, ** p< 0.01

Socio-demographic variables: Sex (Female = 1); Education 0- 7 scale: 0 = None/primary incomplete; 1 = Primary; 2 = Secondary incomplete; 3= Secondary; 4 = High School; 5 = Professional training/vocational qualifications; 6 = University degree; 7 = Doctorate.

Political attitudes: (Interest) How much interest do you generally have in what is going on in politics? 0 = None at all; 1 = Not very much; 2 = Some; 3 = Quite a lot; 4 = A great deal; (Efficacy) Generally speaking, how complicated, if at all, would you say you find politics? 0 means 'not at all complicated' and 10 means 'extremely complicated'. (Trust) How much do you trust British politicians generally? 0 means 'no trust' and 10 means 'a great deal of trust'.

Civic skills: Which of these, if any, have you done in the last 12 months as part of your involvement with your job, community or other organisations you belong to? Written a letter; Gone to a meeting where you took part in making decisions; Planned or chaired a meeting; Given a presentation or speech. (0-4 scale).

Internet skills: Which, if any of these, have you done? Sent an attachment with an email; Posted an audio, video, or image file to the internet; Personally designed a webpage or blog; Downloaded a software programme to your computer from the internet. (0-4 scale).

Engagement in online election activity 0 -9 scale using items listed table 1. Non-internet users score 0.

Conclusion

The 'dog that didn't bark' seemed to be the popular view of the internet in the 2010 campaign and superficially, at least, many of the trends in our findings here don't seem that different to previous studies; internet activity was passive rather than active, geared to consuming existing content rather then generating new content and reliant on official information sources more than unofficial channels. Compared to the US our results at first glance look decidedly more limited but this doesn't necessarily reflect the failure of the parties, or the technology, or indeed, the electorate. More it reflects the differences in the political and media environment which mean that UK elections are less fertile ground for online campaigning (Ward, 2005; Williamson, et al, 2010). Arguably, in 2010 the excessive expectations of the internet and the dominance of the televised leaders' debates in the election narrative mask some of underlying changes. It's worth reflecting that those

accessing the internet for election information have more than doubled since 2005 and those searching out official party sites have also increased dramatically. Amongst the younger age cohorts the internet is now often the medium of choice when searching for information suggesting that the internet's role will grow rapidly in the future. The internet also appears more popular for the 55-64 years age group, a traditionally more politically active set. No doubt some of the growth this time can be explained by the rather unique circumstances of the campaign (the uncertainty about the outcome and the TV debates). Indeed evidence from elsewhere suggests that the leaders' debates drove traffic online. Yet as a source of information about electoral politics the internet is beginning to become part of people's everyday experience.

In terms of more activist online participation, the internet remains predominantly the preserve of politically interested elites (most notably young, male and educated), although, even here, there are some intriguing details. There are now a group of voters who participate only in the online political environment suggesting either that some are substituting offline participation for virtual activism or that there is a small e-mobilisation effect. There are also variations in activity between the identifiers of different parties which wasn't apparent in 2005 and is worthy of further investigation.

Our results indicate that we should not simply write off the internet as of no consequence to campaigning. Perhaps by the next election the internet will have become less of novelty, so that we can move beyond the media-internet hype cycle of over-exaggerated expectations followed by inevitable disappointment and look more realistically at the way the internet is being incorporated into everyday practices of voters.

References

Best, S. J. and B. S. Krueger. (2005). 'Analyzing the representativeness of internet political participation'. *Political Behavior*, 27 (2), 183-216.

Curtice, J. and P. Norris. (2008). 'Getting the Message Out: A two-step model of the role of the internet in campaign communication flows during the 2005 British General Election', *The Journal of Information Technology and Politics,* 4 (4), 3-13.

Henn, M., M. Weinstein, and D. Wring. (2005). 'A generation apart? Youth and political participation in Britain', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 4 (2), 167-192.

Smith, A. (2009). 'The internet's Role in Campaign 2008' 15 April, Pew internet and American Life Project. Available at www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/6--The-internets-Role-in-Campaign-2008.aspx

Schifferes, S., W. Lusoli and S. J. Ward. (2009). 'What's the story? Online news consumption at the 2005 UK General Election'. *Northern Lights*, 7 (1), 51-71.

Ward, S. J. and W. Lusoli. (2005). 'Logging on or switching off? The public and the internet at the 2005 general election.' In S. Coleman and S. Ward (Eds.) *Spinning the Web.* London: The Hansard Society. Available at www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/publications/archive/2007/09/27/Spinning-the-Web.aspx

Ward, S. J. (2005). The internet and 2005 Election: Virtually Irrelevant?' in Geddes, A. and Tonge, J. (eds.), The Nation Decides: The 2005 General Election. (pp.188-206). Palgrave: Basingstoke.

Verba, S., K. L. Schlozman, and H. E. Brady. (1995). *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics.* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Williamson, A., L. Miller, and F. Fallon. (2010). *Behind the Digital Campaign.* Hansard Society: London.

INSIDE THE DIGITAL CAMPAIGN

Andy Williamson
Hansard Society

The 2010 General Election was the election that couldn't have happened without the internet – but that does not make it an 'internet election'. In fact, post-election there has been a general acceptance that a lot of the anticipated public-facing side of the internet and social media 'failed to fire' during the campaign. Was this really a surprise? Certainly the evidence from previous election campaigns in the UK and abroad suggested a clear pattern of internet use that would focus attention more on the back-end than on front-facing websites or social media in the 2010 election (Williamson, Miller, & Fallon, 2010). This chapter contextualises the role of the internet and social media by arguing that it is in their capacity over the longer-term to build social capital and create 'third spaces' for debate and engagement that their value for politics lies. It will further challenge the notion that some clear 'tipping point' for the impact of the internet on politics can be identified. Instead, it is argued that the gradual social appropriation of digital media is moving it from an outsider to a default medium for political campaigning and politics more generally. The internet is not a game changing technology, but it is an increasingly important component of the political process. Without it, the UK general election campaign of 2010 would have looked very different.

Despite international electoral experiences in countries with similar systems to the UK and the experiences of the UK European Parliament elections in 2009, all of which suggested that digital media was going to be important but not game changing in 2010 (Williamson et al., 2010), commentators in the mainstream media still insisted on promoting 2010 as Britain's first true 'internet election'. Mainstream media news outlets went into overdrive building the internet, and social media in particular, up as a major election issue. The Daily Telegraph thundered 'General election 2010: Facebook and Twitter to have unprecedented impact' (Swaine, 2010), and a few weeks later The Guardian asked rhetorically 'Will it be the Sun or Twitter wot won it?' (Greenslade, 2010). Arguably, the biggest 'false promise' of the 2010 campaign was that it would replicate the Obama campaign three years earlier. Of course it didn't, and never would because of the differences in the nature of the two election systems and particularly the individualistic candidate-centred focus of the US Presidential campaign.

Although vastly overstating the importance of social media, these headlines do convey the growing perception of a shrinking influence for the print media in UK elections. Despite the Sun's famous assertions to the contrary in 1997 (from which the Guardian headline above is derived), the notion that a politically biased press can actually manipulate the result of an election has been under strain for some time. Certainly a persuasive argument can be made for a media dialectic that causes the voices of individuals and deliberative discourse to be stifled and subsumed within the narrow self-interests of a media elite. However, as academic research has demonstrated this is not enough to affect the overall outcome of an election (Curtice, 1999). And while not wishing to reintroduce any hyperbolic claims about the political influence of the internet, it is a plausible contention that online spaces may be further reducing the ability of established media to control information flows by allowing citizens access to a wider variety of sources and providing opportunities for them to actively participate in the news production process itself (via blogs and social networks), and thus the wider public sphere (Habermas, 2006).

The fact that the internet failed to 'take off' in the manner predicted by pundits was in many respects predictable. The nature of British politics does not lend itself to a US-style web campaign, even with the first ever televised leaders' debates making this election more of a personality contest than previous ones. British general elections are about electing individual MPs from 650 constituencies across the country which requires well developed party infrastructures, local organisations with roots in the community, and strong 'brand recognition' to be successful. Components like these are not developed overnight or even in the course of a few weeks on the web. Moreover by 2010 the party brands had arguably become more tarnished than ever before in terms of public trust (Hay, Stoker, & Williamson, 2008). An erosion that made the promotion of the parties by any medium a harder 'sell' than in previous years. Finally, the impetus provided by the fundraising needs of U.S. candidates to engage in online outreach efforts simply does not exist in the UK. The centralised party-based model of campaigns and more stringent limits on expenditure significantly dampens the inclination of individual candidates to launch web-based appeals for campaign finance.

What the parties did

If the internet was not the pivotal force in the 2010 general election, it was certainly valuable. All the political parties built official campaign websites of varying degrees of scale, interactivity and sophistication. Some of the parties also invested in what might be called 'stealth sites' – partisan offerings – that did not clearly link to the main sites. The Liberal Democrats scored a notable and surprise web hit in this regard with their party operated but unbranded *labservative* site. This was a fun multi-media website that played on Nick Clegg's emphasis on the need for politics to go beyond the two main parties. However, a key contention of this chapter is that the value of the internet for the parties in 2010 lay not in the public face of their official campaign sites, but 'behind the scenes' in the management tools used to organise their campaigners, candidates and supporters. The internet was a vital way of keeping members and supporters connected to the campaign at large, and as Liberal Democrat blogger Mark Pack (2009) predicted, it was the old web 1.0 stalwart,

email, that proved to be one of the best ways to communicate with a whole range of potential voters in 2010.

Email

Looking across the parties it seems that the use of email clearly differed (as Matthew McGregor's chapter in this volume also makes clear). While the Liberal Democrats focused their programme largely on internal campaign activists, the Conservatives adopted a much broader and more vigorous strategy, making prolific use of email (often more than daily) to fill the inboxes of members and a wider group of interested voters with messages sent from a range of party figures including David Cameron, George Osborne, Eric Pickles and William Hague. Labour hovered somewhere in between the two. While more public facing than the Liberal Democrats in their email contact they were not quite as prolific and wide-ranging as the Conservatives, nor as slick and professional.

Online fundraising

Beyond email clear differences also existed between the parties in the political donations canvassed and received online. While falling well short of Obama's total, the Conservatives make one of the strongest claims for a return on their investment, reportedly receiving around £500,000 from online donations during the 2010 campaign (Elder, 2010). The party are somewhat less open in disclosing the costs of running the e-campaign, particularly the expenditure devoted to Google AdWords and other search engine optimisation tools, not to mention site and application development costs.

Web strategies

Overall the Conservatives did do an exceptional job of driving traffic to their sites and promoting their message through their strategic capture of key election events and phrases as Google search terms. A search for 'Gordon Brown' for example produced a link to a short Conservative video on YouTube. The other parties never really came close to matching this strategic reach. Other Conservative web-strategies were notably less successful, however. Examples include automatic reposting of all tweets using the '#cashgordon' tag on the official 'cashgordon.com' site. Many of the posts unfortunately contained links that sent visitors off to porn sites and even to labour.org.uk. Needless to say, this feature was quickly disabled! However, the incident suggested a surprising degree of naivety on the part of what was otherwise a highly professionalised and web-savvy Conservative operation (Crabtree, 2010). On balance, therefore, it remains an open question whether any of the parties received a significant return on their digital investment. Certainly it can be seen as highly unlikely that digital spend directly correlated to votes gained, as has been noted in other elections (Williamson et al., 2010).

Expensive projects like myconservatives.com simply did not gain the traction that was hoped for and the main party websites do not appear to have featured particularly strongly during the campaign period, despite the fact that their visitor numbers were up significantly

since 2005 (as noted by Gibson et al. elsewhere in this volume). This is perhaps unsurprising and mirrors what happened during the European Parliamentary Elections in 2009; the trends observed then suggested that social networking spaces and third-party sources were superseding centralised party websites as the focus for voters within digital campaigns (Williamson et al., 2010). The main party websites, as visitor numbers clearly show, are useful but they acted as repositories of information rather than tools for engagement. The next part of this chapter will discuss why this was the case.

Non-party produced election content

Beyond the official campaign offerings a range of independent election specific sites sprang up with varying degrees of success. As earlier parliamentary web campaigns in the UK and elsewhere have highlighted there has been an increasing trend toward the production of these non-aligned election-specific websites (Williamson et al., 2010).

One of the most notable examples to emerge in the UK 2010 campaign was *mydavidcameron.com*. The site was set up by an individual to promote user-generated spoofs of the Conservative party election billboards featuring a heavily 'airbrushed' image of the Tory party leader that appeared across the country. The website allowed anyone to download templates, create their own spoof Conservative election posters, and then upload them. These user-generated posters ranged from the banal to the hilarious and generated significant coverage in the mainstream press as well as among the online public. Whether the posters actually effected changes in voter perceptions and more importantly their behaviour is not known. However, introduction of this type of irreverent user-generated content constitutes the digital instantiation of a long tradition of negative humour that has actually been linked to mobilisation (Coleman, Shifman, & Ward, 2006). Of course, as Conservative web editor Craig Elder (2010) subsequently pointed out, the audience for the online posters will have been dwarfed by those seeing the original unaltered billboards around the country, making the website's likely impact comparatively negligible.

As well as these spoof sites a number of more seriously minded 'vote match' websites emerged. These sites sought to provide independent and non-partisan information to voters about the parties and their policies to help them in their reaching vote decision. Despite forming useful cues for undecided voters, none of these sites really seemed to gain a great deal of attention during the campaign. Indeed their strongest appeal may have been to the already engaged by providing a novel way to test their established partisan alignments. More generally, it would appear that a lack of time to build up the necessary critical mass of users in the electorate combined with the absence of the type of social capital and trust associated with more established sites meant that such initiatives largely failed to contribute to the wider political discourse at this election.

Social networks, Twitter and online social spaces

So what use was made of the much vaunted independent platforms like Facebook and Twitter by those within and outside the official channels? In 2005 most of the now widely

used web 2.0 technologies were in their infancy or had not yet arrived. By 2010 not only had internet access increased substantially – up from 55% in 2005 to 73% in 2009 (Ofcom, 2010; ONS, 2006) – but use of web 2.0 had expanded significantly, with more than one third of the UK reportedly registered on Facebook at the time of the election. Although the rate of growth is slowing this still amounts to some 25 million people (Clickymedia, 2010). Given the predominance of younger people on Facebook – 35% of registered users in the UK are aged between 20 and 29 (Clickymedia, 2010) – this was clearly a place where those concerned about declining participation and turnout would be keen to have a presence. This age group are typically the least likely to vote and hardest to reach and engage with politically (Hansard Society, 2010; Hay et al., 2008).

Getting to know you: The candidate's story

Facebook and Twitter did prove popular for a large number of aspiring MPs, however, all too often it seems that our would-be representatives failed to exploit the interactive properties of these media, using them more for editorials than for engagement. Or put another way, usage very much followed a 'broadcast' rather than a 'conversational' mode (Williamson, 2009, 2010b). The successful users of these online social networking and micro-blogging tools were the ones who used web tools as part of a locally-focussed campaign and who were prepared to get involved in a conversation with the electorate, online and offline. Labour MP Stella Creasy proved to be a good example of this mix. Creasy had spent considerable time before the campaign increasing her visibility within her constituency and focusing her online efforts on local issues rather than national issues and personalities. Her reward – a 1.5% increase in Labour's share of the vote in Walthamstow despite the national swing to the Conservatives – was credited by her, in large part to her effective use of social media, particularly Twitter (Creasey, 2010).

For every Stella Creasy, however, there were others whose extensive online efforts failed to deliver a positive result. Consider the examples of Ed Fordham (Liberal Democrat, Hampstead and Kilburn), Shaun Bailey (Conservative, Hammersmith) and Stuart King (Labour, Putney), all of whom ran high profile digital campaigns but ultimately failed to be elected. Fordham in fact came third, despite consistent predictions that he would be a close second or even win the seat. Conversely Jack Straw's 5.7% increase in the share of the votes in Blackburn was achieved without any evidence of a clear digital strategy. What these cases demonstrate is that it is not enough just to wire candidates up, rather electoral success in 2010 was, as much as ever, about ensuring that campaigns had a local focus and high public visibility. In other words, the key to success lay in developing politically relevant social capital - a job that could clearly be helped by the effective use of social media tools but one that the tools in and of themselves could not deliver alone. As has been shown by numerous authors, social capital is a major enabler of democracy with significant consequences for levels of participation and civic engagement (Cox, 2002; Norris, 2002; Putnam, 2000). Thus, the successful use of social media tools and the internet in this election required using them to build both online and offline connections, a process that demanded a significant investment in time and integration between traditional and web-based campaign methods.

The downsides of an over exuberant use of web 2.0 technologies were also on display in this election. A run of 'gotcha' moments involving candidates being caught out by unguarded and unprofessional uses of twitter and email appeared with disturbing regularity. One of the more highly publicised such incidences involved Scottish Labour candidate Stuart MacLennan who posted a series of offensive tweets prior to the campaign. The widespread reporting of the tweets led to his standing down as a candidate and later resigning from his job as a researcher at the Scottish Parliament (Siddique & Carrell, 2010). Other 'victims' of injudicious twittering included David Wright (Hope, 2010), who remains the Labour MP for Telford but was damaged by a series of ill judged comments on the popular micro-blogging service. A Liberal Democrat candidate was not so lucky, being forced to resign after being identified as the author of offensive comments posted anonymously on Guido Fawkes *order-order* political blog. Interestingly, it wasn't only the digitally naïve who fell foul of social media, Labour's Social Media Tsar, Kerry McCarthy was reported to the Police for a tweet releasing sensitive information about the count of postal votes in her Bristol East constituency (Batty, 2010). Interestingly, such gaffes were not so common among the ranks of the Conservatives. A difference that may be testament to the party's strong commitment to managing social media use amongst their candidates very carefully, even to the point of having to vet and pre-approve comments (Groves, 2010). While this hardly made for a spontaneous and effective use of social media platforms, it clearly helped to minimize the self-inflicted damage experienced by the other parties.

The view from below: the voter's story

One site that appeared to do much to reach out to the mass of undecided younger voters was the DemocracyUK election page on Facebook (www.facebook.com/democracyuk) which had just under 280,000 friends and took a strong line on encouraging young people to register to vote. Existing online communities such as *Mumsnet* and also the consumer site *moneysavingexpert.com* also generated a surprising amount of election-related debate. Discussions differed from those that took place on the more heavy-weight political blogs and in the twitterverse, appearing more conversational and drawing in the less politically active.

Despite their lack of an overtly political focus, the electoral value of these websites should not be under-estimated in comparison to the 'purpose-built' election sites of the parties and independent actors. The active social networks and online communities that these sites represent constitute powerful spaces for political discourse to take place. The levels of familiarity and trust felt by users contribute to meaningful interactions, through which changes in attitudes and behaviour become possible and even likely to occur (Chadwick, 2009; Williamson, 2008). The fact that these spaces are not *a priori* political but rather engage users in political discussion within a context of mutual concern over private or more domestic matters (e.g. parenting or financial services) creates an ebb and flow of conversation through which a natural transfer of interest and knowledge over political matters can occur (Hansard Society, 2009). As such these communities have established

themselves as what Oldenburg (1991) refers to as 'third places', wherein they become anchors for online community life and foster a culture of mutuality and cooperation.

Issues of trust and reciprocity also go some way to explaining the differential nature of the conversations that took place on Twitter and Facebook during the first televised leaders' debate, held on April 15, 2010. The quality of Facebook's leaders' debate page was high in terms of its inclusiveness and interactive opportunities. Questions were posted and replies given with little evidence of any 'flaming' behaviour. This more anchored presence of Facebook can be contrasted with the more ad-hoc and ephemeral nature of Twitter as a platform for discussion of the TV debates. In general the conversation generated through Twitter appeared to be more ideologically driven with a high frequency of partisan statements or jokes made (Williamson, 2010a). While its deliberative capacity was no doubt constrained by the 140 character limit per message, the tendency toward a more adversarial tone indicates that this particular web tool may be promoting the type of balkanised version of the internet that some commentators warned of in the early days of the net, where people seek out like-minds rather than choose to engage in more open minded deliberation (Williamson, 2007). The result being the fragmentation and dissolution of coherent political debate (Sunstein, 2001).

What happened to the blogsphere?

Blogs, despite having a longer and louder political presence than the other web 2.0 manifestations discussed above fell surprisingly silent during the 2010 campaign. Although there was some evidence of attempts at attack blogging on the opposition, particularly from the more right of centre blogs, overall their effectiveness appeared muted. One obvious reason for this placidity was that their authors on both the right and left side of politics did not want to harm the electoral prospects of the parties that they were associated with in the midst of what was shaping up to be a highly competitive race. Viral replication of highly critical and poorly thought through comments about party policy or leading politicians on one of these blogs could clearly have created a highly unwelcome 'own goal' at a crucial moment. This wariness was no doubt particularly keenly felt within the powerful right-wing blogsphere, a dominant force in UK politics since blogging first emerged. With the Tories on the brink of victory some self-censoring of its critical stance toward the party seemed inevitable. In addition to any self-imposed 'gag rule', however, a number of 'A-list' bloggers were busy elsewhere serving as political pundits for mainstream media outlets and so simply did not have a great deal of time for posting comment. As conservative blogger Iain Dale, drawing on Orwell's Animal Farm, noted reflexively in the Daily Telegraph

> The voters outside looked from blogger to journalist, and from journalist to blogger, and from blogger to journalist again; but already it was impossible to say which was which (Dale, 2010, p. 1).

The internet as mediator

So if, as was argued earlier, the role of the press within elections is in retreat and the internet has not quite yet come into its own, what of television? After the first of the televised leaders' debates a consensus started to grow around the idea that it was the old medium of television that would prove to have the most impact on the voting public. However, television is not a medium that promotes active engagement by citizens. Instead it presents a passive method for receiving information that promotes a disconnection between our daily lives and the world around us (Mander, 1978). It was arguably in extending the functionality of old media, particularly through the introduction of a discursive dimension that new digital media gives us one of the strongest signs of its future public and political impact. Around 9.4 million people watched the first debate and this popularity was reflected on social networking sites, with a live discussion on Facebook and a very active flow of posts on Twitter. Broadcasters' websites also reflected this shift towards media convergence with live streaming of the debates augmented with panels and live analysis. Tweetminster (2010) reported 184,396 tweets relating to the first debate, averaging over 29 tweets per second (and peaking during the debate at more than 41 tweets per second). Of course this flow of messaging needs to be placed in context. The 37,000 people who tweeted during the debate was still less than half of one percent of the TV audience. Despite the likely bias in the population participating Twitter and Facebook both served as remarkably accurate indicators of popular sentiment. Both displayed broadly similar trends to the sentiment tracking devices used in the debates themselves and were closely aligned with division of opinion registered in the post-debate polls.

Conclusion

The internet did play a critical part in the 2010 election campaign but the pre-election hype generated by the mainstream media was misguided and naïve. By and large the public party websites and election-specific web content failed to excite the high levels of interest seen in the US in 2008. The internet's primary value lay largely behind the scenes and it was database management and email that were vital to parties' effective exploitation of the new technology. Moreover, increasing media convergence saw the internet play a significant role in extracting added value out of the traditional media. Finally, social media and existing online communities played an important if understated role, particularly at the local level. As such the internet's use during the 2010 general election campaign simply reflected the ongoing and incremental process of appropriation that this new medium is experiencing within society *writ large*. Rather than there being any pivotal moment at which we entered the age of internet politics, the online election of 2010 demonstrated how the internet has become a 'business as usual' channel for people and, with this, for politics and political debate.

References

Batty, D. (2010, Apr 29). Police investigate Labour candidate's Twitter postal vote gaffe. *The Guardian*,

Chadwick, A. (2009). Web 2.0: New Challenges for the Study of E-Democracy in an Era of Informational Exuberance. *I/S: A Journal of Law and Policy for the Information Society, 5*(1), 9-41.

Clickymedia. (2010). UK Facebook user statistics April 2010. Retrieved Mar 27, 2010, from www.clickymedia.co.uk/2010/04/uk-facebook-user-statistics-april-2010/

Coleman, S., Shifman, L., & Ward, S. (2006). *Only Joking? Online Humour in the 2005 UK General Election*. Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute

Cox, E. (2002). Making the lucky country. In R. D. Putnam (Ed.), *Democracies in Flux* (pp. 333-358). New York: OUP.

Crabtree, J. (2010). David Cameron's battle to connect. *Wired UK*.

Creasey, S. (2010). *General election 2010 - Action replay*. Paper presented at the Personal Democracy Forum.

Curtice, J. (1999). *Was it the Sun wot won it again? The influence of newspapers in the 1997 election campaign*. Oxford: Centre for Research into Social Trends

Dale, I. (2010). General Election 2010: This was meant to be the internet election. So what happened? *Daily Telegraph*,

Elder, C. (2010). *General election 2010 - Action replay*. Paper presented at the Personal Democracy Forum.

Greenslade, R. (2010, Apr 26). Will it be the Sun or Twitter wot won it? *The Guardian,* pp. www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/apr/2026/election-2010-sun-twitter,

Groves, J. (2010, Feb 5). The Tory Twitter police: Election hopefuls told their online comments must be approved first. *Daily Mail*, from www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1248898/The-Tory-Twitter-police-Election-hopefuls-told-online-comments-approved-first.html

Habermas, J. (2006). *Ein avantgardistischer spürsinn für relevanze: Was den intellektuellen auszeichnet*. Wien, Austria: Renner Institut

Hansard Society. (2009). *Audit of Political Engagement 6*. London: Hansard Society

Hansard Society. (2010). *Audit of Political Engagement 7*. London: Hansard Society

Hay, C., Stoker, G., & Williamson, A. (2008). *Revitalising politics: Have we lost the plot?* . Paper presented at the Revitalising politics conference.

Hope, C. (2010). Labour MP David Wright apologises after his Twitter feed insults Conservatives. *Daily Telegraph*, from www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/politics/7245445/Labour-MP-David-Wright-apologises-after-his-Twitter-feed-insults-Conservatives.html

Mander, J. (1978). *Four arguments for the elimination of television*. New York: Morrow.

Norris, P. (2002). *Democratic phoenix: Political activism worldwide*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Ofcom. (2010). UK internet users becoming more security conscious. Retrieved May 27, 2010, from www.ofcom.org.uk/consumer/2010/05/uk-internet-users-becoming-more-security-conscious/

Oldenburg, R. (1991). *The great good place: Cafés, coffee shops, community centers, beauty parlors, general stores, bars, hangouts, and how they get you through the day*. New York, NY: Paragon.

ONS. (2006). *Internet Access: Households and Individuals*. London: Office of National Statistics

Pack, M. (2009). *Political campaigning online panel* Paper presented at the Future Democracy 09.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Siddique, H., & Carrell, S. (2010, Apr 9). Election 2010: Labour sacks candidate Stuart MacLennan in Twitter row. *The Guardian*, from www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/apr/09/stuart-maclennan-sacked-twitter-general-election

Sunstein, C. R. (2001). *Republic.com*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Swaine, J. (2010, Apr 6). General election 2010: Facebook and Twitter to have unprecedented impact. *Daily Telegraph*,

Tavits, M. (2006). Making democracy work more? Exploring the linkage between social capital and government performance. *Political Research Quarterly, 59*(2), 211-233.

Tweetminster. (2010). The leaders' debate. Retrieved Mar 27, 2010, from tweetminster.co.uk/posts/view/524329305

Williamson, A. (2007). *Empowering communities to action: Reclaiming local democracy through ICTs*. Paper presented at the Community Informatics Research Conference.

Williamson, A. (2008). Transforming democracy through ICT. In C. Van Slyke (Ed.), *Information communication technologies: Concepts, methodologies, tools, and applications* (pp. 2441-2449). Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference.

Williamson, A. (2009). *MPs online: Communicating with constituents*. London: Hansard Society

Williamson, A. (2010a). Calm down dear, it's only a tweet [Electronic Version]. Retrieved Mar 28, from hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/edemocracy/archive/2010/04/16/calm-down-dear-it-s-only-a-tweet.aspx

Williamson, A. (2010b). *Digital citizens and democratic participation*. London: Hansard Society

Williamson, A., Miller, L., & Fallon, F. (2010). *Behind the digital campaign: An exploration of the use, impact and regulation of digital campaigning*. London: Hansard Society

LESSONS FROM THE DISAPPEARING PHONE BOXES FOR THE INTERNET AND POLITICS

Mark Pack
Mandate Communications

Does the rhetoric and analysis of Joe Trippi[1] and Clay Shirky[2] or the reality of the mobile phone more accurately foretell the future impact of the internet on British politics? That is the central question for anyone looking to predict how technology may change politics and campaigning over this new Parliament.

The case for a Trippi and Shirky based view is fairly straight-forward and has often been made by others prophesising an internet election or an internet revolution in politics.[3] Both are skilled and eloquent chroniclers of how the internet can and will or should change the way people organise. By making it easier for like-minded people to find each other, talk to each other and organise together, the internet strips away power from traditional structures and hierarchies, opening up opportunities for new movements.

There are numerous examples of this happening outside politics or on the small political stages, but on the big political stage examples so far remain elusive. Howard Dean did not even become the Democrat nominee for the US Presidency, let alone President, whilst Barack Obama – for all the drama of his victory and the skill of his use of the internet – still started the contest as a Senator. Not exactly an outsider to political power or elites. Similarly in Britain, whilst the internet has helped fuel surges in support for parties (think UKIP in the 2004 European elections or, more debatably, the Liberal Democrats in the 2010 general election), in neither case did the internet create the surge.

As a result, the lesson of the mobile phone offers itself. The mobile phone has spawned a multi-billion pound industry. Thousands of people's jobs depend on it. An eco-system of

---

[1] Former campaign manager for Howard Dean and author of *The revolution will not be televised*, William Morrow, 2004.

[2] Adjunct professor at New York University (NYU) and author of *Here comes everybody*, Penguin, 2008.

[3] To be fair to Trippi and Shirky, their own views are often more nuanced and Shirky himself has steered clear of British political predictions.

supporting services and companies has sprung up. Our high streets feature numerous phone-dependent shops. The old phone box is disappearing from our streets. Phone masts have proliferated around our communities, frequently spawning debates, triggering research and involving people in the planning process. Text voting has become integral to many TV shows. The way we organise our social lives has changed as instant locating and planning strips away the need to plan in advance. People have started remembering fewer phone numbers as mobiles make the skill increasingly redundant. Their features have spawned a new vocabulary and an ever-expanding range of technical abilities has seen the mobile phone eat into areas once monopolised by other types of devices. The idea that a phone is just for phone calls is rapidly become as quaint as the idea that paper is for writing on rather than feeding into a printer.

The list could go on and on, yet for all the undeniable multifaceted impact of the mobile phone, where is the major change to our society or our politics that it has brought about? A huge collection of tactical changes, yes, but a strategic change? No.

So the alternative to a picture of British politics and the internet rooted in the views of Trippi and Shirky is to see the internet's impact as analogous to that of the mobile phone. Widespread and important, but not one that has or should be expected to fundamentally remake the way British politics is done. Trippi and Shirky after all base their arguments on arenas other than the British political one, and so their views can be widely applicable and yet still not be predictive of British politics.

Buttressing this more modest view of the internet's impact on British politics is the actual role of the internet in the 2010 general election.[4]

The general election was dominated by the televised debates between party leaders which, for the first time since Sweden pioneered the concept in the 1950s, came to a British general election. Moreover, the debates were 90 minutes long, free of advert breaks and cut-aways to reporters live on the scene (or more frequently live somewhere vaguely near the scene), shorn of any fancy computer graphics save in the titles and free of phone-ins and text messages. This wasn't just TV; this was old-fashioned TV.

Then from 10pm onwards on the Thursday night, politics was dominated by the voting system's output. It finally did what it wasn't meant to do, but many have often warned about: it served up a hung Parliament even though one party had a clear lead in the popular share of the vote. Proponents of first past the post had liked its habit of providing the most popular party with a clear overall majority even when that party was not actually that popular. This time it did not.

---

[4] Parts of the following are based on a guest post written for the Slugger O'Toole blog. Thank you to Mick Fealty for the invitation to write that post and prompt the thoughts which have been further developed here. They also expand on a point Nick Anstead made during a session we both gave at Salford University where he posed the question, "If that wasn't an internet election, what would be one?" Thank you to Stephen Ward for inviting us both to take part in that session.

However brief an account of British politics in the first half of 2010 one might be asked to write, it is hard to conceive leaving out either the TV debates or the fact of a hung Parliament. But the internet? Bring the word limit down far enough and it could be left out without making the account meaningless or misleading.

There may therefore be no rush to answer in the affirmative the question "Was this the internet election?", but as Nick Anstead has wisely pointed out, that says more about the question than it does about the internet. For the internet had numerous impacts, prompting the question that if they don't all add up to making it an internet election, quite what would the internet have to achieve to get an answer of "yes" to the question?

Perhaps the most important contribution of technology, including the internet, was in polling. Internet polling has both brought quicker polling in its own right and also helped move the phone polling industry into offering (even) quicker polls than used to be the norm. Combined, this meant that coverage of the first TV debate in particular was determined by what people told pollsters rather than by what media owners told editors. Without the reputable poll results to box them in, would the partisan media have reported the first debate in the same way? Almost certainly not.

The internet's other notable contribution was in its sheer pervasive presence in the day-to-day working of politicians, journalists, campaigners and helpers. Whatever the precise mix of tools and channels used by different groups, the internet has become essential to the working and communicating of those in politics. Not just (to take James Crabtree's terminology) in the visible form such as websites, online petitions and Facebook, but also in the invisible form of the online databases, the use of the internet to get artwork to printers and the use of email to organise when and where people meet for offline campaigning, and so on.

Pull the plug on the internet and political campaigns and their coverage would shudder to a halt. Most campaigning and coverage most certainly takes place offline, but it depends on the online world. Yet whilst it has become organisationally essential, the fundamental nature of political organisations and the shape of political campaigns has not been changed.

Perhaps the ability to so readily caricature the latest political billboard poster will kill of that advertising medium (though even there the case is far from sure), but billboard posters have come and gone in the past. Trace the rise of the national billboard poster following the Liberal Party's test case that first opened up the doors to national political advertising, through to its post-1992 decline, subsequent revival and now possible death once more and you cannot trace a wider changing nature of elections. The comings and goings of the billboard poster are an interesting tale, but it is not a tale of wider significance.

The internet has changed some of the faces on the political scene, as my own 2010 campaign experiences show. Blogging and tweeting definitely gave me a higher profile and a supply of media appearances that would not have been possible in pre-internet days. But to what overall effect on the way politics is done?

Nice though it was to be able to use the My David Cameron poster spoof site to produce one that then was reprinted by the Daily Mail, expanding the pool of occasional authors of political satire tweaked rather than revolutionised politics.

Moreover, fun (and hopefully productive) though the media appearances were, having an ex-political party staffer appearing in the media is much more business as usual than a new way of doing politics. Bloggers have gently displaced backbenchers from some media slots and made it much harder for future MPs to carve the sort of 'rent-a-quote MP' routes that some took in the 1980s – as bloggers now get first dibs – but that is a gentle evolution rather than a new politics.

Looking at the range of Liberal Democrat pundits regularly called on by the media, there was a sprinkling of bloggers to vary the usual mix of MPs, ex-MPs and the like. It was a different circle of political faces, open opened up to some new – and very good – people, but still a fairly small pool.[5]

The political elite may have been opened up to some new people and, courtesy of the ability of good and dedicated bloggers to elbow their way in to getting attention, be somewhat more permeable than in the past. However, whilst being a more open elite it is still an elite.

Open elites are, in fact, a common occurrence in areas where the internet has had a major impact, even in the two poster children of its impact, Linux and Wikipedia.

The Linux operating system is one of the biggest and most important examples of how the creation of open software is facilitated by the internet and can result in high quality, widely used programs. Yet for all the numerous contributors spread across the globe, Linux is not run on cooperative or democratic principles. Instead, the best model is that of the benevolent dictator – Linus Torvalds. He may be very benevolent and not very dictatorial but the core final decisions are not made via democracy. He has the final world, even if it is one hemmed in by the knowledge that volunteers will only continue to contribute if treated well and respected. Anyone can start contributing and, if their work is good and relevant enough, see their code used by millions around the world. That makes the Linux community, with both in its small numbers (even as a proportion of computer programmers, let alone the wider number of people who directly use the software) and its benevolent dictatorship power structure, an elite albeit an open one.

Similarly, Wikipedia is a dramatic and important example of how the internet can facilitate widespread cooperation in content generation, producing the most heavily used encyclopaedia in the world. As with Linux, there are many contributors from around the globe, though their numbers compared to those who use the encyclopaedia are small.

---

[5] It is also a pool still dominated by white men, a point I visually illustrated in my February 2010 lecture at Nottingham University: www.markpack.org.uk/how-the-internet-is-changing-british-politics-and-what-2010-will-bring/

As with Linux too, there is a power structure underpinning the enterprise which adds to its elite characterisation. In Wikipedia's case previous disputes have seen the person who would fill the role of benevolent dictator – Jimmy Wales – cede more power to others and even the creation of levels of authority based on a range of democratic systems. Some people are elevated to positions of power over others, with the numbers getting smaller as the power increases and communal decision making being importance at the lowest levels – where consensus is prized – but fading at higher levels. Even at those lowest levels, for a new participant the system has many elitist features with the frequent references to a large body of Wikipedia rules and the willingness of many to undo changes made by new people. To decide to persevere and try to persuade the wider Wikipedia community that a regular editor is wrong in their views and some text should read otherwise can be a daunting prospect if that editor is insistent. It can – and often is – done but it adds to the picture of an elite, or rather an open elite.

Even on Twitter – a nearly egalitarian service at the technical level – elites have quickly grown up. The system has only one type of user – immediately putting everyone on a level playing field – and only elaborates on that slightly with the "authenticated" tag that is added to some users, indicating not only that Twitter staff have authenticated the account to show the person is really who they say they are but also indicating that they are sufficiently important in those staff's eyes to have warranted that step. It is a pretty minor piece of structure to assemble on top of the basic uniformity of one account type for everyone.

This technical equality has not stopped the creation of elites being part of the emerging communities and behaviour on Twitter as the service has grown. In the field of UK politics, for example, there are the more prominent tweeters, the networks of journalists and politicians with common names popping up in the lists of who each thinks is worth following. It is a structure that has meretricious routes (who provides the most interesting / timely / funny messages?) yet rapidly we have seen the emergence of people whose tweets are considered important because other people already consider their tweets important – and therefore if you want to know what others are talking about you need to follow them.

It is an emergent elite that is also developed from factors outside of Twitter. Who knows what is happening in politics? Who is able to be at a tweet-sending device at the right times? And so on. So once again, whilst it is an elite that is open to newcomers, it is still an elite.

It is the same picture in British political blogging. Iain Dale is a former Conservative Parliamentary candidate, Jonathan Isaby is an ex-Telegraph journalist, Will Straw is the son of a former Cabinet minister and so on. They all have their own abilities, characters and careers, but this is not a wholly new group to British politics.

Despite the internet's widespread impact on British politics, it has made the political elites more open rather than replacing or abolishing them. Given the prevalence of open elites in areas that have been transformed by the internet – such as Linux and Wikipedia – I believe the expectations (or hopes) in the Trippi/Shirky mould that there can or will be "an internet election" which radically reshapes our political system are misplaced.

We have already had one general election – in fact, more like two or three – where the internet had become an organisational necessity and, mobile phone like, its impact has spread widely. They have not seen British politics reshaped, so the wise conclusion is that there is no reason to think the next Parliamentary cycle will be any different. Watch the elites shift, the faces change, openness exploited by some, but don't expect the hierarchies and structures to come tumbling down.

Instead, for more dramatic change look to the business of governing with open data and public sharing of information. As with political campaigning, the shift may not go further than creating open elites, but for many areas of governing the elites are currently so closed that such a change would be dramatic.

Take the availability of detailed spending information for government departments. Making it available in theory to millions of people will no more result in millions of Britons analysing it than making Wikipedia available to anyone to edit has resulted in millions of Britons editing it.

But as Wikipedia has shown (and so too as the My Society projects such as TheyWorkForYou.com have shown), it need only take a small number to produce information that far wider audiences consume. Both Wikipedia and My Society have changed the ways information are consumed. So too will the new flow of government data and information. How and when that happens is the future trend to watch, not a chasing of the willow-the-wisp of "will the next one be an internet general election?"

CLICK HERE TO UNSUBSCIBE: THE USE OF EMAIL IN THE 2010 ELECTION

Matthew McGregor
Blue State Digital

On the morning of Thursday 6th May 2010, hundreds of thousands of voters awoke to an Election Day different to ones that had gone before. They were planning to vote, and almost all had made up their minds who for. The difference was that on this Election Day, the leaders of Britain's main parties sent them a personalised email.

The emails from Gordon Brown and David Cameron arrived in around 850,000 inboxes during the morning and exhorted their readers to vote. "We all know it's time for change", wrote David Cameron. Gordon Brown told Labour supporters in a 9am email that only their active support on the day would help the party – "Now let's get going" he ended.

The Election Day emails were the culmination of two email programmes that sought to maximise the votes for their parties in starkly different ways, and which both struggled to meet the high expectations of the media's much vaunted "first internet election".[1]

Email, so much used by organisations to broadcast their own news to audiences, is increasingly used by political campaigns to drive a conversation with supporters that results in genuine two-way engagement. At its best, this engagement sustains an online community in which supporters become active advocates for the cause, delivering tangible benefits for the party, and the satisfaction of being a meaningful part of something compelling and important to the supporter.

The way in which Labour and the Conservatives used email points to their deeper strategic approaches to new media. In this chapter, we will lay out the steady drumbeat of email that emanated from the campaign teams, examine the different tactics and philosophies that underpinned them, and consider the varying successes and failures of the programmes.

---

[1] See for example Reuters' "Will this be the internet election?" blog post blogs.reuters.com/uknews/010/03/10/will-this-be-the-internet-election

Broadcast versus engagement

In the 2010 election, the parties used new media channels to get their key messages out directly to voters. These included better than ever websites, social media such as Twitter and Facebook, and online advertising. Email, while cited as a seemingly dying medium[2], remains central to most online programmes.

To those using email for campaigning, there are two distinct schools of thought regarding the ends to which email communication is best placed to achieve.

One view is that the email is best used to communicate messages to a broad audience of engaged but passive or undecided groups of people. This "blast" approach is focused on maximising the number of people receiving the email, and in honing a better and better use of content to ensure open rates are high and that information is consumed. Broadcast and consumption is the focus.

Another school of thinking is that email is better placed to communicate messages to already engaged and potentially active supporters to increase the rate at which those supporters act as agents or advocates for the message originally disseminated. This action can be online – e.g. posting content to social media networks – or it can be offline, pushing people to donate or join activism efforts with traditional campaign activities such as door-knocking and phone canvassing.

The benchmark for email programmes remains President Obama's campaign of 2008. Thirteen million email addresses – one in five of those people voting for Obama – signed up to an email list that told the story of the campaign week by week, and which encouraged supporters to donate millions of dollars, and millions of hours of activism. Of the two approaches outlined, the Obama campaign took the second, using email as a platform for a strategy that sought to engage and mobilise supporters, creating an army of advocates across the country for their candidate. Both of the two major UK parties used email in support of their election efforts, each sending around four to five emails per week throughout the campaign. Although neither party's programme succeeded to the extent that Obama's did, as the weeks passed it became apparent there were some clear differences in strategy and approach.

The Conservative approach

The Conservatives' new media team saw email largely as a support to the party's overall message delivery plans[3], and the approach remained consistent with the previous 18-month period in which Cameron had sent weekly emails to the subscriber list in a 'news broadcast' mode.

---

[2] See, for example, "Why Email No Longer Rules" Wall Street Journal, 12 October 2009 online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203803904574431151489408372.html

[3] Telephone interview with Samuel Coates, Conservative Party new media team, 7 June 2010

Activism, especially of the offline variety, was mentioned at certain points but the primary focus was on imparting news and information. There were some 'soft' calls for action that included inviting subscribers to watch video produced by the party. While a number of the videos were simply internet versions of the Party Election Broadcasts made for television, others were 'home-grown', featuring content that was purpose-built for the online audience.

Offline action, including that based on the MyConservatives.com platform built to organise better activists, was not trailed heavily in the email programme. During the campaign, an email from Eric Pickles, the party chairman, promoted an online form where supporters could sign-up for local campaign activities. This information was then forwarded to local Conservative Associations.

The Tories' email programme drove online fundraising fairly aggressively during the campaign itself. However in the run up to the calling of the election requests for funds were more typically presented as 'soft' asks, i.e. invitations to donate coming at the end of a message. American email campaigns by contrast generally have taken a much more direct line, with an entire email focusing on a single request for a donation.

Overall, however, this softly-softly approach appeared to have worked relatively well for them. The Conservatives new media team estimated that online fundraising brought in donations of around £500,000 during the official campaign period, with an average donation of around £50 per transaction[4]. The most successful fundraising email came in the third week of the campaign when William Hague wrote to the list with a video of Gary Barlow endorsing the party. In the email Hague – one of the party's more popular front benchers – asked directly for funds. According to Samuel Coates of the Conservative new media team, the email brought in £100,000 in the immediate 24-hour period after it was sent [5].

The Labour approach

Labour took a different approach to the Conservatives, and one that followed more closely that of the Obama team. This was made crystal clear after the election when Douglas Alexander (the party's Campaign Director) wrote in a piece for *Total Politics* that, "for the Tories, new media was just another part of their one-way broadcast campaign, Labour set about developing a strategy designed to mobilise and motivate people to help us where we know it matters most - on the doorstep."[6]

Although much of the party's publicity focused on the 'doorstep', most of the party's emails directed supporters toward online activities, often in preference to offline actions. The reasoning for this, according to Sue MacMillan of Labour's new media team was that one set

[4] Information given during interview with Conservative Party official, 18 July 2010

[5] Interview with Samuel Coates, member of the Conservative Party's new media team, 7 June 2010

[6] Douglas Alexander. (2010). General election 2010: The Labour campaign. Total Politics magazine, www.totalpolitics.com/magazine_detail.php?id=936

of (online) actions will encourage supporters to take action elsewhere (i.e. offline). "We definitely had a sense that if you build an online community, it will lead to more offline activity. When you sit in the debates at Party Conference you feel part of something bigger. We wanted to replicate that online – to give people that sense that 'I am not just in my constituency on my own'".[7]

Offline activities did not feature as heavily in the party's main email programme, but Labour's system did alert supporters to activities through automated emails. These were driven through the party's "Membersnet" tool, and provided a list of activities in marginal seats within a certain radius of the person receiving the email. Although it could be argued that the functionally clunky emails, sent without much context or personalisation, were a weaker element of the overall programme, they do point to Labour's focus on the real world end goal of using email.

As with the Conservatives, Labour are quietly proud of their fundraising efforts. Labour's wider online efforts raised £350,000 during the campaign with an average donation of £50, an amount identical to that claimed by the Conservatives[8]. From testing different reactions to emails early in the campaign, Labour learned that there was a measurable increase in donations with the express or 'hard' asks for money over subtler 'soft' asks that simply included a donate button at the bottom of the email. It also became clear that negative emails worked better than those that simply claimed credit for the Labour government. Emails referencing Lord Ashcroft's donations to the Conservative Party proved particularly effective in driving cash into the Labour party's campaign coffers. Labour also learned quickly the importance of linking "hard ask" donation requests to specific campaign activities, such as advertising spend or leaflet production.

Email programmes as media management

An additional functionality of the email programmes that both parties operated in to some degree was the targeting of messages toward established news media outlets and journalists, with a tactic of 'press-release-by-email' in evidence during the campaign. These emails, rather than focusing on the interests and activism of voters or supporters, were designed to frame or feed a 'line' into the mainstream media reporting of events. Perhaps the best example of this was Gordon Brown's pained email to supporters apologising for his "Mrs Duffy moment". This email came just hours after a planned email from Ed Balls, and seemed mainly intended to help the party's wider effort to shut the story down. In addition, Peter Mandelson for Labour and George Osborne for the Conservatives sent achingly long emails setting out their strategic view of the campaign as it was progressing that seemed designed much more for the close observer or political 'anorak' rather than the average voter or party member.

---

[7] Interview with Sue MacMillan, Labour Party New Media Director, 18 June 2010

[8] Information given during interview with Labour Party official, 14 July 2010

A week in the life of a subscriber

Signing up to a party email list, despite being a relatively simple task, signifies a certain degree of commitment to the organisation involved. Those signed up to a party's email list have signalled an active interest in hearing its views and about the activities it is involved in, as well as a learning about the ways in which they could be further engaged in those actions.

Both parties have engaged in building member email databases since the last election, allowing them to contact those most actively engaged in the party's activities. Both parties also used the period ahead of the General Election campaign to expand these databases to include non-members by running individual e-petition campaigns. The Conservatives appear to have been most successful in this regard, with a total of 500,000 email addresses captured[9], including through the use of 'affinity' marketing. Although no public record of Labour's email list size is available, it is said to be around 350,000 strong[10].

The experience of members of each of these email lists was quite different. This followed largely from the differing approaches taken by each of the party's to the purpose of the email programme and also, to a degree, to the resources they were prepared to commit to its development. To illustrate the key difference between the two main parties' use of their email lists, we captured those sent by each during a single week of the campaign. This period came in the run up to the final weekend before polling day. The key characteristics of the parties' emails are set out in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Sample of emails sent by main parties during election, 21 April – 30 April

Date	Sender	Title	Summary	Action	Words
22 April	Douglas Alexander	What can you do tonight?	Short email explaining a page on the LP site that collates tweets and other messages posted during that evening's Leaders Debate.	Visit Labour Party website discussion area	230
25 April	Peter Mandelson	State of the Race memo 4	Long memo setting out Peter Mandelson's view of the campaign and the big issues that are being fought over.	Soft donate ask	931
28 April (11am)	Ed Balls	Together we can Save Our Sure Start	Launch of LP 'family's manifesto' and petition in support of Sure Start centres.	Visit a campaign Facebook page	252
28 April (6pm)	Gordon Brown	My Apology to Mrs Duffy	Email explaining why the PM apologises to Gillian Duffy and apologising to LP supporters for "impact" on the campaign.	NO ACTION	310

---

[9] Email list size confirmed during interview with Conservative Party official, 18 July 2010.

[10] Email list size confirmed during interview with Labour Party official, 14 July 2010.

Date	Sender	Subject	Description	Call to action	Words
29 April	Douglas Alexander	Tonight: Substance vs Style	Email explaining a page on the LP site that collates tweets and other messages posted during that evening's Leaders Debate.	Visit Labour Party website discussion area	257
30 April	Gordon Brown	This election is still wide open	Email to make the case that the election is close with many voters undecided – and that LP supporters can make the difference by volunteering.	Pledge x hours to campaign offline for Labour	354
21 April	William Hague	Our Country needs a decisive Conservative victory	Email which covers the need to eject Gordon Brown, the launch of a new video from the campaign trail and tidbits from Hague's own campaign activities.	Watch Gary Barlow video Donate	441
24 April	George Osborne	My take on week three of the campaign	Email setting out key elements of the election, including a review of the debate and an appeal for funds.	Watch PEB Watch Internet Ad Donate	936
26 April	Eric Pickles	10 days until the election – help us win	Email from Party chairman with a range of small actions people can take to assist the party's campaign.	Fill out volunteer form Download a poster to print out Donate Watch PEB Forward email to friends	757
28 April	Michael Gove	The Conservatives are fighting for our children's future	Short email setting out Tory policy on "free schools"	Watch video of Cameron	505
30 April	David Cameron	A contract between the Conservative Party and you	Email launching a 'contract' setting out Conservative policy pledges for a new government.	NO ACTION	966

Focus

The Conservatives in particular use a broadcast model of email that asks people to consume. Of the five emails in the week examined, four ask people to watch a video of Conservative politicians speaking to the camera. This approach of "watch, not do" fits with the party's strategy of attempting to reach undecided voters and trying to encourage them to consume content from the party that could

persuade them to cast their vote for the Conservatives.

Labour by contrast kept a focus on activism. Each email, aside from the unusual "Mrs Duffy" email from Gordon Brown, and Peter Mandelson's "state of the race memo" referred supporters to an activity that they could carry out, and linked their support through that activity to the success of Labour's campaign.

Length

Labour's email during this period had an average of 389 words per message, dropping to 280 words when Peter Mandelson's extraordinarily long "State of the race memo" message was excluded (with a word count of 931). By contrast, the Conservative Party's emails were generally almost twice as long as those from Labour. Over the same period, the party's five emails averaged 721 words. The shortest – William Hague's email of 21 April totalling 441 words – was still longer than Labour's longest (if excluding the Mandelson outlier). In addition, Conservative emails used embedded graphics in their emails to a greater extent in this period than Labour, lengthening the emails still further.

Events

Email allows organisations to react swiftly to breaking events and help to frame and define wider popular reaction as well as generating a response from supporters. As seasoned online campaign managers in the U.S. have attested to, the benefits accrued from the tying of emails to events happening in the wider campaign are potentially very significant. According to Obama's New Media Director Joe Rospars, if a supporter is reading content that chimes with what they have just seen on television, elsewhere online or have even read in a paper, the connection will be clearer, and consequently the supporter more likely to take action in support of request.[11]

A classic example of this came during the Republican National Convention in 2008 when Sarah Palin dismissed Barack Obama's background as a community organiser. Before that evening's TV had finished analysing the speech an email had been sent by the Obama campaign that aggressively challenged her claims and asked for donations to fight back against Palin's attack.

The appeal raised several million dollars, according to Rospars[12]. While there some instances where the UK parties adopted this more responsive or 'real time' approach – Gordon Brown's email apology for his dismissal of Gillian Duffy as a "bigoted woman" being one –

---

[11] Interview with Joe Rospars, 11 July 2010

[12] Interview with Joe Rospars, 11 July 2010

overall the parties favoured a more pre-planned approach.

Linking email to campaign moments

Developing the notion of specific events driving successful email messaging, it is their use around 'moments' in a campaign that is seen as crucial to maximising their capacity for energising and mobilising support and framing the party's message. A 'moment' is hard to define, but can include an event, speech, gaffe, or new advertisement. The first UK election debates were such moments. Although the parties referred to them in email they did not use them very effectively to build momentum or action.

Labour, in the form of Douglas Alexander's "Tonight" email sought to shape reaction to the first debate before it took place and made no effort to contact email supporters afterward. The Conservatives were even more reticent. No email was sent on the day of the debate and an email sent by David Cameron the following day made no reference to it at all. Arguably it was the Liberal Democrats, however, who failed most spectacularly to exploit the opportunities for capturing the mobilising 'moment' offered by the TV debates. Nick Clegg's stunning success in the first of the series clearly presented an ideal opportunity for email appeals to action to immediately follow. An email response didn't appear in supporter's inboxes, however, until the afternoon of the following day[13].

What held the parties back?

So how do we explain the reluctance of the parties to fully exploit the potential of their email programmes?

Resources

Compared to the U.S. the parties' programmes were miniscule in their overall cost. A recurring theme when examining the email campaigns of both UK parties is the low level of financial and staffing investment made compared to other areas of campaign spending. When interviewing staff at both parties, the topic of capacity and under-resourcing was returned to throughout the conversation. This referred in part to the under-development of the technology at hand, but was also clearly a matter of insufficient staff time to carry out additional new media campaign functions, such as segmenting email lists according to geography and user behaviour. By contrast both parties invested heavily in advertising, especially billboards in the

---

[13] Email from the Liberal Democrats. Subject: Keep the momentum going. Time stamp: 16 April 2010 14:09. Sender: Chris Fox.

case of the Conservative Party. The further harsh reality for Labour was that they fought the election during a funding crisis that saw every area of the campaign underfunded. Indeed this was likely a factor that helps to explain why Labour's online campaign more generally focused more on mobilising local activists and fundraising among supporters than that of the better-funded Conservatives.

Internal organisation

The teams sending the emails for the parties required the support of senior members of the party to ensure the programmes were run efficiently and effectively. As noted above, in both parties an increasingly wide range of prominent figures featured as authors of messages. This process, however, took time. As one party staffer commented, "Our emails were a growing pain – they started out not very good but got better progressively over time as politicians bought into what we were doing."[14] While involvement of senior figures did have the potential to slow the process down, staffers and politicians saw authenticity as important. David Cameron for example personally checked emails sent in his name.[15]

Despite the slow start it was clear that both sets of new media teams had a considerable degree of operational independence and that email was not subservient to other elements of a campaign. One campaign official said, "There is often pressure to add in the 'daily lines to take', it could have become a nightmare, but we actually got to do it our way. We had quite a lot latitude and we had a lot of buy in from the top. There were more loops to jump through once the campaign started officially, but they weren't massive."[16]

Strategy

New Media works most effectively when it is central to the overall campaign strategy being executed by a party or candidate. Parties will get the most out of this area of the campaign when New Media teams don't feel the need to protect themselves from other elements of a campaign, but are instead empowered by campaign managers to lead other elements of the campaign.

---

[14] Interview with Labour Party official, 14 July 2010

[15] Information confirmed during interview with Conservative Party official, 18 July 2010

[16] Interview with Conservative Party official, 18 July 2010

Conclusion

Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign was seen as setting new standards for internet campaigning. Its chief innovation was that it placed effective use of new media at the heart of the operation. The more typical approach, however, is that campaigns set their strategy and then seek to 'bolt on' new media tools in support of that. Both major parties in the UK election of 2010 are seen as falling into the latter camp, particularly in their use of email, which essentially amplified their traditional election campaign plan.

Party email programmes can be a powerful means of driving a conversation with supporters and deepening their relationship with the party. Although both Labour and the Conservatives emphasised the role their online supporters could play in their campaigns through email, neither really succeeded in fully delivering on this promise.

For the Conservatives, a professionally delivered and aesthetically strong email programme was operated, largely following the old principles of top-down broadcast communication, with elements of social media buzz added in. Ultimately it lacked the grassroots element harnessed so successfully by Obama.

Labour's email programme, by contrast, clearly sought to apply the lessons of the Obama campaign, in that its stated objective was to mobilise supporters, and to use those supporters as an offline army of advocates for the party. How far an effective implementation of that strategy took place during the campaign, however, is clearly a matter of debate. Much of the action that supporters were asked to take saw them remain online rather than transferring their energies to more effectual offline activities. Initiatives such as the debate night 'social media dashboard' for example created something of a buzz but did not result in any obvious and substantial wave of face-to-face activism.

The raised expectations for an "internet election" within the mainstream media (and discussed by Andy Williamson's chapter in this volume) always meant that 2010 was likely to disappoint. However, as UK politicians and parties develop a greater understanding of the new media and its impact on campaigning, the role of email is clearly set to grow in importance. Labour's linking of email to grassroots activism in particular shows an understanding of its mobilising and 'action' oriented possibilities that will no doubt continue to be developed into the future.

Ultimately what the UK parties need to recognise to make the best use of this by now established form of online communication, is that email at its heart is not just another medium through which to pump out information from the centre. In email, the parties have the opportunity to build relationships with supporters that can be honed and developed over time. The supporter can get more from supporting the party, and the party can build an army of advocates across the country. It is in understanding and cultivating such relationships, rather than focusing on the technology per se, that the parties will find ways to increasingly use new media successfully.

YES WE DID? WHAT LABOUR LEARNED FROM OBAMA

Will Straw
Left Foot Forward

Barack Obama's presidential victory in 2008 was heralded for its groundbreaking use of new media. But his team knew that his website, *MyBarackObama.com* social network, email list, and use of YouTube was merely a tool to enhance the organisation and message of his campaign rather than an end in itself.

Famously, the Obama campaign harvested 13 million email addresses but this was done to extract $500 million dollars in small donations and encourage millions of people to knock on their neighbours' doors. In the words of Joe Rospars, Obama's head of new media, "the Obama campaign prioritised the web because it provided a conduit to the very heart of the organisation: ordinary people."[1]

Replicating this success was always going to be a hard task for Britain's political parties but over the last two years both major parties have been engaged in a process of learning the online and offline lessons offered by Obama's campaign.

The Conservative party's approach focused on improving the user-based experience of the wider electorate by investing in a shiny new website and spending money on Google ads.[2] The Labour party, meanwhile, has tended to focus its online efforts on increasing the number, and enhancing the work, of its activists.

In this chapter, we will examine how Labour changed its approach to new media in order to enhance self-organisation, improve volunteer management, and increase fundraising. We will also look at innovations that took place at the local level before questioning whether the focus by Labour's leadership candidates on the community organising model, popularised by Barack Obama, will end up being counter-productive without new attempts at root-and-branch reform.

---

[1] www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/may/04/new-digital-battlefield-old-politics

[2] See for example James Crabtree, 'How the Conservatives learned from Obama, Google and Facebook to digitise their election strategy' (Wired).

New media at the national level

Labour's campaign coordinator Douglas Alexander described the key insight from Barack Obama's presidential campaign as "word of mouth".[3] In a YouTube video to Labour activists, he said, "Members of social networks – whether that is the book club, whether that's the coffee morning, whether that's the sports and social clubs or whether that's online – each one of us has a role to play in communicating Labour's message."[4]

Despite the election result, which saw the party fall to its second worst defeat since the Great Depression, the local campaigning that Alexander encouraged was surprisingly successful. By Election Day, Labour activists were making three times the number of contacts with voters that they had in 2005.[5] A poll by YouGov showed that, despite the money that Lord Ashcroft had poured into marginal seats, more members of the public had been contacted by a Labour activist than by an activist from any other party. Over the course of the campaign 17% of the public had been contacted by Labour's foot soldiers – by telephone, on their doorstep, or somewhere neutral like a shopping centre – compared to 16% by Conservative activists and five percent by Liberal Democrats.

As with Barack Obama, Labour achieved this by recruiting activists and then encouraging them to carry out the age-old techniques of knocking on doors or phone voters. This is where new media came in.

Following a trip by Douglas Alexander and Labour's new media team to the United States in the summer of 2008, the party built an online system to track new volunteers. The programme allowed a dedicated team at HQ to phone someone who volunteered within hours of their joining or volunteering. In doing so they could find out how the new person wanted to be involved and then point them in the direction of their nearest marginal seat. The central team then had the simple task of sending the information gathered to the campaign coordinator in the relevant constituency. It sounds deadly simple but, until 2010, no system had been put in place to manage prospective volunteers who stumbled across the party's website.

Meanwhile, working alongside the Progress pressure group, Labour launched the National Volunteer Taskforce with the explicit aim of "harnessing the talents of our members and supporters".[6] The aim was to recruit volunteers with the "experience and ability to project manage, think innovatively and make strategic decisions". This followed the piloting of other community organising techniques, such as the house parties used by Obama.

Once recruited, volunteers were encouraged to contact voters in a chosen area. Most of this activity took place street by street but the party also enhanced the way it contacted voters

---

[3] www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/feb/19/labour-voters-optimism-tory-election

[4] www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJdZ32Y5Fs0

[5] Anthony Painter, "A little more conversation, a little more action", (Orange, 2010).

[6] www.progressonline.org.uk/articles/article.asp?a=4835

by telephone. A new initiative, imported directly from American campaigns, was the virtual phonebank.[7]

Accessed through the party's Membersnet system, users were able to contact voters in a particular target seat from the comfort of their own home. The online system provided voters' numbers, a script for the conversation focusing on local issues, and had an easy-to-use system allowing them to click on buttons to feedback the voters' answers as they worked their way through the call. All the data was fed back into Contact Creator, the party's national voter database.

Cottoning onto the party's desire to give supporters the tools to self-organise, local activists began to adapt this system. A group of young activists in Manchester, for example, took up the challenge and used Twitter to encourage Labour supporters all around the country to spend their Monday evenings speaking to voters in one particular area.[8] The campaign was called "MobMonday" referring to the desire to mobilise a mob of people to use their mobiles to help Labour.

The Party embraced this new grassroots led approach to campaigns. "Gone are the days when the Party believed that all good ideas came from Head Office – or that all that Party supporters were good for was knocking on doors", one insider who worked on the new media aspects of the campaign told me. "Labour hasn't just 'let go' – it has also done its best to support, promote, empower and include its grassroots activists in its campaigning." It did this in relation to MobMonday by encouraging high profile politicians like Sadiq Khan to get involved and produced videos showing MobMonday in action.[9]

The Party also used new media to give its supporters the necessary information to convince their friends to vote Labour. All the policy briefings that would normally have gone only to candidates and the media were made available on the party's website and via a popular iPhone app. Douglas Alexander made regular YouTube videos updating supporters on the campaign strategy. Meanwhile, 110,000 people viewed or downloaded the manifesto (compared to just 8,000 purchasing the document at the previous election). Bloggers were also invited to press briefings and special blogger briefings ensuring that sites popular with members including Labour List and Left Foot Forward were often ahead of the mainstream media on new announcements. All this meant that supporters had access to all the necessary materials to support their own persuasion efforts on the doorstep or with their friends and family.

The party also developed issue-specific websites and email lists such as "Ed's Pledge" on climate change and the "Back the Ban" campaign on foxhunting.[10,11] Where emails had

---

[7] www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Lt2sOrFCN0&feature=player_embedded

[8] www.labourlist.org/labour-tweeters-unite-for-mobmonday

[9] www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBQPruFknZ4

[10] www.climatechangepledge.co.uk

[11] www.backtheban.com

previously been tedious press releases sent in the name of Labour's Cabinet Ministers, the party experimented with dynamic messages asking supporters to write a letter to a local paper, sign a petition, or email a friend. This resulted in open rates on emails as high as 80% and action rates of 20% – far above average commercial rates.

Finally, despite a good degree of scepticism from within the party, £350,000 was raised online during the campaign. David Blunkett sent a series of emails to members asking for donations (often using the size of Lord Ashcroft's gifts to the Tories as a hook) and feeding back on progress. Tailored emails were sent to the single-issue email lists mentioned above asking for funding for specific campaigns. In addition, a number of candidates made good use of centrally provided tools for prospective parliamentary candidates to raise local funds online. For example, Lucy Powell in Manchester Withington was able to raise £2,000 in just two hours.

Not everything, however, went to plan and some of the party's initiatives backfired. Most famously, the party asked its activists to design a poster for its Easter weekend campaign. Jacob Quagliozzi, a 24-year-old Labour supporter from St Albans, entered the winning design featuring David Cameron as Gene Hunt, the politically incorrect but popular star of the Ashes to Ashes TV series, under the slogan "Don't let him take Britain back to the 1980s".[12] As with David Cameron's "I'll cut the deficit, not the NHS" posters, the campaign was widely spoofed including by the Conservative party who changed the slogan to read, "Fire up the Quattro. It's time for change".[13]

Community organising at the local level

As we all remember, the big story of election night was that despite nearly 100 gains, the Conservative party could not do enough to win an overall majority. The Conservative tide was held back by pockets of resistance by local Labour campaigns around the country. Meanwhile the party gained 14 councils and close to 500 new councillors. Much of this was due to direct experience of Barack Obama's campaigning techniques as close to 200 Labour party activists made it out to the United States in 2008 to volunteer and observe the final stages of Barack Obama's assent to the White House. Many others, including myself, had been working in the United States for the duration of the campaign or longer.

In Bethnal Green and Bow, campaign manager Marcus Roberts had recently returned from a lengthy stint in the US where he had worked on Al Gore, John Kerry and Barack Obama's presidential campaigns as well taking part in the midterm elections of 2002 and 2006. His team built an army of volunteers and focused these individuals on an aggressive voter identification and turnout campaign modelled on best practice in US politics.

The team's head of field strategy, American Frank Spring, wrote on the Labour values website, "All told, the campaign fielded over 500 volunteers in various capacities and

---

[12] www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/apr/02/david-cameron-gene-hunt-labour-poster

[13] www.flickr.com/photos/conservatives/4486832262/

contacted more than 7,200 individual voters on election day. Our estimates suggest that 3,000 of Rushanara Ali's 21,784 votes were due to the 'get out the vote' operation."[14] The result was a 14% swing from George Galloway's Respect party to Labour and one of the only gains of the night.

In Dagenham and Rainham, the party used what it called a 'tight-loose' campaigning technique – similar to Obama's mix of top-down messaging and bottom-up activity – in which all the branding and organisation was dealt with in the campaign HQ (tight) but all the canvassing and identifying of local issues was done by Councillors and their teams at ward level (loose). Among the activists involved in the campaign was Nick Lowles, editor of anti-fascist magazine Searchlight, who has been a student of American campaigning techniques for a number of years.

Meanwhile in much feted Birmingham Edgbaston, the campaign imported Obama's techniques without the inconvenience of traipsing around autumnal Ohio. In September 2009, Gisela Stuart MP and her campaign coordinator, Caroline Badley, wrote on the Labour List website, "Neither of us went over to the States but many people we knew had gone over".[15]

They were inspired by an article by Zack Exley called 'The New Organisers, What's really behind Obama's ground game'[16] and wrote, "It was obvious what we had to do to change our campaign. We had to stop doing and start building. We don't have a paid organiser so something had to give – for a time we stopped our regular canvassing sessions and started using the same volunteers to call potential volunteers, both members and non members."[17] The local party ended up tripling its activist base and empowered its volunteers by using their skills in a productive way and encouraging anyone with a good idea to take the lead responsibility for implementing it.

At the general election, Birmingham Edgbaston stood at number 39 in the Tories target list. Despite a five percent national swing that should have wiped it out, Ms Stuart's seat held firm in a sea of blue with a swing of just 1.3% and more people voting Labour than in 2005.

Party reform in the leadership debate

The final victory for those urging a greater focus on Obama's use of new media and old organising techniques was the apparent enthusiasm shown by all five Labour leadership candidates towards enhancing the party's grassroots. David Miliband has said, "We have to rebuild the Labour movement as an organising, campaigning 'movement for change' – open, reaching out to local communities, more democratic."[18] In launching his own

---

[14] labourvalues.org.uk/field-work-in-bethnal-green-and-bow

[15] www.labourlist.org/new_party_organising_uk-style

[16] www.huffingtonpost.com/zack-exley/the-new-organizers-part-1_b_132782.html

[17] www.labourlist.org/new_party_organising_uk-style

[18] www.davidmiliband.net/2010/06/05/i-will-rebuild-the-labour-movement-from-the-bottom-up

campaign at the Fabian Society's conference, his brother Ed said, "The Labour party needs to not just be an electoral force, but also a movement for change in every part of our country."[19] Writing for the Labour values website, Ed Balls says, "Political aims, vision and policies aren't enough unless Labour can also be a community-based political party rooted in the communities we represent."[20] Outsiders Andy Burnham and Diane Abbott have both said that they can best reunite the party with its "grassroots".[21, 22]

In Progress magazine, Anthony Painter asks whether this is putting the cart before the horse: "The Labour party came out of a movement not the other way around. And yet, the challenge that is now presented to the party is to do precisely the reverse: to create a new movement out of the party."[23]

Aside from this conundrum, there are other questions which remain unanswered about the candidates' commitment to enhancing the role of members. Up and down the country many Labour members face bureaucratic restraints from their local councils, MPs, regional bodies or, in extremis, the national party. If Labour is serious about giving its members the tools to self-organise and in letting go of its command-and-control, this must extend from the online to the offline with restraints on vibrant local branches lifted.

Second, the leadership should remember that most new members and volunteers get involved because of a desire to change the world. During the recruiting ground of a general election these new activists may pragmatically recognise that the need to advocate on behalf of their party by canvassing and leafleting. But these members may also want a say or, indeed, the right of initiative in relation to the party's policy making. Warm words to "strengthen" [24] (Ed Balls) or "look at"[25] (David Miliband) the National Policy Forum are not enough. The party should be delighted that 25,000 new members have joined since the election began but party bosses must also think hard about how to include its members, new and old, in the decision-making of the party.

Conclusion

The Labour party understood the fundamental truth that technology is a tool rather than an end in itself. Throughout the campaign it used its meagre resources to help members and volunteers to self-organise and started the journey of opening up the party and beginning a

---

[19] www.fabians.org.uk/events/transcripts/ed-miliband-next-left-speech

[20] labourvalues.org.uk/re-building-our-party-from-the-ground-up

[21] www.mirror.co.uk/news/top-stories/2010/05/27/burnham-in-grassroots-leader-bid-115875-22288685

[22] www.channel4.com/news/articles/politics/domestic_politics/labour+leadership+abbott+is+first+black+female+contender/3675127

[23] Anthony Painter, "Movement politics" (Progress Magazine, July 2010)

[24] labourvalues.org.uk/re-building-our-party-from-the-ground-up/

[25] www.leftfootforward.org/2010/06/david-miliband-talks-to-left-foot-forward

cultural glasnost.[26] Compared to the previous election, there were thousands more activists pounding the streets, and hundreds of thousands more conversations with voters as a result.

With a general election unlikely until 2015, new recruits and re-energised existing members will want a greater role than they were given by either Tony Blair or Gordon Brown. The next step is to listen again to the party's membership as a new mission and message to win back power are put together. New media can again provide part of the solution if the party chooses to embrace it. New ideas, policies, and campaigning best practice can be shared on the Internet while social networks can be used to bring groups with similar interests together regardless of their physical location. The party could also experiment with new approaches to selecting its candidates using online elections to widen the pool of voters.

Following a rapid rise in recruitment in the early years of Tony Blair's leadership, the party lost over 200,000 members from 1997 to 2010 by ignoring its base. By pushing the boundaries of new media to embrace a genuine grassroots culture, it must ensure that it doesn't make the same mistake a second time.

---

[26] Will Straw and Nick Anstead (eds.). 'The change we need: What Britain can learn from Obama's victory' (Fabian Society, 2009)

AUTHORS

Marta Cantijoch

is Research Associate at the Institute for Social Change (University of Manchester). She is currently involved in the ESRC project 'The Internet, Electoral Politics and Citizen Participation in Global Perspective'. She is also a member of the research group on Democracy, Elections and Citizenship at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. In the past years, she has done extensive research on digital media and involvement in Spain as a member of the Polnet project.

Rachel Gibson

is Professor of Politics at the Institute for Social Change, University of Manchester. She researches and publishes in the area of new media and politics and is currently funded for three years under an ESRC Professorial Fellowship to examine 'The Internet, Electoral Politics and Citizen Participation in Global Perspective'. The work focuses on elections in four countries: the UK, Australia, France and the U.S. and examines how far online media are leading to changes in the way parties and candidates campaigns and opportunities for citizen participation.

Matthew McGregor

is London Director of Blue State Digital, who he joined in September 2008 to set up the company's London office. He has over ten years experiences of political campaigns, both in party politics and in advocacy campaigning. Matthew's experience includes work for Ken Livingstone's 2008 Mayoral campaign, for trade justice advocates War on Want, for TULO, the coalition of Labour supporting Trade Unions, and others. In 2006-7, Matthew managed Jon Cruddas' deputy leadership campaign, which won Channel 4's prestigious 'Political Campaign of the Year' award. He has worked with campaigns in Sweden, Ireland and America.

Mark Pack

ran the Liberal Democrat online general election campaign in 2001 and 2005 and is now co-editor of Liberal Democrat Voice (www.LibDemVoice.org) and Head of Digital at Mandate Communications (www.YourMandate.com). A regular pundit on the internet and politics in the media, Mark has also contributed to numerous publications including Iain Dale's Guide to Political Blogging 2007, The Total Politics Guide to Political Blogging 2008, The Total Politics Guide to Political Blogging in the UK 2009-2010, The Internet in the UK election, Dictionary of Liberal Biography, Great Liberal Speeches, Dictionary of Liberal Thought and President Gore and other things that never happened. Mark has also co-authored Political Parties and Web 2.0: the Liberal Democrat Perspective which appeared in Politics 2010, Vol 30(2).

Will Straw

is Editor of Left Foot Forward and a Fellow at the Center for American Progress. He was a 2007-08 Fulbright Scholar, worked for four years as a senior policy adviser at HM Treasury, and is a former President of the Oxford University Student Union. He is co-editor of "The Change We Need: What Britain can learn from Obama's victory", published by the Fabian Society.

Steven Ward

is a Reader in Politics at the University of Salford. His research interests are in the area of the Internet and politics, where he has analysed the role of the Internet in elections in a range of countries since 1997. His publications include: Making a Difference? A comparative view of the role of the Internet in election politics, (Lexington Books 2008), co-edited with Richard Davis, Diana Owen and David Taras.

Andy Williamson

is Director of Digital Democracy at the Hansard Society and an Honorary Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Social Change, University of Manchester. A well known presenter and author, he has an extensive background in research and consultancy relating to digital media, strategy, online campaigning, policy and innovation. Andy has been an advisor to a number of governments, parliaments and international agencies in areas such as community informatics, ICT for development, digital engagement and inclusion, digital policy and broadband. He holds a PhD from Monash University in Australia.

The internet and the 2010 election:
Putting the small 'p' back in politics?

Edited by Rachel K. Gibson, Andy Williamson and Stephen Ward

The Hansard Society is the UK's leading independent, non-partisan political research and education charity. We aim to strengthen parliamentary democracy and encourage greater public involvement in politics. Since 1997 the Hansard Society's Digital Democracy Programme has led the way in understanding how digital media affect and transform the way democracy works. From the internet's impact on parliament, to better government engagement with citizens and the potential for civil society to harness digital media, our thought-leading research has been a formative part of an emergent digital Britain.