

## **Chapter 19. The Internet in Campaigns and Elections**

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### **Introduction**

There has been much written about political e-campaigning; the use of information and communication technology (ICT), especially the Internet, in co-ordinated action to mobilise and/or influence individuals. Early research into the role of the Internet in political campaigning was marked by peaks of idealism and troughs of disillusionment (for instance Hill and Hughes, 1998; Bimber, 2003). The idealistic argument is articulated by Joe Trippi (2004), the mastermind behind Howard Dean's revolutionary but unsuccessful bid for the 2004 US Democratic Party presidential nomination, who spoke of a revolution in electoral politics by permitting the candidate to appeal directly to potential supporters, so negating strong media effects, and enabling any citizen to be better informed, find like-minded individuals and, within networked collectives, influence the course of a campaign or even the outcome of the election. Dean's innovation was to finance his campaign through public donations, but the ultimate failure of the campaign also perhaps showed the limits for the Internet's revolutionary potential. This debate between cyber optimists and cyber pessimists is played out over and over again, but as the story develops the embeddedness of the Internet within campaigning strategy becomes ever deeper.

Studies in the 1990s focused on the potential of the Internet and its possible political effects; debates centering on the extent to which there was revolutionary potential or whether new media would simply reflect the traditional hierarchies of power, share of

voice and influence. However, research has not simply focused on evidence to support a specific set of hypotheses, but developed along three related strands: how the Internet can be used to inform, to mobilize and to lead to interaction. While highlighting that there has been a significant impact on the forms and repertoires of political communication, empirical studies reach mixed conclusions about its deeper impact on the political system.

Globally, however, there is a very mixed picture regarding the use of the Internet as a whole, as well as variations in online political communication styles. Variations are linked to national contexts, more especially the infrastructure, the institutional arrangements, the legal provisions and the political culture which exist in each country. For instance, uses differ in countries with a proportional election system (which tend to promote a nationwide, party-led debate) than in those with a majority system (which are usually more conducive to more localised and individualised electoral campaigns), hence due to national contextual variations different political uses of the Internet emerge.

The mixed picture that is electoral e-campaigning makes this a fascinating as well as complex area of academic study. This chapter will map the key developments in both practice and research to understand the role the Internet can and does play in the context of political campaigning, what we can learn from this about both political campaigning and the Internet, and where the research agenda needs to look to further develop our theoretical and empirical understanding.

## **The Potential of the Internet for Campaigning and Elections**

Research on the potential enhancements brought to political campaigning and elections center around three key areas (Vedel, 2003). First, citizens can become better informed about and engaged with the processes of democracy through the capacity of the Internet to provide vast resources of data at any time to any wired location. Secondly, candidates and parties are able to build relationships with their supporters and more cheaply, effectively and efficiently mobilize them to participate within the campaign. Thirdly, but also most fundamentally for democracy, the Internet offers the potential to facilitate a broad public debate around a plethora of issues and so have direct input into the campaign agenda.

### *Information*

The development of ICT for political communication basically rests on the traditional argument that citizens in a democracy need full information and an enlightened understanding of situations to contribute to democratic deliberation and make good decisions (Dahl, 1989). ICTs make enormous quantities of information available to the public. The reduction of publishing and dissemination costs allows access to fuller information, thus fulfilling a key element of democracy, which states decision making should be transparent and accountable to the citizen. Equally the decentralised structure and global nature of the Internet help provide greater pluralism of viewpoints. The Internet provides new channels for information and expression, which are to some extent in competition with the traditional mediation processes. Personal or collective blogs, video-sharing sites and Wiki-type co-operative

applications are making citizens more independent from the major daily newspapers and TV news broadcasts.

This change in quantity may result in a change in quality. Instead of getting limited and general information on political decisions, citizens can be provided with detailed data, preparatory reports, expert advice, and can examine issues in greater depth. In the same way, instead of getting abstracts of politicians' statements or political platforms, citizens can get the full text and, therefore, have a better knowledge of what politicians really propose. Secondly, citizens can be active, instead of passive recipients of news from a limited number of sources. Citizens can actively search out the information they want, compare sources, and look for alternative views. However, quantity may also result in problems finding information, due both to scale and the gatekeeping function of search engines, as well as in determining the veracity of information they find.

### *Mobilisation and Co-ordination*

The Internet facilitates contact between individuals who share common interests and helps co-ordinate joint actions. The Internet has the potential to challenge traditional political organizations (parties, trade unions and economic lobbies) in facilitating the formation of new political and social forces hitherto hindered by the lack of a structured apparatus or low resources. Use of ITCs also encourages the consolidation of collective identities, at a local community level or on a global scale, with the Internet providing the spaces for crystallising and shaping social relations around a shared project (Melucci, 1996).

The ability of ICTs to connect people who share common interests to get in touch despite distance or social barriers can lead to a whole new dimension for politics. People can escape geography (and marginalization) through global forums based on specialized narrow interests. For example, it is difficult for people who belong to a minority to really count in a small city; but, through the Internet, those people can acquire a sense of their identity and of their social or political weight at the global level. Once like-minded individuals have created a group, they can more easily exchange ideas in order to define their political platform and decide the kinds of action they want to engage in.

ICTs also make communication easy. Email updates can be sent regularly to members, and discussion forums can be established to discuss options. As these political groupings build their organisation and reach they are then able to influence decision-makers or public opinion – for instance, by organizing email campaigns directed at government officials or politicians. Such tools, the potential of which have been demonstrated in studies of pressure groups (Rodgers, 2003), have equal application within election campaigns. Through ICTs, individuals can participate more actively, frequently and quickly in the decision-making process of political parties and organisations. Individuals can publicly or privately communicate their opinions on parties' platforms, and express disagreements with parties' strategies or just comment on the campaign.

These developments, facilitated by technology yet adapted by those who are politically engaged online, lead us to focus on understanding the rise of a campaign

communication ecosystem online; one that is connected, interdependent, open access, and chaotic. However, this is not necessarily evidence of a democratisation of politics. Several surveys by the Pew Research Center have shown that Internet users interested by online politics had a considerably higher standard of education and social status than other Internet users, and even more so, than the population as a whole. The Internet serves to “preach to the converted”, as Pippa Norris put it (Norris, 2003), increasing the capabilities of those who are most integrated into the political system. However this can be a significant development for democracy.

### *Debate and Discussion*

The online communication ecosystem is founded on interconnected conversations taking place across platforms, forums, and public spaces around a given topic. It is argued that as citizens become better informed, and mobilised to seek further information, form collectives and engage with political decisions, this can also nurture more proactive civic behaviour. Those empowered would be defined as the ‘connected people’, what others have called a ‘fifth estate’ of online activists (Dutton 2009). The Internet provides many spaces (discussion forums, blogs and social networking or file-sharing platforms) that facilitate the exchange of information, commentary and ideas between individuals from different backgrounds who would probably never otherwise engage in joint discussions. This enables the Web to enlarge and/or revitalise the public sphere, so much so that some see it as a novel agora. In other words, the Internet would give rise to virtual communities, a notion popularized by Howard Rheingold (1993). This perspective runs through analyses of social relations within the networked society (Van Djck, 2007; Castells, 2009) and

many popular texts that claim to redefine the relations between politics, business and society (Benkler, 2008; Shirky, 2009).

### **How to Survey the Political Web? Methodological Challenges**

There have been a range of distinct and discreet methodological approaches to the study of political campaigning using the Internet. Schneider and Foot (2004) identified three ways of analyzing political parties and candidates' websites and categorized the studies as using content analysis, discourse analysis, and Web sphere analysis. All offer a range of advantages and disadvantages; a few studies have also surveyed party strategists and consultants, though issues of access and the likelihood that this group will offer only post-hoc rationalizations limits their utility (Lilleker 2003). Hence most studies focus on analysis of what is physically created online in order to discover the role of the Internet in campaigns (Xenos and Foot 2005).

The most frequently employed method is content analysis, a quantitative technique that consists of developing a series of categories that can later be tested for their presence or absence, and counted within a specific website. The method is one that is highly objective and transparent and it can easily cope with a large sample. The problem with content analysis is that it can only categorize features and make assumptions about the experiences that are enabled, but not necessarily realized; it remains more difficult to assess what experiences are actually provided. This is particularly relevant when we consider the complexities surrounding interaction within

environments built with Web 2.0 technologies that can facilitate, but never achieve, extensive content co-creation by both the host and visitors.

However, content analysis provides the basis of much academic understanding of Internet use in politics. The coding schema developed by Gibson and Ward (2000b) has helped create a rich picture of the role that the Internet has played within election campaigns globally (Ward and Gibson 2003; Tkach-Kawasaki 2003; Coleman and Ward 2005; Foot and Schneider 2006; Conway and Donard 2005; Schweitzer 2005; Stanyer 2006; Strandberg 2006; Kluver et al., 2007; Ward et al., 2008) and generally in political communication (Jackson 2003; Gibson et al., 2003a; Ward and Lusoli 2005). Variations on the methodology have also been developed and adapted for web analysis; Videostyle (Kaid & Johnston, 2001) in particular has been used for the analysis of presentational elements of candidates and parties (Trammel et al, 2006).

While content analysis focuses purely on counting, discourse analysis treats Web based communication as a rhetorical text (Davis and Brewer 1997). Text, taken to mean all features and layout (Fairclough 2003), are analyzed for their meaning using concepts borrowed from linguistics (Bergs 2006). With this approach the focus is on the message, in particularly the semiotics (Mayer 1998), however this is often criticized as highly subjective. The advantages are, however, that within interactive environments we can assess the number of speakers and the nature of the conversations, for example the extent to which the host encourages dialogue (Rafaeli, 1988). It has proven useful for measuring levels of interactivity on U.S. Presidential Primary websites (Benoit and Benoit, 2002) and government portals (Negroponte 1995; Boardman 2005), as well as in exploring the existence of an



online public sphere (Chadwick and May 2003; Dahlberg, 2001), including user-to-user interaction in social chat-rooms within virtual communities (Herring, 2004) and plotting news stories between microblogs and the mainstream media (Chadwick, 2011).

In contrast, web sphere analysis is an attempt to develop a grounded theory based on the network structure of websites (Schneider and Foot 2002; Kluver et al., 2007). In campaign studies, the method was used to compile over 50,000 different websites and interviewing 50 Web producers in order to examine the political actions on, and traffic between, websites in the 2000 US election. The studies found that the presence of websites was transforming the way campaigns were conducted and that learning was cross-national; though the latter finding was supported by using content analysis also (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). Kluver et al (2007) also predicted the impact of user-generated content, ones we are only beginning to recognize. The definition of the web sphere as 'not simply as a collection of Websites, but as a hyperlinked set of dynamically defined digital resources spanning multiple websites deemed relevant or related to a central theme or object' (Schneider and Foot 2004: 4) is significant for understanding the Internet within the context of election campaigning and placing the user at the center of research into online campaigning.

There has been a significant amount of research employing content analysis; less has taken a critical discourse analysis approach; while Web sphere analysis is underused. Equally, only content analysis has been used to study election campaigning, and specifically the content of websites, hence this offers a more

comprehensive method of exploring interactivity and its role within election campaigning and voter engagement.

However, there are broader questions relating to what specific media are important within the context of an election campaign. Is the collection of data from a website becoming pointless as browsers, and so campaigners, move into established social networks such as Facebook? In other words, is communication taking place in various places and so is locating the heart of the online campaign becoming more difficult? Furthermore, in terms of how the browser might view the campaign, to what extent should user-generated political communication be recognized as part of the eco-system of a campaign and require as great attention, if not perhaps more, than official channels? The most important, but most difficult question, concerns the impact that the Internet is having on the attitudes and behavior of the voter: a significant amount or none at all? Capturing the impact of any campaign, or isolating the impact of any specific tool or aspect of a campaign, is at best a highly complex moving target. Influence is multi-directional, unique to the individual and governed as much by the individual's psychology as the design of the stimuli. Experiments remain underused and often produce mixed results. Yet, to fully understand the significance of new technologies and the ways in which they are employed within an election campaign, one needs to remember that at the heart of most election campaigns is the voter. Currently it is hard to find them as the central character within this strand of research.

## **The Evolution of Campaigning**

## *Modeling Changes from Pre-modern to Post-modern Campaigns*

Colin Seymour-Ure (1977) suggested that political organizations adapt their communication to suit the dominant media of the day. This process of adaptation can lead to a simple re-orientation of communication or to significant changes to the organization itself. While societal pressures also have a key role in the shaping of politics, such as the consumerization of society leading to a marketization of politics (Lees-Marshment, 2011), focusing on the relationship between political organizations and media is useful when considering how technological advances in communication lead to adaptations in the form and style of political communication.

In terms of the adaptations of political communication across the last half century, Norris' (2003) typology is in this context a useful heuristic. While the terminology is much contested, in particular the characterization of eras as pre-modern, modern and postmodern (Negrine, 2008), her schematic reinforces a shared conceptualization of change within a historical timeframe which elides with studies that introduce campaigning ages (Blumler, 1990), campaign styles (Gibson & Rommele, 2001), orientations (Lees-Marshment, 2001) or organizational styles (Katz & Mair, 2002).

The first or pre-modern age prominent until the 1950s was a time of easy access to a largely deferent media, voters held fairly stable partisan attachments and so parties could largely stand on a consistent product-oriented platform. Campaigns were local affairs, run by decentralized volunteer groups. This was the era of mass membership and so a labor-intensive campaign was both tenable and appropriate.

Television ushered in the modern era or second age. This led to campaigns developing a more national character, and the beginning of a centralization of strategy and a professionalization of communication. Campaigning became more sales oriented, focused upon converting and persuading voters while also getting the loyalists out on election day. Rather than focusing on the partisan press, radio, posters, and interpersonal communication, television was supported by targeted direct mail.

The 1990s saw a further ramping up of the professionalization, ushering in the postmodern campaign era. Political organizations adopted a market orientation to their communication, as well as to some extent the design of key political messages and policy priorities (Lees-Marshment, 2001). Post-modern campaigns also became more targeted, narrowcasted via direct channels of communication; these channels incorporated the mass media as well as email, online forums and intranets (Norris, 2003). In addition, organizations adopted a more bifurcated strategy for their campaigning; while the central campaign command set out the core messages, communication is also the responsibility of local organizations, in particular the use of local email lists, intranets, forums (Gibson & Rommele, 2001; Katz & Mair, 2002; Norris, 2003). Over time, local organizations would also be partially responsible for using social networking and microblogging tools to reinforce and make locally relevant the national campaign strategy.

This suggests a shift in organisational behaviour, one perhaps driven both by new communication technologies as well as broad social changes. The extent to which the third or post-modern age is becoming the age of the Internet, as previous eras

were interpersonal or television ages, is a moot point. Campaigns have clearly been adapted to a digital media landscape characterized by “abundance, ubiquity, reach and celerity” (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999: 213). However, it is argued that even in 2011, it is the 24/7 mass media that remains dominant for campaigns, even within the US, yet we find new ways of characterizing campaigning that are designed specifically for the integration of the online environment.

### *The Hypermedia Campaign and New Political Repertoires*

The political campaigning response to the social uses of technologies is the adaptation of the tools of the postmodern campaign to incorporate digital communication technologies. Howard (2006) defines this as the hypermedia campaign, where communication is relayed across a wide range of outlets simultaneously, and thereby meeting the demands of the postmodern media, the 24/7 news, and the global online audience (Davis, 2010). Any single item of content will be tailored for multiple forms of consumption and disseminated in ways that can be collected by journalists, supporters or web browsers alike at multiple communication junctions. While there will be an informational component within communication, a range of interactive actions are facilitated. Items are created to allow ease of sharing to facilitate messages going viral across the Internet (Boynton, 2009) and can be commented on and adapted within the campaigns’ ecosystem.

The hypermedia campaign must allow for and expect the “decomposition and recomposition of messages” (Howard, 2006: 2). These communicative processes permit co-ownership of communication across a wider agora and for reach of

messages to be multiplied across networks. While this appears to be beneficial for democracy, there are also threats associated with the use of technologies within the hypermedia campaign. Howard argues that the extensive use of data-mining and targeting will lead to a communicative divide. As noted in other critiques of political marketing and campaigning (Lilleker, 2005; Savigny, 2008), only a privileged few voters may be positioned at the heart of the campaign, having messages constructed for their consumption and being invited to offer their input.

This reductionist strategy of targeting those voters whose participation may swing the result leads to what Howard refers to as a thin democracy, with engagement being managed through the process of targeted communication using email. This contrasts with perspectives that suggest that the broadening out of the ability to produce content can lead to a fatter, if no less unequal, form of democratic participation. The ability to wield political power and exert influence will depend on the size and reach of communication within social and communicative networks (Davis, 2010, p. 98). Measurement of a network effect has been discussed widely, its value linked to the number of people within a network (Van Dijk, 2007: 78) with the equation of the number of members squared referenced as one method of evaluation (Anderson, 2007: 21), thus the more connected members of the emergent polyarchy are, and the more they are able to disseminate and/or amplify a message, the wider their reach through the network.

However, real value is also related to the social capital of the network effect. The amplification of messages via a network does not simply increase reach but also credibility as individuals act as information hubs to their networks of contacts and

friends. These constitute a new information elite (Van Dijk, 2007, p. 185), which can include established elites such as politicians and journalists as well as individual weblog authors (bloggers) or users deemed credible due to their propensity to share items among their friends and followers.

Thus for the meeting of campaign objectives, the hypermedia campaign strategist must harness the online and offline information elite simultaneously and create a synergistic communicative process between nodes within the network. Online actions by political actors (a post to Twitter for example) feed into communication by online and offline communicators (journalists and bloggers) and these draw hits to other online features such as a campaign website which generates further sharing or generates interaction, which in turn can create broader offline and online attention, or resources in the shape of volunteers or donations. The hypermedia campaign is thus the response to the 21<sup>st</sup> campaign communication environment, it recognizes that to be successful one must both create and join the communication ecosystem.

*Box: landmark campaigns from Dean to Royal to Obama*

The evolution in adaptation to the hypermedia campaign can be traced through studying the campaigns of Howard Dean, Segolene Royal and Barack Obama. The historiography of 2004-2008, and the influence of these campaigns since, is instructive for understanding how a hypermedia campaign looks when executed. In most ways Howard Dean's bid unsuccessful for the Democratic nomination in 2004 was a typical insurgent campaign. The aim was to get a substantial amount of media coverage, so resulting in name recognition, and building support. Support would

equate to donations, the lifeblood of any US electoral bid. However, unusually, Dean opted out of the federal government's match-funding scheme to avoid the campaign spending cap. The reason for this was the confidence he had in focusing on small donations from a large support base (Lipsitz and Panagopoulos, 2012). The key technological innovation adopted by Dean involved going to a site already used then by some 5 million Americans: Meetup.com. Meetup.com is a social networking platform that facilitates offline group meetings in various localities around the world. Meetup allows members to find and join groups unified by a common interest, such as politics, books, games, movies, etc. Dean harnessed the network effect of Meetup.com to organize supporter meetings and importantly fundraisers. Small donations of \$10-\$100 flooded into his campaign coffers amounting to, at one point \$4 million per day (Price, 2004). Dean's campaign highlighted that a campaign could use the benefits of the new Web 2.0 technologies for their advantage and that potentially they could have an impact on the results (Towner & Dulio, 2012).

The lessons from the Dean campaign, however, brought a new focus to incorporating the Internet into political campaigns, and in particular considering the benefits of the latest platforms. The 2007 French Presidential campaign saw significant innovation in the use of ICTs. The eventual winner, Nicolas Sarkozy, focused on technological sophistication by building his own online video site (NSTV) and for a while created the second life *Isle de France* environment where his presidential style could be tested out. However, it was the runner-up in the second round of voting that would best harness the social media environment and adapt to the norms of a hypermedia campaign. During the race to win the left vote in round one, Segolene Royal first allowed her supporters to contribute to a co-produced online manifesto. The *Cahiers*



*d'esperance*, (Notebooks of Hope), became a symbol of a more open style both of campaigning and signifying a more collectivist presidential rule. This involved reaching out to those already politically active online and harnessing them to her campaign. The Segosphere was a tightly hyperlinked group of weblog authors who promoted her presidential bid and contributed to a wider political public sphere that centered on Royal's political platform. The Segosphere, which was created to target younger voters, linked together around 14,000 weblogs. This reflected the bottom-up communication style of Royal (Vedel & Koc-Michalska 2009), her website encouraged visitors to contribute to discussion groups and add to her platform.

It has been claimed that without Segolene Royal the Obama campaign would have been far less innovative; Obama's campaign was the first to utilize all aspects of the online communication environment, joining the existing political public sphere and creating his own ecosystem. Obama created presences across seventeen different social network profiles. Obama used YouTube as an online television service, making his videos available 24/7 but also facilitating browsers to express their support, by clicking the thumbs-up button to show liking, and through sharing via social networks. Twitter was utilized as a news feed, informing supporters where Obama was holding events as well as giving insights into his campaign. Alongside these pull media, the Obama campaign proactively harvested mobile phone numbers, particularly by offering mobile subscribers the opportunity to be the first to learn who Obama would have as his running mate. Thus, like Dean and Royal, Obama entered all the spaces where his potential voters may happen across political information and provided a space where they could engage with his campaign.

The key innovation was myBarackObama.com, or MyBO. MyBO was a personal social network and public sphere where members could express support, comment on policy, ask questions and be part of the Obama supporters' community. MyBO was not just simply a space for friendship and chat however, MyBO was a mobilization tool. Joining MyBO was about joining a community of activists, with activism orchestrated by the core campaign team but developed by community members (Harfoush, 2008). Email was the key mobilization tool, both in directing traffic to the site and encouraging matching donations with other community members, facilitating holding fundraisers, providing training for canvassing and getting out the vote. If we measure success in donations alone we should note that \$711.741.924 was raised online (Hendricks, 2010) The Obama campaign was the closest to a Web 2.0 campaign (Vaccari, 2010; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011: 78). The reason was that it was genuinely co-produced. The news weblog elicited huge amounts of comments, averaging eighty per item across 11,452 entries. In fact, it was almost impossible to find an Obama presence online that was not accompanied by public comment, though there was significant moderation. Obama's openness, matched by his success, placed the Internet on the map as a campaign tool and led many to ask how to 'do an Obama' and replicate his 'Internet magic' (Plehwé, 2009:173). The Obama innovations were adopted, in adapted forms in Germany, the UK and elsewhere (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011: 164).

### **Impacts on Political Participation and Electoral Outcomes**

Any argument that the Internet can shape patterns of political participation, either activism or the formation of voter choices, must be moderated by the 'preaching to

the converted' thesis (Norris, 2003). Hindman (2009) performs the widest survey of online behavior and finds that the most read weblog authors replicate offline sources of influence; they are largely white, male, highly-educated and politically active. These elite figures are also most likely to be able to have input into the broader political public sphere, shaping both the online and offline news agenda. Therefore the democratizing potential of the Internet, where anyone can have their voice, is significantly limited and reinforces the perspective that "it may be easy to speak in cyberspace, but it remains difficult to be heard" (Hindman, 2009: 142).

Such findings are reinforced in a variety of studies that demonstrate the power of offline political elites in shaping both the content and sentiment of contributions within the online political communication ecosystem. Furthermore, the picture of who is heard online and who hears those voices offline is largely similar (Smith et al 2009: 1). However the report finds that the gaps in terms of age, income and education level, where the politically active tend to be older, better off and better educated, is narrowed within social networking sites. This is particularly the case with age, with most online participation being the preserve of the over 35s on social networks the age band is 18-24; however those on lower incomes also make small donations to campaigns and the lower educated are as equally likely to participate by commenting, sharing and liking than their better educated peers (Smith et al, 2009).

Yet, overall, there is still a stark inequality on most measures of civic engagement and participation online, which mirror more traditional means of being politically active. Therefore it seems that the greatest impact that the Internet has on campaigns is that it enables the campaigner to mobilize supporters and orchestrate

fundraising more efficiently, so bringing the campaign and its supporters into a community, but it only reaches beyond a privileged and highly engaged minority at the margins on social networks.

Nevertheless, engagement with election campaigns is being reshaped by the Internet. Reviewing Internet use during the 2010 mid-term US elections Smith (2011) found 58% seeking political information online and for 32% it was the only information source. More importantly, 53% performed at least one action classified as civic engagement. The Internet is not, however, simply a media for reception. A majority of online users report that they feel it easier to connect with others who share their views politically, suggesting that people seek out communities of like-minded individuals. A majority also report that the Internet facilitates exposure to a wider range of political views than they can get in the traditional news media, so broadening knowledge and facilitating a more active public sphere.

These factors were argued to be of critical importance for the 2008 Obama campaign. As a result of his adoption of a hypermedia campaign strategy, in particular the young were mobilized more effectively than had had previously been the case. Barr (2009) notes the use of text messaging, Facebook, MySpace, email and interactive platforms facilitated the establishment of a range of youth-led pro-Obama organizations that meant the campaign reached out further and got more young people registered to vote, developed peer-to-peer networks of youths and offered a range of media that was attractive to the young.

However, these positives can also be balanced by a range of negatives. There has long been observable evidence of the growth of cyberghettos (Sunstein, 2007; Hindman, 2009), where like-minded individuals group around quite narrow political ideas. Often these attempt to lock browsers into a network of web presences with a single ideological perspective. Equally, extremist movements can find a home on the Internet and are just as able to reach out to potential supporters as more mainstream and moderate movements.

When focusing on 'impact', it is important to view a campaign holistically. The interplay of communication creates a rich campaign ecosystem with each aspect feeding the others. Broadcast media still play a huge role, as do a range of activities that occur below the radar and are often at a person-to-person level. Comments and conversations, liking and following, reflect a range of political and social trends that are occurring alongside the official campaign. The ability to share information gleaned from a telephone or doorstep conversation with a canvasser with a national or global audience adds texture to a campaign. Political activity online thus provides an immediate and visible element to a campaign.

The more active a campaign is the more engaged a following they gain, this is also the case when measuring the impact of candidates' or parliamentarians' communication in terms of gaining fans, followers or getting content shared within networks (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2012). The more posts made to Facebook or Twitter, the more weblog posts authored, the more likely they are to reach a wide audience and encourage participation. In this respect, if there is an impact from engaging through a hypermedia campaign, it is that the attention

received can also be used as a predictor of votes. Tumasjan et al (2011), based on a survey of sentiment within Twitter, notes that such tools “can be a valid indicator of the political landscape off-line” (Tumasjan et al, 2011: 414). Therefore winning in the battle to have the most proactive hypermedia strategy may also result in increasing awareness, engagement and support; however such a conclusion needs further rigorous testing.

#### **Four Lessons on the Internet and Politics**

The research on models of campaigning and their impact offer four specific lessons regarding the limitations of both academic predictions and the potential of the Internet as a campaign tool.

##### *Ideology versus **R**esources as Predictors of Usage*

Explanations for the usage of the Internet as a campaign tool, and particularly the integration of interactive Web 2.0 era features and platforms into a hypermedia style campaign usually focus on three elements: resources, incentives and orientation (Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Gibson et al, 2000; Norris, 2003; Gibson et al. 2003a; 2003b; Solanet and Cardinal, 2008). The incentives dimension relates to the extent to which the Internet has the potential to reach significant numbers of actual and potential supporters, a factor seldom questioned across most democracies. The debate continues, however, as to whether physical resources such as finances or staff, or the orientation or ideology of the party or candidate offer the most explanatory power for having an innovative online presence. Thus we find in literature

two competing hypotheses, that candidates or organizations that have the greatest resources at their disposal, or that are more center left are most proactive online.

The evidence to support either hypothesis is reliant on how the research was conducted. Sudulich, in a comparative study of Italy, Spain, the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain found ideology was one factor and that the left performed best in terms of interactivity (Sudulich, 2009). Alternatively, Copsey (2003) argued that marginalized voices, and in particular those on the extreme right, find the Internet most appropriate for community building. When looking at the evidence from recent campaigns we can argue that both Royal and Obama, both center-left presidential candidates, utilized the Internet for more inclusive and interactive purposes than their center-right opponents. In Germany and the UK, however, we find the parties with the largest and most innovative presences as those with the largest parliamentary representation and representing both centrist viewpoints. The outlier within the UK parliamentary contest was the far-right British National Party. Their website was the only one to match that of Obama in terms of its interactivity (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011).

This offers a highly mixed picture in terms of the impact of ideology.

Resources offer little indication of separating the main candidates in the 2007 French contest. Obama's fundraising gained him three times the spending power of his rival McCain. Equally, parties with the greatest chance of winning also attract the greatest resources. This suggests that the level of resources is the key factor and when considering the technical sophistication and person-hours to create, monitor and

maintain a sophisticated web presence, this makes sense. The outlier, once again is the British National Party. They relied on credit leading to their highly sophisticated website being closed down on the morning of the 2010 election due to a failure to settle their account. Without resources, a sophisticated and innovative web presence is far more difficult.

### *A Limited Revitalization and Enlargement of the Public Sphere*

A longstanding argument has been that the Internet and related technologies can augment avenues for personal expression and promote citizen activity (Papacharissi, 2002: 9-10, see also Negroponte, 1995; Rheingold, 1993). The Internet, it is argued, has the capacity to provide substance to the idealized notion of the Habermasian public sphere based on open access to information and spaces for debate, discussion and mobilization (Dahlgren, 2005). Research tends to demonstrate, however, that this potential is largely unrealized (Papacharissi, 2002). As we highlighted earlier, beyond the use of social media platforms, there is no evidence of a major broadening of political engagement as a result of campaigns adopting an online element (Norris, 2003).

### *The Uneasy Diffusion of the Internet within Political Organizations*

Independent of the incentives, there is much caution in adopting a hypermedia campaign. Stromer-Galley (2000) suggests two main reasons that have received some support by recent studies (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). The first is one of resources. Campaign strategists often struggle over questions relating to which



media is most effective and efficient for meeting the objectives of the campaign. Offering basic web presences full of content repackaged from offline brochures can be seen as reasonably cost-neutral. More sophisticated presences require investment, and while the use of social networking platforms may be free, the creation of bespoke content is costly. Equally expensive is the monitoring of comments, removing attacks, and responding to those asking questions.

More fundamental issues relate to the nature of participation. The chaotic ecosystem that can form around a campaign is impossible to control. The centralist tendency to orchestrate a coherent, persuasive campaign can be undermined if the campaign becomes co-created. Each response to a post, text or video, contributes to further visitors' experiences, but also can undermine the persuasive impact of a message if it offers a negative perception. Similarly, erroneous material such as spam can be posted across open access platforms and cause a distraction from the original content. More worrying for campaigns can be a loss of ambiguity over messages. Campaigns usually employ broad themes that capture the hopes and desires of the mass electorate. Potential supporters, however, often seek specific information relating to policy initiatives often relating to impact within their own lives. Not only is answering such queries highly costly in terms of time, it can lead to electoral organizations making very specific promises, in public places, that it might not be able to keep if elected (Stromer-Galley 2000).

Drawing on a more party-centered perspective than that of Stromer-Galley, Lilleker et al (2010) argue that the demands of citizen participation and internal party democracy must also be balanced. The external online audience can be involved but

through weak interaction, such as by gauging opinion through simple polls. Forums that engage with an internal audience, open to members only, and concealed within Intranets, are viewed as more effective for good policy-making. Thus parties limit their adoption of such tools, and building a public sphere, as they do not want to invite an unmanageable mass to participate in expense of those who they need to involve and should be at the heart of decision-making.

### *The Media-Mix: Combining Media and the Internet*

The final lesson relates to the complex interplay within online and offline environments. Chadwick (2010) describes a hybridized media environment, which involves a range of actors, mass media, online media, independent, or citizen journalists, weblog authors, and the broader users of social networks and microblogs. This ecosystem allows information to flow with fluidity, being adapted, refreshed and elaborated alongside the usual news cycle. This process leads Chadwick to describe political information cycles as “complex assemblages in which the personnel, practices, genres, technologies, and temporalities of supposedly “new” online media are hybridized with those of supposedly “old” broadcast and press media. How this hybridization process occurs shapes power relations among actors and ultimately affects the flow of news” (2010: 7). The hypermedia campaign embraces this hybridized media environment and attempts to move within the political information cycle, recognizing the interplay between platforms and interdependence of a range of actors, the elite and emergent non-elite, in shaping the news agenda as well as the fortunes of a campaign.

## **Agenda for Future Research**

There is much to learn, in particular as the role of the Internet as a campaign tool is constantly evolving, being adapted to campaign logics, while also causing campaign logics to adapt. There are three general ways in which the research agenda needs to develop to provide a foundation both for future knowledge generation and the improvement of practice in this field.

First, there needs to be a shift from purely supply-side studies to ones which incorporate analysis of citizens' web usage and to what extent there is a demand for a more engaging, interactive and sophisticated online campaign among candidates or parties seeking election. Such research should not only develop the experimental work that has taught us so much about the use of news, advertising and posters for online environments but also explore the political behavior of digital natives. What new forms of participation are being adopted, and to what extent they are perceived as civic engagement are important questions that are currently underexplored; research needs to understand the psychology of online political participation.

Secondly, there is a need to better understand the interaction between off-line and online politics, and whether online activism changes the nature of political participation. Does the internet usher in new forms of political engagement which are more flexible, contractual and moral issues oriented, by opposition to traditional activism, conceived as a permanent, ideological, even sacrificial, commitment (Ion et al. 2005). Some critics, such as Morozov (2011), have been prompt to mock the emergence of a slacktivism, described as the illusion of having a meaningful impact

on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group. Also, we need to understand how the rise of online campaigns affects the transformation of parties. However, it would be useless to oppose online and offline political activities as being good or bad. It is more important to study their respective benefits and shortcomings, how they might interact and how this transform the functioning of political forces.

Finally there is the need for more comparative research and the extent to which not only organizational factors, resources, incentives and orientation, shape Internet use but also the extent to which the political and social cultures, structures and traditions impact upon campaign strategy.

In conclusion, political campaign communication has been transformed, but only to an extent. Campaigns have moved from an interpersonal amateurish stage of campaigning, through the eras of the dominance of television to a hypermedia era. In the modern age the gulf between centralized and local is narrowing. Interpersonal communication, even face-to-face communication, can occur despite distances of millions of miles. There are new ways to be social, ones which involve being simultaneously isolated and connected. Politics has to be part of this environment, but candidates and parties cannot only be social in order to be elected. Being social involves resources and risks which need careful consideration; it also requires new skills which are slowly moving into the electoral arena. However, what is referred to as new media does not work in isolation from old media and the hybridization and merging of platforms creates a new communication ecosystem where influence is diffuse and consistency is hard to attain. There are many challenges facing political

campaigners as they adapt to the online environment, there are also many benefits that are enabled; perhaps we are at the cusp of a new age of campaigning and political engagement or perhaps we are just witnessing a minor shift in politics as usual. E-campaigning is fertile ground for study, but an ever moving target; such is the challenge for this burgeoning field of study.

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Social media in election campaigning. SUMMARY Low engagement of citizens in politics and ever declining voter turnout are taken as evidence of a democratic deficit in the European Union. By providing a new form of communication among politicians and citizens, social media may provide a way of increasing citizen involvement in political life, especially during election campaigns. Social media allow political actors, particularly smaller parties or less well-known candidates, to bypass mass-media filters. Some attribute the increasing levels of political activity on the internet to citizens who are already politically committed. It may be that social media have only a very limited effect on getting otherwise disengaged citizens to engage – even just to go out to vote.