

Politicians Get Their Clicks

The UK general election is upon us. Once again this is heralded as the first true 'internet election' – and once again, it will probably disappoint. Although much media attention has been given over to the use of the internet in the last US presidential election and, from this, conclusions drawn about the internet's impact here in the UK, it is important to step away from the hyperbole and look at a few key facts and, most importantly, key differences.

The internet emerged as a tool for political campaigning in the mid-1990s. Like the evolution of the internet itself, this started with the use of 'corporatised' party or candidate websites and has spread into a myriad of interactive, multi-media and user-generated social networking sites. The political web now extends from official party sites, beyond individuals to third-parties and even spoof sites. The political web exists at two levels – as a conduit for breaking stories, feeding the internal activists and media and, increasingly, as a channel for communicating with prospective voters.

In particular, we have seen the line between blogging and journalism becoming blurred. Citizen activists use online platforms to discuss political events often ignored by the mainstream media and, in some cases, to champion issues that have eventually crossed over. Meanwhile, journalists and politicians have begun to use blogs as a way of widening their own audience and reach. This explosion of citizen bloggers and the emergence of user-driven content with websites like Facebook, YouTube and Flickr has seen online political activity concentrated around hubs, with citizen and party activists linking to each other, to NGOs and to single-issue campaigns. Politicians have traditionally coalesced within their own hubs but recent trends suggest that, as use of social media by politicians (both elected and

prospective) increases, this erodes the boundaries between citizens, media and the political classes.

Making it personal

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, the internet was a source of news and campaign information for 55% of voters during the 2008 US presidential election campaign (and preceding primaries). This was second only to television and the internet was particularly significant for younger voters.

The roots of Barack Obama's internet campaign lie in Howard Dean's unsuccessful attempt at the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004. What the Dean campaign did then set the bar for internet campaigning, pushing the use of ultra-local, internet-coordinated events and encouragement of small donations. Obama's campaign extended the scale and reach and took advantage of some new technologies but also quickly realised that good data was vital. Knowing who did, or could, support you and targeting them personally makes a difference. In this regard, the last presidential election was not the election of the future but one very much rooted in the past.

Television's dominance of American politics had centralised the message. The internet took this message back to the neighbourhoods, into people's homes and made it personal once again. All candidates in the presidential primaries in 2008 invested heavily in online strategies. Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton announced their candidacies online. Once the campaigns were active, they used a range of strategies from internet advertising and search engine positioning to Facebook and YouTube to encourage citizens to organise on their behalf.

Friction free

The cost of this effort shouldn't be overlooked – Obama spent around \$16 million on online advertising, Republican Party candidate, John McCain, \$3.6 million. Obama's Facebook campaign alone is reputed to have cost more than \$600,000.

To pay for this, candidates need donors and online campaigns in 2008 reportedly attracted unprecedented revenues from small donations. According to the Washington Post, Obama's campaign raised over half a billion dollars online and in the biggest fundraising month, September 2008, \$100 million of the \$150 million raised was donated online. Overall, six million out of the 6.5 million online donations were for less than \$100.

Although attributed to an 'internet effect', in reality, this could just as easily be about a nation more online and more comfortable doing business online choosing the simplest, friction-free way to make a donation (and not ignoring the psychology of small donations). In reality, it was also about strong personalities and campaigns built around individuals.

The US model, however, has two critical differences with the UK; the amount of money available in the US is a magnitude greater and the focus on an individual is critical. Building a campaign around one person is far easier than developing one for 650 candidates surrounded by a party brand in an age of failing party loyalties. Perhaps more relevant in predicting what we might see happen in the UK are countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Canada saw its first so-called federal 'internet-election' in 2000 when opposition and fringe parties pioneered innovative, localised online strategies whilst the incumbents led more centralised campaigns. By 2004 Canadian political parties had begun to integrate the internet seamlessly into the campaign, albeit with a top-down approach and focus on email and mass communication. With the rise of social media, the 2008 campaigns built on the centralised products from earlier elections to include YouTube channels and more blogs. However, campaigns were limited by budgets leading to political parties coming under pressure to co-ordinate online campaigns or provide templates that could be used by local candidates. This election also saw the emergence of citizen-led initiatives linking them into the wider centralised campaigns.

New Zealand has exhibited very similar patterns of internet adoption during election campaigns to

those seen in the UK. Originally largely party-driven, the last general election in 2008 saw a significant growth in the use of candidate blogs and social media. What has been interesting has been the demise of many of these channels post-election. Even where candidates were successful, social networks have not necessarily been maintained as tools to communicate and engage with constituents.

Similarly, Australia witnessed a rise in internet-based campaigning websites post-1996, largely driven by opposition parties, who pioneered increasingly sophisticated interactive and multi-media websites. During Australia's 2007 federal election, candidates from all parties harnessed social networking and video-sharing sites. As we're now seeing emerge in the UK, web strategies were not confined to the immediate electoral period. The Australian Labor Party's 'Kevin07' website launched several months beforehand, incorporating tools such as Flickr, Twitter and YouTube. Since becoming Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd has continued to use his online presence to keep the electorate aware of political developments. This is itself a key factor for observation – the transformation from online campaigning to online government – and policy making (also seen in the US).

Smaller scale

With the UK general election imminent, we are starting to see how the digital campaign landscape will be defined, learning from what happened in the US (and elsewhere) but on a smaller scale and with – most likely – more limited impact.

What we will see falls into two areas; the public-facing use of digital media and its internal use by the parties. In the former category, it is the Conservatives that have the most profile. Despite their incumbent MPs being far less digitally enabled than the other two main parties in the Westminster Parliament, Conservative party candidates have been encouraged to become adopters of social media tools such as blogs and Facebook. It is the Conservatives too, through their new website, myconservatives.com, who have the highest profile web-presence.

Real-time response

Social media will play an important role, less directly for the wider public and more for the political and media classes. Unlike deadline driven newspapers and TV news, the internet operates 24x7 and this changes when, where and how political stories break and how they are responded to. It's no longer sufficient to target the next TV

news deadline to rebut a negative story – it's got to be done now and online! Stories are likely to emerge first through the blogosphere and circulate rapidly and virally via Twitter and Facebook before hitting the mainstream media.

Party strategists will be called on to respond in real time and in the same space. Newspapers and TV will also pick up stories, not because of their news value, but because the story involves Twitter or another novel social media tool. This is a tactic the Liberal Democrats have used but in reality email remains their most powerful digital tool.

The targeted use of advertising on search engines and social networks is also emerging as a digital campaign tool. First seen in the US in 2007, the geo-targeting of placed advertisements in Google and Facebook has a role to play in the UK, although the relatively small size of UK constituencies makes ultra-local challenging.

Data is king

Behind the scenes, data is king. It is important for all the parties to identify and engage supporters and to do this they need to capture as much information about as many people as possible ahead of and during the campaign. A lesson clearly learned from the US is targeted marketing to potential – and particularly swing – voters. What this means is that all of the major parties have invested heavily in making sure they capture all the contacts that they have and systems have been put in place to support the campaign. None of this is new; Labour has had voter databases for over 20 years but these are now sophisticated internet-facing 'Campaign creator' tools, that allow party campaigners anywhere in the country to create print and email campaigns and to analyse voting intentions and household demographics.

When it comes to the campaign itself, the internet is going to play a key support role. A good campaign needs fast and reliable communication between party headquarters and the constituencies and between constituency offices and the local campaigners on the ground. For this, email remains the 'killer application' but this election will see more effective use of social networking tools, such as Facebook and Twitter, not just for public-facing communications but also to coordinate volunteers on the ground.

So, perhaps in an appropriately British way, we will not see the digital razzmatazz witnessed in the US – the party-based political landscape is too different and the budgets much smaller. But we are going to see digital media quietly cementing its place as an invaluable tool to support effective on-the-ground communication and campaigning.

There will also be a further erosion of the power of the traditional print and broadcast media as the internet and particularly social media overcome the tyranny of deadlines. In the long run, the internet is going to become an increasingly important democratic tool, but for the moment it will remain secondary.

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