2001: Cyber Space Odyssey

The internet in the UK election

Edited by Stephen Coleman
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great expectations</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Coleman</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spinning on the web</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-campaigning and beyond</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Coleman and Nicola Hall</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View from the parties – the Labour Party</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate McCarthy</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View from the parties – the Conservatives</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin Jackson</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View from the parties – the Liberal Democrats</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Pack</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winning a seat in Cyber Space</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate web sites</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beccy Earnshaw</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was there an online public dialogue?</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Coleman</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did the internet do for first-time voters?</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicola Hall</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A view from the States</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg Sedberry</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions and recommendations</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Coleman</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001 Election Web Directory</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More connections...greater expectations</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy Green, Chief Executive, BT openworld</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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“I believe that the information revolution can revitalise our democracy. The Hansard Society through its innovative electronic media programme is pioneering new ways of involving people of all ages and backgrounds in citizenship through new internet and digital technology. That can only strengthen our parliamentary democracy and I welcome it.”

Rt Hon Tony Blair, Prime Minister

Why is the Hansard Society, an independent educational charity existing to promote effective parliamentary democracy, interested in e-democracy?

We are aware that there is a prevalent sense on the part of the public that Parliament is remote from them – that it is not necessarily very interested in what they have to say. This was one of the main findings from our research into public perceptions of Parliament after 10 years of cameras in the Commons.

The new communication environment is characterised by the interactive nature of ICTs. This capacity to link citizens to their representatives, irrespective of distance or space, offers opportunities of strengthening the connections that constitute democratic representation.

It is undoubtedly the case that efficient parliamentary business relies upon the expertise and experience of people beyond Parliament. The evidence traditionally taken by select committees is a good example of this. It is sometimes said that Parliament and Government rely too much upon ‘the usual suspects’ – ‘the great and the good’ whose knowledge is already respected. Beyond this group there are undoubtedly many others whose voices could also usefully be heard.

Most modern states are currently interested in e-commerce and e-government. E-democracy is something of a junior partner alongside them and relatively under-studied.

The concept of e-democracy is associated with efforts to broaden political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their representatives using ICTs. Hague and Loader, in their introduction to Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision-Making in the Information Age, explain their idea of e-democracy:

‘Strong democracy requires strong and interactive links between the state and civil society, between government and the governed… we have the prospect of national and local governments interacting with citizens via web sites, e-mail addresses and public information kiosks. We also have experiments with electronic voting, electronic voter guides, citizens juries and the like’ (p.13)

The Hansard Society is interested in e-democracy as a means of making representative democracy stronger and more effective. We are piloting inclusive ways of involving citizens in the parliamentary process: linking people with relevant experience and expertise via ICTs to select committees, the scrutiny of legislation and other democratic processes. We are exploring new ways of informing representation and facilitating the broadest democratic communication.
This election may not be the UK’s first wired election, but it’s already more than a dry run. In some marginal seats, it could, even now, shape the results: where a few hundred votes decide between victory and defeat, having the right e-mail list could make all the difference.

Sir Paddy Ashdown, forward to VoxPolitics Primer

The fact that politics has not been transformed – relationships rebalanced, citizens empowered, virtual conversations initiated, seats won or lost – because of the internet is hardly a surprise or a disappointment. After all, the mighty medium of television, which has dominated British politics for over 40 years, has had no such effect. In short, it is quite possible to argue that the internet is re-shaping politics without expecting it to transform politics within the course of one four-week election campaign.

Rather than searching for the miraculous and transformative qualities of the internet, this report sets out to:

- Provide an analysis of the expectations and context of the 2001 e-election.
- Examine the innovations and value-added features that the net brought to election campaigning and coverage in the 2001 election.
- Offer some recommendations for the future of e-politics.
Great expectations

1959 revisited

In 1959, Britain had its first ‘TV election’. Or, more accurately, it was the first British election campaign to be covered on TV. In 1947, there were only 15,000 TV sets in Britain – by 1950 there were 350,000, but the BBC (as the only TV broadcaster) had entered into an agreement with the Government not to cover election campaigns in case they influenced voters.

By 1959, the landscape had changed in three ways: there were 11 million TV sets in Britain (following the mass purchase of sets at the time of the Coronation); there were two national TV channels, BBC and ITV (established in 1954); and, after the opening of critical TV debate during the Suez crisis and ITV’s coverage of the 1958 Rochdale by-election, broadcasters felt brave enough to cover the election campaign.

The televised campaign of 1959 was regarded as a watershed in the relationship between politicians and the voters. Treneman and McQuail observed that:

‘In no other medium could one virtually sit within 15 feet of a political leader and watch his mind at work, study his manner and moods and assess his general qualities. Here, at last, was a medium where the speaker did not have to compete with conversation and domestic activities as a voice from the background, in an attempt to gain the attention of the elector. The television screen compels attention.’

Television and the Political Image, p.14, 1961

In retrospect, the role of TV in the 1959 election was pretty dull and far from groundbreaking. The politicians did not know how to use the new medium: political interviews tended to be stilted, visually frozen and over-deferential; party political broadcasts resembled radio talks; politicians presented themselves to the cameras – when they remembered to do so at all – as if they were addressing a public meeting. In short, most of what happened on television replicated old campaigning traditions from a pre-TV age. By 1964, when Labour’s young, new leader, Harold Wilson, had learned to cultivate TV opportunities – much to the cost of his opponent, Alec Douglas Home – television started to play a pivotal role in election campaigns. It was arguably not until 2001 that the three main parties all had leaders who had grown up within and adapted themselves to a TV-dominated democracy.

The 2001 e-campaign was 1959 all over again. Everyone knew that the net was important, but few knew how to use it inventively. Old forms of publicity were replicated within a new medium: parties and candidates set up web sites that looked rather like printed brochures or low-budget TV shows or ads for insurance policies. It was a campaign of borrowed content showcased within a glossy new medium.

Three models of e-campaigning

In fact, there was not one e-campaign in 2001, but three – each trying to hit different targets, each performing different roles.

The e-marketing model

This model imported the methods of e-commerce to politics. E-commerce is concerned with selling goods and services via the web. E-politics campaigners were concerned to sell parties, policies and politicians via the web. As with all marketing campaigns, the criteria of success were measurable. Just as selling books or holidays on the web succeeds or fails in terms of how many books or holidays are sold that would not otherwise have been bought, e-campaigners would be judged ultimately in terms of seats won or lost, new members or activists attracted to their parties, amounts of online donations or requests for information.

The voter empowerment model

Much of what was offered online had little to do with traditional vote-seeking, but started from the assumption that voters were somehow under-represented and required strategies to fight back against the party machines and the media elite. There were four main elements within this model:

i) Online irreverence. A plethora of web sites provided opportunities for voters to laugh at, reconstruct and humiliate the parties and politicians. These sites circulated virally at a stunning speed, creating a bush network of populist scoffs and sniggers, unprecedented since the yellow press of the 18th century. This genre was to the majority of under-35-year-olds who were not to vote on June 7 what the Today programme was for the political junkies – it was a cultural snub to the postures and affectations of party politics.

ii) Tactical voting. The several web sites which offered opportunities for electors to swap their votes with those in other constituencies were a direct attack upon the aggregative outcomes of most electoral choices. Claiming to provide an alternative to wasted votes and a mechanism for voting against a selected greater evil, tactical voting sites offered voters the chance – or, at least, the illusion – of being able to transcend the traditional barriers of electoral arithmetic.
iii) Conversational politics. Web forums and e-mail lists offered spaces for public debate and informal conversation, enabling voters to exchange views with other voters.

iv) Narrowcasting. Several web sites targeted distinct groups of voters, ranging from gays to Muslims to teachers to the elderly. These sites reflected the fragmentary nature of the web and its capacity to narrowcast messages to and from specific sections of the electorate, traditionally overlooked by the broad canvass of broadcasting.

The e-democratic model
The first two models are concerned with utilising the internet as an instrumental power. But what about the internet as a social and political phenomenon in its own right? What did the parties – or anyone else, for that matter – have to say about the future of the internet, about the information society or e-democracy or the new economy? In the Scandinavian countries these issues have generated real debates in electoral politics, but in the UK this model was largely conspicuous by its absence from the election.

This is stranger still when one considers that the 2001 election took place within the context of a major anxiety about the disconnections between parties, Parliament and the people. The first week of the campaign was full of media reports about an allegedly apathetic electorate. The Conservatives accused Labour of being dominated by spin and unwilling to listen. Labour characterised the Tories as out of touch and incapable of learning from the electorate. On June 7, voters provided some credence to both main parties by staying away from the polls in greater numbers than at any time since the democratic franchise began.

One in four eligible citizens did not exercise their right to vote – as many as 62% of first-time voters and 55% of under-35-year-olds did not vote. The Government, elected with a bigger majority than any other since 1945 (apart from its own majority in 1997), received votes from only 25% of eligible voters – 20% fewer than the abstainers. Surely, this was the election in which the parties could usefully have been talking about how the internet could be used to re-engage citizens in democratic politics?

With the exception of a passing mention of ‘electronic consultations’ in the Liberal Democrat manifest, the only reference to the internet in the entire campaign was a distractionary policy announcement by Labour about cracking down on online child molesters. This was hardly designed to inspire public confidence in the democratic potential of the net.

The Hansard e-democracy programme was developed to explore ways that parliamentary democracy could adapt to, and be invigorated by, the new information and communication technologies (ICTs). Strengthening the relationship between representatives and represented could result in better-informed MPs, more connected and less frustrated citizens and a more legitimate democratically rooted Parliament. The objective here is not to replace Parliament by some technopolitist version of direct democracy, but to strengthen representative democracy. This will require a political will to explore the democratic opportunities offered by the inherent interactivity of digital media. Ironically, the e-marketing model of electioneering tended to steer clear of authentic interactivity – rightly so, from the no-risk perspective of traditional campaigning. Some critics, coming from the e-democratic perspective, berated the party web sites for not inviting voters to discuss their policies online. But this is to misunderstand the difference between selling policies and engaging citizens in the formulation of policy. The latter offers a counterweight to spin, superficiality and secrecy in democratic governance, but is unlikely to be adopted within the more aggressively competitive context of electoral politics.

The future of e-politics?
The extraordinary hype that preceded the US presidential election of 2000 and the subsequent debacle of the e-strategists (examined in our earlier report: Elections in the Age of the Internet: lessons from the United States) served to protect the UK election from the more embarrassing excesses of e-rhetoric. Few in Britain ever believed that the 2001 election would be won, lost or significantly affected by anything that happened on the internet. And they were right.

But there is a danger of such modest sobriety resulting in an exaggerated dismissal of the political role of the internet. There has been a tendency to see the internet in the 2001 election as a flash in the pan. This view is misguided for several reasons:

- The 2001 election was unusually predictable and rather dull. Even television, which put huge resources into covering this election, failed badly to engage the electorate. If TV were being judged by its ability to connect with voters in 2001 it could well be dismissed as an obsolete medium. But not all elections will be like this one. The role of the internet in a more closely fought or controversial election could well be much more important. In this respect, the internet may have a key role to play in providing information and facilitating public deliberation in the forthcoming euro referendum.

- Whatever happens, a significant section of the population will want to use the net as a convenient information and communication tool. People use the net increasingly for work, sending mail, playing games, shopping, banking, learning and booking holidays; it is inconceivable that they will not also choose to use it when deciding how to vote. If politicians or the media were to evacuate the internet, others – perhaps less democratically accountable – would surely fill the void; it is important that the key players in democratic life are effectively represented on the net.

- From radio phone-ins to reality TV, there is lots of evidence to suggest that people these days prefer media featuring ‘real people’ to the staged media events of traditional politics. The interactivity of the internet, which breaks down old barriers between producers and receivers, is a perfect medium for the more inclusive, participatory aspirations of contemporary democracy.
Great expectations

- Even if the internet in its present form is far from being all that e-enthusiasts claim, it will not remain in its present form for much longer. By the time of the next general election in 2005/6, far more people will have access to and skill in using the internet. Web sites are likely to become faster, better designed and less of a novelty item. As more platforms become available for connecting to the internet – from mobile phones and palm tops to digital TV – e-politics will become much more accessible and adapted to voters’ lifestyles.

Apathy and engagement

The 2001 election witnessed a watershed in voter disengagement. This may have been related to the particular circumstances of one election, but even if this is so, it is consistent with a long-term loss of interest or trust in the traditional democratic process by a number of socio-demographic groups.

Not only did 2001 see the lowest voter turnout since 1918; perhaps more importantly it was the first election in which it was considered ‘cool’ to disengage. This was made pretty explicit on the web site of the popular Big Brother programme:

Voter Apathy?

THEY say apathy has gripped the country. They accuse the public of not caring. They sit in comfortable chairs laughing at you. Well, now’s your chance to bite back and prove to the nation that the election is important and that your vote really does matter.

The newspapers may pander to the political parties, but not Big Brother. On the site today we offer you – the esteemed viewer – the chance to take part in the vital referendum.

Forget the Euro, stealth taxes and spin, today Big Brother online is asking: Is the Big Brother Election more important than the General Election?

To put your cross on the ballot paper, simply click the polls icon on the home page and make your voice heard.

By registering your vote on the site before the 11th member of the house is finalised at 10:40pm tonight, you can show the world that England is still a freethinking, pro-active country that cares. We urge you to take part and show that this sleepy green-fielded nation is gripped by the freedom of choice, vis-à-vis Anne, Josh or Natasha.

Our manifesto is simple. We want to prove to the bureaucrats that people will not simply lie down in quiet awe, but stand up and be counted. Remember, a vote for Big Brother is a vote for democracy and freedom. You can make a difference.

June 1, 2001

If future e-campaigns – by the parties, candidates and pressure groups – can capture the playfulness and voter-centredness of the joke, game and spoof sites that abounded in 2001, the internet may well play a key role in politically re-energising a turned-off generation. Rather than seeking to compete with traditional media for the attention of an ageing and dwindling population of news consumers, e-communicators should turn their attention to the majority for whom electoral politics has to be re-invented before it becomes fashionable.

Coming soon

We will not have to wait for the next general election to evaluate the significance of e-politics in the UK. If and when there is a referendum on joining the euro the net will play a key role. This will be a single-issue debate, involving passionate views on each side and a complexity of information that could be well served by the depth qualities of the net. The scope for streamlining online communications – by not having catch-all ‘Vote Yes’ or ‘Vote No’ web sites, but target sites for specific social groups – could contribute tangibly to voters’ sense of feeling informed or uninformed.

The next general election, expected in 2005 or 2006, will not simply be the UK’s second internet election, but possibly the last election in which personal computers will be the main access platform to the internet. The Government’s declared aim to switch off digital TV by the end of this decade means that the election after next could well be Britain’s first digital TV election – with all sets having interactive functions, including internet access and e-mail. Arguably, the incorporation of e-interactivity into the traditional domestic sphere will be the real coming of age of the net. In this sense, 2001 and the next election could be seen as dress rehearsals for the coming arrival of universally accessible e-politics.

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The evidence presented here is based on daily monitoring of the party web sites; in-depth interviews with the three party web masters before and after the election period (Justin Jackson, Conservative Party web master, Kate McCarthy and Andrew Saxton, Labour e-campaigns and Mark Pack, Liberal Democrat web master) and a national poll, conducted by MORI specifically for this research.

Internet advantages
The internet offers four advantages over traditional campaign media:

1. **Multimedia** – the internet offers the capacity to combine the visual, audio, print and video qualities of other media and can distribute text via e-mail for much less than the price of a postal mail-out.

2. **Personalisation** – the internet provides targeted information at any level of depth for individuals and interest groups; it can adapt delivery according to users’ preferences via personalisation of content, e-mail and ‘narrowcasting’.

3. **Interactivity** – the internet is dialogical, not monological as is the traditional media. Interaction, dialogue and feedback between hundreds of users is possible via ‘clickable’ links, e-mail, bulletin boards, discussion forums, chat rooms and newsgroups.
4. **Unmediated** – the internet gives the parties direct access to the electorate and vice versa, without the intervention and manipulation of the media. For political parties, this means getting a message across to the electorate without intervention; for citizens this means getting information straight from the horse’s mouth.

How far did the parties capitalise on these four advantages and what did the internet campaigns really achieve? With the exception of tactical voting – considered on page 17 – there is little evidence that the internet was a decisive influence on voting. However, the success of an e-campaign can be judged on more than mere voting outcomes. This chapter argues that the e-campaigns were successful as far as they went; but failed to exploit the full potential of the internet.

**The parties’ intentions**

The main advantage of the internet to the parties was that it offered them a chance to address themselves directly to the electorate, without the intervention or interpretation of the media. When interviewed before the election was called, the three parties identified different reasons for running e-campaigns.

- **Conservative web master, Justin Jackson, identified the internet’s interactivity and feedback as important:** ‘What other medium is there where you can actually listen to people and get feedback on a continual basis? It’s the whole idea of “narrowcasting”. It’s the first time in my political lifetime that you can have an ongoing political dialogue with individual people about political issues.’

- **For Kate McCarthy of the Labour Party, the e-campaign was part of a tool-box supporting the party structure:** ‘Anything that we are doing online is to convert people into the next stage along in the process.’ The web was being used to support the party by converting people into a more active role – persuading inactive members to work actively for the party and persuading supporters to join, donate to party funds or volunteer time. The Labour Party aimed to get its site into the top 20 most viewed web sites during the campaign period, and claim they achieved this.

- **For Mark Pack of the Liberal Democrats, the internet created a level playing field where smaller, less well-funded parties could compete on equal terms with the larger parties:** ‘The web site will give us another way of getting that information out – hopefully to a slightly wider group of people. If we just put it on the web site… it’s effectively a cost-free exercise.’

All three party e-strategists agreed that e-campaigning was just one tool alongside others. E-campaigning would serve a variety of purposes, some of which could also be done offline and some of which could only be done online.

**Party web site features**

Parties offered the following:

- **Public web site** – Users could visit a web site to gain information and interact with the three parties.

- **Home page** – All three web sites opened with identifying features such as party colours, logos and promotional graphics or adverts/campaign ‘posters’ and links to the various sections of the site.

- **Daily news stories** – Visitors could read the campaign news headlines and top stories (which were updated up to 10 times a day), with instant rebuttals of stories and events throughout the campaign. The parties could mediate information and content as they wished, highlighting certain stories or incidents and glossing over others.

‘We can “disintermediate” and do not have to rely on the media to get our message out. People who are interested can come and find out for themselves. All the copy on the web site is written specifically for the web site – why should the public have to read a press release when it’s not written for them?’ said Conservative web master, Justin Jackson. Online news proved a popular section of the web sites, transferring an offline delivery mechanism (leaflets through doors, television news) online. The advantages for the parties are manifold – news can be updated regularly to rebut damaging stories, given a flattering angle, and removed when necessary. For users, the advantage is instant access to the party’s version of events, although this may be just as manipulated and mediated as news from an alternative media source.

- **Join the party online** – Users could join via the web site by either paying online or printing out and posting a membership form. This option made it possible to bring membership to people’s attention via prominent display on the web site. For users, this proved a simple method of joining the party, fitting into the e-commerce model of transacting online with which people are becoming increasingly familiar. It worked – the Labour Party claims that as many people joined it online as joined via the telephone during the election period.

- **Make a donation online** – This transaction was reported as being particularly successful in the US presidential election in 2000, but was much less of a phenomenon in this election due to tighter restrictions on fundraising in British electoral law. People could donate money online without having to commit to being a party member. This was the online delivery of a transaction that in the past had happened over the telephone.

- **Contact the party online** – Users could interact with the party via an online e-mail form or e-mail address. This was the main online route for interactive feedback to the parties. The parties claim that they usually responded to e-mails within 24 hours, but this was not as reliable as it should have been. It is likely that some slipped through the net. (See box on page 18 about the test questions e-mailed to the parties.)
None of the parties offered a chat room or discussion forum. They don’t seem to be a great success on other web sites. You tend to have a fairly low quality of postings – you don’t have a very good quality discussion.’ said Mark Pack of the Liberal Democrats.

- **Policy information** – During the campaign the parties focused on their manifestos. The manifestos were available to download online (and were available in different languages on the Conservative site). On the Labour site, additional manifestos, including ones directed at youth and business, were available. Detailed policy information on a range of issues was provided free of charge in this way whereas, previously, people would have had to buy a copy of the manifesto from their newsagent.

- **Party Election Broadcasts** – These were available to download in a video/audio clip. To watch them, users needed Real Player software, a sound card and speakers, which are not available on lower range computers. These were probably used very little by the general public – who rarely complain about missing election broadcasts. Having these available was more of a statement of the parties’ technological ability than an addition to the democratic process.

- **Links to candidate information** – Users could find out who their candidate was via the party web sites. All three parties gave online information about their candidates. The Liberal Democrats best utilised the potential of the internet in this capacity by providing a database (searchable by name and constituency) of all candidates, including a biography and link to their web site (if they had one). The Conservatives offered a ‘Find my Candidate’ function, searchable by postcode, which provided a short biography of all candidates. Labour only provided an alphabetical candidate list in a Word document – this lacked the interactive features that could have made it more useful for users.

- **Links to other sites** – Visitors could use the party web sites to gain access to related organisations. All three main parties included links to sister parties or organisations, such as Conservative Future, Liberal Democrat Youth and Students, other European Labour organisations or candidate web sites.

- **Speeches** – Labour offered a list of the week’s main speeches, the Conservatives and Lib Dems offered ‘click-throughs’ where appropriate. These allowed people to get full versions of the scripts rather than just sound-bitten extracts that usually appeared on other traditional news media. This took advantage of the textuality of the internet and its ability to store and deliver large quantities of information, allowing people to directly access the news source.

- **Free downloads** – Users could download free cartoons, screensavers and posters from the party web sites. This is certainly something that could not have been delivered prior to e-campaigning and it added a ‘fun’ element to the campaign. This feature was not available on the Liberal Democrat web site.

- **Daily e-bulletin** – Users could sign up for daily e-mail bulletins on campaign news. It was possible to request certain types of e-mailed information – such as ‘health’ or ‘education’. The three parties sent e-mails out daily with ‘click-through’ links to the full story on their web sites.

The Labour Party used e-mails for the widest set of functions: to remind people to vote; to highlight certain issues and information; to elicit support and rally people to volunteer; and to rebut news stories. They sent out 32 daily e-mails, four weekly summary e-mails, 12 policy-specific e-mails, four e-mails from rup4it and a personal message from Tony Blair to everyone on the party records with an e-mail address. Their e-mail list included around 35,000 e-mail addresses.

The Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats used e-mail predominantly to highlight latest news stories and to invite people to test out new features on their web sites. For the parties, e-mail proved advantageous. E-mails provided a cheap and unmediated alternative delivery mechanism for news, enabling parties to draw attention to specific issues and reach the in-box of those who did not check the web site regularly or, via viral marketing, by forwarding e-mails to those who had not even contacted the party. By specifying areas of interest, users could receive particular information, but could not influence the volume received.

- **Online application for a postal vote** – This feature allowed people to ‘click-through’ to the postal vote application web site, as an alternative to telephoning. For voters, this was important information, since it made the possibility of a postal vote better known. This feature was not available from the Liberal Democrats.

- **E-mail a page to a friend** – This encouraged users to share a page with a friend via e-mail and therefore disseminated the party’s material more widely. Labour confirmed, when interviewed, that the public used this feature surprisingly rarely. This feature was not available from the Liberal Democrats.

- **Party-only extranet** – A password-protected area for party members, including downloadable campaign material, graphics, advice on how to respond to voters’ questions and reflections on the day’s events and news. The Labour Party extranet included an area for members to e-mail in their campaign experiences to share with other members. The Labour Party extranet for councillors included a bulletin board on which they could exchange views and experiences. The Conservative extranet offered graphics for candidates to use on their own web sites and published around 100 documents a day – with suggested party lines to take – including all party press releases. The parties confirmed that extranets proved a successful and cheap way of disseminating information and templates within the parties.
The alternative election

Chris Quigley

So how was it for you? Longer than expected, interesting, exhausting, unforgettable – a lot of fun. An election virgin, the 2001 general election proved one of the most interesting experiences of my life. Sat at the helm of Spinon.co.uk, the election-based satire site, with only 22 years of life under my belt, I observed the election process from a unique angle. By providing daily satirical coverage of the election, and reaching out to over 40,000 individual users, Spinon filled a newly-opened gap in the media market, and enabled me to see how the younger generation were responding to the election events.

The idea for Spinon came from America. Having followed the US 2000 election on the net, it was particularly evident that where serious election-based web sites failed, humorous/irreverent web sites succeeded. Whilst the dry politics.com and voter.com faltered and lost millions of dollars, off-the-wall sites like Bovrop.net and Indecision2000 thrived. Using these alternative American web sites as a model, and spurred on by press reports of youth apathy and the need to get the young involved in politics, Spinon was conceived and developed by rubberductions (the multi-media production company) and fully launched at the beginning of April in time to cover the predicted May 3 election.

From the outset, we wanted Spinon to be more than just a humorous site. We wanted it to be informed and, to an extent, educational. The aim was to use the full multi-media capabilities of the internet to provide irreverent but intelligent coverage of the election. With its e-games, animations, cartoons, text-based comment and very own online radio channel (Spin Radio), Spinon was able to give a fresh spin on politics, reach out to an audience who might normally avoid mainstream political coverage – those who may be considered the ‘apathetic youth’.

From Spinon’s statistics and the feedback we received, it seems as though the mix between fun games and more serious satirical comment struck a cord with our young audience, drawing them into the election process. The numbers of visitors speak for themselves: with over 100,000 visitors, 40,000 individual users and with a peak of 600 hits a second at one point, it is undeniable that Spinon was a success. Perhaps the best indication of Spinon’s success was the fact that at the height of the election fervour the site was hacked into and forced offline by an unknown cyber hacker. Interestingly, this breach of security came on the same day as we ran a spoof story detailing government plans to introduce the Press Control Commission – a story that took a satirical jab at Labour’s attempts at media manipulation. Who ever doubted the effect of the internet on the election?

To say that Spinon had a huge impact on the election would be wrong – however, I do think that as an experiment it proved enlightening and showed what the future holds. Without doubt, in future elections political parties will send out ‘unofficial’ humorous games lambasting the opposition: games that will go further than Labour’s rather lame Tory Tax calculator and which will be more like Spinon’s irreverent MP in a Blender – a game which involves… well… putting your least favourite MP in a blender and doing your worst. Such games are more than just mindless fun – what they do is allow the electorate to actually connect with MPs, albeit in a virtual way.

The popularity of MP in a Blender – the fact that 35,000 people wanted to put their least favourite MP in a blender and do their worst – illustrates the fact that a large proportion of the electorate, especially young people, felt/feel alienated from politics.

What attracted people to Spinon was the fact that they could interact with politics; Spinon allowed the disaffected alienated public to Egg Prescott, jump on William Hague’s Bandwagon, and engage in a Three Way Debate with the main party leaders – all in the comfort of their offices or bedrooms. Although on the surface such activities seem like ‘just a bit of fun’, the popularity of Spinon raises some important questions about the state of politics today, and the health of the electorate. Why did people so enjoy our negative satire? Why did people love running over bogus asylum seekers in our Egg Prescott? These are the questions that need to be addressed by the government. In the meantime, Spinon will carry on undressing the government and pandering to the electorate’s needs.

Chris Quigley is Co-founder/Editor of Spinon.co.uk

Internal SMS – All the parties used SMS (text messaging) and mobile telephony as internal organisational tools, as successors to using pagers.

Media centre – Labour and the Liberal Democrats offered media centres with searchable press releases and candidate information. ‘It is a resource for the media. We have downloadable press releases or press conferences so you can really get access to them.’ said Kate McCarthy from the Labour Party.

The Conservatives offered a password-protected media centre with PDA and WAP downloads of the day’s press releases as well as an SMS function: ‘You can click on a button and it will SMS the press officer for you.’ explained web master Justin Jackson. These functions were well used by journalists.

Web cast press conferences – Labour and the Conservatives web cast their daily press conferences. In Labour’s case this was done via mobile telephony when on location away from London. This benefited...
journalists, particularly those outside London and on the campaign trail. It also benefited the parties by making their message and news agendas more widely spread across the country.

- **WAP/PDA** – Users could sign up for daily downloads of news and other features to their WAP phones or PDAs. The Conservatives confirmed that PDA proved a popular method of keeping up-to-date and offered a portable alternative to the web. This feature was not available from the Liberal Democrats.

Each of the parties offered certain unique functions:

**Conservatives:**
- **My Manifesto** – This was as close to genuine interactivity as any party got. Users answered a set of questions on the Conservative web site about their socio-demographic profile and were then presented with a personalised manifesto based on their answers. So, if you were recently married, the ‘Starting a Family’ section of the manifesto would be highlighted. This was an innovative attempt to personalise internet content. The idea of personalising content – and particularly policy – to suit users’ interests is one of the strengths of the internet and was under-explored in this election. *My Manifesto* took a step in the right direction, but it was not detailed enough to produce truly individualised results.
- **Live web cast interviews** – The Conservative site web cast four live interviews with senior shadow cabinet members during the election. Site users could e-mail in their questions for the shadow ministers prior to the web cast – which comprised a face-to-face video recording where an interviewer put the public’s questions to the politician. For the party, this provided an opportunity to ‘produce’ its own television-style programme without the constraints of balance and time pressures. Although the questions were supplied by the ‘audience’, they were selected by the party. All that this amounted to was the transfer of a broadcast model to the internet – it was no different from calling a radio or television programme. For the public, this was an effective and interactive way of presenting policy information about achievements of the Labour Government to local campaigners and to non-party users. For users, it provided up to five pages of detailed, local policy information about 41 different policy areas. It was the most systematic and comprehensive method of presenting policy information of all the parties.
- **Mortgage calculator** – This feature allowed users to type in the value of their mortgages and calculate how much money they would save under Labour. For the party, this was yet another way of presenting campaign material; for the public, it offered little explanation of how the sums added up or how the calculation was made.
- **Cut’n’Run game** – The web site offered a game where users could propose cuts to public services in the Pac-Man-style of older computer games. This served to highlight and ridicule the Conservatives’ tax plans. For the party, it was intended as a humorous way of getting a message across. The game was forwarded to an estimated 200,000 e-mail addresses as an ‘exe’ file through people forwarding e-mails.
- **Tony Blair message** – The site included an audio/video welcome message from the Prime Minister. By providing footage online that was unavailable elsewhere, the party could attract people to the site. Labour had intended to use more dedicated web site-only footage to attract users, but this never reached fruition because of time constraints on senior politicians.
- **Campaign diary** – The site included a daily diary, with photographs and short notices sent in from campaigners across the country. Five digital
Spinning on the Web

The internet was primarily used by the parties for the online delivery of previously offline marketing material. What was previously done on a billboard or leaflet was ‘e-ified’. In general, there was a lack of connection with the voters. Interactivity was limited to ineffective e-mail feedback channels and tentative attempts to create personalised content – such as the Conservatives’ *My Manifesto* feature. Voters could not ‘answer back’ to the parties any more than they could before the arrival of the internet – and indeed, could respond a good deal less than in the days of local public meetings.

Of the four advantages of the internet mentioned earlier in this chapter, the parties have taken advantage only of the unmediated nature of the internet and, to some extent, its multimedia potential. They have not yet capitalised upon its interactivity or its personalisation abilities. As Kate McCarthy stated, ‘We won’t be [“narrowcasting”] because we have limited resources and limited time. There are other things for us, bigger priorities.’

The parties’ failure to exploit the net’s interactivity and ability to personalise and ‘narrowcast’ content is reflective of the parties’ inability to interact with the public more generally. As party membership levels decline and voter turnout falls, the parties must address this question and reassess their e-campaign as part of a wider problem of disconnection. The internet is not a panacea for the problems of democracy, but it may serve, if its true capabilities are optimised, to strengthen the connection between parties and voters, as well as citizens and Parliament.

II. Empowering the voters – the public makes its mark

Much has been made of the open, interactive and often anarchic nature of the internet. Unlike broadcasting, it eludes centralised control mechanisms and can easily host a plethora of many-to-many communications.

Much of the literature on the development of online communication has predicted that the internet will become increasingly dominated by the major offline institutions and interests – such as corporations, governments, big parties and established media. This is sometimes referred to as the normalisation thesis. By contrast, others have advanced a mobilisation thesis, seeing the internet as providing for an opening up of communication (television) and textual (press and posters) forms of manifestos, speeches or party election broadcasts, retrievable at times that suited them, for as long as they wanted, without the selective and possibly biased interpretation of the media. The e-campaign

Undoubtedly gave voters direct access to more information from the parties than would have been disseminated to the public in previous elections. However, very little of what was available online was unique to the internet; much of it was merely the reformatting of existing offline content.

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offs. For example, one would have wanted to look at whether the 10 Green candidates who saved their deposits operated a particularly strong online campaign – or whether candidates from less-resourced parties had new opportunities to further their political agendas and connect with voters as a result of e-campaigns.

Without seeking to draw any conclusions about normalisation or mobilisation, we can note that the internet opened some spaces for new kinds of information-sharing and communicating in the 2001 election which probably would not have emerged without it. These new opportunities benefited candidates (and non-voters) by providing channels for a public mood of disenchantment with traditional electoral politics. This mood seemed to have been rooted in the following attitudinal trends:

- a breakdown in traditional deference to authority and institutions, accompanied by a more critical challenging of all propositions about governance;
- frustration about the predictability of the election result;
- frustration with the politics of spin and stage management;
- a popular feeling that the public is not listened to;
- a disenchantment with the style and apparent exclusivity of much political discourse – especially as shown on TV.

The public felt under-represented in the political process as they perceived it – so the new opportunities offered by the internet served as strategies of the under-represented to make their feelings known. In an instrumental sense, none of these strategies could be seen to have produced tangible electoral effects (with the possible exception of online tactical voting.) But in an election where over 40% of the eligible population did not choose to vote, one should not judge political communication strategies purely in terms of their effects on votes cast.

**Online irreverence**

The 2001 election witnessed a mushrooming of political humour web sites. Almost daily e-mails would arrive with links to new sites, funnier caricatures of well-known candidates, more inventive (and destructive) ways of reconfiguring political images and new games loosely based upon electoral themes. There was a fervour about the spread of these sites, particularly among young people, that was unmissable.

The Prescott punch – an early moment of political drama in a dull campaign – gave rise to numerous web sites where one could punch, be punched by or enter into a contest with an animated John Prescott. (See www.panlogic.co.uk/splat_the_MP.html and www.sirsearchalot.com/biffa.htm and www.rancon.co.uk/prezza/main.html)

Other sites enabled users to splat MPs with an egg (http://images.thisislondon.com/img/news/election2001/splatgame.html), re-mix them in a blender (http://www.rubbershorts.com/spinon/games/blender/blenderprescott.html), punch them

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**The rights and wrongs of internet polling**

**Peter Kellner**

Although still in its infancy, internet polling has passed its first tests with flying colours. Success in the United States – where a Harris internet poll correctly predicted the photo-finish between Al Gore and George Bush – has been followed by YouGov’s achievement in Britain, where it called the outcome of the race between Labour and Conservative more accurately than any traditional poll. Various web sites conducted polls during the campaign period. Most of these suffered from the fundamental problem that respondents were able to vote as often as they wanted. Clearly, no such poll could claim to be representative of the population, and their results were wildly divergent from the final election result. Even major news providers conducted such polls.

There were two notable exceptions to this. ICM conducted a series of issue-based polls for the BBC via e-mail of 1,000 BBC News Online users. However, these were not designed to predict the general election result and are therefore not strictly comparable with voting-intention polls.

The second example is the YouGov/British Election Study online poll, conducted in association with Freeserve. More than 7,000 respondents were attracted to the survey via the Freeserve home page, and answered more than a hundred questions (in parallel with the face-to-face and telephone polls conducted for the BES by NOP and Gallup).

In terms of the crucial variable – the gap between Labour and Conservative – the YouGov poll recorded the most accurate results of all published pre-election results (both on and offline). On Sunday June 3, the Sunday Business published the then-latest YouGov poll showing a Labour lead of 11% with ICM (offline) next closest on 12%.

The final published eve-of-election results for all organisations were:

- YouGov – 10% Labour lead (43%-33%)
- ICM – 11% (43-32)
- Rasmussen – 11% (44-33)
- MORI – 15% (45-30)
- Gallup – 17% (47-30)

On election day, Labour’s actual lead over the Conservatives was 9.3% (42.9-32.7).

Although the raw data contained demographic biases that needed to be corrected, YouGov’s data confirms that access to the internet has become sufficiently widespread that a well-conducted internet poll is a powerful new addition to the armoury of weapons for studying public opinion.

**Peter Kellner is a political journalist and polling expert**
There were political anagram sites (www.anagrams.net/politics), fantasy politics sites (www.fantasyelection2001.com and www.amielectableornot.com) and sites telling people how to vote on the basis of online questionnaires (www.votemonkey.com and www.whodoyoufor.co.uk).

These sites were wholly interactive, simple to follow and amusing to share with others. Often they were devastatingly cruel, such as the satire on the famous A-team: the C-team, featuring the Tory front bench (www.guydowman.com/Images/a-team.shtml).

What was going on here? These sites were about more than someone painting anarchist graffiti on a Town Hall wall. There were various anarchistic web sites, such as Vote Nobody (http://uk.geocities.com/votenobody/), Nun of the Above (www.nunoftheabove.org/), the abstention site (www.dontvote.org.uk/), Election fraud (www.electionfraud2001.org.uk/) and Guilty Party (www.guiltyparty.co/), but these tended to be politically uninformative precisely because they were trying to make political points. Spoof sites, such as www.williamhague.com, www.tonyblair.co.uk, www.robincooper.org and www.anawriddecombe.com failed to cause the kind of confusion that parody Bush and Gore sites had in the US election – although there was one case of cyber-squatting in Wales, where the Liberal Democrats registered a site at www.plaid-cymru.co.uk, clearly intending to pick up voters looking for the Welsh nationalists.

Overall, online humour and games successfully tapped into a popular feeling about the disconnection of politics from people – especially young people. The parties should learn from these sites that the public (or a significant section of the online public, at least) wants a much more interactive use of web sites and a different style of relating to politics. This was the public that felt more comfortable with Have I Got News For You than the News at Ten.

**Tactical voting**

In all elections voters are faced with the problem of their one vote counting for little within the overall aggregation of votes cast. Although few voters are familiar with the theoretical aspects of rational choice theory and its conclusion that most votes cast do not determine the election results; many feel frustrated because they cannot possibly vote for the candidate of their choice with any realistic expectation of affecting the result. Tactical voting is one way in which voters can collaborate to oust least preferred candidates. The www.stop Hague.com web site offered this explanation of its strategy:

**TACTICAL voting is a democratic means of ensuring that an unwanted party does not win the election by voting for the next strongest candidate, regardless of party affiliation. For example, if you are registered to vote in Kingston and Surbiton – where Labour cannot win – you would vote for Edward Davey, the Liberal Democrat candidate, to ensure that William Hague's candidate is not elected. Voters from Wimbledon – where the Lib Dems can't win – would support Labour's Roger Casale over Hague's candidate. This way, both Liberal Democrat and Labour supporters can hold critical marginal constituencies, instead of losing them to Hague's followers.**

Tactical voting existed long before the advent of online politics. It has never been an officially sanctioned party policy, so channels have not existed for party supporters in different constituencies to swap votes. The web is a perfect medium for such distant transactions.


Voters going to tactical voting sites registered their names, e-mail addresses and constituencies and were then put in touch with voters from other constituencies with whom they could agree to swap votes. Such swaps or vote-trades served as strategies for beating the odds of the first-past-the-post electoral system. The largest of the vote-swapping sites – www.tacticalvoter.net – claimed to receive as many as 200,000 visitors during the election campaign and 8,153 unique pledges by voters to swap their votes.

Did tactical voting, organised online, change any results? In two constituencies there is strong evidence that this did happen:

- In Cheadle – where www.tacticalvoter.net had received 47 vote-swapping pledges from voters – the Conservative MP was ousted by a Liberal Democrat majority of 33.
- In Dorset South, Conservative MP, Ian Bruce (ironically, one of the most e-friendly Conservative MPs) was ousted by a majority of 153 votes – with 185 pledges received on the tactical voting web sites.

Were vote-swapping sites legal? On the face of it, voters are quite at liberty to enter into voluntary arrangements with one another about how to cast their votes. Ian Bruce, in Dorset South, complained to the Information Commissioner that www.votedorset.org was in contravention of the Data Protection Act, in that it was collecting and disseminating personal data without a licence. The Conservatists also filed a complaint with the Electoral Commission about the www.stop Hague.com web site, claiming that if it constituted a ‘third-party’ donation of over £500, it had to be declared as an election expense. Neither objection was upheld, but it would be surprising if we did not see further wrangles in the future about the legality of vote-swapping web sites.
Customising politics

The 2001 election saw the rise of a number of community and interest-based web sites which reflected a more personalised, consumer-targeted trend that may well come to the fore in future elections. Sites like www.vote-environment.org.uk, the Asian voters’ www.zindagee.co.uk, www.education-election.com, set up by the National Union of Teachers, the gay site www.gayvote.co.uk, the Muslim site www.votesmart.org.uk and the Christian www.makethecrosscount.com were interesting examples of how the web can help to organise distinct groups of voters. 2001 also witnessed the emergence of factional, internal-party sites, with Conservative eurosceptics promoting www.imperial-tories.com and the National Association of Ted Heath Burners at www.surf.to/heath.

Some target sites were particularly impressive in highlighting aspects of the electoral agenda that might otherwise have been missed. Advocacy Online’s site for older voters (www.advocacyonline.net/learn_say.jsp) – run in collaboration with Age Concern – was a model of how to conduct effective and accessible online lobbying. The site included details on how to contact local candidates, a manifesto for older people and a well-used discussion forum. Oneworld.net’s Vote For Me site (www.oneworld.net/uk/election/index.html) did a superb job in directing public attention to global issues that are all too often neglected during election campaigns.

III The online media – what were the information bonuses?

This was the first UK election in which traditional media coverage moved online. In 1997 no national newspaper or broadcaster ran an online election service of any sophistication. The GE97 web site, set up by a commercial company called Online Magic, was unique in covering the election online. In 2001, every major broadcaster and broadsheet newspaper (though not the tabloids, which remained resolutely offline) had an online presence.

Vote-swapping online

Jason Buckley

www.tacticalvoter.net facilitated tactical voting against the Conservative Party. Individual voters whose first choice candidate was in an unwinnable position paired up online and agreed to ‘swap’ votes – each supporting the other’s party to maximise the effectiveness of the anti-Conservative vote.

The site generated tremendous coverage. Although there was no systematic increase in tactical voting nationally, switching already in the system was maintained and hotspots such as Ludlow, South Dorset, Shrewsbury and Kingston & Surbiton showed the responsiveness of the electorate to concerted tactical campaigning. An NOP poll in the final week showed that up to 41% of voters would consider tactical voting – an unprecedented level of recognition.

A surprisingly high proportion of vote-swappers had very strong party loyalties: many were even campaigning for their first choice party in a neighbouring seat, but were casting a tactical vote in their own seat as a means of purchasing a more useful vote elsewhere.

Those using the site exhibited an antipathy towards the Conservatives which has not abated in the last four years. On any system, except pure proportionality, while that antipathy endures it will find expression in results that diminish the effectiveness of Conservative votes.

Visitors to the site were engaged by the opportunity for direct contact with other voters, through our pairing system. This peer-to-peer communication created thousands of conversations about the site, deepening the commitment of those who registered. To handle that amount of correspondence from the centre would have been a huge task.

Many also became spokespeople for the site at a local level. We were able to use our database to connect journalists with individual site users in seats of interest, providing supplies of sought-after ‘real people’. Activists also downloaded posters and car stickers and distributed leaflets in 15 key seats. It was a demonstration of the superiority of facilitating interaction over a top-down approach – particularly when resources are limited.

This was maintained on our message board, which was unstructured and unmoderated, with visitors able to begin new threads willy-nilly. It attracted a great number of hostile comments, but these were the lifeblood of the conversation. Party web masters should recognise that their best recruiting sergeants are the activists of opposing parties and be less scared of allowing free discussion onto their web sites.

A disappointment was the failure of the viral campaign to greatly increase traffic to the site. About one in five registrants made use of the Tell Your Friends facility to provide e-mail addresses of up to seven friends who were then sent an e-mail inviting them to visit. The rate of reproduction remained low – with less than one registrant per referrer passing on the message to a new generation. By contrast, the original vote-swap sites in the US spread rapidly through e-mail, creating a flow of traffic independent of offline coverage.

Our impact in 2001 was mainly to consolidate established patterns – tactical voting led by the net is likely to grow and further distort the imbalance in the electoral system. In four years time, UK levels of internet fluency and penetration will have caught up with the US. The race is likely to be closer, creating a sense of urgency lacking in the 2001 election. Finally, there will be far greater activity at a local level with sites winning specific marginal seats.

Jason Buckley is founder of tacticalvoter.net
Spinning On The Web

E-mail test
The three main party web sites had a feedback mechanism allowing voters to e-mail their questions and receive a personalised response. The Hansard Society tested just how interactive the parties really were. We sent out a set of nine questions to the three main parties from a variety of separate individual e-mail addresses. They were designed to find out about aspects of the parties’ policies and outlooks – particularly those that are not obvious from the web sites or the manifestos. The questions asked were:

- How does your party feel about using the internet more often to involve the public in policy making?
- Is it true that most MPs don’t accept e-mails from their constituents? Would you accept and reply to them if elected?
- Do you agree with me that Britain should join NAFTA?
- Does your party support free eye tests for all?
- I am unemployed and would like to know your party’s policy on enabling people to open bank accounts who are currently rejected by the major banks?
- What is your party’s view on stem cell research?
- Would you favour lowering the voting age to 16?
- Who would you regard as the best Prime Minister of the 20th century?
- I am seven and when I grow up I want to become an MP. How do I learn to do this and which party should I support?

How did the parties do?
- The Conservative Party was fastest to respond to questions.
- The Liberal Democrats were slowest to respond.
- Labour was the party most likely to respond to questions.
- The Conservatives were least likely to respond.

Labour
- Labour’s average response time was 945.6 minutes (over 15 hours).
- Labour responded to 89% of the e-mails.
- But 70% of these were ‘automated responses’ that did not specifically answer the questions put – referring enquirers instead to the party manifesto or the web site.
- Only one response e-mail from Labour contained information pertaining directly to the question asked – on the topic of free eye tests.

Conservatives
- The Conservative response time was the fastest – with responses averaging at 771.6 minutes (about 13 hours).
- The Conservatives were least likely to provide any response at all – replying to only 56% of e-mails.
- However, if enquirers were lucky enough to receive a response from the Conservatives it was in all cases related directly to the questions they asked.

Liberal Democrats
- The Liberal Democrats’ average response time at 1035.3 minutes (over 17 hours) was the longest of all the parties, but enquirers can expect to receive a personalised response.
- The Lib Dems provided a response to 78% of all e-mail inquiries. The responses varied between one word on several occasions (‘Yes’ or ‘No’) and 10,000 words (a 25-page policy document was attached to one e-mail).

Thanks to the online media sites, the 2001 electorate was exposed to more information – freely available and from several perspectives – than any generation of voters since the rise of the mass franchise. It is easy to overlook the extent to which the internet has established an era of information abundance. But what were the information bonuses for voters from the online media? What could voters find online that was new and useful?

Two media web sites excelled above all others in 2001: BBC News Online and the Guardian Politics site. The former started life in 1996; the latter was launched just before the 2001 election was called. Both offered a number of key information bonuses:

The BBC Vote 2001 site included sections on:
- the main issues in the election and a concise, accessible account of the main parties’ policies;
- a guide to the key marginal constituencies;
- a full list of candidates in each constituency across the UK;
- analyses of opinion polls as they were released;
- an Online 1000 panel who were surveyed on various issues throughout the campaign;
- a Persuade me to vote feature, in which the public tried to urge intended non-voters to participate in the election;
- a Virtual Vote feature, allowing users to calculate the results using an online ‘swingometer’;
- an archive of recordings from BBC coverage of elections since 1945;
- links to Newsround and an If U Were Prime Minister feature in which young people could put forward their own policies;
Spinning On The Web E-Campaigning And Beyond

19

None of these were attempts to replace the broadcast media or the press, but all of them supplemented the old media in ways that helped to make the election more direct, accessible and meaningful for significant numbers of people.

Although the big offline media organisations dominated online coverage, some new online enterprises made their mark: www.e-politix.com provided thrice daily e-mail newsletters on latest election events which were a bonus for news junkies; www.YouGov.com ran its impressive online polls throughout the election and usefully hosted the online part of the British Election Survey; towards the end of the campaign Communities Online put up an election site (www.co-democracy.org.uk) which could serve as a networking model for future elections.

IV The public’s reaction

How did the public use the internet during the election campaign? To find out, some poll questions were commissioned from MORI; these were placed on MORI’s General Public Omnibus Survey and were asked to a representative sample of 1,999 adults aged over 18 in face-to-face interviews at home between June 21 and 26 2001.

How many of them had access to the internet?

- 33% reported having home internet access.
- 33% said that they had access to e-mail.
- 69% had mobile phones.
- 32% used text messaging (SMS).
- Only 13% said that they used digital television for interactive services – such as shopping, games or e-mail.
- Males were 11% more likely to have internet access at home than females.
- Members of socio-economic group ABC1 were more than twice as likely to have home internet access than C2DEs.
- 46% of Liberal Democrat voters, 37% of Conservative voters and only 29% of Labour voters had home internet access.

US polls about e-politics have tended to find that online citizens are significantly more likely to vote for

• a guide to the voting system;
• a guide to the local elections;
• regular, archived web casts;
• a range of discussion areas.
than those without internet access. This was not the case in the UK election of 2001, where 23% of respondents without internet access did not vote as against 25% who were online. This is explained by the high number of young non-voters with internet access being outweighed by the high number of older voters who are least likely to be online. The only party that had significantly more votes from online than offline voters were the Liberal Democrats.

We then asked those respondents who did have access to the internet or e-mail what they used it for during the election campaign:

- 82% of them did not use the internet or e-mail for any election-related activities. But almost one in five did.
- Over one in 10 (11%) said that they visited a media web site, such as BBC Online, to read about the election.
- 7% used web sites or e-mail to find out information about the election, parties or candidates.
- 5% sent or received e-mails about the election.
- 4% sent or received e-mails or visited web sites with humour or games about the election.

Men were more likely to do most of these activities than women (for example, twice as many men as women visited media sites to find out about the election), but more women than men sent or received e-mails about the election.

SNP e-campaign
The Scottish National Party are veterans of two e-campaigns (1997 general election and 1999 Scottish Parliament election). Their e-strategy was an integral part of their 2001 general election campaign:

- www.westandforscotland.org aimed to present the SNP's message in a new and innovative way and facilitate a two-way communication between the party and voters. Over 25,000 people downloaded the party manifesto during the election period and the web site was successful in recruiting a significant number of new members.
- Daily news releases were e-mailed out to party members and to people who had signed up on the web site. E-mails were sent out within a couple of hours of any event as a means of keeping activists informed.
- The web site was rich in content with over 5,000 pages of information going back to 1998. Visitors who used the feedback forms to ask policy questions were given an answer within 24 hours or one working day.
- As an integrated part of the whole campaign the web address was included on all election literature.

Summing up, Russell Horn, SNP web master said: 'The SNP created the first political web site in the UK and we see our web site as an essential part of putting across our message.'

5% of Labour and Lib Dem voters went to the humour and games sites, but only 3% of Conservative voters. But, interestingly, visitors to the irreverent humour sites were not mainly disaffected non-voters – only 1% of non-voters went there compared to 6% of those who voted.

What kind of information were those who were online looking for?
- Over one in 10 (11%) were searching for the parties' policies.
- Almost one in 10 (9%) sought information about the parties' national campaigns or the candidates in their constituencies.
- 3% of respondents sought information online about how to vote tactically – with women being more likely than men to do this.

We would have predicted that Liberal Democrat and Labour voters would have been considerably more interested in using the internet to find out more about tactical voting, but found that exactly the same number of respondents from each main party did this – perhaps Conservatives were visiting such sites to size up the threat.

Interestingly, one in five (21%) of 18-24 year-old respondents used the internet to find out what the parties’ policies were, compared with only 8% of 25-44 year-olds and 12% of 55-64 year-olds.

We then asked how important overall the internet and e-mail were in providing our respondents with information that helped to decide how they voted.

- 6% said that it was very or fairly important;
- 66% said that it was not at all important.

The internet and e-mail influenced the voting choices of twice as many Liberal Democrats (9%) as Conservatives (5%) and had much more influence upon 18-24 year-olds (17% of whom reported that the internet was a very or fairly important influence on their voting) than upon older voters, under 5% of whom reported any e-influence upon their voting. These findings point to a trend: younger voters are much more interested in the internet as a route to politics than are older voters; these are the voters of the future, so e-politics is here to stay and in future elections this generation of voters and those following them will be targeted much more successfully by e-campaigners. The lesson for the euro referendum, if it happens, is that there will be many younger voters, whose votes may well be decisive, looking to the internet to explain the issues to them in their own terms.

Dr Stephen Coleman is Director of the Hansard Society e-democracy programme.

Nicola Hall is researcher on the e-democracy programme

Footnotes
1. Full transcriptions are held at the Hansard Society.
2. Some of the following items were only offered by Labour and the Conservative Parties.
MORI poll findings

Q1 Which of these, if any, do you personally use?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobile phone .................................................. 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMS text messaging on a mobile phone ...................... 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC - desktop or laptop or other computer at home ................. 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC - desktop or laptop or other computer at work, place of study or elsewhere .................. 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet at home .................................................. 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet at work, place of study or elsewhere ................ 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail ................................................................. 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive services through your Digital TV eg games, shopping, banking or e-mail .................. 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these ......................................................... 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know ............................................................. 0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q2 Thinking about the recent general election campaign, which of these things, if any, did you do during the campaign?

Base: All adults 18+ with access to the internet/e-mail (727)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sent/received e-mails about the election ............................................. 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used e-mail or web sites to find out information about the election, parties or candidates ............................................. 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visited a media web site (e.g. BBC Online) and read about the election .................................................. 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filled out a web-based survey or opinion poll ........................................ 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in a live chat or web-based discussion forum about the election .................................................. 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sent or received e-mails or visited web sites with humour or games about candidates/the election ............................................. 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donated money online to a party or candidate ........................................... 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteered online to work for a party .................................................. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (SPECIFY) .......................................................... 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these ............................................................. 82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know ............................................................. 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q3 Which of these things, if any, did you get information about, from the internet or e-mail during the election campaign?

Base: All adults 18+ with access to the internet/e-mail (727)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The parties' campaigns nationally ......................... 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The policies of the parties ...................... 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The candidates in your constituency ................. 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The local elections ............................................. 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to vote tactically ............................................. 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (SPECIFY) .......................................................... 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these ......................................................... 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No opinion ............................................................. 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q4 How important overall were the internet and e-mail in providing you with information that helped you to decide how to vote?

Base: All adults 18+ with access to the internet/e-mail (727)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very important ................................................. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly important ................................................. 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very important ............................................. 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all important ......................... 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No opinion ............................................................. 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know ............................................................. 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First Impressions 21
The Labour Party is a campaigning organisation. It is our role to fight and win elections so that we can pursue our values and policies in government. We use all the tools available to us in a strategic and integrated fashion. The internet is no different. The aims of our electronic campaign were the same as the aims of the Labour Party – to win votes, to communicate our message, to recruit members and volunteers, and to raise funds.

Our challenge was to use the technology imaginatively to exploit its strengths – intimacy, depth, speed, interactivity, fun – to communicate our message. Once we had identified our general mode of communication, we highlighted which audiences were particularly important to us and built their additional communication requirements into our plan.

We aimed to:

- Use the internet to meet the needs of all our audiences by being responsive, fast, accurate, and interactive.
- Mobilise and support members and activists by providing a depth of resource and a link between the centre and the field.
- Reach out to new audiences, particularly young people, by being non-preachy and non-dictatorial.
- Establish our web site as a first point of call for journalists and opinion formers by ensuring it is always accurate and up-to-date.
- Generate off line news stories that communicate Labour’s message.

The eCampaign used a variety of tools to implement our strategy. At the heart of the plan was our web site – www.labour.org.uk – which we created as a welcoming, constantly up-to-date, interactive window into Labour’s campaign. The site supported Labour eNews, the core of our e-mail strategy, which took our message – both policy and organising – to the desk top of subscribers. We had numerous mini web sites aimed at different audiences and used mobile phone technology.

This report will cover our general communication strategy and then focus on each of our target audiences in turn.

**Responsive, fast and accurate, interactive**

There were certain basic principles running through the eCampaign – appreciating and responding to our audiences, accuracy, immediacy and interactivity.
Responding to different audience needs

Visitors to websites usually do not arrive at a particular website by mistake—they have deliberately clicked on a link, or typed the website address to get there. The challenge is to keep them there. The Labour Party website had several target audiences—general public, members and activists and the media. We wanted to entice the casual visitor to stay a while and leave having taken an action (such as leaving their e-mail address, or sending a text message), whilst enabling users who had a clear purpose for visiting the site to find the information they wanted easily.

The site had to cater for a broad spectrum—those who knew lots about the Labour Party and those who knew nothing, people with advanced internet skills and beginners, the hard core activist and the floating voter. Our messages needed to be accessible and inclusive.

To this end, the site was deliberately positive and upbeat as our research showed website users are turned away by heavily negative content. It had a simple and comprehensive navigation system, search facility and site map, and was as viewer-friendly as possible, using clear language and images to get our message across. The site received the RNIB’s ‘Bobby’ approval for partially-sighted viewers.

In all of our work we aimed to move those interacting with us to the next level of involvement—from floating voter to solid Labour; from Labour voter to vocal supporter; from supporter to member; from member to activist. We were inviting people to become more involved.

The same principles were applied to our e-mail strategy. E-mail is integral to the Labour Party’s modus operandi, and is used to communicate with key stakeholders (staff, candidates, key campaigners, members) as well as the public. Two elements of e-mail use fell under the eCampaign – Labour eNews, our permission-based e-mail bulletin, and e-mail from the voters.

Labour eNews was born during Labour’s annual conference in Brighton in September 2000 when we started with zero subscribers. By election day we were sending e-mails to around 35,000 people.

Labour eNews is permission-based—it is only sent to members who have opted to give us their e-mail address and to people who sign up on the website.

Right at the beginning we took data protection and ‘spamming’ very seriously, and turned down lists of probable supporters because they had not given us permission to contact them. It was essential that we respected our audience in this way.

Accurate and fast

We aimed to establish our website as the first place people would go to get information about the Labour Party. We wanted people to return to the site to get information on our message without the filter of the media. Labour eNews was used to ensure our e-mail subscribers were kept in regular contact with the campaign.

The front page was always up-to-date. It was changed hourly during the busiest days of the campaign between 6:30am and midnight—in effect providing a 24-hour-a-day view of Labour’s campaign. Information was on the site as it was announced and the news-style front page gave us the flexibility of using positive stories about Labour as well as highlighting the weaknesses of the Tories.

The site had a depth and breadth of information with over 80 areas of policy—enabling users to find accurate information on the topic of interest to them, even if it wasn’t making headline news. There is no other way to easily provide voters with detailed policy positions on such a range of issues. We prided ourselves on the fact that (unlike the other parties) we had such a richness of policy information—but also that we linked each policy area to speeches, press releases, FAQs and related policy areas, so the reader could always find out more.

Interactive and personal

We wanted the campaign to be interactive and personal because participation in the political process is more likely if voters feel as though they can have a say and if they feel that the outcome will affect them personally.

The most interactive part of the campaign was probably e-mail with tens of thousands of incoming e-mails (to two general e-mail addresses) being dealt with like phone calls and post by call-centre staff. An automated response was sent within 24 hours (deliberately not immediately as our experience showed that an immediate response was thought to be automated, however personal it was) and a personalised response within 48 hours. Effort was put into responding to every e-mail that was sent to us, reports on the concerns raised by e-mail were passed to campaign strategists and e-mail questions formed the basis of the daily FAQ response.

Users could interact with us from every single page of the site—pledging their support (supporters would then be contacted individually by a local or regional office), joining, donating or shopping. We are proud that as many people now join and shop through the website as do through our incoming calls, and we raised significant amounts of money. The interactive map was also featured on every page of the site offering visitors the chance to enter their postcodes to find how Labour has delivered in their constituencies and how they could contact their candidates. Games (Cut ‘n’ Run, Boom and Bust and Throwing it all away), screensavers, wallpaper, video and audio clips and the mortgage calculator also offered visitors opportunities to interact with Labour.

Personalised information was sent to eNews subscribers who provided us with information about themselves. They could choose to sign up for e-mails daily or weekly, in eight policy areas and by age or geographical area (constituency). In the last week of the campaign, thousands of very localised e-mails were sent emphasising priorities and achievements of the Labour candidate and the importance of every vote.
Mobilise and support members and activists

The Labour Party is a membership organisation with around 350,000 members. Elections are won and lost by a combination of national and local campaigning. Much of what the Labour Party does centrally is communicate with and support staff and members in the constituencies. The internet is an ideal tool for that.

A resource

The Labour Party web site and eNews were massive resources for Labour activists. Probably the most popular and useful feature was the interactive map that showed tangible domestic delivery in every constituency – more jobs, investment in local schools and hospitals, better deals for pensioners and families and children and so on. Local activists found this focus on local delivery an invaluable resource when creating local leaflets and newsletters and canvassing voters.

There was no better illustration of the worth of the map than when one of the eCampaigns team came to work elated by the fact that his local Labour Party had already copied it word for word in one of their leaflets. Here was proof that activists were using the web site as a tool and using it effectively to produce materials that had much more detail than anything our opponents were producing.

Labour eNews was another useful resource for activists. Often, eNews content was used by constituency members to bolster their own organising e-mails which they sent out to local activists. Some subscribers even took on the responsibility of printing out the regular bulletins to share with activists who were not online.

As well as the public area of the site, there are two password protected areas, one for members and one for councillors – each is a resource and information centre for the relevant group with, for example, leaflet templates and logos for literature.

A link between the centre and the field

It was important to keep local campaigners motivated throughout the election. We helped do this by linking the national and local activity and giving public credit to the hard work going on in the field. For example, on pensioners’ day we focused on a silver surfer showing how eNews encouraged her to get involved and how she had subsequently become an active member of her constituency party.

As part of our outreach strategy, we published a campaign diary and an exclusive account of life on John Prescott’s battlebus. We used human-interest stories of ordinary people who were helping Labour in the election and gave their reasons why. We also featured small messages of support from celebrities and new photos, video vox pops and stories every day that told a story of how Labour was doing in various seats. We lent digital cameras to ministerial staff on the road and they and other campaigners e-mailed stories and digital pictures to us every day.

Reach out to new audiences

The political challenge to all parties is to increase participation in the political process. We used mini web sites with audience appropriate language and SMS (text messaging) to communicate with young voters.

At the beginning of the campaign we launched a special web site – www.ruup4it.org.uk – with the aim of invigorating young people in the democratic process. This site featured a great, non-Labour branded design with words written in a way research indicated young people wanted – i.e. non-preachy, non-dictatorial and providing a reasonable overview of the political parties and the main political issues. There was a compare and contrast page where people were asked to agree or disagree with certain statements to find out where they stood on the political barometer, a political history and links to other online political resources – including the Tory and Lib Dem sites.

Other pages featured endorsements from first-time voters and celebrities, games and text message competitions where people could win prizes by voting on their favourite text message. Fifty thousand scratch cards and a similar number of flyers were distributed by Labour student groups to drive interest to the site.
We also wanted to engage those who were connected supporters, but who had little time to participate. Supporters were encouraged to pass eNews onto their friends, or to download our wallpaper or screensavers onto their computers. Online, a supporter was able to do half an hour or so of campaigning and spread Labour’s message to potential voters.

Fun interactivity such as the Cut ‘n’ Run game (a game highlighting the Tories’ 20 billion cuts guarantee) and our get-out-the-vote ‘Don’t let wiggy in’ e-mail (featuring one of the campaign posters) helped communicate Labour’s message to non-activists as well as motivating our supporters. We used e-mail to distribute our games and screensavers and estimate they helped to get Labour’s message across to tens of thousands of people.

During the last week of the campaign, we offered what we believe was a first for a British political party – a free text messaging facility that was fun but contained important messages. Web site visitors were able to send get-out-the-vote messages to their friends and colleagues via our site, resulting in tens of thousand of messages being sent urging people to vote on election day.

We also sent out five bulk SMS messages during the last week before polling day. Our text messaging was, like eNews, carefully controlled so we didn’t ‘spam’ anyone. On election day itself, we sent two messages aimed at getting out the vote. On Saturday June 9 we sent a ‘thank you’ message.

A first point of call for journalists and opinion formers

By the end of the campaign, journalists would visit the web site to get basic information before contacting the press office – taking a lot of pressure off our press team, allowing them to spend more quality time briefing individuals.

From the site, journalists could download documents and manifestos, read speeches as they were being made, get press releases immediately, and download pictures and audio clips. The policy section on the site proved to be a massive research tool.

During this election, for the first time, every press conference, both from Millbank Tower and on the road, was web cast – fitting perfectly into Labour’s agenda of openness and transparency. Voters and journalists could watch every press conference live and each was archived for 24 hours. Such openness distinguished our site from our rivals. We also did live web casts of other sessions – for example question and answer sessions with the prime minister, using exciting mobile web casting technology, developed especially for Labour and used for the first time during the election.

Different ways to communicate message – story in itself

The numbers of visitors to a particular web site are still small in comparison to newspaper readers or TV viewers and it was therefore important to use our eCampaign as a vehicle to get Labour’s message into the press. Not surprisingly, the basics of what we were doing received little media coverage (no one, for example, covered the fact that we had extraordinary depth and breadth of policy content on the site). We did however receive some great coverage for some of our innovative outreach ideas – particularly ruup4it, our SMS messages, and our first game – Cut ‘n’ Run. In each case, the eCampaign gave journalists a different way to write about Labour’s message. Often the articles were in non-political pages – for example in a web site of the week section.

Summary

The 2001 general election served as the baptism of electronic-campaigning in British politics. While it is clear there is still progress to be made, the internet has been accepted as a useful campaigning tool that is here to stay. This election, the first in which the internet played a significant role, has highlighted its potential.

Our campaign was successful. During the period of the campaign, we estimate our web site was within the top 20 sites in the UK with hundreds of thousands of users, each spending an average of about nine minutes on the site. We sent e-mail briefings connecting the party across the country and involving those who wouldn’t normally receive our message. The internet has become as important a recruitment tool as the incoming phone call, and sales in our online shop generated much needed funds.

The internet strategy was integrated fully in Labour’s overall strategy and the Labour Party URL is now on literature, leaflets, booklets, billboards, party election broadcasts, the lectern senior ministers speak from and all branding at party events.

This election has shown that eCampaigning is a key tool in the wider campaign strategy. While it neither will nor should replace traditional campaigning, it does have the ability to reach new audiences, mobilise and support members and act as a first point of call for journalists in a way no other tool is able.

In the future with more interaction and personalisation, eCampaigning will become even more valuable. Never again will Labour go into an election without being equipped with a sophisticated online strategy.

Kate McCarthy is eCampaigns manager at the Labour Party
Conservatives had two key objectives in the run up to the last election. We were listening to people and tackling the issues that matter to them. It was in this context that we tried to harness the internet. From the outset, the project was politically led: war room staff first developed the system and then created the content.

The internet was just one way in which we engaged with the electorate, alongside the traditional channels: face-to-face, by post, on the telephone and through advertising and Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs). Given that each might reach a slightly different audience, perhaps with slightly different concerns, should our communication have reflected that? The medium matters, too. You have longer to spell out your policies on paper than on the phone. It is easier for people to respond to surveys online than by returning a slip. Material on the web needs to be punchier.

In the end, we decided – with a bit of rudimentary cost-benefit analysis – to tailor our content according to the medium itself, but not its associated demographics. We also had to consider the delicate balance between consistency of message and making best use of the available medium. The internet illustrates this well. These days, it is difficult for any party to explain precisely how its policies cash out for a particular individual and his or her family. Parties barely have the resources to contact every household, let alone provide a personalised report on what they have to offer. Too much of the discovery process is left up to the voter. Conservatives took a decision early on to use new technology to do some of this work on behalf of the voter. This took two forms.

First, we developed a platform to deliver highly pertinent news stories and campaigning information to a voter based upon his or her own interests. We learned this through explicit revelation (completing questionnaires, answering polls) or by making a ‘best guess’ based upon the voter browsing the site.

I do not understand why some think this is sinister – provided, that is, no attempt is made to hide content from visitors. It is the job of a political party to listen to the public, find out what issues really matter to voters and explain how it would deliver. Personalisation simply uses technology to discover what issues are of interest to a particular voter and then explain, specifically and clearly, what a party would do in that area. It lowers the cost to the voter of uncovering relevant information and puts no obstacles in the way of finding out anything else.

In the event, we did not activate this facility before the election. Consistency of message is everything: only if parties retain a laser-like focus on their ‘theme of the day’ can they hope to cut through all of that day’s
political activity and get their message across. Given that virtually everyone still gets their news from TV, radio or the print media, parties have to broadcast. They cannot yet ‘narrowcast’ effectively – and, if they could, any message they sent would often cut across the majority of messages reaching a voter that day through the broadcast outlets.

In short, if you are watching the Conservatives talk about health on the TV, hearing about it on the radio and reading about it in the papers, it would be inappropriate to visit our web site that day and be told what we think about defence.

Things are different outside of an election; equally, they are different if a voter actively seeks information about another policy area. There is no risk of the message not getting through if he or she is that interested. This line of reasoning led us to a simple conclusion: personalise content that a voter pulls down but do not – at least during a campaign – tailor material that you push.

This is how we ended up with My Manifesto. Voters were asked a series of questions, the answers to which were not recorded even in aggregate; this was to reassure users and increase take up. There was no cost, in terms of a missed opportunity to listen to people, as the questions were only demographic. What they allowed us to do was tailor the party’s manifesto, Time for Common Sense, to the individual and his or her family – highlighting relevant policies and cashing them out for a voter’s own circumstances and area of the country.

My Manifesto was a crude and blunt instrument. Yet it remains the first attempt by a political party to harness a key advantage of the internet as a medium: ‘narrowcasting’. Instead of outlining how Conservatives tackle the issues that matter to us all, we could begin to explain how the party tackles the issues that matter to individuals. This was, for me, a significant aspect of the web site.

The most important feature again harnessed the unique nature of the internet, but had nothing to do with technology. All of our news stories were written straight. To be sure, conservatives.com was set up to win votes and our copy was put together with that in mind. Yet the ‘yah boo’ aspect of politics was wholly absent. Any partisan comment was attributed to a named or anonymous party spokesman. We thought – perhaps not entirely accurately, as it turned out – that we had a strong enough case without editorialising.

Two former journalists worked full-time producing copy for the web site and did so using the tools of their previous profession – press releases, background documents and notes taken during our own press conferences. Yet these were all means to an end: producing a news story written for the online voter - they were never in themselves a finished product.

This was a unique approach among the political parties and, to this day, I do not understand why. Tesco would not dream of putting press releases on its consumer, rather than corporate, site – so why did the political parties, including the Conservatives, think they could get away with this for so long?

We wanted voters to use conservatives.com as a direct, immediate and genuine source of news. Why go to guardian.co.uk or bbc.co.uk when you can get everything straight from the horse’s web site? Voters are smart. We thought we had a strong case. So why not engage in a dialogue directly with the voter and cut out the middle man?

It was always meant to be a dialogue, too. The ease with which one can interact on the internet was the third feature that we tried to harness. We wanted to make our Listening to Britain exercise mean something for the online visitor, as well as those who attended our meetings up and down the country or wrote in to Central Office.
Our solution was the *Make a Difference* bar, at the top of every page on the site. This allowed users to register with us, keep up-to-date, send in feedback, join the party, make a donation and so on – in other words, get involved. It was important for us to provide this opportunity throughout the site. These days, as the public rightly adopts a more instrumentalist approach to the parties – what can you do for us? – we win (or increasingly fail to win) their votes on the basis of what they think we would deliver.

If this analysis is correct, people get involved with the Conservatives because of what the party does, not what it is. They will join the party if they agree with its policy on keeping the pound or the Patient’s Guarantee. They will want to tell the party it has just lost the plot because of what it has said about asylum seekers. In other words, they will want to interact as they read news stories or flick through the campaign pages. We were determined to avoid ‘ghettoising’ the opportunities for interaction.

While voters were our key visitors and listening/tackling was our mantra – we also provided specific content for two very different audiences: the media and our activists.

We launched a dedicated online Media Centre a few months before the election campaign. This allowed accredited journalists to read current press releases, operation notes, articles and speeches; they could also search for past statements using a powerful search engine.

More importantly, though, our colleagues in the Senate Republican Conference reminded us that words are not enough. Newspapers need photographs; broadcasters need sound and pictures. So we took photographs of our own events and recorded them in broadcast-quality audio, making the files available for immediate download. It should be tolerable to provide broadcast-quality video within a couple of years; as it was, we could only provide low fidelity video streams of our press conferences.

There remained a third audience for whom we catered: our activists, elected representatives and staff. *CCO Online* was launched at the Conservative Spring Forum in Harrogate and replaced the old extranet – allowing activists to access ‘lines to take’ on the day’s issues together with campaigning material, such as clip art or off-the-peg articles for local newsletters.

Members of the Research Department and the Media Unit were already producing the material that needed to go on *CCO Online* and the Media Centre; we therefore devolved responsibility for using the content management system directly to them and integrated it into their routine. We could not do this with the main web site for the simple reason that copy did not already exist and was best produced by experienced journalists.

Where possible, content was ‘repurposed’ across several platforms so people could access it from a variety of hardware. Conservatives provided access to key information – such as news stories, speeches and press releases – on both PDAs (personal digital assistants) and WAP phones (mobile phones allowing access to the net). Activists could also access lines to take on their mobiles and the definitive *Campaign Guide 2001* on their personal organisers. Not many people used these services, but those that did – typically, they were out on the road with members of the shadow cabinet – found them helpful.

This was not quite the sum of our activities. Colleagues produced screensavers and wallpaper. Voters could put questions directly to senior members of the shadow cabinet during our live web casts, hosted by Michael Dobbs. We launched e-mail campaigns and experimented with SMS (mobile phone text messaging) updates.

Most of our time, though, was spent making sure that everything the party produced – manifestos, speeches, whatever – were on the web site. If someone wanted to find out what the Conservatives were doing that day, or saying on a particular issue, they could.

The key lessons we learned over the past 18 months are:

- First, political strategy must determine not only the content, but also the functionality of a web site.
- Second, approximating one-on-one dialogue with individual voters is valuable – providing it reinforces, rather than cuts across, offline campaigns.
- Third, voters are smart and, by visiting a party’s web site, are clearly interested in what it has to say – so tell it straight and, if you have a good case, why would you want to do anything else?

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Perhaps the most notable internet innovation during the 2001 general election was the ability to punch the deputy prime minister from the safety of your armchair. Despite the pre-election hype by internet enthusiasts about using the internet to involve the public and improve communications between politicians and voters, the most popular election-related uses of the internet were jokes and games – often indiscriminately poking fun at all politicians simply because they were politicians.

In that sense, the internet failed quite spectacularly to improve the quality of democracy and, indeed, may have helped to increase cynicism about, and hostility to, the political process.

However, it would be unfair to judge the efforts of political parties and others simply on these grounds. A more realistic evaluation is that, against a background of widespread apathy, the internet’s ability to make a difference was decidedly limited.

For the Liberal Democrats, it was a highly successful way of providing key groups of people with the information they wanted and we wished to give to them. What the internet did not do was to increase significantly the numbers of people interested in such information. It could make obtaining the information easier – but it could not make people want the information in the first place.

UK web site

The overall tone of the Liberal Democrats’ UK web site, www.libdems.org.uk, was deliberately straightforward, with an emphasis on information rather than technical gadgets, and policy rather than humour or games. The slightly serious ‘what you see is what you get’ approach was designed to complement the party’s national general election message – and in particular the approach Charles Kennedy took during the campaign.

When the general election was called, the daily number of visitors to the web site increased about four-fold, and in the last week increased again by nearly three-fold. The web site was designed to appeal to:

- Journalists/lobbyists/pressure groups
- Supporters/members
- Floating voters – particularly those with specialised interests

With the increasing number of media outlets covering UK politics, it was essential to use the web site to head off as many journalists’ queries as possible. Otherwise, the press team would not have been able to cope. Press releases, the full UK manifesto, candidate biographies and background policy papers were particularly popular.

For supporters and members, the web site provided an easy way of drawing people into greater involvement with the party – particularly if they lived in an area...
where traditional Liberal Democrat grassroots campaigning was weak. Just as shopping over the internet is becoming an increasingly normal and popular activity, so joining a political party over the internet – rather than ringing or writing – is becoming an increasingly important source of new members.3 The web site also provided a new range of ways for people to take part in political activity and campaigning, such as sending electronic postcards to friends or downloading wallpaper which others in their office would see. One particular benefit of such electronic campaigning is that it allowed people to become involved who would otherwise find it difficult to take part in traditional local campaigning for reasons such as long working hours, transport difficulties or physical infirmity.

For floating voters, our particular aim was to provide a range and depth of policy information which meant that, whatever their specialised interest, they should be able to find out the detailed information they were seeking.

Many of the people who made use of this information were interested in a particular policy area rather than in politics in general, so detailed information on the issues they wanted to find was important. The Lib Dem web site included comprehensive candidate biography information, along with contact details and election results. A postcode search facility made it easy for people to find their candidate.4

These features were designed to meet the two most common questions that come up during elections – ‘who is my candidate?’ and ‘how do I contact them?’ For an increasing number of people, going to the internet is the natural way to find the answers to such questions.

Supplementing the public web site was an extranet (private web site) to which candidates and their campaign teams had access. Along with regular e-mail bulletins, it provided the usual range of internal material – policy briefings, sample artwork etc – which all parties have distributed in the past by post. By the end of the campaign, the extranet and e-mail were clearly the default sources of information for most candidates.

E-mail

Complementing the web site were a variety of e-mail communications, including a daily news bulletin and a series of campaign updates for people who had previously signed petitions online. This national activity ran alongside local grassroots campaigning, collection of e-mail addresses and dispatch of messages.

Perhaps the most surprising feature of the e-mail campaign was the volume of very positive responses received back from members of the public who had been e-mailed. For some recipients, being contacted directly and personally by candidates was a welcome experience, and people appreciated the fact that candidates were making efforts to contact voters and explain why they wanted their votes.

Of course, there were also some negative responses – in particular from a small minority of people who had forgotten that they had given the Lib Dems their e-mail addresses and so made lurid accusations about ‘spam’, data protection and the world ending.

Candidate web sites

Nearly a third of Liberal Democrat candidates had a local web presence,5 which made the Lib Dems the most enthusiastic users of web sites at a local level. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the Liberal Democrats’ traditional emphasis on grassroots campaigning, the development of this local network of web sites was an important supplement to the UK-wide, Scottish and Welsh sites.

Superficially, many of the web sites appeared very limited in content. Compared to the range of technical possibilities displayed on many commercial web sites, it is easy to dismiss them as failing to make good use of the internet’s possibilities.

However, many of the sites were designed quite specifically to meet a small number of basic needs and this did not require impressive looking technology. As mentioned above, two of the most common questions candidates faced were ‘who are you?’ and ‘how do I contact you?’ Very simple and small web sites can – and did – answer these questions for a wider audience.

One of the major changes in candidate sites in the year running up to the election was the increasing emphasis on providing the right policy content. The party’s main national themes – such as extra investment in public services paid for by modest and sensible tax increases – were increasingly echoed on local web sites.

Election law

Much election law is still firmly rooted in the 19th century. There has recently been a burst of modernisation and new legislation – election expense returns no longer refer to the cost of sending telegrams! Nonetheless, several studies of e-campaigning have highlighted potential problems with applying existing election law to e-campaigning.

From the perspective of the Liberal Democrats, many of these concerns are misplaced. Or, more accurately, they highlight ignorance of existing election law provisions and practice. Two examples of this are the VoxPolitics Primer and the Hansard Society’s Guide to Electoral Law and the internet, both of which raised issues related to election expenses.

Reading one or both, the casual reader would get the impression that these were new problems. In fact, all political parties have been dealing with such issues for several years. The election expense returns from all parties for the London Mayor and Assembly elections in 2000 contain provisions related to internet campaigning. The same applies to the national election expense returns from the 1999 European elections. In this case, it is the political pundits and internet pioneers who are lagging several years behind the political parties.
The number of issues for which changes in the law would be sensible is relatively small and in some cases already provided for – such as the power given under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 to draw up rules for imprints on items other than printed materials (e.g. e-mails or video tapes).

Candidate information
Outside of the political parties, the general election saw numerous web sites that promised to have comprehensive databases of candidates, their biographies, election results and links to local web sites. Some offered all of these items, and some only a subset, but a common theme was the contrast between the claims made for the comprehensive nature of the information compared with the actual quality of the data.

The overall quality of these sites was highly variable. Only rare exceptions – such as the BBC – met their own grand descriptions. Even otherwise good web sites, such as the Guardian’s, had numerous gaps in their data that could have been filled simply by comprehensively taking the information published on the main parties’ sites.

From the outside, it appeared as if many of the organisers of these web sites were genuinely surprised by how much effort was involved and – for whatever reason – were not willing or able to allocate sufficient resources to make their own sites anything more than a slightly random and incomplete subset of the information available on a combination of parties’ own sites and the BBC’s site.

From the feedback the Liberal Democrats received directly from members of the public, it appears likely that the incomplete nature of this information often unfairly disadvantaged candidates. For example, a member of the public who failed to find a site for their local candidate might assume that therefore they did not have such a site, rather than question whether or not the source they were looking at was comprehensive.

To be fair, political parties themselves may in future have to make their own information more readily accessible for people compiling such databases. Whilst the Lib Dem web site had a comprehensive set of biographies, there was no ‘one-click’ download option which made it easy for people to take this information and populate their own databases.

Many other similar areas of election information have, over the years, had a shakeout of information sources with a relatively small number of authoritative sources now being widely used by the media. It will be interesting to see if there is a similar shakeout of online databases for the next general election.

Was America the right place to look?
A final word about America. Developments in American politics and American use of the internet are often rightly trailed as a foretaste of what will happen in Britain. To an extent, the American experience of the internet in politics fits this pattern – the hype appeared in America first, as did the subsequent sobering up and more hard-nosed evaluations of the impact of the internet on politics.

However, America is very different from Britain in one significant way. Each candidate in America has to build a campaign team and grassroots network largely from scratch for each campaign. In both the States and in Britain this sort of internal use of the internet, particularly e-mail, now has a well-established history of effectiveness. However, in Britain – with its much stronger party machines – there is much less need for this activity and therefore the internet may well always be a less important tool than in America.

In another respect, though, Britain is similar to America, but different from many other countries. This is the use of a ‘winner-takes-all’, first-past-the-post election system. In such elections a tiny margin of voters can make a huge difference to the result. What we have seen in both the 2000 presidential election and the 2001 general election is the limitation of the internet in making a noticeable change in national shares of the vote. But, with first-past-the-post, a small number of votes in the right places can make a very noticeable change in the result – and the internet is very well suited to this sort of targeting.

Mark Pack,
Internet Campaign Manager, Liberal Democrats

Footnotes
1. The Lib Dems had purchased in advance a number of variations on this web site address, but none of the alternative web addresses purchased, e.g. www.liberal-democrats.org, generated anything more than a trivial amount of traffic.
2. The previous peaks in web site interest had occurred at the time of the budget and party conferences.
3. Approximately 1.5% of the party’s membership is now made up of people who joined the party via www.libdems.org.uk between January 1 2001 and June 10 2001.
4. All the main parties used different databases but all suffered from noticeable error rates in locating postcodes in the correct constituency. This appears to be a problem across the industry – the quality of the postcode/constituency matching databases available has plenty of scope for improvement.
5. 205 out of 639 as of June 6. All the party’s MPs standing for re-election were contactable via the internet with either their own web site, a public e-mail address or both.
6. Clause 143(6).
7. For example, contact information for Lynne Featherstone, the Liberal Democrat candidate in Hornsey & Wood Green, was available on both the national Lib Dem web site and her own local web site from early 2000. However, the Friends of the Earth, Policos and Guardian election databases all failed to include it until direct personal requests were made to add it.
Winning a seat in Cyber Space: candidate web sites in the 2001 general election
Beccy Earnshaw

If you visited Edward Davey’s candidate web site on June 6 2001, a pop-up screen would have warned you that only 56 votes separated him from his Conservative rival. A return visit after the election would have shown you his message of thanks for the extra 15,620 voters that put a cross by his name on election day.

To suggest that Edward Davey’s success in increasing his majority so dramatically was a result of having a web site – even a very good web site – would be ridiculous. Parliamentary seats are not decided by clever technology, good graphics and fast downloads. However, if Edward Davey’s web site was indicative of his campaign as a whole – professional, well planned, accessible and balanced between personality and policy – the reasons for his success are clear.

It is very difficult to calculate the precise number of candidates who developed web sites for the 2001 general election campaign. There is no definitive listing and many of the sites are hard to categorise. For the purposes of this report, all of the three main-party candidate sites linked from the national party web pages, and those linked from independent lists of candidate web sites, were viewed. All sites with broken links or holding pages were discounted. Out of a total of 430 original links, 245 web sites were analysed and the results from these form the basis of this report.

Each candidate web site was tested for 18 different style and function features:

1. Does the candidate address the visitor directly?
2. Can I find out the candidate’s views on hunting with hounds?
3. Can I find out the candidate’s views on the single currency?
4. Can I find out the candidate’s views on a local issue?
5. Does my candidate have an e-mail address?
6. Does my candidate ask me to donate money online?
7. Can I find out about my candidate’s parliamentary/work record?
8. Can I find out where my candidate will be this week?
9. Are there any comparisons made with opposition candidates?
10. Can I see a picture of my candidate?
11. Can I find out my candidate’s marital status?
12. Can I find out how old my candidate is?
13. Does the web site ask for my views?
14. Does the web site link to the national party web site?
15. Does the web site link to local web sites?
16. Is there a discussion forum or message board?
17. Can I find out how I can help with the campaign?
18. Can I search the web site?
A series of e-mail interviews was conducted with web masters from selected web sites. The purpose of this report is to assess the role of candidate sites in the 2001 election and to review what was available online from the candidates, what worked well and what could be improved for the future.

Finding your candidate online
To view a candidate web site constituents must first be able to find it – a task that would appear to require a degree in orienteering. First logical port of call would be the national party web sites – surely they would be proud to advertise their candidates’ initiative? Whilst the Conservative and Liberal Democrat sites did have links, these were often Association or ward sites which held no candidate information.

Both were an improvement on the Labour site. The candidate profiles on the interactive map did not include any web addresses. A small number of links to candidate sites were available in the Labour links section. Under the heading MPs’ web sites (despite there being no MPs during the campaign period) one could visit the sites of a select few of Labour’s incumbent candidates, with a few random challengers thrown in. Many of the sites listed were offline and often you reached a holding page explaining that the MP’s site was down during the election campaign.

Attempting to search for candidates on popular search engines was usually fruitless. Unless voters were knowledgeable about sophisticated search techniques they were unlikely to get past the Guardian, BBC Vote 2001 and old articles from local newspapers. A number of independent sites did endeavour to list links to candidate sites: www.parliamentaryelection.com boasted ‘a comprehensive list of all candidate sites in 2001 election’ but with only 160 listed in total, there were plenty missing in action.

Frustrated web travellers may have resorted to guessing their candidate’s web address. Sensibly, most candidates stuck to the simple www.myn-name.co.uk formula. Candidate pages squatting on Association or constituency sites were often lumbered with more cumbersome www.myn-name.co.uk/my-name addresses. A number of candidates made a feature of their web addresses, thinking up memorable slogans which acted as branding for their whole campaign – for example, Richard Allan’s site, Allan/thallam, which was cleverly registered as .com, .org and .co.uk, and Sir George Young’s www.keepingyoung.com

Design and content
A web site can be anything from one page of basic information to thousands of searchable pages with flash graphics and streamed audio and video.

Candidate web sites in 2001 varied greatly in terms of quality of design and content.
The design of a web site should reflect its purpose. More ambitious candidate web sites fulfilled several objectives and combined different elements targeted at different visitors. For several candidates, though, it would appear that the objective was merely to have a web site whether it fulfilled any useful purpose or not.

The best designed web sites are those which are attractive to the eye but simple to navigate. Graphics and animation may look good but they add considerably to the download time, which can be frustrating for users of slow home PCs.

It took three months of analysing requirements, prototype designs and assessments by focus groups to finalise the design and content of Edward Davey’s web site. The design criteria included the ‘two-click rule’ (a visitor would be able to get to the section they wanted in no more than two mouse clicks), fast download times, consistent layout and restrained use of animation. Michael Portillo, Stephen Twigg and David Lammy’s web sites were high on gloss and graphics, but arguably lacking in depth of content, while other candidate sites were one long page of writing on a brown background – not likely to encourage the visitor to return.

Ease of navigation should always be the key issue when designing candidate web sites. Voters will not be prepared to spend time trekking through a maze of broken links and dead ends to get to the information they want. The content on candidate web sites should reach a balance between the campaigning needs of the candidate and the areas of interest for the voter.

Well-designed web sites in the 2001 campaign did receive respectable visitor numbers – especially considering the size of their target user group. www.cheadlelabour.org.uk had 25,000 unique users over a four month period with 1,200 visitors on their most popular day.

Personality v policy
There was a wide variation in the focus of the 245 candidate sites that were tested for this report. Only 22% of the sites were written in the first person, giving the impression of the candidate talking directly to the voter – however, a greater percentage of sites included a welcome message from the candidate.

You were 20% more likely to find out a candidate’s marital status than their opinions on the European single currency and 51% more likely to find out their age than their view on hunting with hounds.

Nearly all candidate sites included a biography of the candidate. These ranged from the basic date of birth, previous occupation and area of residence to the full history.

Most voters never meet the candidates standing in their area; therefore a candidate web site can be the next best thing. Ann Widdecombe’s ‘widdyweb’ has received widespread praise for showing the human side of politicians. With pictures of her cats and her home, she invites the user into a private world far removed from her fierce role at the dispatch box. Similarly, Martin Salter’s site has a section on fishing – with pictures of his best catch. A number of candidates wrote about their passion for local football teams and it was hard to avoid...
Winning a seat in Cyber Space

The problem with many of the candidate sites was not that they were personality orientated but that the level of detail about themselves was not matched by the information about their policies.

It would be impossible to list a candidate’s view on every issue but some candidates successfully tackled a range of national and local policy areas, arming the voter with enough information to make an informed choice. ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ sections gave visitors the benefit of other people’s initiative in raising issues. From Lynne Jones’ site (candidate for Birmingham Selly Oak) you could ascertain her views on topics as diverse as high hedges and transsexualism.

Many candidates devised mini manifestos or personal pledges for their web sites summarising their views on the major issues. These were useful for voters to assess the candidates’ political priorities.

Features of candidate e-campaigns

Interactivity and innovation

Replicating campaign posters and press releases online misses the unique advantages of new media over old. The effective candidate e-campaigns exploited the added value of the web – interactivity.

During the 2001 election, interactivity on candidate sites took a range of forms including search options, message boards and online surveys.

Feedback forms

36% of the candidate sites requested feedback from the visitor. On some sites the queries were displayed in a question and answer format – for others the individual responses were e-mailed out. The questions asked on the sites covered all the controversial issues from ‘what is your view on the single currency?’ to ‘who is your favourite football team?’ and if you e-mailed one NW Norfolk candidate you were guaranteed a response within 24 hours. The web therefore offered an opportunity for voters to question candidates directly, only possible in the past if you were behind one of the doors the candidate knocked on during the campaign.

But the web also offers anonymity which means that the questioner cannot be certain that the response is from the candidate themselves and, unlike face-to-face questioning, the candidate has time to prepare a full answer or can choose to ignore the question altogether.

A couple of candidates seemed to miss the point of interactivity: ‘if you want to know more about me, e-mail here’ was the inviting option for feedback on one candidate web site and another asked voters to contact him, not with their questions or views on policy, but with ‘messages of support’. Despite this, feedback forms were a positive addition to the 2001 campaign.

Online surveys

Inspiried by the online polling pioneered by political web sites such as YouGov.com, some candidates included polls and surveys on their site asking visitors’ opinions on, for example, how the local museum should be paid for (Wansbeck Liberal Democrats).

Chris Shaw, Conservative candidate for Leicester West, ran an online questionnaire about which local candidate had the best web site. Voters were asked whose web site looks most professional, whose offers the most interactivity and whose web site is most informative? The options given were Chris Shaw, Patricia Hewitt or a nameless Liberal Democrat. One day before the election the nameless Liberal Democrat was winning convincingly on all counts!

Message boards

9% of candidate sites included a discussion forum or message board. These brave attempts by a few candidates to encourage debate among voters and harness the interactivity of the web generally failed to inspire anyone but their critics. Most of the discussion boards had no postings at all, even from the candidate themselves; other were victims of the solitary post announcing how exciting and interesting the debate on the site would be. The risk for candidates was their inability to ensure that discussion participants would be supportive of them. As the career advice on one incumbent candidate’s message board shows: Hello, I was wondering what career you would pursue after the general election? Will you be looking for a high profile job in the city to compensate for your four years of mediocrity and anonymity at Westminster?

Downloadables

Printing and distributing leaflets and posters is costly to campaign budgets. Web sites allow interested voters to collect election literature themselves at their own cost. E-leaflets and posters that could be downloaded by the visitor and then either printed off or e-mailed around as an attachment enabled the visitor to buy into the campaign and take the message away with them at no extra financial or time cost to the campaign.

Future campaigns are likely to extend the use of download material and include many more downloadable games and screensavers on candidate sites.

Web casts and streamed video

UK election law prevents any individual candidate screening his or her own election broadcasts, but the same rule does not apply on the web. Howard Dawber’s Cheadle – the Movie; Robert Forsdyke, Greenwich and Woolwich Conservative candidate’s streamed video and Duncan Hames, Liberal Democrat candidate in Watford’s personal web cast, were all attempts by candidates to use multimedia to enrich their web sites. Whilst the videos were hampered by poor picture and sound quality online, they added an extra dimension to the site and left a lasting impression with the visitor.

‘I have now spoken with many Watford residents on their doorsteps over the past weeks and months, but often people are not in when we call. Residents can now meet me online, by viewing a personal web cast from me via this web site.’

Duncan Hames, www.watfordlibdems.org.uk
Cheadle – the Movie was downloaded by several hundred people, Howard Dawber’s e-campaigns manager commented that if they had produced a videotape for this number and posted it through doors it would have cost an ‘absolute fortune’. Next time around, the Dawber Labour campaign hopes to offer 24 hour ‘Big Brother-style web casting of everything the candidate does’!

E-mail

89% of the candidate sites listed an e-mail address to contact the candidate and/or their campaign staff. E-mail sign-up boxes feature on a few sites, offering the visitor regular updates on the local campaign. E-mail is the most important tool for any e-campaigner. A web site requires people to visit it, whereas e-mail can be sent straight into a potential voter’s inbox and, by including hyperlinks in the message, the recipient can be directed to specific areas of the web site.

Many more UK adults now have access to e-mail at home or work and an e-mail can be sent to thousands of people for less than the cost of a first class stamp. An effective e-mail campaign relies on a large, well-managed mailing list.

E-mail addresses should be included as a field on every survey, petition, membership application and sign-in sheet that party activists handle. The list will be an ongoing resource for drumming up support around particular events, canvassing opinion and keeping voters up-to-date on the latest news.

Unsolicited e-mail is viewed by many as worse than junk mail, as the recipient may be paying to receive it (in internet call charges). Five e-mails a day tracking the candidate’s every move will not be welcomed. A small number of targeted e-mails highlighting a campaign event or round-up of the campaign news with links back to the web site will remind voters and raise awareness without raising tempers.

In future elections, voters should expect to receive personalised e-mails referring specifically to their street, profession or family circumstances.

Links

Web links can direct people who access the candidate site to other sites that share a common aim, are supportive of the candidate or represent the candidate’s views and interests. 82% of candidates linked to their national party site from their web site. 44% linked to local web sites, such as regional newspapers and general local information sites.

Links are another way of enriching the content of the site. Incumbent MPs linked to the search facility on the Hansard site so visitors could check their record in Parliament. One candidate linked to their rival’s entry in the register of members’ interests. Many Conservative candidates linked to the Keep the Pound web site.

At least 10 Liberal Democrats and one Labour candidate linked to www.tacticalvoter.net – the vote swapping web site aimed at pairing up Labour and Liberal Democrat votes in marginal seats to block Conservative candidates.

Case study

www.robertkey.com

Before the election was called, Robert Key’s web site www.robertkey.com received around 752 unique visitors over a month for an average visit length of 14 minutes. The web site provided a vast range of information about Robert Key and the constituency – including postcode password entry section for residents.

When the election was called, the site was archived and a special election site was added containing policy information on national and local issues, detailed evidence of Robert’s work in the local area, a list of public meetings and contact details, and a section aimed at first-time voters explaining why it is important to vote.

- The e-campaign ran in conjunction with traditional canvassing (by telephone and doorstep) and 19 public meetings.
- In total, the web site received 1,241 unique user visits but very few actually gave feedback via the web site.
- About 150 constituents were e-mailed in response to specific enquiries – averaging at about five a day.
- The election arithmetic proved that twice as many people visited the web site as went to public meetings.

Robert Key believes that having a web site did make a difference to his re-election: ‘The advantages are going to be immense, probably more in the future than in this election. This was a gentle start to the internet election revolution. Many lessons have been learned for next time. We were ahead of the game.’

Campaign diaries

Campaign diaries were a popular feature of the candidate web sites analysed. However, they were mainly retrospective with only 17% of the candidate web sites in this study informing voters of where the candidate would be at any time during a given week. The web site of Cotswolds’ Conservative candidate, Geoffrey Clifton Brown, had a moving ‘ticker tape’ informing visitors of where he would be on different days of the campaign and lots of candidates included reports and pictures from the campaign trail. By keeping the diaries up-to-date, the candidates looked proactive and motivated and were able to publicise future visits.

Candidate web sites should be easily manageable and up-to-date. A number of the web sites appeared to have been quickly forgotten after the first few days of the campaign. Any attempts to provide latest news and campaign information backfire if these sections are not updated regularly.
Winning a seat in Cyber Space

Humour
An indicator to the success of a web site is how long people spend on it. Sir George Young’s, Howard Dawber’s and Jackie Pearcey’s web sites offered light relief from the campaign pages in the form of jokes/humour sections. These sections appeal to younger people and tempted visitors to stay on the site after they had found the information they were looking for.

Getting caught in the web
The lack of campaign web sites in the 2001 election may be attributed to over-cautious candidates. Despite the pitifully low amount of hits on most candidate web sites, local journalists will have scooped over the site eager for any error, break from the party line or slip-up they could find. It is not surprising that Millbank advised all Labour candidates to link to the national party site for policy information and it is perhaps for this reason that it was so difficult to find a Labour party site for policy information and it is perhaps for this reason that it was so difficult to find a Labour candidate’s view on anything much from their personal web site.

Conservative candidate for Birmingham Edgbaston, Nigel Hatislow, hit the news in January when Tony Blair quoted his site in Prime Minister’s Questions. Describing his party as ‘a lost cause’ and suggesting that under the Labour Government, ‘We’ve never had it so good, people are prosperous, unemployment is falling, there’s nothing much to worry about’, did little to endear him to Conservative Central Office or the voters of Edgbaston.

Many sites carried hits clocks – unwise when in some cases the number of visitors had failed to rise above double figures. Repeatedly, candidate web sites carried misspellings, broken links and ‘floating graphics’. It is easy to criticise the quality of candidate sites: in the main they were amateurish and lacking in good design; but many of the sites were developed by helpful party workers with little or no web experience and put together on a shoe string.

One way of ensuring a general standard for candidate sites is for them all to follow a set formula. The Labour Party offered ‘a web in a box’ package at £250 for its candidates – an economical, foolproof means of creating a web site. There is a danger, however, that while the basic quality of sites would rise, the originality, innovation and personality of many candidate sites would be lost. The candidate web site would become an extension of the national e-campaign – with little opportunity to tailor the site to the interests of local voters or the candidates themselves.

Legal issues
The activities of candidates during any election campaign are bound by the Representation of the People Act, impacting upon their spending and media exposure. The law is clear that upon dissolution of Parliament all MPs become candidates and are prohibited from referring to themselves as ‘MP’ on any campaign literature. The Hansard Society’s publication Electoral Law and the Internet – some issues considered stated that:

‘MPs, upon becoming candidates, must remove all reference to ‘MP’ from web sites which they control… MPs would be justified in retaining reference to ‘MP’ in archived files, press releases, or newspaper articles on their web sites if the references to their being an MP were correct at the time at which the pieces were written.’

Whilst this advice was heeded by the majority of incumbent candidates, there were at least 12 exceptions – including one senior cabinet minister. It is impossible to argue that these breaches represented a serious risk to a fair election, but the complacency of these candidates reflects the status of the web in their campaigns. It is unlikely that leaflets, stickers and posters would slip by unnoticed in this way.

The newly formed Electoral Commission is likely to be considering the issues relating to e-campaigning before the next election and with more candidates likely to be online clearer guidelines may be necessary.

Publicity and the media
In the months before the 2001 election, there was a great deal of discussion in both the online and offline media concerning the role the internet would play in the election. Journalists like writing about e-related campaign stories and this gave media-aware candidates and campaigners a great opportunity to grasp column inches. Local newspapers carried stories about candidate web site launches and candidates who could claim an online first – for example Howard Dawber’s candidate election web cast – were covered in the national press. Some of the candidate web sites were able to create stories, e-mail them out to the press, archive the press release and then headline any subsequent articles on their latest news section: a perfect example of creating and reporting their own story.

Press rooms – areas of the site containing pictures, stories and campaign information specifically for the media – were a feature of a few campaign web sites, such as the Newbury Conservative’s www.wbeca.org.uk. Digital pictures could be uploaded and available for the press within minutes of an event or photocall.

Unlike e-mail, web sites are a ‘pull’ rather than a ‘push’ media – having built a site there is no guarantee that anyone will visit it. Publicity related to the site is vital to ensure that it is used and gives a positive message about the candidate’s efforts to connect with voters.

An e-campaign should be fully integrated with the traditional campaign. In the US, candidate web site addresses were displayed on every billboard, leaflet and podium of the campaign. An e-campaign will not succeed as a self-contained activity – it should be used to complement and add value to the offline campaign.

‘We had the web address on absolutely everything we put out… stories on the web site and ‘e-news’ drove people towards other events such as hustings and campaign meetings. Using our campaign diary to say how much work we were doing was designed to demoralise our opposition who we knew were accessing the site.’

Mark Dawber, Howard Dawber campaign
The evidence from the 2001 election would suggest that in candidates’ online campaigning the UK lags far behind the US. During the US elections in 2000, three quarters of senate candidates and well over half of congress candidates developed campaign websites. However, there is undoubtedly a greater incentive for a US senate or congress candidate to invest in online campaigning.

• Firstly, the US has higher levels of internet penetration than the UK: 47.9% of the population compared to 31.9% in the UK.
• Secondly, the geographical area represented, especially by senators, is huge compared to a UK constituency, so the web is more necessary as a tool to connect with voters across vast distances and acts as virtual campaign headquarters for voters in areas remote from the state capital.

Case Study

www.Allan4Hallam.org.uk

Richard Allan – the incumbent Liberal Democrat candidate for Sheffield Hallam – used e-campaigning as one tool in his re-election campaign. He successfully raised his majority with a 4.1% swing. He designed and built his own web site and ran an e-mail campaign.

Web site

www.Allan4Hallam.co.uk performed the following functions:

• Information resource – Contained contact details, polling results from 1997, links to Liberal Democrat policy pages and the manifesto. On average, throughout the campaign, about 60 pages of the web site were viewed per day. This appears quite a small figure – but within the localised context of its audience it is more significant.

• Feedback mechanism – People could pledge support and offer help via an e-mail form on the web site. About 20 people used this facility.

E-mail

E-mail was used in the following ways:

• Mass e-mailing – Three e-mails were sent out to about 400-500 e-mail addresses, collected via the web site, from surveys and questionnaires in the constituency and from lists of supporters and members of the party in the area. This is a substantial e-mail list for one constituency. The three e-mails were:
  1. To announce that Richard Allan was standing and to launch the campaign. It included a link to the Lib Dem manifesto on the main party web site.
  2. On the final weekend of the campaign to answer election FAQs about polling procedure.
  3. On the eve of polling to remind people to go and vote.

The e-mails were contained to one screen’s worth of text. No more than three e-mails were sent so people did not feel swamped with information – they were encouraged to e-mail personally if they wished to have a more sustained dialogue.

• Personalised e-mails – Richard Allan answered constituent’s e-mails throughout the election campaign.

‘My inclination is, if the volume is fairly low, to go for personalised e-mails rather than going for mass mailings using one of those commercial mail tools. I’m just interested to see how these things work and what level of response we get.’


He received on average three personal e-mails per day and communicated with 200 people during the course of the campaign. E-mails were replied to within two days and usually contained a ‘click-through’ to the main party web site for policy queries.

• Other e-mails – Richard Allan wrote content for other e-mailing lists sent out during the election campaign from non-party sources. For example, an e-mail to all students at the university about a mini hustings taking place and one about e-technologies for an IT mailing list that was distributed during the campaign period.

Successes and failures

The web site was less successful than the e-mailing strategy. It proved difficult to raise awareness of and direct people to it. The e-mailing strategy was successful and cost effective. Only 1% of people asked to be ‘un-subscribed’ from each of the e-mailings. A further 1 or 2% e-mailed Richard with positive feedback after these e-mails. The content and regularity were pitched well – they did not bombard people and contained a ‘readable’ amount of relevant information.

The personal e-mail strategy was the most important strand for Richard’s campaign. Responding to people’s e-mails promptly and with interesting, friendly, and useful content was appreciated by constituents. He built up qualitative contacts via e-mail with around 200 people, using personal e-mail as an excellent method to build support, strengthen existing supporters and galvanise people into campaigning action.

For Hallam constituents, this meant closer connection and interactivity with their candidate – the ability to ask questions and receive prompt answers. For the candidate, it provided a means to connect closely with hundreds of constituents, provide personalised responses to particular questions and build up a support base.

For Richard Allan MP the e-campaign made a clear addition and enhancement to his re-election campaign.
Winning a seat in Cyber Space

- Thirdly, senators are elected every two years, so they are constantly campaigning.
- Fourthly, US candidates’ campaigns are far less party-centered, and the US parties are far less organised and significant than the UK parties.
- Finally, the benefits of an online campaign to a US candidate are more tangible and easily quantified. UK electoral law strictly limits the amount of money a candidate can raise for the purposes of their campaign; in the US campaign, web sites were used primarily for fundraising and the success of the web site was assessed by how many dollars were pledged online.

One of the main reasons stated for the decline in voter turnout in the UK in 2001 was the public’s distrust of the party machine and the lack of definition between the parties. Dedicated web sites gave candidates an unmediated and targeted opportunity to convey their plans for the local area, past achievements in relation to the constituency and personality. They could also compare their stance on issues directly with the opposition candidates – these could include national policy but, often, more important to the voter is what the candidate will do about local services and issues which may not be covered in the national campaign. With membership of political parties and the number of local activists in decline, a well-publicised web site can attract new blood to the constituency campaign. It is also a good organisational tool to tell people where the candidates will be at any time, arrange lifts to polling stations and allow people to apply online for postal votes.

The web is a two-way medium. 36% of candidate web sites in the election asked for feedback and views from visitors. Other sites offered online polling facilities and discussion boards. Politicians are regularly accused of not listening to the views of the electorate. Feedback mechanisms are another means for a candidate to build a relationship with a voter. This can effectively complement traditional campaigning.

By the next UK election, candidates will not be seen as opting into the information age but opting out. Those candidates who do not offer constituents an online option will be viewed as at best lazy, and at worst uninterested.

Beccy Earnshaw is Project Manager at the Hansard Society e-democracy programme

Candidate e-campaign tips

Do
- Recruit a volunteer web master with web experience and knowledge of politics. A good starting place would be university and college computing courses where students may be looking for CV enhancing opportunities.
- Take responsibility for checking all editorial copy personally.
- Tailor the web site to the constituency – use local references and tackle local issues.
- Brand the web site (with colour scheme, logos and slogans) and use this branding across campaign material
- Advertise your web address on anything and everything.
- Include a question and answer section.
- Have sections of the web site aimed at different demographics – first-time voters, pensioners etc.
- Use e-mail mailing lists to co-ordinate supporters.

Don’t
- Try to do everything
- Pack the web site with animation and graphics.
- Make promises you cannot keep – e.g ‘we will reply to all questions in one hour’.
- Let the site get out-of-date. If you haven’t got time to update the site regularly, avoid sections such as ‘latest news’.
- Be too formal – the language used on the web and in e-mails tends to be more relaxed than in print media.

Edward Davey MP
Thank you for re-electing me as Member of Parliament for Kingston & Surbiton, with a large majority this time!

The result in Kingston & Surbiton

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>% of Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nick Barmby (UKIP)</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward Davey (Liberal Democrat)</td>
<td>29,582</td>
<td>60.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Hain (Socialist Labour)</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jeremy Middleton (Unrepresented People’s Party)</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>David Shaw (Conservative)</td>
<td>15,550</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Scarce (Green Party)</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Woodford (Labour)</td>
<td>4,188</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Majority : 15,076

View my profile

Beccy Earnshaw is Project Manager at the Hansard Society e-democracy programme

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Was there an online public dialogue?

Stephen Coleman

Healthy democracies are dependent upon robust, reliable and inclusive channels of communication. In an earlier, more deferential age, such channels tended to facilitate one-way flows from the political elite to the voters, via post, posters, radio, the press, television and telephone. Two-way communication between politicians and voters used to take place at well-publicised election meetings, but these face-to-face encounters have declined in recent elections, so that voters are more than ever recipients of a top-down information-flow rather than participants in interactive communication.

As parties have retreated from the culture of the public meeting (despite occasional symbolic reincarnations of soapbox oratory, under highly controlled conditions and principally for the benefit of the television cameras), the media has become increasingly interested in creating participatory events, in which ‘real’ people are seen to set the agenda and put the politicians through their paces.

From ubiquitous election phone-ins to studio debates, the electronic media has been almost obsessive about the need to show that it can connect politics to the public voice.1 In 2001, all three main party leaders faced studio audiences on both BBC and ITV and were forced to submit to the test of winning the confidence of a random selection of the undecided and the plainly hostile. The popularity of these encounters rests upon the trust that members of the public have in other members of the public to speak for them; the capacity of ‘ordinary’ people to invoke experiences that illuminate policy issues; and the occasional moments of drama when politicians are confronted with timely expressions of the public mood.

Diana Gould’s 1983 phone-in interrogation of Margaret Thatcher over the sinking of the Belgrano, culminating in the caller’s exasperated comment: ‘That’s just not good enough, Mrs Thatcher’ – a comment that no professional interviewer would ever have uttered – was a seminal moment in media ‘people power.’ In the 2001 election Tony Blair was confronted by Sharron Storer who harangued him in public on behalf of her partner, a cancer sufferer; Margaret Beckett was similarly confronted in a dramatic encounter on the BBC Election Call programme by a caller whose frustration with her treatment by the NHS spoke louder than any political polemic.

Despite this turn towards interactivity, the broadcast media has experienced great difficulties in attracting viewers and listeners to political slots. When Tony Blair faced the BBC’s Question Time audience during the 2001 campaign, only 2.5 million viewers chose to watch. As with the decline in turnout, there has been an inexorable drift towards public turn-off from election coverage. With BBC News losing as many as 2 million more viewers in 2001 than it lost in 1997, the most popular interactive response to election coverage was for viewers to reach for their remote control zappers.
The internet to the rescue of democracy?
The internet has inspired high hopes amongst political commentators and democratic theorists, with some envisaging the emergence of an online public sphere in which anyone can talk to everyone. In the UK’s 1997 election few attempts were made to encourage online debate – not least because only 2% of the population then had home access to the internet. By 2001, over a third of the population had home access to the internet; the BBC had created and developed a well-resourced online service; the broadsheet newspapers had set up their own web sites; and several independent political web sites, such as YouGov and epolitix had established credible reputations. Given these conditions could the internet play a role in opening up a public dialogue about the election? In the absence of a televised leaders’ debate (a lamentable failure of the old media to invigorate democratic discourse), could the new media generate an authentic voters’ debate?

In exploring and evaluating the extent of online election dialogue, it is important to distinguish between the various forms of online discourse. Just as there are critical distinctions between the Sun and the Guardian or Channel 4 and ITV2, so it would make little sense to examine chat rooms and web-based discussion forums as if they were the same thing – they are both arenas for online discussion but, comparing them may be rather like trying to compare pub arguments with policy seminars. So, our research methodology involved identifying the various kinds of online discourse available to the public during the election campaign and pursuing detailed studies of each of them, primarily based upon content analysis of messages submitted to the discussions. This research set out to answer the following questions:

- What opportunities were available for voters to participate in online discussion about the election?
- How many voters did debate online and what sort of people were they?
- What was discussed, and who set the agenda?
- To what extent could these online debates be regarded as a contribution to a more democratic election?

Discussion opportunities
In the 1997 election, the limited online debate that took place was facilitated by UK Citizens Online Democracy (UKCOD), a non-profit, citizens’ initiative. In 2001, the main spaces for online debate were provided by established media organisations, moving online as an extension of their offline profiles. The BBC has for some time been devoting considerable energy to its discussion areas – these include BBC News Online’s Talking Point, which allows people to e-mail comments on set topics, which are then edited and published selectively online; and its BBC Online message-board forums, to which anyone can register and send comments on a range of agenda topics.

In the 2001 election, we analysed 833 messages to Talking Point; 500 out of 1,050 messages on the It’s Your Parliament forum between May 15 and June 6; and 568 of the 1,200 messages on the Today programme forum between May 8 and 25 and June 4 to 6. These fora were selected for their different formats and styles. Talking Point comprises edited e-mail messages. These web fora comprised pre-moderated messages from two different audiences: It’s Your Parliament users tend to be less politically sophisticated and closer to the culture of a political chat room; Today forum users tend to be more politically sophisticated and are driven by the agenda of the highly respected daily news programme.

In addition, we examined 39 BBC Online web casts. These were quite different from other online discussion fora, in that they were more like television on the web than a traditional online discussion forum. Our aim was to examine the discursive and interactive potential of web casts.

The Guardian’s election web site was launched shortly before the campaign started. It ran a number of separate discussion topics, each on their own message boards. 573 messages were posted between May 31 and June 6, of which all were analysed for this research. The Times, Financial Times and Daily Telegraph also ran election message boards, but failed to attract the numbers of posters or quality of messages at the Guardian discussion forum. We also analysed four web casts run by the Guardian site.

In all, we analysed 2,474 messages posted by members of the public, as well as 43 separate web casts. This was sufficient to give us a clear picture of what was happening in the most high-profile online election debates, but the picture is incomplete because we chose not to examine other, smaller web-based discussions or chat rooms. The latter were not nearly as widely used in the UK election as in the US, where there seems to be a youth-centred chat-room culture.

We also left out newsgroups, of which there were several specifically discussing the UK election, some of which grew to several thousand postings during the campaign period. Newsgroup election discussion will be the subject of further research, but at this point it can be reported that these were more akin to communities of committed participants than anything resembling a public sphere to which interested bystanders might come to ask a question or make a point.

The online discussion fora were well publicised and easy to join, assuming that voters had access to the internet and basic online skills. This begs the question, central to all e-democratic thought, of the digital divide and the tendency for those without internet access or skills to become even more information-poor as a result of being outside the online loop. For opportunities to discuss the election to have been truly democratic, strategies needed to have been devised for building bridges to the digitally excluded.

The people spoke – but how many?
We know from our MORI polling that very few voters participated in web-based discussions or chat rooms. Indeed, of the representative sample polled, none claimed to have participated in such online discourse...
Was there an online public dialogue?

and edited discussion. Presented as ‘the nation’s debating chamber’, Talking Point allows people to e-mail their comments on given topics and selects those messages – or edited parts of them – for publication. Something of a cross between an online letters’ column and a phone-in, Talking Point’s main achievement is a more focused discussion involving much bigger numbers of people. Of the 833 messages analysed, the majority came from once-only posters: 66% of the posters to Talking Point had only one message published and most of the rest had no more than two messages up on the site. So, these posters have much more of a sense of participating in a broad discussion, rather than a club.

What sort of people contributed to online discussions?

There is little concrete data about them, but, from reading the messages, it appears that they came from quite a wide variety of backgrounds. We were able to analyse gender balance and found that men were disproportionately represented:

- In It’s Your Parliament, infrequent posters constituted 83.5% of all participants and contributed 39% of the messages.
- In the Today forum, infrequent posters constituted 87% of participants and contributed 39% of the messages.
- In the Guardian forum, the 573 analysed messages were posted by 106 people, of whom seven frequent posters contributed 79% of all messages.

Not only did a very small minority dominate these online discussions, we found that this minority was less representative of the nation as a whole than the infrequent posters: they were almost exclusively male, highly opinionated, rarely contributing factual information and more likely to set the discussion agenda than others. This would seem to confirm a popular prejudice that fora of this kind tend to be dominated by those with enough energy to make a noise, but often the least to contribute to intelligent debate.

The main problem with these three discussion fora was that they were highly unmediated – anyone could submit a comment at any time, regardless of its value or relevance to the topic under discussion. There were moderators who would not allow offensive or libellous messages to go up on the site, but the general message to users was that they could have their say whenever they liked in whatever form they chose to express themselves. In short, these were rather like asynchronous versions of chat rooms (chat rooms are synchronous) and their quality and balance reflected the unmanaged nature of the chat environment.

It may be that democratic discourse is best when it is more mediated, filtered and rule-based. BBC News Online’s Talking Point is an example of such mediated and edited discussion. Presenting a ‘the nation’s debating chamber’, Talking Point allows people to e-mail their comments on given topics and selects those messages – or edited parts of them – for publication. Something of a cross between an online letters’ column and a phone-in, Talking Point’s main achievement is a more focused discussion involving much bigger numbers of people. Of the 833 messages analysed, the majority came from once-only posters: 66% of the posters to Talking Point had only one message published and most of the rest had no more than two messages up on the site. So, these posters have much more of a sense of participating in a broad discussion, rather than a club.

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- In the Today forum, 91% were men.
- In the Guardian forum, 88% were men.
- In Talking Point, 82.8% were men.

When frequent posters were coded for gender it was clear that over 97% of all of these were men.

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The web casts were even more mediated and edited. In these, guest politicians or experts appeared on the web and responded to selected e-mails sent by the public. We examined four series of web casts:

1. BBC News Online’s 15-minute daily online supplement to its popular Election Call phone-in series (this was particularly interesting, for the data collected could be compared with that from a
Was there an online public dialogue?

2. BBC News Online’s Election Forum and Leaders’ Forum, conducted daily at midday between May 14 and June 6.

3. BBC News Online’s Election Trail in which the public had a chance ‘to talk to real people involved in real areas of life, like health, education and transport’.


On average, 15 e-mail questions were put to the guest politicians in each of the Election Call web casts – these were selected from several hundred emails sent (rising to over 1,000 when Tony Blair was the guest).

In Election Forum, the 18 politicians each answered seven emails on average – which was approximately one every two minutes. The party leaders answered 11 questions per web cast – spending 1.7 minutes on each answer.

In the Guardian web casts, guest politicians received live questions from voters, but did not respond to all of them: Patricia Hewitt and Simon Hughes both responded to 58% of questions put; Stephen Byers responded to 28%; the system broke down when Tessa Jowell made her web cast appearance and therefore a simple interview was conducted instead.

The people’s agenda?

As we have established, the participants in online discussions could hardly be regarded as constituting the voice of the public. They did not reflect the public’s gender balance and were dominated by a few opinionated voices. Nonetheless, even a minority can sometimes serve to represent what larger numbers of people would have chosen to say had they taken the trouble to do so.

For example, in the 1997 Election Call series, although no more than 250 callers actually appeared on the air, a survey of viewers and listeners to the programme found that 69% of TV viewers and 53% of radio listeners agreed with the proposition that: ‘The callers as a whole asked the type of questions I would want to ask.’

To what extent did the online debates during the 2001 election indicate that the public had its own agenda to pursue? The It’s Your Parliament forum invited voters to discuss questions posed by the host. There were 10 such questions throughout the campaign, ranging from the euro to devolution to public spending to predictions of the election result. Despite this agenda setting, only 25% of messages posted to the forum related to the questions put and only 43% of messages related explicitly or implicitly to the election – 57% of messages ignored the election. Contributors to this forum started 78 different discussion threads during the course of the campaign; 23.4% of messages posted were about the EU or the euro; but two days before the election one of the most active threads was discussing gun law, a non-election issue.

Messages in the Today forum were much more related to issues discussed on the Today radio programme; the online agenda was set by a traditional offline media agenda-setter. Few messages in the Today forum were unrelated to the election.

In the Guardian forum, the frequent posters tended to engage in a debate of their own, with high levels of interaction (over 80% of their messages are replies to other messages), whereas infrequent posters tended to raise new topics for discussion. It seems as if frequent posters were more involved in the established party-media election agenda, whereas infrequent posters tended to use online discussion as a way of setting their own agenda topics.

In Talking Point, the discussion topics were set by professional journalists; contributors had to respond to the questions of the day in order to have a chance of being selected for publication. But, interestingly, of the four most popular topics in Talking Point (i.e. those attracting most e-mails from the public) three were on issues that did not conform to the highest profile issues in the party-media agenda:

- The number of women MPs attracted 2,650 e-mails.
- Tactical voting received 2,371.
- Rail nationalisation received 1,464.
- The euro (which was very much on the agenda of one main party) attracted 1,517.

Also, Talking Point was overwhelmed by e-mails on the day of the ‘Prescott punch’ and whenever Lady Thatcher made a public comment.

In the much more mediated web casts, established party-media agenda issues dominated, but this might have been because those selecting these e-mails were more receptive to such issues than to new agenda issues. (To investigate this further we would need to compare used and unused e-mails sent to these fora.)

The web casts were seen much more – both by the guest politicians and the broadcasters – as a form of broadcasting: 46,465 people in all clicked on to the BBC web casts, with 2,203 watching the Blair web cast on June 1.

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A separate study of Election Call being conducted by the present writer.

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Considering that this was a campaign in which politicians’ encounters with ‘real people’ provided some of the most dramatic moments, it is surprising that there were so few moments of drama, conflict or newsworthy interaction in the various online fora. It is difficult to find a single instance of an online encounter in which politicians were particularly put on the spot or wrong-footed. The reason for this might be that the mediated online encounters were so managed that members of the public seeking to expose or trip up politicians were filtered out, whereas the unmediated fora were dominated by cliques who were either tedious or not interested in discussing the election. In addition, the opportunity to send one e-mail question to a politician offers no chance to challenge their answers so, unlike on a phone-in where callers are usually invited to comment on the response to their points, web casts offered a pretty comfortable ride to the politicians.

**Din or deliberation?**

In one sense, almost anything that extends freedom of expression is good for democracy. The opportunities provided by the internet for citizens to speak to each other as well as to question and challenge those wishing to represent them can only serve to make democracy more meaningful. Given the problems of alienation and disconnection which seemed to come to the fore in the 2001 election, the two-way path of the digital media can only offer potential, albeit a vulnerable potential.

There is a significant distinction, however, between letting the public rant and encouraging rational deliberation. The recent literature on deliberative democracy has emphasised a number of normative requirements for deliberative discussion. In this study of online election discussion we have been careful not to be too prescriptive about criteria for deliberation – there is no point in setting discursive standards so high that one stands in a permanent state of aloof condescension towards public talk. This election debate analysis is part of a much broader research study which is examining online public deliberation in a number of contexts.

How can one determine the extent to which online discussions were rationally deliberative? Our research concentrated upon two key questions:

- Were the messages posted based upon factual information or relevant experience?
- Did message posters show any signs of listening to and learning from anyone else?

In the *It's Your Parliament* forum, 74.6% of messages posted were statements of opinion, with no factual substantiation of any kind; only 9% referred to factual information and 3% referred to personal experience as a basis for their comments.

The *Today* forum sought to link the discussion topics to the radio programme. Gregory Stevens, who ‘hosted’ the forum for the BBC, explained to us that: ‘Generally, we pick a topic that has been on the show. At least this way people will have heard some of the viewpoints and it gives people something to think about before putting their messages up. It provides a more well-informed debate.’ Despite this intention, messages to the *Today* forum were mainly statements of opinion (70%), with only 9.5% of posters bringing any factual information to the debate.

In the *Guardian* forum, messages based upon factual information were much more frequent (30%), although only 1.5% referred to their own experiences to support their arguments.

Surprisingly, given that it was an edited forum, *Talking Point* messages were also overwhelmingly opinionated and fact-free (72.4%), with only 2.4% including any factual information and 3.8% referring to their own experiences.

In the web casts, a significantly higher number of selected e-mails were based upon factual information (20.9%).

Did discussion participants show any signs of listening to one another? After all, posting a message to a web site is a pretty solitary sort of activity, far from the sociability and vigour of face-to-face political conversation or debate. The latter are characterised by frequent interactions and interruptions, as well as verbal and bodily cues and reactions. An online discussion in which nobody responded to anybody would be more soapbox ranting than deliberation.

In fact, given the asynchronous and virtual nature of online discussion, there was a high degree of interaction between posters:

- In the *It's Your Parliament* forum, 76% of messages analysed were replies to a previous post. As stated earlier, this forum was not unlike a chat room where posters came to know one another, often by name, and the degree of familiarity and multi-participant conversations was high. Most responses disagreed with previous messages (29.6%) rather than agreed (7.4%).
- In the *Today* forum, 65% of messages were replies to earlier messages. Of these, 40% responded by disagreeing and 18% by agreeing.
- In the *Guardian* forum, 55% of messages were responses to others.
- In the much more mediated *Talking Point* forum, there were very few responses from one poster to another (5.4%), probably because the format constrained direct interaction between participants.

The general conclusion to be drawn from this is that most message posters were opinionated, short on factual information and highly responsive – mainly to one another. We are in danger here of painting a picture of participants in online discussions as being very far from ideal deliberators. There is a need for more balanced understanding of what is happening in online discussions. When we isolate frequent posters who dominate the online discussions, we might expect them to be rigidly opinionated, uninformed and incessantly chatting to one another. This is a caricature and it is important to distinguish between how people behave and the environments in which they find themselves.
Was there an online public dialogue?

- In the *It’s Your Parliament* forum, the frequent posters seem to conform to the image of being uninformed and chatty: 43.5% of all uninformed comments in that forum came from frequent posters, as did 56.7% of disagreements with previous messages.

- In the *Today* forum, frequent posters contributed 61% of the messages, but only 24% of those included any factual information.

- In the *Guardian* forum, however, frequent and infrequent posters were equally unlikely to support their arguments factually, and 80% of messages from frequent posters were replies, mainly serving to sustain the debates and encourage further messages from infrequent posters.

Rather than condemn frequent posters for being frequent (after all, who condemns MPs for speaking more frequently than others in Parliament?), it would be more useful to consider why so few people choose to participate at all. If discussion is good for democracy, barriers to it should be taken seriously.

Citizens do not participate in online discussions because they lack interest in politics as they understand it. They do not participate because they lack confidence in their ability to articulate political views; they lack time to participate; they are sceptical about the purpose or outcome of such discussions; and they are aware of the reputation of online discussion – indeed, most public political discussion – as being dominated by the opinionated and the super-confident. Rather than accept these as facts of life – much as one might start to accept the fact that young people do not vote – there is a case for thinking seriously about how online engagement in democratic discussion could be encouraged and promoted.

**Promoting a national conversation**

The internet offers a prospect of promoting an inclusive national conversation in which citizens can enter the democratic debate, exchange views with others, listen and learn. The use of the internet in the 2001 election shows an interest on the part of major media organisations in generating an environment for public debate, but, as our research findings have shown, the discussions that took place were far from inclusive, popular or balanced. In setting out ideas for future online political discussion, we are not arguing that democracy will never be healthy until everyone can be persuaded to participate in political debate, nor are we arguing that the internet is a substitute for other loci of conversation and debate, such as talks amongst friends and families, party involvement or other media-generated discussions. What can be done to engage more people in the online democratic debate?

**Trusted spaces**

Just as people go to polling stations to vote, they need to know that there are trusted places – or, in cyber-terms, spaces – where they can participate with others in meaningful public discussion.

In *Realising Democracy Online*, Jay Blumler and the present writer have argued the case for a ‘civic commons in cyber space’ which would be publicly funded and connected to real-world political institutions. Trust arises from outcomes: people trust shops which deliver to them the goods on offer; they trust banks that let them have their money when they need it; they trust hospitals that treat them when they are ill. Online discussion is currently distrusted because citizens are invited to ‘have their say’ (a rather patronising formulation, incidentally) and then just left to talk to themselves.

A poll of 4,782 people, conducted by YouGov.com for this research, found that 64% of respondents agreed that ‘online discussions are usually dominated by the same few people’ and 44% agreed that ‘online discussions rarely lead to any useful conclusions’.76% of those who participated in online discussions agreed that such discussions help to inform people about different points of view from their own. When asked to state the most important features of useful online discussions, 27% said that all participants should have a fair say and 17% said that they should feed into the policy-making process.

The web casts succeeded in the 2001 election because they opened up real connections between voters and those seeking to represent them – even though they offered no real opportunities for voters to pursue their points beyond the initial question. In the other fora such connections did not exist and so those participating tended to talk as if nobody cared very much what they were saying. There has been a tendency for producers of online discussions to treat the public condescendingly: ‘what you say counts… let’s hear what’s on your mind… come and get it off your chest.’

There should certainly be spaces online for people to chat – on BBC Online the *EastEnders* discussion forum is by far the most popular. But democracy is a more complex relationship than having a natter and there is a need to think through the best conditions for facilitating democratic and meaningful discourse.

**Interactive representation**

Interactive politics requires interactive politicians. As we have shown elsewhere in this report, few candidates made real use of the interactivity of the internet during the 2001 election. Truly interactive politics will not happen until online interactivity is regarded less as a gimmick and more as an integral part of the process of democratic representation. The strongest impression one receives from reading the messages in the various online fora is of an electorate that feels disconnected from the political elite; they simply do not believe that their representatives are listening to them or making an effort to keep in touch with them. A couple of examples are indicative of hundreds more like them:

*’I’ve come to the conclusion all MPs are just a bunch of liars who never do what they say they will. They’re like spoilt children in a playground, name-calling their opponents and never admitting that they might...*
be wrong or that someone on the other side actually has a good idea. I've lived in this village for 19 years but I've never seen our MP here in all that time. Last November we had floods, but you never saw a politician [in the village] then. We've got lots of other problems. The schoolhouse has closed, the last bus to Doncaster leaves at 4.30 in the afternoon, the nearest shop is six miles away. But they're not interested.

I've come to realise that politicians make lots of promises but they never keep them.'

Janet Hanton – May 31 2001, BBC News Online

'I am angry, damn angry. I am totally fed up with this phoney democracy, the once every five years cross in a box. I would like to be consulted, I would like to have a say in what is actually taking place in my name. The only way I can see that happening is if the issue is actually put before us and we are allowed to vote on it. Preferably without the media trying to influence the outcome with their own propaganda. We will not be allowed this though for the reasons I have stated earlier, they think we know nothing and are only fit to be led to the ballot box every five years like sheep.'

Joe Herd – May 19 2001, BBC Online Forum

Intemperate and perhaps unfair though such comments might be, they were sending a message to politicians – if they choose to hear it. Indeed, anyone reading the messages in online discussions during the 2001 campaign might have sensed the impending collapse of turnout on June 7. The solution does not lie in the campaign might have sensed the impending collapse of turnout on June 7. The solution does not lie in

Broadband and multimedia

Whether or not 2001 was an ‘internet election’, it certainly took place during a period of technological and cultural transition. Less than half the population is currently online – this will not be the case at the time of the next general election. The internet is still far from being a user-friendly technology. Television is easy to use and highly visual; the internet is fiddly and counter-intuitive to operate and is still mainly text-based. As more people come online and broadband expands, online politics will develop into multimedia – so that instead of just writing to each other we shall be seeing and hearing more of one another. This will help to humanise and domesticate the internet, connecting it more with people’s daily lives. Digital television could provide a major platform for the future of e-democracy, but only if it can win people to it by imaginative content and trusted outcomes.

The need for moderation, filtration and summation

Democracy must be organised in ways that help people to make the most of their opportunities. This calls for the establishment of agreed rules of civilised debate. People do not want to participate in fora that are dominated by just a few people; so, if the trade-off is between the total liberty of expression of a dozen persistent posters and the greater inclusion of many more people, it is clear that the current right to dominate discussions should not prevail.

Online discussions need to be competently and transparently moderated; messages need to be placed within appropriate discussion threads and participants offered the maximum degree of support – including information resources to help them put their arguments reasonably. There should also be regular summaries of the discussions, so that new participants can see what has been said so far and a sense of cohesion and conclusion reached. These production tasks must be carried out with strict impartiality if they are to benefit democratic discourse.

Beyond the election campaign

General elections are about electing representatives to form a Parliament. If online discussions are to be more than ephemeral features of democracy, they need to be incorporated into the representative institutions that arise from the election. MPs and Parliament as a legislative body have much to gain from connecting with the public via online discussions and consultations, as do local and national governments. The need is for new channels of communication that will allow representatives to be connected with the informed opinions of those they represent, and for the expertise and experience of citizens to be recruited as a resource for better democracy.

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2. www.democracy.org.uk
3. Coleman, S., Election Call: A Democratic Public Forum? Hansard Society, 1999, p27 (A study is currently being written of the 2001 Election Call series)

The data on which this chapter is based was produced by a research team comprising former and present LSE postgraduate students: Jamie Cowling, Thorsten Faas, Bianca Jordan, Milica Howell, Emilie Normann and Roman Winkler. Their contributions to this research are acknowledged and much appreciated

Was there an online public dialogue?
On June 7, only 38% of 18-25 year-olds voted. I was one of that percentage – but why was I in the minority and could the internet have made any difference?

The turnout for 18-25 year-olds fell far below the exceptionally low average turnout of 59% across the UK. First and second-time voters were simply not interested enough in this election to use their vote.

Apathy?
Apathy was blamed as the root cause of the low turnout. Theories abound as to the reasons – satisfaction with the status quo, convergence between the main parties towards the centre ground, (especially on macro-economic policy), lack of a viable alternative party, and even that the election was a foregone conclusion and Labour’s second term was guaranteed. Even in fiercely contested marginal seats, turnout remained at a similar or slightly lower figure compared with 1997. Despite the parties’ best efforts, the election did not engage 62% of 18-25 year-olds.

Technology?
A second element here is technology – mobile telephones, WAP, the internet and e-mail. Young people have above average access to and affinity with such new technologies. It is estimated that 81% of 15-24 year-olds use text messaging every day and 82% of 16-24 year-olds have internet access – compared to just over 40% nationally. There are three million students in the UK, the majority of whom have access to a university e-mail account and internet access. A Guardian poll published in March 2001 estimated that 24% of 18-24 year-olds would look online for news and information about party policies and issues and nearly a quarter of first-time voters would use the internet to help them decide how to vote. The market and appetite for e-technologies are already well established – so how were e-technologies used to invigorate the youth vote?

This chapter will:
- Explore recent research that suggests that although apathy in young people is often mistaken for laziness, this is not necessarily the case and that young people do take an active interest in ‘politics’ – even if they do not define their interest in ‘political issues’ in that way.
- Look at what happened online for younger voters and critically analyse its impact.
- Consider the implications of these findings for future ventures into e-campaigning and online citizenship for younger voters.
(1) The new apathy

Youth apathy is not a new phenomenon. Common wisdom has it that young people cannot be bothered with politics, are apathetic to the point of laziness and uninterested in political issues – exemplified by low turnout in this and many previous elections. Contrary to popular opinion, recent research suggests that young people do possess political values and opinions, take an active role in political processes and understand the importance of citizenship and political participation.

A recent study found that young people possess a narrow definition of politics – they see it as the adversarial combat of Prime Minister’s Question Time and party warfare. These were the elements of politics with which they could not identify or have respect for. However, young people are interested in issues that have political resonance for them, even if they do not couch such interest in political terms. Furthermore ‘even those who declare themselves least interested in politics share political concerns and may have taken part in activities such as signing a petition, attending a local protest or voting in an election’.

It is not just that younger voters do not wish to vote, but that it is harder for them to vote since they are less likely to be on the electoral register. A recent study found that 60% of the 18-24 group are registered to vote compared to 92% of the general population. Younger people are more likely to be mobile on a yearly basis (particularly students and recent graduates) and do not register at each new address. The introduction of the rolling register for the 2001 general election made it easier to register at any time in the year and was available via a special web site www.rollingregister.gov.uk. But it was not well advertised and we wait to see what impact this had on the accuracy of the register on June 7.

Young people are interested in issues and have repeatedly shown that their concerns mirror those of older adults in terms of health, education and work. Some of the most successful examples of online activity presented in the next section display this interest in issues above and beyond traditional party politics. However, young people feel under-represented in terms of age, gender and racial diversity by MPs and feel disconnected from their representatives in-between election times. It will take more than a few text messages or fancy election web sites to combat these problems.

(2) What happened?

This section will look at what happened online for younger voters and critically analyse its impact, specifically considering the political parties, political institutions, national youth organisations, youth media sites, humour sites and speciality issue sites.

Political parties

Labour

www.Ruup4it.org.uk

The Labour Party invested time and effort into attracting younger voters. A week into the campaign a youth web site was launched called www.Ruup4it.org.uk. It was marketed via scratch cards sent out to universities and other literature. The site included:

- Celebrity quotes and interviews with soap stars, comedians, and famous politicians, such as Nelson Mandela. Users could discover that David Lammy MP’s favourite type of music was drum and base.
- Quotes from ordinary students and young people supporting Labour.
- Text message competition to design a slogan for the party and an online vote for the best one.
- Downloadable games, screensavers.
- News – a set of links to news web sites (including the BBC, ITN Channel 4 and various newspapers).
- Voting information – FAQs such as ‘Why should I vote?’ and ‘How do I vote?’
- Get involved section – including suggestions such as ‘write to your MP’, ‘go on a demo’, ‘read the BBC’s politics pages’ or ‘join a pressure group’.
- Download the youth manifesto.
- The Difference – a section to describe the main policy differences between the main parties in the form of a ‘check box’ list where users could tick policy statements that they agreed with then be presented with a summary of what the Labour party was doing in those areas.
- E-bulletin – users could sign up for a ‘Youth e-bulletin’ about youth news issues.
- Mock election pack – downloadable items such as a Tony Blair letter, top 10 campaign tips and the Labour campaign song.

The web site provided some useful information for first-time voters and accessible summaries of policy positions and youth policies. It was bright, attractive and simple to navigate. It combined information with personality, glamour and humour – it was far more than any other party attempted.

The site was another arm to the main party e-campaign. It re-packaged the main site (with a few additional features such as competitions) in a less formal style with less party branding and relevant information for
What did the internet do for first-time voters?

young people highlighted. Younger voters could receive information directly from the party without interference and mediation by media sources. However, the site offered limited possibilities to interact with the party and contained no links to candidate information. It lacked a ‘face’ or personality and almost had the feel of a ‘big brother’ talking to you. This top-down approach, as in much of the e-campaigning, probably intimidated and patronised as many users as it enlightened or encouraged.

Labour asked people to volunteer their mobile phone number through the Ruap4it? site. They sent out a series of four text messages in the final week of the campaign. The first specifically targeted younger voters with the message ‘Don’t give a XXXX 4 last orders? X Lbr on June 7 4 long drinking hrs’. The message was sent to around 100,000 numbers but the party hoped it reached almost three times that number via viral marketing. Text messaging was relatively simple for the party to organise and was a successful coup as far as e-campaign strategy was concerned, surpassing anything the other parties tried.

But it was unlikely to have affected turnout or informed voters and it is ironic that the policy Labour used to attract younger voters has been dropped from their legislative programme for this Parliament. Recipients of the messages were probably initially impressed by the novelty, but whether one single message caused sympathy for the party. Text messaging was a good publicity stunt, an innovative use of the technology and certainly did more good for the party than ill. What it did was to give a much smaller organisation than young Labour… We can put the data on the net then tell people at student unions. It makes it a whole lot easier to get our message across. In terms of on-the-ground campaigning, just for financial reasons, we’re never going to be able to match them pound for pound – whereas on the web site we can rely on people doing their computer degree or whatever to do it for us.’

Regarding text messages, Matthew said: ‘To do that you need to get people to give their mobile phone numbers to you and agree for you to text them, and I think the only people who are going to do that are going to vote for you anyway.’

Conservatives
http://www.conservatives.com/consfutures.cfm

Conservative Future is the youth section of the main party and comprised one sub-section of the main party site. These few pages were a minimal concession to the younger element of the party. They were buried deep within the main party site and unlikely to attract passing voters.

Liberal Democrats
http://www.cix.co.uk/~ldys/

The site was not as impressive graphically or in design as Ruap4it?, nor did it offer text messaging or competitions. But it was designed and developed by a grassroots team of young volunteers and was a strong campaigning force on issues such as tuition fees. It was built on a limited budget and received 12,000 hits during the election period, particularly from students. The site provided photos and e-mail addresses so users could get in contact and interact with the people ‘behind the scenes’. LDYS was a good example of how the internet can be utilised on a small scale to send information to people who could not access it elsewhere. LDYS indicated that small groups could compete online on equal footing with better-funded organisations.

Matthew Hanney, LDYS web master, reflected that: ‘We’re a much smallerorganisation than young Labour… We can put the data on the net then tell people at student unions. It makes it a whole lot easier to get our message across. In terms of on-the-ground campaigning, just for financial reasons, we’re never going to be able to match them pound for pound – whereas on the web site we can rely on people doing their computer degree or whatever to do it for us.’

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Political institutions

The following political institutions and government departments offered information online for younger voters:

Home office
http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/elections/1617.htm

A section aimed at 16-17 year-olds telling them how to get on the electoral register and why to vote – including a leaflet about how to register to vote.

Local authorities

Some local authorities provided online information for young people such as at http://step-in.staffordshire.gov.uk/youth/index.htm which provided specific contact details for local councils and local MPs on their youth pages.

National youth organisations

National Union of Students
http://www.nusonline.co.uk/
NUS Online comprises part of the work NUS does to encourage students to vote. The site contained an Election 2001 section in the Newsroom, including:

- Link to FaxYourMP web site (www.faxyourMP.com).
- Information on how to get on the electoral register or get a postal vote.
- Deciding who to vote for section – containing an overview of where the parties stood on key issues.
- General Election Briefing – containing an official NUS document encouraging students to take part.
- Information about key marginal seats with large student populations.
- Making votes count – a piece about electoral reform.
- Specific articles for Northern Irish students, Welsh student voters, gay students and students with disabilities.

Milly Rosier, Public Affairs Officer from NUS, identified three impacts of the site:

- Firstly it gave countrywide student officers and workers access to information about the rights and responsibilities of unions during an election (such as the Representation of the People Act). They received a lot of positive feedback about how useful it was to have information online.
- Secondly, it facilitated easier dispersal of information directly to students. In the past an election pack was distributed to all unions to use as they wished. This time the pack was available online, which meant more people could access a greater variety and depth of information.
- Thirdly, the web site may have helped motivate students to be politically active. Turnout among students was probably higher than in the age group as a whole due to postal votes – advertised though NUS Online – allowing students to vote from their home address.

Milly Rosier argued that students are particularly active at the moment – the NUS rally in London in 2000 had the largest turnout for a decade. She also believed the NUS web site might in some way have influenced electoral outcomes. The Liberal Democrats gained the marginal seat of Guildford in Surrey from the Conservatives. This seat had a large student population (from the University of Surrey and other FE colleges) who may have been motivated to vote due to NUS online and offline campaigning. Negligible though the effect of this site was, it did provide a useful information resource for users – aiding more informed decision-making on election day.

**The Youth Internet Project**
http://www.youth.org.uk/

This site included a large directory of youth orientated groups and web sites. It was one of a minority of sites to include a discussion board, but none of the messages on it related to the election.

**National Youth Agency**
http://www.nya.org.uk/

The National Youth Agency published a Youth Manifesto online to reply to the main parties’ manifestos. The site included articles about lowering the voting age to 16 to combat youth apathy and a rebuttal of the Conservative election broadcast’s alleged caricature of young people. The site established an online presence for one of the youth campaigning organisations but did not go much further than offering what amounted to an online version of their newsletter.

**British Youth Council**
http://www.byc.org.uk/

The BYC had a prominent election section on its home page, aiming to promote the youth agenda to politicians. It included:

- A Charter for Youth which was available to download, sign and post to the parties.
- A policy comparison section for the main parties.
- An article with Scope finding the nearest polling booths for people with disabilities – users could complete an online survey to explore the amenities in certain areas.
- A manifesto for lowering the voting age to 16.
- E-mail feedback for further details or publication ordering.

This site was an online campaigning presence for BYC and was probably mostly used by similar organisations and the media. Young people would only need to look at this site for research purposes for A Levels etc. The attempts at interactivity were somewhat limited but were steps in the right direction towards getting users engaged in the site and in the issues it was attempting to raise.

**Youth media sites**

Several media sites were especially created or adapted to engage young people in election news.

**BBC Newsround**
http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/election/index.shtml

This web site was aimed specifically at young people under the age of 18, i.e. pre-voters. It is worth mentioning here for its innovative presentation and content. It included:

- News section – picking out news items relating to young people.
- ‘Votemon’ – a ‘Pokemon’ cartoon-style section, which allows users to click animated cartoons to read basic fact files about the main parties and their leaders.
- Ask Kate – users can e-mail questions about politics and read the most recent answers (e.g. a question about the number of black MPs).
- Pac-Man game.
What did the internet do for first-time voters?

- Policy feedback – users could e-mail comments about policies. Selections were posted on the site. Although this site really aimed at non-voters, it incorporated bright graphics and colours with useful information and several feedback mechanisms where users could see their comments up on the site. This was one of the most interactive sites found.

Spiked
http://www.spiked-online.com/Sections/election/index.htm

Spiked is an online magazine written by and for young people. Its tone (satirical and humorous) was of more appeal to older age ranges (20+). It included an election section with specially written election stories focusing on ‘youth issues’ such as the parties’ youth e-campaigns. Users could sign up for Spiked by e-mail.

Sandy Starr of Spiked said: ‘One of Spiked’s principal aims is to raise the level of discussion and debate around politics. The election gave us an ideal opportunity to achieve this. [Spiked aims] to provide a lively, non-party-political analysis of the issues behind the election issues, and to encourage genuine engagement with political debate.’ Starr maintained that Spiked ‘encouraged younger readers in particular to engage more actively in political debate and also to question the obsession with voter apathy’.

The site received 40,000 hits and around 2,000 unique visitors per day; the election section was the sixth most popular section of the site. Many users were students, academics, journalists and young professionals.

Spiked worked well and remained popular because it provided a no-nonsense and realistic version of the news, written without party bias. It catered well for the younger, more cynical electorate and stimulated thought and debate through feedback on a letters page, where readers could have their say in much the same way as an offline newspaper.

Radio 1

As a result of public service obligations, the BBC Radio 1 web site had an election section run by Polly Billington. It offered the following:

- Three games (one dedicated to each party leader).
- Links to all the main parties’ web sites so people could make an informed decision.
- Downloadable one-minute audio manifestos (new one added daily) from a variety of party candidates.
- Read bite-sized leader biographies.
- Read comparisons on major policy areas through pop-up screens e.g. on crime, drugs, schools.
- Downloadable audio clips of 14 celebrities’ views about voting.
- Polly’s page – goes behind the spin to bring the news (from the campaign tour bus).

- Feedback e-mail channel to e-mail questions for the three party leaders when they were interviewed online and to feedback about other issues.
- Download interviews with three main party leaders in front of an audience of Radio 1 listeners.
- Download a form for the electoral register (removed once out of date) and help-line to call to find out local authority.

Polly Billington said the web site aimed to provide enough information for people to make an informed decision in a reasonable manner. The aim was for the election to be evident, but the ‘politics’ hidden. The site dealt primarily with issues and information. The web site added value to what is essentially a music station. Radio 1 gave extra information on the site that it would not have been able to give on-air because listeners would turn off. It tackled the election in a sensible and realistic way, providing information for those who wanted it, but keeping the horse-race aspect of the election out of sight. The election part of the site was quite difficult to locate and this may have prevented even the keenest users from finding the information.

Channel 4 Learning
http://www.4learning.co.uk/electionfever/

The Election Fever site used colourful animated graphics to provide information about all aspects of the election – including Parliament and MPs, the pollsters, the polling booth and the campaign tour. It included an A-Z of ‘weird’ words. It required ‘Flash’ to do justice to the graphics and animation but also offered a no-flash version for slower computers. It offered useful bite-sized information in a lively, interesting and amusing way. No alterations were made to the site during the election period.

Limb By Limb
http://www.limbbylimb.co.uk/

Limb By Limb is an online magazine with an election section – it provided a cynical weekly round-up of the events. Visitors could also download a video clip of the Prescott punch. The site made only a small concession to the election within its usual news coverage.

Metro
http://metro.thisislondon.co.uk/dynamic/election/poll.html

Metro magazine ran an online poll for readers (18-25+) including questions on who they would vote for, who
they voted for last time, and who they would like to see lead the parties over the next term. The results were published in *Metro* on June 4. This online poll aimed to get young people thinking about election issues and interacting via the internet.

### Speciality/issue sites

A series of speciality or issue-based sites became prominent during the election. A selection is presented below.

**Your Turn**

http://www.yourturn.net/

*YourTurn.net* positions itself as ‘A web site for young people who want to change things and who want to be heard.’ It received over 40,000 hits over the election period and used sophisticated graphics, games and multimedia to get its message across. It provided:

- Mechanisms to get involved in politics.
- Explanations and examples of why to get involved.
- Feedback areas via e-mail e.g. ‘Tell us your story’ and ‘Tell us your opinion’.
- Games to illustrate the effects of decision-making on everyday lives.
- A guide to the UK. Down-to-earth and accessible guides explained how the major systems and structures in the UK operate – from central government to the law, from the world of sport to the media.
- Real-life stories – interviews with young people.

Nick Stannah of *YourTurn.net* said: ‘During the election, teachers and young people used *YourTurn.net* to learn about many of the issues important in the UK today, to read the inspirational stories and to use the games and animations. *YourTurn.net* fights apathy by providing the information and inspiration for young people to get involved. It highlights politically active they voted for last time, and who they would like to see lead the parties over the next term. The results were published in *Metro* on June 4. This online poll aimed to get young people thinking about election issues and interacting via the internet.

**Channel 4**

http://www.itn.co.uk/election/interactive/yousay/young.s.html

This online poll aimed at younger voters specifically: ‘Are you in the 18-25 age group? Surveys have claimed that young voters aged between 18 and 25 are less likely to vote in the general election than any other group. Do you find the general election a big turn off? Do the political parties neglect your desires for the next Parliament? If you’re not planning to vote – why not? Send us your comments here.’ When the site was checked, there were no comments posted!

*ITN* also ran a similar online poll aimed at young people.

These polls utilised new technology to get a snapshot of what young people thought about the election – even if their results were somewhat unrepresentative. Being asked an opinion via the internet was one way of engaging voters in the political process, but was probably only used by a minority of people.

The news sites aimed to get users in touch with election information in a non-biased and non-party-political way – in a variety of styles from bite-sized (Radio 1) to critical (*Spiked*) to humorous (*Limb By Limb*).

### Humour sites and games

Internet-based games and humorous web sites provided one particular mechanism where young people could engage with the election. Sites such as *Spinon.co.uk* created games such as ‘Splat the MP’ or ‘MP in a Blender’ in reaction to the political events of the campaign. These games were perhaps the most prevalent aspect of the online election. Chris Quigley, creator of Spinon explores the relationship of online humour to youth involvement in the election and explains his motivation for the site (see box on page 12). As Stephen Coleman argues elsewhere in this report, humour became one strategy by which people feeling under-represented (and especially younger people) had their say in the election. By e-mailing a game to a friend, young people were participating in critical political comment and becoming more aware of the issues at stake.

**Guilty Party**

http://www.guiltyparty.cc/

This was one example of the spoof web sites available – based on clubbing. The spoof party toured in a bus round London. Its policies included ‘No tax on vinyl’. Users could download a soundtrack featuring voice samples from the party leaders and newsreel footage of the election campaign.
teenagers and challenges the widely held belief that teenagers in the UK don’t care about politics.’

The site was pitched at younger people; not quite old enough to vote – but any 18-year-old visiting would probably have found something of interest. It was a well-designed and interactive site where the users had a role in the outcomes visible on the web pages.

The site
http://www.thesite.org.uk/>

Thesite’s mission is to empower and inform its users to make informed decisions on issues – from relationships and sex to the election. Dominic Waghorn of Thesite said: ‘Promoting involvement in the country’s democratic process fits with this mission. We were never going to have the resources to build a massive election microsite. Instead, because most are first-time voters, informing them on the issues that specifically affect them was seen as the most viable option.’

Encouragingly, the election section was listed just above Big Brother on a list of hot topics! It included:

- Action section – linked to related issue sites and FaxYourMP.com.
- Pop-up boxes to compare the main parties on key youth policy issues, such as decriminalisation of drugs, immigration, school class sizes and tuition fees. The boxes aimed to ‘strip back the gloss and spin and provide you with the no nonsense bottom line on where each party stands on 10 big issues’
- Information on why and how to vote including form to download to get on electoral register.
- Set of discussion topics – one of which was devoted to politics. Within politics discussion topic there were 22 sub topics – some relating to the election, others to general political issues.

Thesite had around 12,000 users per week (mostly in the 16-24 age range) but Dominic Waghorn said: ‘The election content has been pretty poorly supported – we’re battling against all the barriers associated with providing political information to young people – apathy, cynicism towards politicians and exams!’

This was one of very few sites that hosted discussion boards for young people. The boards were fairly well used and tended to be short and chatty. Topics covered included environmental issues and comments about party leaders. The boards instilled a sense of community on the site and allowed users to explore their opinions and test out their views in an open (moderated) forum. According to Dominic Waghorn: ‘Reasoned debate can and does happen but at the moment people are drawn to our boards for the advice angle rather than a desire to discuss weighty topical issues.’

Gay Youth Vote
www.thegayvote.co.uk/www.gayyouthuk.co.uk

The Gay Youth web site covers various issues for young gay people. It linked to the Gay Vote web site including the following:

- News items regarding gay issues in the election.
- Online vote to register which party users would vote for.
- Online vote to ‘name and shame’ homophobic politicians.
- Online discussion boards about election issues.
- Series of online chats with candidates.
- Articles about how the parties stood on gay issues.
- Search for your MP and view list of homophobic and supportive MPs.
- Online petition for gay rights – received 10,000 online signatures (representing every constituency). Was handed to PM on June 11 on CD-ROM.

This web site made innovative use of the internet to campaign for gay rights and inform its users incorporating most of the functions that other sites had only partly used. It attracted over 25,000 visitors and almost 80% of these used the site to find out their candidate’s views on gay issues. Mark Watson of Gay Vote said: ‘I don’t believe that people use party sites, but sites like ours – that cater for a particular group with clear issues. I think they will become the more popular ideal.’

Vote Smart for Muslims
http://www.votesmart.org.uk/new/

This site was run by an independent group working with the Muslim Council of Britain to help Muslim voters play an active role in the election. It included:

- A list of reasons to vote.
- A list of MPs with Muslim communities in their constituencies and excerpts from Hansard journal of their record in Parliament.
- List of suggestions – how to write to your MP, lists of questions to ask PPCs etc.
- A discussion forum area was under construction.
- Sign-up for e-mail alert of latest news.
- Details of six marginal seats where Muslim vote is vital.
- List of top 10 marginal constituencies where Muslim population outweighs the majority with
‘click-throughs’ to find out about the PPCs and their views on Muslim issues.

- Links to the Parliamentary MP Locata and FaxYourMP.com.

This site acted as a resource for Muslim voters and was couched in accessible language with good use of graphs and graphics in similar, if slightly less sophisticated ways, to Gay Vote.

Issue sites seek to empower and inform their specific users by providing information and opportunities to interact, using the internet. They appear to be successful at attracting young internet users who have a specific issue and wish to obtain detailed information written by people who understand and share their position in society. They empower users via the new technology by facilitating online action – for example, participating in an online petition, talking on a talk board or downloading some graphics that illustrate how their vote may make a difference.

What these sites rarely do is connect users more closely to Parliament and the MPs themselves. The sites take on a campaigning role that works well – but by avoiding politicians and the parties they extract the election issues from the election itself.

Escaping the election

Escaping the election online was far easier than engaging with it. The following list of sites includes those which could reasonably be expected to have provided election information, but which actually avoided the subject entirely.

Dazed and Confused
http://www.confused.co.uk/

This is an online magazine for young people. Skye Sherwin said: ‘As the election is all over the media – obviously Dazed isn’t doing any specific features.’

Amnesty International Youth
http://www.amnesty.org.uk/student/

This site deals with issue politics – but had no mention of the election.

Juiced
http://www.juiced.co.uk

Juiced – the online student section of the Telegraph newspaper. This had news relating to other topics: films, sports, horoscopes, but nothing on the election.

Student sites

All the following student sites provide information for students, but nothing on the election:

http://www.studentpages.com/
http://www.studentzone.org.uk/
http://www.only1studentguide.co.uk/
http://www.studentuk.co.uk/

Asians.com
http://www.asians.com/
Provided only entertainment news.

British Asian Youth Alliance
http://www.britishasian.f9.co.uk/mission.htm
Provided only a home page with a mission statement.

Y-Vote Mock Election Scheme
http://www.learn.co.uk/yvote
This site was set up to support the mock elections run across the country by the Hansard Society in conjunction with BBC Newsround and Learn.co.uk.

It included:

- Online discussion forums.
- Descriptions of the parties and their policy positions.
- Calendar of election events.
- Lesson plans for all key stages.
- An interactive guide to Parliament.

Produced in partnership with the Hansard Society and the Guardian’s new educational web site, the Y-Vote site was designed to support schools taking part in the BBC Newsround Hansard schools mock election. Lesson ideas were designed to help teachers tackle voter apathy in the classroom and encourage the under-18s to take an active interest in democracy and voting. Lesson plans are still available for schools teaching political literacy as part of Citizenship.

Also available at the site were articles about elections and voting, an interactive guide to Parliament and interviews with MPs, political commentators and campaign workers. Articles provided teachers with further teaching material and the interviews gave pupils an insight into the roles and day-to-day work of people involved in politics.

The most successful part of the site were the online debates, offering young people the opportunity to debate about topical issues such as fox hunting, crime and reducing the voting age to 16. The debates attracted over 1,000 contributions over three weeks. The under-18s were able to show that they were interested in political issues and are able to make intelligent and insightful contributions to online debates. Interviews with keynote speakers in each debate are still available for reference.

(3) Did it make a difference?

Did this online activity have any impact? Did anything happen online that could not have happened otherwise?

There are three main conclusions that can be drawn from the examples considered in this chapter.

- Firstly, young people seemed to use the internet primarily to access a trusted source of non-biased news and information. The web can be updated more frequently than a daily newspaper or weekly
What did the internet do for first-time voters?

magazine and can contain a depth of information and back-catalogue of articles that no other resource could sustain. Jenny Bristow of Spiked said: ‘I’m not aware of any sites in particular that engaged young voters. As far as I know the sites they favour in relation to politics are the media sites – they use these to get information and to find out what the debates are. I cannot imagine any site that was self-consciously ‘political’ being anything more than a turn-off for young people today. As for Spiked – I think we did better than anybody else at providing a lively, interesting debate about the issues. Clearly we didn’t go a bundle on the gimmicks because we prioritise comment, news and debate above all.’ The gimmicks on the party sites (such as text messages and downloads) amused for a while, could definitely not have been delivered offline, and attracted positive media attention – but failed to engage younger voters more deeply in the election process.

- Secondly, in terms of voting outcomes – the net may have had a minor influence. The NUS site claimed to have influenced turnout – particularly in marginal constituencies such as Guildford where the Liberal Democrats took a Tory seat. The gathering together of like-minded people onto one web site could have electoral outcomes. Furthermore, from the volumes of young people using the web, it is reasonable to expect that those who did vote made more informed and educated decisions based on what they read online.

- Thirdly, issue-based sites have a large impact in the online world. Sites catering for young gay people or young Muslims offered relevant information pitched at the right level, and facilities to interact (such as some online discussions or online petitions) which utilised the interactive characteristics of the internet well. These sites were few and far between, but through their interactivity demonstrated that participation in the election could be done online where it couldn’t be done elsewhere. The internet offers a level playing field so that voices of interest groups usually marginalised by the mainstream media can participate. The internet provided a mechanism for the under-represented to represent themselves during the election. This manifested itself in sites ranging from online humour and games to online petitions.

Young people were not very well served online during this election. For each site that did make allowances for the election, at least another 50 avoided it altogether. This confirms the supposition that young people cannot and do not wish to associate themselves with traditional politics. If young people wished to find election news and comment they could find it easily. If they wished to discuss the election with their peers, that was somewhat more difficult. If they wished to interact with politicians or candidates online, that was almost impossible. Young people’s lack of connection with politics is a far more wide-reaching problem than simple turnout figures. Some web sites addressed the problem of connection well, but there is much more that could be done. The internet made a small contribution towards re-connecting young people to politics during this election – but it is down to the citizenship education curriculum, political institutions, Parliament and MPs to re-connect with young people (and the population as a whole) before the problems will be solved. Young people just weren’t ‘up 4 it’ and neither was most of the internet.

Nicola Hall is researcher on the Hansard e-democracy programme

Footnotes
4. The findings in this chapter are based on e-mail and telephone interviews with various site developers and web masters, and in-depth internet searches at regular intervals during the election period.
8. Some of whom are not even old enough to vote, including Matthew Hanney, the web master.
9. Pokemon is a Japanese style cartoon popular amongst younger age groups.
I made some bold decisions yesterday. I decided which brand of salsa to buy, which radio station to listen to, which movie to watch and which e-mails to answer and which to ignore. Each one a personal decision; each one with a personal result.

The daily realisation of my personal decisions is based upon a desire to dictate my existence. Politics is personal. Politics is local, directly impacting on the daily life of all constituents in a given region. Each election, citizens make personal decisions and expect personal results from the leaders they place in office. Some choose to side step the voting booth and allow others to dictate their personal results. Those who do trek to the voting booth, make their mark in favour of the political figure they feel can best guide them to their desired personal results.

For candidates, the most important question is how to influence the electorate’s personal decisions on election day. The dominant vehicles for campaigns to attract voters in the US have been TV, radio, and direct mail. This mass appeal affects personal decisions come voting time. But is it personal? How personal is a 30-second ad on TV? Or a direct mail leaflet mixed in with bills and junk mail? Do voters choose candidates like I do salsa – based on the label and 30 seconds of decision making? Or do they delve deeper?

The impact of the internet in political campaigns is directly influenced by access and use. Nielsen Net Ratings estimates that the May internet universe numbers 167.1 million US and 22.6 million UK home users. Nielsen cites that in May 2001, US web users spent approximately nine and a half hours online at home. The UK data estimates a total of six hours spent online per month at home.

Political parties and campaigns in the US and UK targeted these constituents in the last election cycle seeking strength in numbers. In both the UK and US the sites were clean and crisp, often trendy. The technology was sound. The code dynamic. Each major political site offered e-mail subscriptions to keep politically interested internet users up-to-date. Press releases were posted for the media. Policy information for the undecided. Donation links for the decided. Volunteer sign-up capabilities for the politically active wishing to engage in personal action. Mobile access for users on the go. And a litany of special features to add interactivity to the user experience. Each in an effort to sway personal decisions.

These are the staples of campaign web sites. The new foundation for the internet campaign community. Like the 30-second TV ad, they are accepted as having an impact on the campaign process and we will see them in each election cycle for years to come. So where did we miss the mark if all of these sites were so effective?

In a June article titled Political Parties Fail e-Lectorate, theregister.co.uk addressed the number one problem experienced by every internet campaign; How do I answer all these e-mails? The article highlighted the Hansard Society study which found each UK political party deficient in responding to e-mails. The same problem occurred in the US during the 2000 election cycle.

‘Netiquette’ demands that e-mails are answered. When I type an e-mail to a friend, I expect an answer. If I don’t receive one, I remember. Do voters remember when their e-mails are not answered? Yes. Do they take this into account when they make their mark at the voting booth? Yes. The trendiest, most functional web site in the world cannot overcome the damage done by not responding to e-mails. Can the candidate apologise? No.

It is difficult for campaigns to remember that e-mails are personal when 10,000 show up in less than an hour. At that point, the problem is not response – it is the stability of the network and the lack of storage space needed to harness the barrage. System administrators run frantic for a solution and concentrate on technical problems rather than responses.

It has been said that one death is a tragedy and a million is a statistic. Political campaigns die a thousand deaths every time they leave a single voter cold by not answering a single e-mail. Some have stated that an internet campaign cannot compare to personal contact with the candidate. I argue that e-mail inquiries directed at a campaign represent personal contact with the candidate.

The band-aid in the past has been auto-responders with a wide array of links pointing users to information on a stagnant web site. How personal is that? How likely is a voter to support a candidate if the personal result of their e-mail is a canned auto response with links?

The lions of the campaign world, TV, radio, and direct mail are not personal. We engage them in our personal lives and they are potent at creating mass appeal, but not personal appeal. E-mail is personal. E-mail is local. E-mail is the fine line between an effective internet campaign and a dangerous one.

Is there a solution? I’m not that good. However, the research and development to find the answer is worth the dedicated attention of all political campaigns. The ability to connect personally with voters via e-mail is the real power behind internet persuasion in the personalisation era. Candidates and campaigns will either find the means to respond to their constituencies or they will be replaced by another brand of salsa. It is their personal decision. On election day it is their personal result.

Greg Sedberry was web strategy manager for the 2000 Bush-Cheney campaign. He is writing in a personal capacity.
Conclusions and recommendations

Stephen Coleman

- The 2001 election was not fought out on the internet. The internet played a peripheral, but significant, role – especially for younger voters.
- 18% of voters with internet access used the net as an information resource in the 2001 election. 21% of online 18-24 year-olds used the net to find out what the parties stood for.
- By the time of the next general election, many more people will be connected to the internet. It will by then be a much more sophisticated medium; the lessons from 2001 will be crucial in setting an e-politics agenda for the future, including the hotly-contested euro referendum in which the battle to supply trusted information will be highly significant.
- The party web sites in 2001 made use of the unmediated nature of the internet and its multimedia functionalities. They did not exploit the net’s capacity for interactivity and personalisation. Next time, they should.
- Candidate web sites were generally dull and uninspiring. Next time, they should make efforts to brand their web sites throughout their campaign material (as happened in the US 2000 election), relate their sites more to their constituencies and provide more targeted information for groups of electors, such as young people, the elderly, women.
- Tactical voter sites helped to raise the profile of voters’ power in ousting least-favoured candidates and probably changed the results in two constituencies. Online tactical voting will not go away in future elections. The Electoral Commission needs to monitor it.
- Humour and games web sites mushroomed in 2001. They caught the mood of the electorate, particularly the young. The messages from these sites should not be missed; they are saying something about how people view politics and particularly politicians.
- The media rose to the occasion in 2001 and provided some excellent online resources. One in 10 people with internet access went to these sites for election information, especially after the polls closed. Next time, they will play an even bigger role; there are lessons to be learned from the inventiveness of BBC News Online and Guardian Politics.
- There was plenty of scope for online discussion in 2001, but it was remarkably dominated by a few people - overwhelmingly males. The absence of women from the national online dialogue tells much about the state of political discourse in the UK. Next time, special efforts should be made to include women and the less opinionated.
- E-politics in 2001 was primarily an extension of political marketing. E-democracy is about more than that. In the period between now and the next election the internet should be used much more to connect citizens to their representatives and to the policy-making process. People will take elections more seriously if they are voting for something that takes them seriously. The internet offers important opportunities to involve citizens in a strengthened form of representative democracy.
- The internet will not go away, but it will evolve into new forms. Analogue switch-off and the growth of digital TV present possibilities for taking the net into the more traditional information environments of people’s homes.

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Director, Hansard e-democracy programme
Political party web sites
www.conservatives.com
www.cix.co.uk/~ldys
www.dup.org.uk
www.greenparty.org.uk
www.labour.org.uk
www.libdems.org.uk
www.plaidcymru2001.com
www.sdlp.ie
www.sinnfein.ie
www.socialistalliance.net
www.socialist-labour-party.org.uk
www.uup.org
www.votegreen.org.uk
www.westandforscotland.org
www.williamhague.org.uk

Humour sites
www.amielectableornot.com/
www.angelfire.com/mp/dimblebingo

www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/~m6chan/2001_uk/index.html
www.crouchingtony.com
www.emailpolitics.com
www.fantasyelection2001.com
www.grandad.freeuk.com/carstickers.htm
www.guydowman.com/Images/a-team.shtml
www.mikecowley.co.uk/ncdmv/index.htm
www.mtv.co.uk/content/fun/games/stereo_mps/index.html
www.mulletsgalore.com
www.mylittletony.com
www.newlabour.co.uk
www.newstatesman.co.uk/fantasypolitics
www.panlogic.co.uk/splat_the_MP.html
www.pedigreedogs.co.uk/enter.htm
www.sirsearchlot.com/biffa.htm
www.spinon.co.uk
www.thebraintrust.co.uk/yatb
www.tonyblair.co.uk
www.williamhague.com

Please note that some of the above sites were taken down after the election.
Tactical voting sites
www.keeptheoriesout.co.uk
www.stophague.com
www.tacticalvoter.net
www.toryfreescotland.com
www.votedorset.net

Political portals
www.epolitix.com
www.genelelectionsite.co.uk
www.lineone.net/cgi-bin/vote2/election/vote/election_results.html?question=electionresultspromo&choice=0
www.parliamentaryelection.com
www.ukelect.co.uk
http://uk.news.yahoo.com/election2001
www.voxpolitics.com
www.yougov.co.uk

Media sites
www.bbc.co.uk/livechat
www.bbc.co.uk/londonlive/metropol/election/index.shtml
www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today
www.itn.co.uk/election
http://metro.thisislondon.co.uk/dynamic/election/poll.html
www.politics.guardian.co.uk/election2001
www.sky.com/skynews/politics
www.telegraph.co.uk
www.thetimes.co.uk

Candidate sites
www.allan4hallam.org.uk
www.bellforbrentwood.com
www.cheadlelabour.org.uk
www.eddavey.org.uk
www.Keepingyoung.org.uk
www.lindagilroy.org.uk
www.michaelportillo.co.uk
www.robertkey.com/homepage.htm

Practical sites
www.postalvotes.co.uk
www.rollingregistration.co.uk

Special interest sites
www.advocacyonline.net/learn_say.jsp
www.makethecrosscount.com
www.mori.com/election2001/ec0529.shtml
www.votesmart.org.uk

Young people’s sites
www.amnesty.org.uk/student
www.asians.com
www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/election
www.dfee.gov.uk/youthpeople/index.shtml
www.guilty_party.cc
www.learn.co.uk/yvote
www.limmbylimb.co.uk
www.nusonline.co.uk
www.nya.org.uk
www.wales.gov.uk/youthvoice
www.ruup4it.org.uk

Discussion fora
http://network54.com/Hide/Forum/120743
www.studentuk.co.uk
www.student-world.co.uk/cgi-bin/gx.cgi/AppLogic+FTContentServer?pagename=Worlds/Student-World/Templates/Default
www.thesite.org.uk
www.yourturn.net/PAGECZC%23%23%23%23%23%23%23000
www.youthnet.org.uk
www.youth.org.uk/frame.htm
www.whatnow.co.uk
More connections…
greater expectations

Just as other leaders in the internet industry, I am often challenged on the issue of the ‘digital divide’. Of course industry and government must work together to ensure that as many people as possible get affordable access to the internet. But digital inclusion is about much more than just access to technology. It is about making sure that people get access to the information or content that they want, presented in ways which inspire them to engage, react and participate in their community, in society and in the democratic process.

By the time of the next election, most, if not all, of the population will have access to internet technology, whether through the PC, digital TV, mobile phone or other means. Those currently in their early teens, already well versed in the use of new technology as a communication tool, will be first-time voters. Some people will have been net users for around 20 years. Expectations will increase as more people become used to using the net as a key communication tool. We know, from a number of events over the last year or so, that the internet can be a highly successful medium through which activists can organise and motivate people to action. We need to find ways to harness this power to improve the quality of life of all citizens in the UK.

The trick will be fully understanding how people respond to online communication and what they expect from politicians and other opinion leaders. If we can reduce the number of disenchanted voters and re-engage people’s interest and participation in parliamentary democracy, this will be a great prize.

We welcome the work being done by the Hansard Society in this area and see this publication as a major contribution to understanding.

Andy Green
Chief Executive, BTOpenworld
The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and the Hansard Society, as an independent non-party organization, is neither for nor against. The Society is, however, happy to publish these views and to invite analysis and discussion of them.