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The Hansard Society’s e-Democracy programme seeks to develop innovative ways of using interactive technologies to reconnect Parliament with citizens and encourage participation in the democratic process. The e-Democracy programme’s cutting edge research explores the potential for interactive technologies to create new channels of communication and participation between Parliament and the public to enable citizens to scrutinise and influence legislation and those who represent them.

The Hansard Society would like to acknowledge the support of the Economic and Social Research Council in funding this publication.
FOREWORD

Does online campaigning have mass appeal? Are those most likely to vote seeking new forms of election information? Or, are those least likely to vote using the web to find alternative forms of politics? The Hansard Society is delighted to publish this collection of articles, which seeks to answer some of these important questions and looks further at what happened during the 2005 ‘online campaign’.

It was once expected that the spread of technology would fill a place that traditional forms of media and political communications forgot. Information communication technologies may increase access to information on democracy but do not equal democracy. They may enhance or facilitate the development of democracy but logging on should not be confused with taking part. Seeking information is not the same as active engagement. In an election campaign political awareness is heightened and technologies offer an opportunity for those seeking election and for the electorate to have an enhanced level of interaction.

Although it is the time between elections when long-term relationships between the electorate and the elected can be sustained, the campaign itself is an opportunity for the roots of these relationships to be planted. This collection of essays seeks to understand whether these relationships have been established and how sustainable they are over the next four or five years.

Stephen Coleman looks at the important question of how politics can be brought back into living room - surely this is a crucial way to re-engage an electorate alienated from the political process? Stephen Ward and Wainer Lusoli look at who was online and what they did there. Bill Thompson outlines how the media use the opportunity of an election campaign to do some experimentation of their own. Milica Howell comments on the question of the humanisation of both politics and the internet, suggesting that personal campaigns can be both important and relevant to the wider election campaign. Ross Ferguson brings this back to how these various tools may be used in the newly elected Parliament.

The proof of any of these debates will be in the long term. ICTs do not by their very existence increase participation and engagement with the political process, but their use does tell us interesting things about how and why these tools are used. The development of technology and the changing nature of politics are both at exciting points. Their convergence is something that the Hansard Society will observe and encourage with interest in the new Parliament. For all those interested in strengthening democracy, this potential convergence cannot be ignored.

Clare Ettinghausen, Director, Hansard Society
July 2005
It’s interactivity, stupid!
Digital media and the DIY election campaign

That few voters – and even fewer non-voters – paid any attention to party or candidate websites during the 2005 election campaign is hardly a surprise. Measuring the political significance of digital media in terms of how many people chose to visit these dreary e-versions of the throwaway paper brochures of yesteryear is rather like measuring the health of European culture on the basis of the Eurovision Song Contest.

The fundamental misconception underlying much analysis of e-politics is that the internet is a platform for broadcasting one-way messages via websites. This assumption misses what is new about new media: that users are not inert audiences to be addressed, but are constantly producing, receiving and remixing their own digital content. The internet is not like television – it’s not even like multi-channel television, which offers you 200 ways to fall asleep. When people use the internet they expect to interact – with information, with people they know, sometimes even with strangers. The challenge for contemporary democracy is not to create new technologies for delivering and new audiences for receiving online spin, but to develop engaging ways for citizens to connect, interact and make a difference. I call this DIY politics.

There were three principal ways in which people used digital media to exercise new forms of control over the 2005 election campaign: as a short-cut to more personally relevant information; as a means of sharing and comparing views; and as a way of ‘remixing’ election material to fit in with their own values.

Information
The 2005 election witnessed an unprecedented use of the red button by digital TV viewers, providing them with access to election news on demand. On election night, 422,000 BBC viewers used the red buttons on their remote controls to select their own view of the election results. This constituted 10% of the BBC television audience. At
the time of the 2001 election, Freeview did not exist and the red button was limited to Sky sports’ coverage. By 2005, 60% of viewers had digital TV and we saw the first glimmer of a digitally-interactive election.

The importance of red-button interactivity is twofold: it moves interactivity away from the geekiness of computers to the centre of shared domestic space; and it opens up interactive choices to poorer people who might not have broadband, but can afford a satellite dish or Freeview box. By the time of the next general election interactive TV will be as central to the campaign as the internet was in the last two elections. But the challenge for digital broadcasters is to come up with ways of using the red button to provide people with local information as well as a wide range of opportunities to encounter new interpretations of events, register their views and enter into the drama of politics. What is needed is an Endemol to bring multimedia interactivity to the sphere of political communication.

That there is a public appetite for interactive information sources is clear from the popularity of the BBC election news website which received more visitors on May 6 than ever before, with the local constituency results section and the interactive flash map recording more page impressions than any other part of the site. Nearly a million site visitors accessed video archives from the site on May 6 – the most popular request being for the Paxman-Galloway interview which may well have been seen by more people online than at 4am in the morning when it was broadcast live on BBC1.

Channel 4’s X website provided another innovation in election information: a voter guide which enabled electors to key in their preferences on specific policies and then find out which party came closest to their overall preferences. The C4 Selexion Machine was based on the Dutch StemWijzer which has been hugely popular in recent Dutch elections. 2,227,000 readings were provided by the StemWijzer site in the 2003 Dutch elections. A NIPO poll of users found that 34% completely agreed with the recommendation offered to them, with only 19% disagreeing. 76% of users regarded StemWijzer as a useful tool and, perhaps most significantly, 4% of users claimed to have changed their voting intention as a result of the StemWijzer recommendation.

In a survey conducted at the Oxford Internet Institute of 250 users of the C4 site, 77% reported using the Selexion Machine to see which party they most agreed with; 31% went on to look at the website of the party that came closest to their views; 39% said that they learned something new about one of the party’s issue positions; and 28%
voted for the party that came closest to their views. In the first survey, conducted at the beginning of the election campaign, 30% of respondents stated that they did not know what the parties stood for; of these, 77% reported in the second survey that they had used the *Seleexion Machine*. As low-cost short-cuts to voter information, online tools of this kind could play a more significant role in increasing turnout than e-voting, which is ultimately a merely functional device.

**Communication**

The online public was much more likely to go online to share their views with people they believed they could trust than to visit official websites to be told what to think. In the 2004 US election, I conducted (in collaboration with YouGov USA) two surveys of 3,334 eligible American voters with access to the internet. Fewer than a third of them reported ever going to a presidential candidate’s website and only 8% donated money online to a candidate. But 51% reported that they received an email urging them to vote for a particular candidate, 37% had received an email from friends or family discussing the election and 28% had sent emails to friends or family about the election.

In the 2005 UK election, the number of people sending or receiving election-related emails was lower than in the USA, but, very interestingly, amongst citizens who wanted to influence the views of others during the 2005 campaign, 33% sent emails to friends about the election, compared with 14% overall. (See Coleman and Mesch, forthcoming, for an analysis of a 2005 survey of 3,951 eligible UK voters with internet access.)

As in 2001, there were lots of discussion forums, of which the BBC and the *Guardian Unlimited* were the liveliest. (30,000 political messages were sent to the former.) But it was blogs rather than message boards that best symbolised the wish of a significant minority of internet users to pull away from the party-dominated campaign agenda. It is easy to be dismissive about bloggers: they represent nobody but themselves, lack journalistic credibility and were never likely to affect the election results. From a conventional political science perspective, why on earth should anyone study election blogs? My own reason for studying them (in collaboration with Janelle Ward from the University of Amsterdam) was that blogs provided a significant insight into what might be regarded as the subterranean conversation of the 2005 campaign. The blogs were not strong on arguments about such hard issues as taxation or foundation hospitals, but they did often present a rich and illuminating picture of public sentiments. In an age when the media regard it as ‘masochism’ for politicians to go out and talk to ordinary
voters, blogs served as an important reminder that ordinary people talking is the foundation of effective democracy.

**Remixing**

Online election humour was extraordinarily popular. In the 2004 US campaign, internet users were offered an array of satirical songs, cartoons, jokes and games, mainly designed to puncture the image of one candidate, sometimes aimed at all of them. In the 2005 UK campaign, online satire was distributed virally, but there were few knock-out blows. Much more interesting, amusing and potentially subversive, were sites which enabled people to digitally remix election messages to fit in with their own values. The Conservative handwritten posters – and Tony Blair’s handwritten appeal to *Daily Mirror* readers – were particularly vulnerable to such digital graffiti.

The use of the internet to organise tactical voting can be seen as an extension of this capacity for digital remixing. Whereas the party websites appealed to the tribal loyalties of voters, the internet allowed citizens to vote strategically by collaborating to oust their least preferred candidates. This amounted to a form of DIY-proportional representation. For example, the *tacticalvoter.net* website described its rationale in the following terms:
In the past, a Liberal Democrat in a seat where his party were running third and had no prospect of winning had two choices: vote LibDem, knowing his vote would be thrown away; or vote tactically for the Labour Party to try and prevent a Conservative from winning.

Vote swapping offers a new option: use the internet to find a Labour supporter stranded somewhere Labour can’t win, and make a pact to ‘swap’ votes, support each other’s parties and have the best chance of beating the Conservatives in both seats.

That way, you get a tactical vote for your party in exchange: two votes that can make a difference instead of two votes that are thrown away.

In 2001, Labour swappers on tacticalvoter.net clinched the Lib Dem victory in Cheadle, while Lib Dem swappers helped Labour to victory in Dorset South. This time, we’re looking for more scalps.

Unlike in the 2001 campaign, online tactical voting was not solely targeted at the Tories. The argument for voting Liberal Democrat as a way of punishing New Labour was promoted by music producer, Brian Eno’s highly-professional site, Libdemthistime.co.uk and Blair was the target of Backingblair.co.uk which urged people to vote Labour, but get rid of the current Labour leader.

Another (potentially worrying) aspect of remixing was the emergence of spoof websites, linked to famous political names, but not authorised by them. (The US whitehouse.org site is the model for these.) Like it or not, we are going to see a lot more of this kind of digital sampling and remixing as the recognition sinks in that online content is inherently beyond the control of its originators and vulnerable to the recreative urges of the public.

What about the majority who were not interested?
It is clear from the above that the internet did provide new opportunities for the politically interested to inform themselves, communicate with others and contribute creatively to the election campaign. But what about the politically disengaged: the four out of 10 non-voters and the six out of 10 non-first-time-voters? For most of them, the election campaign was one huge turn-off. In order to gain a better understanding of this group, I commissioned the online polling company, YouGov, to
run a series of 10 surveys of a panel comprising eligible voters who were not interested in the election, but had voted in the 2004 series of Big Brother. Panel members were overwhelmingly female, under 30, disconnected from traditional politics and connected to the internet. In order to monitor closely panel members’ electoral experiences, memories and intentions, surveys were conducted every two days during the 2005 election campaign. A detailed report of this research (which examined much more than internet use) will be published later in the year. Of specific interest here is how panel members came in contact with information relating to the election campaign.

We asked panel members which information source they used most to find out about sport, show business and the election campaign:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TV</th>
<th>Newspapers</th>
<th>Web</th>
<th>Word of mouth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sport</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showbiz</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although panel members were more likely to seek election information online than in newspapers, it was from television that most of them heard about the election. Panel members were twice as likely to go to the web for showbiz news as for election information. When asked which information sources they trusted most, television was again the most popular, although one in four respondents trusted online information more than anything else.

<p>| | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TV</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Websites</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabloids</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word of mouth</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked who they would trust to tell them what the parties stood for, TV political correspondents (58%) were more than twice as trusted as the political parties themselves (24%) or talking to friends (21%). Television remains the key source of information for politically disengaged people, even though there is significant trust in certain online sources.
At the beginning of the campaign, 62% of panel members said that they would definitely not visit a party website. By the end of the campaign, 38% had looked up some information about the election online, 19% had seen a humorous email or website relating to the election and 17% had received at least one email from someone about the election. This compared with lower levels of offline exposure to the campaign: 19% had turned off the television whenever election coverage came on; 14% had listened to an election phone-in; 13% had met a party canvasser and fewer than 1% had attended an election meeting.

As well as standard survey questions, panel members were presented with a series of unfinished sentences which they were asked to complete in their own words. The purpose of this method is to provide respondents with an opportunity to articulate their own views and values. In the ninth survey (May 4) the unfinished sentence was ‘I have used the internet during the election campaign to...’ How did panel members tell us they had used the internet? There were three main categories of response. Firstly, there were those who went online during the campaign period without any interest in hearing about the election:

... nothing associated with the election
... access my internet account and browse the web as normal - not to look at political campaign manifestos
... do personal things, nothing to do with the election
... sell on ebay and find out any footie gossip at arsenal.com
... play games
... chat to friends
... shop! I’ve not used it at all to discuss election campaigns
... do the normal things I do, none of which have anything to do with party politics

A second group of respondents reported going online in order to avoid the election:

... get some news other than elections
... avoid the election which is dominating the other media!
... escape from the election campaign
... to get away from all the media coverage, it is too much bickering - get enough of that when fetch daughters from school playground
... shop, surf and ignore the election
But, despite their general lack of enthusiasm for the election, a third group of respondents were tempted to go online to find out more about what it all meant:

… make sure I’m making the right decision
… do one of those quizzes to see which party I’m most aligned to.
… find out who the candidates are in my constituency as nobody has bothered to contact me!
… try to work out where parties stand on certain issues, as it is not always clear from the sniping and evasion seen on TV
… talk to my family about the election via email

It would be a mistake to generalise from these findings about the role of the internet in connecting the public to the electoral process. Some people went online to get away from the election, others did so as a short-cut to political information. Some people trust television, others are starting to place trust in online information sources. Some people sent or received emails about the election, others would never dream of doing so. In short, like all previous information and communication technologies, people use the internet for a range of different purposes, depending on what they want out of life. There is no deterministic link between the internet and a more inclusive democracy.

A clue to the indifference and alienation of the politically disengaged was suggested by the panel members’ response to a question in survey nine: Did they expect to have contact with their MP after the election was over? 3% expected that they would. 93% expected that they would not. There lies the root of the problem of public disengagement from politics: if people believe that they are being asked to elect politicians who won’t talk with them or listen to them in between elections, why should they talk with or listen to the politicians during the election campaign? There can be little doubt about the potential of the internet as a medium of democratic interactivity, but unless and until parties, politicians and pundits abandon the one-way conversation that has come to characterise contemporary politics, no amount of broadband gee-whizzery will save them from the collective yawns of the demos.

Stephen Coleman
Cisco Professor of e-Democracy
Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford
The run up to the 2005 campaign again saw heightened expectations that ICTs (information communication technologies) might play an important role in the campaign and led to some speculation that this was to be first internet election - just as 1997 and 2001 had been predicted to be.

This time renewed hope rested on both the growth of technologies and political developments online: This was the first election where more than half the population had access to the internet. Moreover, since 2001, we had seen the rapid development of broadband and mobile phone technology raising the possibility that there would be more demand for online election information. Politically, it was argued that the web had matured into a mainstream campaign tool in the UK. But what really excited net pundits was the 2004 US presidential campaign and, in particular, Howard Dean’s use of online tools to create supporter networks, raise money from small donors and generally raise his profile. It seemed that the 2004 US elections really marked a breakthrough for online campaigns and public engagement. Could the same happen here? Although there has been limited information about the UK public’s online political behaviour, previous studies suggested a less exciting role for the net here. Research has indicated that in Britain it is largely an informational tool for the politically active, although with potential to widen engagement amongst younger voters and deepen the levels of participation amongst those already engaged.²

In the light of these expectations, this report explores the role of the net in the 2005 campaign by drawing on the results of a public opinion survey conducted by NOP in

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¹ The authors would like to acknowledge the support of the Economic and Social Research Council in funding this survey (Award No: RES-000-22-1284)
the immediate aftermath of the election. Specifically, we examine who used the internet during the 2005 election campaign; what the technology was used for; why some used it while others did not; the patterns of change from the 2001 general election; and the wider implications of these patterns of adoption and use for online campaigning.

**TABLE 1 SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE ELECTION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>A lot</th>
<th>Some of it</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TV</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party literature</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends / colleagues / family</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>83.1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Q1. How much of your news and information about the election did you get from? Total sample, n = 1937

**Who went online? The profile of political users**

During the 2005 campaign, about 28% of British internet users went online to get information about the election, corresponding to about 15% of the population. While the internet compares unfavourably with established sources of electoral information, such as TV and newspapers (Table 1), it does represent an increasing proportion of the media diet of British internet users at election time. Such consumption is, however, more occasional, but also more deliberate, than for traditional media sources: only about 6% of the public went online once a week or more often to gather information concerning the election.

Superficially, the profile of users mirrors that of previous surveys. It is mostly young, male, educated, and internet literate citizens who went online for electoral information (Table 2). Respondents aged 18-24 are twice as likely (33%) as the average to have used the internet at least ‘a little’ in relation to the election; while 25-34 year olds are the age category who are most likely to have used the internet ‘a lot’ (about 8%).

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3 The survey is based on a stratified representative sample of British adults (18+) n = 1937. Interviews were conducted face-to-face between 12-17th May 2005.
Among young people, it is students who are the most regular internet users. Around one in two students actually used the internet to gather election information. Again, in line with previous studies, male (22%), educated (23%) respondents were also more likely to access information online. Perhaps not surprisingly, those with high levels of internet skills, particularly those who are producers, rather than just consumers, of digital content, were much more likely to have used the internet as a source of election information (47% of internet users).

TABLE 2 PROFILE OF CITIZENS USING THE INTERNET FOR ELECTION NEWS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percent of Category</th>
<th>Difference from Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male gender</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>+ 7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young age (18-24)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>+ 18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young age (25-34)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>+ 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University education</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>+ 8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student status</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>+ 32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘B’ social grade</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>+ 12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled user *</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>+ 19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term user *</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>+ 10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents who have gathered at least ‘a little’ electoral information through the internet, n = 301. Differences are statistically significant at p < 0.01. * Difference calculated on average user.

Interestingly, the traditional predictors of political news consumption had less impact on the likelihood of accessing information online. Neither past voting behaviour nor reported voting at the current election were significant predictors, while general political participation was only weakly related (phi = 0.07, p < 0.05) to online information seeking. Nor did party support make a difference to one’s likelihood to seek information though the web. As both participation and internet use are usually based on the same range of socio-demographic predictors (except for age) this is an indication that the internet is entering the social mainstream, and is accessible to a more diversified public.

However, while internet access makes no difference to older people’s likelihood of voting, young internet users are significantly more likely to vote than their non-user counterparts (+15% reported turnout). Although this does not imply causality, it provides indication that the internet is more of a ‘political technology’ for younger than
for older citizens. This also indicates the increasing stratification of digital Britain, as online information concerning the election is accessed both by young people who are less likely to vote than adults, but more likely to vote than non-users in their age band, and by older people who, in general, are more likely to go to the polls.

**Where and how? Online destinations**

We then asked about how citizens used the internet once they were online. Specifically, we asked questions about whether users visited election websites, used search engines to locate information and came across electoral coverage by chance while navigating the net. In relation to websites, large news producers take the lion’s share of the online information market. While about 17% of British users visited the BBC online website, 9% reported visiting information portal websites (such as Yahoo! and Tiscali) for election-related information. Newspapers only attracted 4% of all users, while party sites were visited by about 3%. Other purveyors of online information, most notably candidates and lobby groups, but also blogs and tactical voting sites, were virtually ignored. Such figures illustrate the difficulty for parties, candidates and other campaigns to break out beyond their traditional supporters into a wider public.

In addition to visiting websites, 12% of British users also reported accessing election information by using Google or another search engine, which makes this strategy the second most prevalent after BBC online news. Finally, we asked users whether they had encountered election information unintentionally while online for other purposes. The results are intriguing, as 27% of users reported coming across such information. Of course, it is important to see whether it was active information seekers who were more likely to encounter this additional information. Although users getting ‘a lot’ of their electoral information from the net were indeed more likely to encounter it (or notice it), a significant group of users (8 %) came across it unsolicited; this increases the number of British internet users encountering some election information to around 36%.

In addition to the consumption side of online news, we were also interested in potentially more ‘active’ forms of online electoral engagement, such as participating in the online campaigns of parties, online discussion forums and sending/receiving email messages about the election. With regard to email, a small minority of users had received electoral information (12%) and an even smaller proportion sent election related material around (5%). While parties, candidates and friends contributed equally to voters’ email inboxes, voters’ emails were mostly addressed to family and friends rather than parties or candidates (although the numbers here are small - see Table 3).
TABLE 3 EMAIL ABOUT THE ELECTION EXCHANGED WITH DIFFERENT CORRESPONDENTS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sent</th>
<th>Received</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parties</td>
<td>.9</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidates</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure groups</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News organisations</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family / friends / colleagues</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchanged no emails about election</td>
<td>95.2</td>
<td>87.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DK</td>
<td>.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q8a and Q9. Did you receive / send any emails about the 2005 general election from / to any of the following? Internet users, n = 1033.

One small difference, however, concerns election-related humour and satire. While the election has been viewed as one of the most uninspiring of recent years, 2005 saw an explosion of satirical websites, viral games and spoof blogs. About 11% of all users received/accessed jokes, cartoons or humorous video clips about the election via the internet/email and some 6% also circulated jokes/games via email. While the figure per se may be low (it certainly is compared to email jokes in ‘routine’ times, at about 43% of British users), it alone equals the aggregate of all other election emails, both sent and received. Humour, in other words, was relatively prevalent in citizens’ private exchanges about the election.

Finally, we looked at active engagement with the online campaign. Again, a small minority of users (8%) engaged in election-related online activities, including taking part in an online discussion (1.5%), signing an online petition (1%) or subscribing to election news (1.3%). Overall, citizens took very little part in the campaign by electronic means. Although, more than a fifth of the British public used the internet, in one way or another, in relation to the election, only a very small fraction used new media to engage with party campaigns. It seems that where they have a choice, as with online communication, then the public will avoid the offerings from parties. This lends some support to the contention that, whilst the public may be turned off by the parties, they are not necessarily turned off by politics or the election in general.
Why and why not? Motivations and barriers
Perhaps more interesting is to explore, at least cursorily, some of the reasons why citizens did or did not use the internet during the election, and what benefits they derived from doing so. First, we asked the main group of information seekers identified above about their reasons for use of the internet to get election information. The most frequently reported reason is that information is available online all the time, (46% of respondents) along with those who mention that online information is more up-to-date. Strikingly, a large number also indicate no specific reason for going online. Arguably, this may indicate that internet information seeking is simply becoming part of people’s day-to-day life (44%). Overall, the impression is that people go online because election information is more convenient to access, rather than to engage or play a more active role in the campaign.

We then asked specifically about what type of election information they were seeking online. Mostly, users were looking for information about issues (37% of online information seekers), followed by information by parties (30%). Slightly less common was looking for more specific information about candidates (22%). Noticeably, about 25% also reported looking for the election results on the net.

Although it is difficult to assess the ‘effects’ of online information for citizens’ election behaviour, we asked respondents to identify whether, and if so how, the internet affected their experience of the election. As broad patterns suggested that younger people were more likely to be active online, we distinguished between 18-35 year olds and older citizens (Table 4). Overall, we note that most users think that the internet was in some way important. Almost one in five responded that online information made for a more interesting election, and helped them make a better voting choice. One in six also claimed that such information encouraged them to go out and vote. Much smaller numbers report an effect on the way they voted, either by confirming or changing their vote decision, or encouraging them to vote tactically. Across the board, younger citizens again report much higher levels of internet effects, especially in terms of making a better choice and going to the polls.
TABLE 4. SELF-REPORTED INFLUENCE OF THE INTERNET BY DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Below 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More interest in the election</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped make a better informed choice *</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraged to vote *</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmed vote decision</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed vote decision</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraged to vote tactically</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraged to take part in the campaign</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some effect *</td>
<td>62.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q12. Thinking about the information and news about the election you read or received online, do you think it .....? internet users who looked for or came across information about the election, n = 401. * = difference is statistically significant at p < 0.05.

If convenient access to issues was the main driver to seek information online, which in turn led to an informed voting choice, what then discouraged other internet users from using the medium for election information? Overwhelmingly, it seems that non-use stems from lack of interest in the election and old media dynamics. About 33% of users who did not gather information online reported lack of interest in the election as the main reason. This illustrates the point that access to technology alone will not produce sudden interest in the political world. Additionally, 24% reported that they got enough information from the traditional media, or that access to traditional media is easier (another 11%).

Finally, what about internet non-users? Is there any chance to lure them into electoral politics online at the next election? Our results were mixed. First, we asked non-users (47% of the British public) whether they were planning to get internet access within the next one or two years. Around 9% answered positively, suggesting that by the next election around two-thirds or more of the electorate may be using the net. The key reasons for moving online are educational, social and commercial rather than directly political. Only 2% of prospective users value the internet as a tool to ‘do politics’ or to transact with the government, whereas education (46%), keeping in touch with family/friends (43%) and commercial transactions (42%) are the most prevalent intended uses. However, it may be that current patterns of information-seeking will be maintained as a significant number of respondents indicated that gathering news information was a consideration in moving online.
The 2005 online election in context
How does this compare with past elections, then? First, one needs to note that digital Britain changed dramatically, both quantitatively and qualitatively, between the 2001 and 2005 general elections. Just after the 2001 election, 33% of the British public enjoyed home internet access and 33% said that they had access to email. In 2005, more than 33% had broadband connections in the home, while 56% accessed the internet overall. More than 45% also used email. Also, digital inequality, as measured by home access to PCs, internet and broadband, has decreased between the two elections - albeit not dramatically.

On the one hand, the online political landscape does not seem to have changed that much. As the 2001 Hansard Society survey found, internet users and non-users had the same likelihood of voting. This largely depends on the social stratification of internet access: both young people who are less likely to vote than average and older citizens who are more likely to vote than average are online, effectively averaging out the voting variance. In other words, enlarged access has not made the internet either a more or less political place than before.

On the other hand, however, actual online activity has increased at least twofold between the two elections, as measured by a range of indicators. Out of all internet users, about 13% sent or received emails about the election (5% in 2001); 17% used the internet for election information on at least a few occasions (7% in 2001); 22% visited a media website (cf. 11%). Although the numbers for active online activities (online discussion, opinion polls, volunteered online, donated money) remains small in 2005 (see above), they are more than double the figures from 2001.

Finally, does such increased activity make a larger difference to citizens’ voting choice than it did back in 2001? In 2005, 18% reported that the internet helped them make a better informed choice, and 19% said that it helped them make their mind up, either by confirming their vote choice or by changing it. This figure was about 6% in 2001. Therefore, internet users may be as likely to vote today as they were four years ago, but the overall importance of the internet for the election has greatly increased.

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Conclusions
The survey confirms many of the patterns first detected in 2001. These include: the web being an information source rather than a tool for political activity amongst most users; the pronounced use of ICTs by young people; and the relatively small number who engage directly with party campaigns. Although the internet may not have made a breakthrough in the sense of influencing results or engaging large numbers of people previously detached from politics (both unrealistic expectations) it is important to remember: (1) that internet election use has grown significantly since 2001; (2) perhaps more interestingly, there has been none of the expected dilution of political usage as access has diversified; (3) and, importantly, these factors have occurred against the backdrop of two dull campaigns in a row. Hence, we could expect more activity across the board if the result looks close or if there were dramatic political events.

It is worth also remembering the wider systemic barriers to internet electioneering in the UK which provide the context for this study. Despite the temptation to do so, we should not expect the US experience to be replicated here. The UK’s experience is always likely to be more low key. This is not necessarily because of lower levels of access but rather because the British political system erodes some of the potency of the web as a campaign tool. There are fewer incentives here for both the parties and the public to use the web. In US elections, especially primaries, candidates are often having to build supporter networks almost from scratch, campaign over vast distances and, for challengers, develop a national profile, all of which lend themselves to online campaigning.

In the UK, by contrast, well-entrenched party machines and the relatively localised nature of election campaigning mean that currently traditional communication tools work just as well if not better. Why use email when direct mail and door knocking works better? Indeed, the internet in Britain may be more suited to facilitating single issue politics and flash campaigns outside elections where innovation, flexibility and networking are at a premium.

Stephen Ward, Research Fellow
Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford

Wainer Lusoli, Research Officer
European Studies Research Institute, University of Salford

5 See the perceptive comments of former MP Richard Allan on www.voxpolitics.co.uk, 29 April 2005..
Through a router darkly: How online campaigning was reported

In the four years between the general elections of 2001 and 2005 the UK was transformed by technology. The proportion of homes with internet access increased from 45% to 57%¹, and over six million households gained easy and always-on access to a moderately fast broadband connection; home PC use rose from 45% to 65%²; wireless networks were available in over 7,500 cafes, bars and railway lounges³; GPRS and 3G phones offered email and web browsing on the move to over 50 million subscribers; and of course the ubiquitous Blackberry meant that anyone who wanted it could have email pushed to them at any time of day or night.

Yet in the acres of newsprint, days of broadcast coverage and gigabytes of online reporting the internet hardly featured at all, either as a story in its own right or as an important element in campaign coverage. While weblogs and online newspapers talked self-referentially about the net and how it was being used, mainstream print and broadcast media sidelined it almost completely.

In part this was because there was no big story, no Dean-like candidate coming from nowhere thanks to the innovative use of online tools and no ‘Rathergate’ to focus attention on the blogosphere in its role as the Fifth Estate. The one candidate who was unmasked for digital trickery, Ed Matts⁴, did not use the net for his deceit, and the group that made most effective use of the net to organise its campaign, the pro-hunting lobby, took great pains to keep its activities out of the mainstream media⁵.

³ WIFI coverage – at least 7,800, see http://www.theregister.co.uk/2005/04/06/bt_broadreach Wi-fi_deal/
⁴ Ed Matts: doctored photo covered in
The Times: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,19809-1566031,00.html
The Guardian: http://politics.guardian.co.uk/election/story/0,15803,1457906,00.html
⁵ Vote-Ok, at http://www.vote-ok.co.uk/, and see also Horse and Hound,
http://www.horseandhound.co.uk/competitionnews/article.php?aid=62041
The reassertion of conventional news priorities and the effective dismissal of the technology angle from coverage was not absolute, and there were certainly occasional articles, features and packages which dealt with the online aspects of the campaign, but they were far from prominent or central to the news agenda. The BBC’s *Daily Politics* programme featured reports on online campaigning but these did not make it onto *Newsnight*.

Email was probably the most widely used tool, but by and large it was being used to talk to the already sympathetic, if not the converted and active. Labour, with some well-judged humour from one-time candidate and writer John O’Farrell, even managed some fundraising through email, although the £50,000 that they boast of raising is minuscule compared to US levels. O’Farrell’s emails were among the most risky and innovative uses of technology in the whole campaign, and included a joke at John Prescott’s expense that could easily have backfired, but they were mentioned only rarely in the press. There was a diary entry in the *Glasgow Herald* and an aside in *The Times* election coverage on April 6, but most coverage came from *The Guardian*, where O’Farrell is of course a columnist.

We did not see a blog breakthrough, but that does not mean there was not a rich and complex debate taking between those who write, read and link to those blogs that took an interest in the election. It may well be that the quality of debate was significantly improved by the lack of any larger-scale media attention, but an unfortunate consequence of this is that the bloggers continue to talk to themselves and awareness among the wider electorate remains limited. In terms of media coverage, one significant development was that most media outlets had at least one weblog offering news and commentary, and these blogs were themselves linked, through comments and trackback and cross-referencing ‘blogrolls’, into the blogosphere on which they were (to a large extent) reporting.

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6 Also featured on their website at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/the_daily_politics/  
7 As noted by Alan Connor on the BBC e-Election roundup at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4532439.stm  
8 See O’Farrell money: £50,000 raised. Letter at http://reply-new.labour.org.uk/go.asp/?bLAB001/mSTMGG1 and thankyou at http://reply-new.labour.org.uk/go.asp/?bLAB001/mOZ79H1  
9 http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,5673,1477634,00.html  
10 The Glasgow Herald, April 30, Page 7 – Two Minute Briefing  
11 The Times, May 6, Page 5: The internet is a turn-off after the polls close  
This created something of a positive feedback loop, where the fact that *The Guardian* had a blog meant that more bloggers wrote about the election on their blogs, giving *The Guardian* more material to report on and hence a wider readership. However there was little crossover/spillage between the blogosphere coverage and the mainstream media output – the BBC had an election blog but it did not feature in news bulletins, and neither *Newsnight* nor *Today* offered their own reporters’ blogs.

Candidate blogs received very little attention, partly because those by the party leaders were immediately dismissed as exercises in e-spin and were clearly carefully vetted, and partly because none of the blogging candidates did the decent thing and embarrassed themselves. The only one that attracted interest was the Prime Minister’s weblog – or rather ‘Campaign Diary’¹³, but even here the tone was cynical and mocking.

It is also interesting to note that the things that ‘went viral’ this time around were not games, in contrast to the situation in 2001 when various games featuring John Prescott became very popular¹⁴, but serious election sites with a twist. Sites like *notapathetic.com*¹⁵, where the disillusioned could say why they are not voting, The Public Whip¹⁶ where details of voting records for former MPs could be searched, and ‘Who Should You Vote For?’¹⁷ took off, while the Tories’ rather poor ‘Bash Blair’ game made no impact. However while tens of thousands of people visited the various political websites, *notapathetic.com* only received eight mentions in print media in the run-up to the campaign, The Public Whip got 27 and TheyWorkForYou¹⁸ was mentioned only 42 times.¹⁹

Within the discourse of e-democracy the press coverage of particular initiatives and plans matters. Whether positive or negative in tone, the fact of the coverage creates awareness of tools and their uses, and this can shape the understanding of the campaign held both by the electorate and by the parties and campaigns. This in turn feeds into the news cycle and influences the coverage of future activities, but if there

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¹³ Still online at the time of writing, http://www.labour.org.uk/tonyblair
¹⁴ See the comment on The Register from 2001, at http://www.theregister.co.uk/2001/05/21/bruiser_prescott_v_the_egg/
¹⁵ http://www.notapathetic.com/
¹⁶ http://www.publicwhip.org.uk/
¹⁷ http://www.whoshouldyouvotefor.com/
¹⁸ http://www.theyworkforyou.com/
¹⁹ Based on searches for relevant keywords in the Lexis-Nexis database of UK newspaper stories
is no sustained reporting of what is being done online then awareness remains low and the incentive to report in future is reduced. The lack of any real coverage of e-democracy tools and the network-based campaign in the 2005 election creates a serious problem both for researchers and the politicians themselves, since it means there is a limited evidence base for evaluation.

By the time of the 2009/10 election, technology will have penetrated even more deeply into the fabric of our daily lives and will have become far less visible. The 2005 general election may therefore prove a missed opportunity for the advocates of e-democracy, the one point at which information and communications technologies were both visible and also in widespread use. Next time around, the media will simply not think of commenting on the technology, just as this time around none of the coverage of postal voting fraud bothered to explain what ‘stamps’ are or how the postal system involves placing objects in a ‘post box’ for ‘collection, sorting and delivery’.

It will be up to the historians, psephologists and political scientists to disentangle the strands of influence and decide whether poster campaigns, emails or text messages are a more effective way of reaching the electorate. When the spin doctors, candidates and party press officers try to decide where and how to use the many channels that exist for communication between campaign and voter, they will have little detailed evidence from the coverage of the 2005 election.

Bill Thompson
Technology Commentator
The human touch

... of online campaigning

The 2005 general election saw charities getting more involved in lobbying candidates. For example, the NCVO encouraged its members to take an active part in promoting its election manifesto, the National Autistic Society (NAS), in collaboration with charity group TreeHouse, launched the autismcounts.org.uk website to support the Autism Manifesto, and Age Concern issued seven challenges to the new government, together with a campaign toolkit on how to hold politicians to account.

The Hansard Society’s research into the relatively new phenomenon of political blogs’ led Crisis – the charity for homeless people - to approach the Hansard Society to produce a weblog to promote Crisis’ own agenda rather than respond to party manifestos. The blog was to be used to enable homeless people to have a unique voice and enable them to start a dialogue with visitors to the site concentrating minds on the reality of the individuals affected by homelessness.

The site, Jamie’s Big Voice, was launched at www.jamiesbigvoice.com in April 2004, authored by Jamie McCoy, an ex-homeless person. Now in his early 50s, Jamie had been homeless since running away from home at 15, and has had problems with drink and drugs all his life. Up until a couple of years ago, Jamie could not read or write, but has since learned to do so. He now writes poetry and children’s books. He was therefore very well qualified, from his own first-hand experience, to raise the concerns of homeless people in a blogging format.

Built on a free software platform, Blogger, the site was developed by the Hansard Society with Jamie, who then developed it further himself. The Society provided basic technical support and coaching, and helped Jamie promote his site. Former MP and prominent political blogger Richard Allan and Guardian journalist Bobbie Johnson attended a workshop session to give Jamie useful tips and advice. Jamie’s

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1 Hansard Society, Political Blogs – Craze or Convention? (Hansard Society, 2004)
blog listed all the relevant election sites and portals, including all the party candidates who themselves kept blogs.

The Hansard Society undertook a media campaign at the start of the project to drive users to the site. Jamie’s Big Voice was publicised through direct mailings, local media coverage, viral emails, web links and by word of mouth. The blog was monitored by the BBC, The Guardian, The Independent, The Times, The FT and CNN. It fast became one of the most talked about election blogs, and its author has become a media star and political commentator in his own right!

Jamie said that although homeless people have the right to register to vote, their plight was not being addressed in the election. ‘Homelessness does not look like being a major issue in the election,’ he said. ‘I want to create a place where the issues can be debated from the point of view of homeless people and I’m inviting all election candidates to visit my blog and discuss these with me.’

Jamie has chosen a conversational rather than confessional style. He comments on more than the issue of homelessness, covering the various mainstream campaign issues such as crime, health and immigration, and he managed to interview various people he came across during the campaign – homeless people in hostels, parliamentary candidates, and members of the Homeless People Panel. Jamie’s message came as a surprise for many readers - some of them homeless themselves - that homeless people actually have the right to vote, despite being of ‘no fixed abode’.

His posts are provocative, sometimes verging on the odd mild rant, but that is what gives them integrity. He is a prolific writer, posting at least once a day, and he even has to store up material, to avoid overloading the reader. Visitors to the site posted 75 comments during the election campaign. Some were on the different policy issues, but the majority expressed their support and encouragement. He gave his personal account of blogging:

“I have only been a blogger for a few weeks and I have really taken well to it. I have had a few teething problems with links but have overcome them with help from other people.

I really enjoy blogging because I can say what I want and can put down what I’m thinking sometimes it’s exactly what other people are thinking but are too scared to put it down on paper but I am not afraid of courting controversy that is the thing I do like to do. If I can get a response from people then it all becomes worthwhile.

Blogging the election is fun. The not so fun part, having to read an awful lot of the news on different web sites. I am even videoing Newsnight! I’ve now become a boring old fart. But that’s me I can recommend blogging to anyone who has a sensibility and fun and who is not afraid of the pen, as I’ve heard somewhere the pen is mightier than the sword.’

Some authors in this report have argued that the 2005 general election was not an ‘e-election’ stricto senso and that online technology had no real impact on the election outcome. Nevertheless, with examples such as personal emails from senior Labour figures, or the Backing Blair project (which used the online facility meetup.com to arrange meetings to personalise a campaign against the Prime Minister) it could also be argued that the internet helped humanise the campaign.

Stephen Coleman has written: ‘It is as channels of honest self-presentation that blogs make their greatest contribution to democracy. If Walter Cronkite’s famous
sign-off, “That’s the way it is” was the dictum of the world of media represented factual certainties, “That’s the way I am” is the dictum of a self-expressive culture, where truth emerges in fragmented, subjective, incomplete and contestable ways.\(^3\)

The internet provides possibilities for both intimate as well as anonymous or fake identity. Thus in the 2005 UK election, manipulation of celebrity was exploited to give ostensibly intimate accounts of political campaigning. There was, for instance, the anonymous ‘Awful Life of an MP’s Wife’\(^4\), later identified as Linda McDougall, the wife of Austin Mitchell MP; or the Conservative leader’s wife, Sandra Howard,\(^5\) who kept a well-publicised campaign blog; or Alastair Campbell,\(^6\) whose vivid blog was entirely spurious:

‘I first came across ‘proxy blogging’ on Tim Ireland’s Bloggerheads site, which encourages people to set up websites on behalf of their MPs. My own local member in Bethnal Green and Bow, Oona King, was tempting - but I thought I could have more fun closer to the seat of power.’\(^7\)

Perhaps the more significant trait of the technology, however, is its ability to give an effective platform for ordinary and authentic citizens, right down to the most marginalised and dispossessed. The voices of vulnerable and excluded people are rarely heard during elections.

Mark Lawson has commented: ‘At its best, blogging has an immediacy and interactivity that the conventional written media can never achieve. But blogs are most useful as a samizdat form: famously the Baghdad Blogger smuggled out thoughts that no other style of journalism could have caught. On that model, though, the Campaign ‘05 blogs we really want would come from Euan Blair or a candidate dissenting from the official party line.’\(^8\)

Jamie’s Big Voice highlights political issues, such as homelessness, that are rarely dealt with during elections, and are not on any mainstream party political manifesto.

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\(^3\) S. Coleman, Blogs as listening posts rather than soapboxes in *Political blogs – Craze or Convention?*, Hansard Society 2004
\(^4\) The awful life of an MP’s wife http://mpswife.blogspot.com/
\(^5\) Sandra Howard Campaign’s Diary http://www.conservatives.com/tile.do?def=sandra.howard.page
\(^6\) Alastair Campbell http://alastair-campbell.blogspot.com/
\(^7\) A. Corp, *That bl***dy Campbell blogger is a woman!*, Times Online, 27 April 2005
\(^8\) M. Lawson, *It's uncut, leftwing and Pooterish*, The Guardian, 23 April 2005 http://politics.guardian.co.uk/media/story/0,12123,1468605,00.html
The blog provided an alternative perspective on the progress of the election campaign.

It was said from the beginning of the campaign that there would be attempts from all parties to humanise the issues. As Brian Wheeler wrote in an election analysis, *Election 2005: Fun, fun, fun?*: ‘Expect to see more ‘humanising’ of the issues, with people such as Margaret Dixon pushed into the limelight to highlight the alleged failings of the NHS.’

A more gradual, less sensationalist and transient model of humanising issues than that offered by traditional media is offered through the internet, as shown by the examples above. Jamie’s blog is an open-ended project, something more than a PR campaign of limited duration. It has the potential for growth and it has got off to a good start. At the time of writing, Jamie’s Blog has had 5,023 visitors with 2,570 unique visitors, 1,644 first time visitors and 926 returning visitors. According to the Yahoo! Search engine there were 401 links to Jamie’s blog and MSN Search found 646 links. As Jamie’s current strap-line heading his blog says: ‘The blog does not stop just because the election is over.’

**Milica Howell**

*Hansard Society e-Democracy programme*

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Diving in the shallow end
Are politicians capable of more depth online?

This report sets out why the 2005 general election was a formative moment in the use of technology in UK politics and argues that the lessons learnt from recent electoral politics can be modified by elected representatives to address a deficit in political awareness and participation.

Hanging hopes
Low turnout at the 2001 election – particularly amongst younger voters – led to a debate about apathy which only began to ease off in the 12 months leading up to the 2005 general election. As the election neared there was a palpable sense of anticipation around an upturn in engagement. One survey showed that the percentage of the UK population with a ‘great deal of interest’ in politics had reached an 18 year high.¹

Much of the hype surrounding online campaigning was based on the 2004 US presidential elections. There the web had built and destroyed candidacies, made and lost millions of dollars and brought clarity and confusion to the electorate.

Although Oxford Internet Institute/Salford University research showed that online political engagement in the UK was more muted, it did show the propensity to utilise the web for political participation was significantly higher among the youngest voters.² To add to the optimism, the Office for National Statistics showed that for the first time there was internet access in the majority of UK households.³

² www.ipop.org.uk
Measurable impact had also been made by citizens on the policy process via online platforms between 2001 and 2005.\(^4\)

### The big blip

Then the election took place. Turnout clambered, rather than climbed, to 61.5% amongst the general electorate and the percentage of 18 – 24 year olds voting fell a further 2% to 37%. The online election campaign was similarly muted. Before the campaign began, e-democracy advocates and suppliers had practised moderation in their optimism and as it unfolded they were granted little release.

Speculation prior to the 2001 election had overplayed the impact of the internet. The Hansard Society took on responsibility for focusing minds in the aftermath when it resolved that ‘the 2001 election was not fought out on the internet. The internet played a peripheral, but significant role’.\(^5\)

Even before May 5 2005, it was clear that an ‘e-election’ would again prove to be little more than hyperbole. As in 2001 there was visible election activity online, generated by both the electorate and candidates, which exercised some influence on voter awareness. However, patterns of usage by the public demonstrated little change from previous campaigns and impact was fragmented, even impotent, on participation.

From some perspectives, the online campaign actually achieved less this time around. The plethora of tactical voting sites claimed no scalps. 18-24 year olds might have been taking an interest in politics online, but their interest failed to materialise in the form of ballots cast. Your Party\(^6\), a political party claiming to let its constituents make the major decisions, and thus relying on web-based technology to aggregate these decisions, received only 1,006 votes. Bloggers were open to accusations of poaching the attention-spans of voters away from those standing as candidates.

### From small acorns

In his appraisals of the contribution made by online campaigning in the 2001 general election, Stephen Coleman had said:

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\(^4\) Forthcoming report *Tell Parliament dot net – an experiment into consulting the public online* (Hansard Society, 2005)  
\(^5\) The Hansard Society, *2001: Cyber Space Odyssey* (Hansard Society, 2001)  
‘In the period between now and the next election the internet should be used much more to connect citizens to their representatives and the policy-making process. People will take elections more seriously if they are voting for something that takes them seriously.’

In the years that followed, this recommendation was addressed enthusiastically by campaign groups, NGOs, activists and citizens. But although e-democracy had kicked off, key players were not on the field. Elected representatives, political institutions, and parties only participated from the sidelines, preferring to limit their input to a little investment or the offer of some carefully measured rhetoric. Yet, despite their passive involvement, politicians and parties did pay close attention to developments.

Through their earlier experiences of using technology in 2001 and subsequently through e-democracy, all those involved in party politics evidently recognised the value of the internet to their campaigns. In 2005, the party machinery set about co-opting the language and tools of e-democracy to portray their candidates as proactive, relevant and in touch.

**Cut and shut**

Basic online technology was rolled out across the campaigns, as candidates opted for the ‘less-is-more’ tactic. Email is cheap, ubiquitous and inter-personal, and therefore prime for electioneering. By far the most visible application of email was by the Labour Party. However, they were dogged by confusion over opt-in/opt-out regulations and by suspicions that the emails were being used surreptitiously to gather data.

Frame-set, brochure-ware websites were the first ‘e-tools’ to be dabbled with by politicians back in 1996. During the 2005 election, the vast majority of examples retained a ‘Nineties’ party uniformity. Poor taste cannot be legislated against but there are strict regulations relating to the use of parliamentary resources by former MPs. Although the majority of those seeking re-election made the necessary content changes to their sites, there were a number of instances of election malpractice.

Weblogs, adopted by a small group of MPs towards the close of the previous Parliament, became the campaign tool of choice for around 65 parliamentary

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7 The Hansard Society, 2001: Cyber Space Odyssey (Hansard Society, 2001)
8 news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/vote_2005/frontpage/4435677.stm, April 2005
9 www.ipop.org.uk
candidates. Blogs had fast become the ‘latest and safest’ media-friendly tool used by those who wanted to give the impression of being comfortable with getting up-close-and-personal with the public. Some of these were nominally blogs, lacking the likes of commenting facilities and being penned by campaign staff rather than the proprietors themselves.

There were attempts to get party messages out through rich-media animations, clips and presentations. However, again these had to compete with output from more trusted, talented and time-rich members of the public. On occasion, parties and candidates attempted satire and recognised the web as a great medium for its dissemination. However, the public was sceptical of these efforts – being far more familiar with parties and candidates as the subjects of satire rather than the protagonists. There was even a whiff of subterfuge with a string of investigations exposing ‘cyber-squatting’ and proxy-blogging activities.

In the months leading up to the election, podcasting was becoming the vogue. Spurred on by the proliferation in ownership of digital audio players (like Apple’s iPod), podcasting was ‘big in America’ where it had been used to spread election messages as downloadable audio clips. In the UK, the Liberal Democrats led the way with election speeches from leader, Charles Kennedy. Now, politicos could subscribe to ‘party political radio,’ play the content at parties and swap it with friends.

The parties also dipped into mobile telecommunications, targeting voters and their activists with ringtones, phone wallpapers and the occasional text message. However, in practice these approaches have never paid off for politicians who prefer to use mobiles as photo-call props rather than effective tools for narrow-casting.

It was in the use of sophisticated information management systems that the parties placed most faith and made most investment. In an election predicted to be determined on movement in a few key marginals, parties were keen to aim their efforts and resources with precision. IT-supported direct marketing techniques would be vital in this respect. With access to the electoral roll increasingly locked down, the Conservative party hoped to glean key electorate data through the ‘Voter Vault’, a software system that was used by the successful Republican campaign in the US.

10 www.ipop.org.uk
11 news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/vote_2005/frontpage/4435677.stm, April 2005
**Show you mean it**

It is easy to be negative about what was achieved through the online campaigning carried out by the candidates and parties in 2005. However, the short lifespan of an election ties parties into zealously-choreographed campaigns, where they are restricted to the kind of political marketing that is criticised in the ‘everyday’ parliamentary cycle.

The positive aspect of the 2005 online election campaign is that MPs and other elected representatives gained first-hand experience of e-democracy’s potential to help them ‘listen and learn’. They witnessed the way in which the creative approaches and consensual discourse of e-democracy can motivate and lift the spirits of the electorate.

Through their use of blogs, they experienced a new potential for networking and scrutiny. Their use of deliberative platforms showed them how easy it is to carry out consultation. Back-end IT systems helped them to tap into rich seams of data. Taken together all this information showed elected representatives how to carry out their mandate in a much more informed and efficacious manner. However, the lesson for all is that online technology is at its most effective in parliamentary politics, where the pressures of time are less, resources more abundant and the need is greater.

The brilliance of e-democracy is that it can give citizens a route into the political process that is complementary to representative parliamentary democracy. However, it will only become another citizen-led protest medium unless elected representatives and institutions get in on the action and think of e-democracy as a collection of techniques and tools rather than a threatening foothold for direct democracy. Only with their committed involvement can the potential of e-democracy be realised for the benefit of democracy.

**Ross Ferguson**

*Hansard Society e-Democracy programme*
The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and the Hansard Society, as an independent non-party organisation, is neither for nor against. The Society is, however, happy to publish these views and to invite analysis and discussion of them.

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online campaigning
in the 2005 general election

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