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Interactivity and Political Communication: hypermedia campaigning in the UK

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Interactivity and Political Communication: hypermedia campaigning in the UK

1. Web 2.0: a new communication paradigm?

- 1 It is commonplace to consider that the internet, as it became a medium used by a critical mass within western societies, has revolutionised the way in which people communicate with one another, and with corporate bodies and political organisations (Macnamara, 2010). Factors that once limited communication, such as state boundaries, physical distance, time differences or access to technology are reducing, greater interaction is facilitated across the boundaries of space and time with the potential to redress social and education inequalities (Youngs, 2007). While focus is often at the macro, global level, so discussing the potential impact of an electronic, global world economy “integrated through information systems and technology rather than organisational hierarchies” (Kobrin, 1998: 362); lesser attention is paid to the impact at the level of the individual user. Arguably the current revolution in terms of individual internet use is facilitated by Web 2.0, the key features of which facilitate greater control over the way individuals communicate, the means of communication and what information is accessed, when and where. Tim O’Reilly (2005) argues Web 2.0 has created an “architecture of participation” that facilitates co-production of information, social networking and offers spaces for individuals to interact. The emerging communicative ecosystem offers real potential for the creation of interest based public spheres that can interact with one another and so create the informational democracy Manuel Castells once viewed as only a distant possibility (Castells, 1996: 353).
- 2 To interact with the participants utilising Web 2.0 architecture, one almost by definition has to participate. Thus one finds business models and strategies of communication being adapted to incorporate Web 2.0 tools. However, to participate, an organisation wishing to interact with online communities must also adapt to the fundamental shift in thinking demanded by Web 2.0; as Birdsall notes, “A build it and they will come ethos” a thinking that dominated the move to internet based communication over the decade 1995-2005, “is being replaced by one of they will come and build it” (Birdsall, 2007). This automatically implies a change in the power structures reinforcing Birdsall’s conclusion that “The Web is not only a social creation, as Berners-Lee asserts, it is about power and politics”. Thus we find there are two distinct elements at play when considering the social impact of Web 2.0; firstly the concept of an architecture of participation creating an informational democracy from below; secondly the demand for a shift in organisational thinking in terms of wishing to be an equal partner within that democratic structure. The question is whether these competing forces can be reconciled.
- 3 It is perhaps politicians and political strategists who most view Web 2.0 as a challenge, if not a threat, to their ways of working (Jackson, 2003; Lilleker et al, 2010). While big brands are able to build a following offline and online, though their fortunes and popularity can wax and wane, and political issue and pressure groups can find large followings using traditional and social media; traditional electoral politics is more likely to inform than embrace interaction (Schneider & Foot, 2006; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011; Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2013) and so is often eschewed by the majority of social media users relegating electoral politics to being a minority activity (Hindman, 2009). Yet, electoral politics may well be the one aspect of civic life that should welcome the creation of the architecture of participation and offer those fundamentals elements O’Reilly (2005) equates to Web 2.0: a rich user experience, harnessing the wisdom of crowds and trusting users as co-producers. Some political parties and individual politicians have been drawn to use social media sites such as MySpace and Facebook, create interactive websites, post videos to Youtube and develop their own weblog; the Howard Dean and Obama campaigns leading the way and influencing subsequent elections (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). The landmark US campaigns have ushered in hypermedia campaigning

(Howard, 2006) which incorporates into political communication strategy the notions of sending, sharing and receiving data. This chapter evaluates hypermedia campaigning by political parties in the UK, a system that borrows and adapts many campaigning concepts from the US (Lees-Marshment & Lilleker, 2012) while retaining many of the constraints faced by other European nations in terms of resources available for campaign innovation. The chapter operationalizes the concept of hypermedia campaigning using Sara McMillan's concept of information flows and Howard's core concepts, capturing how UK political parties communicate to or with site visitors. The chapter also compares campaigning during the 2010 general election and during the permanent campaign, taking May 2012 as a typical period of domestic politics. This allows us to capture whether, and the extent to which, the Internet is impacting upon two elements of political communication, the communication flows between parties and their members, activists and supporters, party reach into online networks, and secondly the extent this might indicate a trajectory towards a political informational democracy. The chapter firstly introduces the concepts related to the use of Web 2.0 tools, in particular highlighting the differences with Web 1.0; we then move to highlight how Web 2.0 has become embedded in the conceptualisation of firstly postmodern and latterly hypermedia campaigning. The methodology section operationalizes hypermedia campaigning allowing us to present data and offer insights into the evolution of European political communication.

2. Conceptualising Web 2.0 as a strategy

- 4 Due to the fast moving nature of technological innovation, every development is greeted with a fanfare and predictions of its revolutionary potential. This has particularly been the case with information and communication or digital technology. The shift in use of the Internet from being a private tool for communication with the US defence department to a resource connecting organisations and individuals across the globe, has led academics and corporate and political strategists to assess its effects and potential. Downes and Mui state in their discussion of how businesses can harness cyberspace: "The goal of developing a digital strategy is to turn anxiety into advantage, by replacing current planning and strategic activities with new ones better suited to a business environment populated by killer apps" (Downes & Mui, 2000:11). The search for the killer application (or app) has driven strategists to explore the potential of every technological development and the ICT industry to continually innovate to match demand. It is within this context that Web 2.0 as both a concept and a technologically-driven communication revolution was conceived.
- 5 The definition that has become popularised, if somewhat vague and technological, is offered by Tim O'Reilly.
- 6 Web 2.0 is the network as platform, spanning all connected devices: Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others, creating network effects through an 'architecture of participation' and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences (O'Reilly, 2005).
- 7 Therefore the key features of Web 2.0 are the ability to build networks that connect individuals and organisations within a community where information is shared and adapted and updated by all members of the community who choose to participate. From an organisational perspective there is talk of the democratisation of information. Whereas within the context of Web 1.0 information was made available to a broader audience; "The idea [of Web 2.0] is to free data from corporate control and allow anyone to assemble and locate content to meet their own needs" (Barsky, 2006a: 7). While Barsky's first article deals solely with the use of really simply syndication, or RSS feeds, which allow users to select the information they access, when it is accessed and from whom, his work progresses to talk of weblogs (online diaries) and podcasting to suggest that: "Web 2.0 is about the more human aspects of interactivity on the Web" (Barsky, 2006b: 33). This builds on a more user focused definition of the key aspects of Web 2.0 that is: "about conversations, interpersonal networking, personalisation

and individualism” (Abram, 2005: 44). This definition suggests that those who choose to participate can talk to whoever they like and create a network based on any combination of shared interests while also being whoever they like and presenting themselves as they would like to be perceived by those who interface with them.

8 Web 2.0 communicative innovations, it is suggested, are transforming audiences into participants (for example see Shirky, 2008). New communication cultures are emerging, introducing new networked forms of socialisation and changing attitudes to self-disclosure (Rainee & Wellman, 2012), “rebuild[ing] structures of sociability from the bottom up” (Castells 2001: 131). Such developments also impact on our social and civic engagement as online digital environments potentiate having influence. But, the extent to which this promise is realised in political terms is a moot point. While ‘Here comes Everybody’ (Shirky, 2008) is in itself a nice metaphor, the chances of everybody becoming wired into the Internet seem distant. Digital divides cut across the globe, across nations and across neighbourhoods. Digital divides might also appear to cut across communication contexts. A significant Twitter-fall, (a deluge of loosely linked remarks offered by a range of users of the Twitter platform) connected by a single hashtag (#), appears simultaneously to many high profile events (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). Yet, political events - the attention given to the 2008 US presidential election notwithstanding - fail to garner the same levels of attention. Politics is one area where it is suggested that there is little evidence for democratisation, perhaps ironically given that some would argue that the Internet is a force for cultural, social and political democratisation because everyone can be heard and so have influence. Hindman (2009) talks of a ‘Myth of Digital Democracy’ suggesting there has been no widening of participation in political communication; instead a new participatory elite has emerged. Hindman’s captures the lack of a transformation within the context of political communication using the 1/9/90 rule where one per cent creates content, nine per cent comment on that content while the other ninety per cent, the majority, remain as passive observers. Arguably this may be a consequence of online political communication rather than widespread civic disinterest with all things relating to electoral politics.

9 Studies of the communication of political organisations within online environments mostly find evidence to reinforce the politics as usual thesis. Resnick (1998) predicted the Internet would have minimal effects as behaviour online is shaped by offline norms. He posited that, firstly, better resourced organisations and individuals, those who earn the greatest media attention and so lead the media agenda, and earn the most in donations and sponsorship, will also dominate the communication scene online. Secondly, and more importantly, the cultural barriers to change within political organisations would prevent transitions to more participatory communication paradigms. Evidence suggests reluctance among political organisations to lose control over the message (Stromer-Galley, 2000), and open up the ability to comment to the masses (Lilleker et al, 2010). Therefore, online public participation in electoral politics is limited and where it occurs it is highly controlled (Xenos & Foot, 2005; Kluver et al, 2007; Ward et al, 2008) even in the case of the celebrated openness of the Obama campaign (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). Strategically we suggest there are two paths open to political parties. The first retains the traditional model of informing and persuading, using the Internet as a supplementary communication tool alongside the national media with any tools designed for mobilisation relegated, like direct mailshots, to coinciding with the local activities that occur during election campaigns. The second path is towards a more participatory information democracy. Parties would have to provide information to visitors to their websites and online presences, one cannot imagine any party not utilising YouTube, for example, as a free broadcasting service. Additionally, however, parties would engage in mobilising their members, activists and supporters to extend their communicational reach, so using the sharing tools to gain purchase within social networks. Parties might equally create issue communities within their website or through the use of Facebook or Twitter that allow more participatory forms of policy development. Strategically the first path is safe; however the second may well create greater levels of interest which might lead to engagement, cognitive involvement and loyalty (Lilleker, 2013). The second path has risks but, long-term, may pay

dividends in terms of having a support base that can be mobilised to further the aims of the political party. Importantly the strategy that follows the second path fits to models of campaigning developed from analyses of the most recent innovations.

3. Hypermedia for election and permanent campaigning

10 Colin Seymour-Ure's (1977) suggestion that political organizations adapt their communication to suit the dominant media of the day remains a truism. Adaptation can involve a simple re-orientation of communication, as in targeting a new medium, or to significant organizational changes. It is argued that leadership communication styles were changed by television (Scammell, 1995; Jamieson, 1996), for example. Maintaining a focus on the relationship between political organizations and media is useful when considering how technological advances in communication lead to adaptations in the form and style of political communication. In terms of the adaptations of political communication across the last half century, Norris' (2003) typology is in this context a useful heuristic tool. While her terminology is much contested, in particular the categorization of eras as pre-modern, modern, and postmodern (Lilleker & Negrine, 2002; Negrine 2008), her schematic places the evolution of political communication within a historical timeframe that elides with competing studies that talk of campaigning ages (Blumler 1990), campaign styles (Gibson and Römmele 2001), strategic orientations (Lees-Marshment 2001), or organizational styles (Katz and Mair 2002). Importantly the model also suggests evolution is driven by media dependency; to benefit most from communication is to reach the right audiences therefore the party must target them using the right media. The media dependency aspect of the schematic suggests the Internet should be now playing a vital role in political campaigning.

11 Norris' pre-modern age, which denotes the period up until the 1950s, saw parties enjoy ease of access to a small number of largely deferent media outlets. Radio and newsreel were the main ways to communicate information to a fairly stable partisan electorate. Election campaigns were local affairs, run by decentralized volunteer groups who relied on party members to deliver a labour-intensive campaign. The major event at this time was the public meeting, when party leaders and local candidates would meet voters in local public buildings and debate issues. Television ushered in the modern era and fundamentally changed the rules of engagement. Political communication developed a more national character, the rules of the newsreel dominated the interface between politicians and the mass citizenry, and the rules of television ramped up the process of professionalization. At the same time mass party membership went into decline, leading election campaigning to focus upon converting and persuading voters rather than solely getting loyalists out on Election Day. The start of the postmodern campaign era, nominally the 1990s, marks the zenith of a further period of professionalization. Political parties appear more market-oriented, pandering to the whims of target voters when designing policy priorities and messages (Lees-Marshment, 2001). Target voters were engaged on a more permanent basis (Ornstein & Mann, 2001), narrowcast to via direct channels of communication. In the late 1990s the postmodern campaign was adapted to digital technologies including websites, email, the short text message service for mobile telephones (SMS) as well as utilising online forums and intranets for organising their activists (Norris, 2003). One also saw the blending of the centralisation of the television era with the localism of the 1950s and before; while a central campaign command centre set out the core messages and strategy, communication was simultaneously the responsibility of local organizations, in particular the building and maintenance of local email lists, intranets, and forums (Gibson and Römmele 2001; Katz and Mair 2002; Norris 2003). Local and central party organizations would also share responsibility using social networking and microblogging tools to reinforce and make locally relevant national campaign messages. Yet the postmodern era is not fully the age of the Internet, though it is certain parties have adapted to a digital media landscape characterized by "abundance, ubiquity, reach, and celerity" (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999 : 213). The Internet shares predominance with mass media, yet it is argued that the Internet can play a far more important role.

- 12 The strategic adaptation of political communication and campaigning to exploit the potential of innovations in communication technologies, and meet the citizens in the new digital playground is described as hypermedia campaigning (Howard, 2006). Howard (2006) defines hypermedia campaigning as having a number of strategic functions. Firstly he notes the online environment facilitates the instant transmission of information. Therefore, political communication has to be simultaneously relayed across a wide range of media outlets, so meeting the demands of 24/7 news, and the global online audience (see also Davis 2010). Secondly, electronic communication facilitates tailoring content for multiple forms of consumption and dissemination, meeting the needs of journalists, supporters, activists or web browsers alike. Targeting must also use a full range of media as each target audience will be operating at multiple communication junctions. Thirdly, to inform is insufficient, and a range of interactive actions need to be facilitated. Items created by political parties must be easy to share (Boynnton 2009), allow comments and expect adaptation due to the nature of behaviour within the political communication ecosystem. Within the age of hypermedia campaigning, political parties must allow for and expect the “decomposition and recomposition of messages” (Howard 2006: 2) as these iterative processes permit co-ownership of communication across a wider agora and for reach of messages to be multiplied across networks. Fourthly, as information is sent out it can also be used to learn about users. The use of visitor counts, cookies and tracking tools, as well as the solicitation of emails, invitations to befriend, or become a fan or follower, all supply data about supporters that can be highly useful. Supplemented by other information that can be purchased from the big online data harvesters, which would include Google and Facebook, including information about interest communities (what other causes your fans and followers are more likely to endorse), builds a phenomenally useful database that can support an online and offline communication targeting strategy.
- 13 One of the core motivations for political parties to adopt this hypermedia strategy is to gain reach into the online communicative ecosystem, what is termed gaining a network effect for communication. Measurement of a network effect has been discussed widely, its value linked to the number of people within a network (Van Dijk 2006: 78), with the equation of the number of members squared referenced as one method of evaluation (Anderson 2007: 21); thus, the more connected members of the emergent polyarchy are, and the more they are able to disseminate and/or amplify a message, the wider their reach through the network. However, real value is also related to the social capital of the network effect. The amplification of messages via a network does not simply increase reach but also adds credibility as individuals act as information hubs to their networks of contacts and friends. These constitute a new information elite (Van Dijk 2006, p. 185), which can include established elites such as politicians and journalists as well as individual weblog authors (bloggers) or users deemed credible due to their propensity to share items among their friends and followers. Thus for the meeting of campaign objectives, the hypermedia campaign strategist must harness the online and offline information elite simultaneously and create a synergistic communicative process between nodes within the network. Online actions by political actors (a post on Twitter for example) feed into communication by online and offline communicators (journalists and bloggers), and these draw hits to other online features such as a campaign website which generates further sharing or interaction, which in turn can create broader offline and online attention, or resources in the shape of volunteers or donations. The hypermedia campaign is thus the response to the twenty-first century campaign communication environment: it recognizes that to be successful one must both create and join the communication ecosystem.

4. Analysing online political campaign communication

- 14 McMillan (2002) characterises communication taking four discrete forms which map well to the above categorization of the hypermedia campaign. Information provision links to downward information flows, disseminated by the party out to all that may be interested; this then fulfils the first two criteria to an extent depending on the methods of dissemination. McMillan separates interactive information flows into asynchronous and synchronous.

Asynchronous information flows enable a party to both privately gather data on the opinions of visitors to their website as well as harvesting data regarding visitors. Synchronous information flows, in contrast, are public, facilitating conversations and are non-hierarchical but while facilitating a network effect also permit the gathering of data. The fourth McMillan category relates to horizontal information flows and the use of hyperlinks; this can be an indicator of the network being built around the party and so relate to targeting strategies.

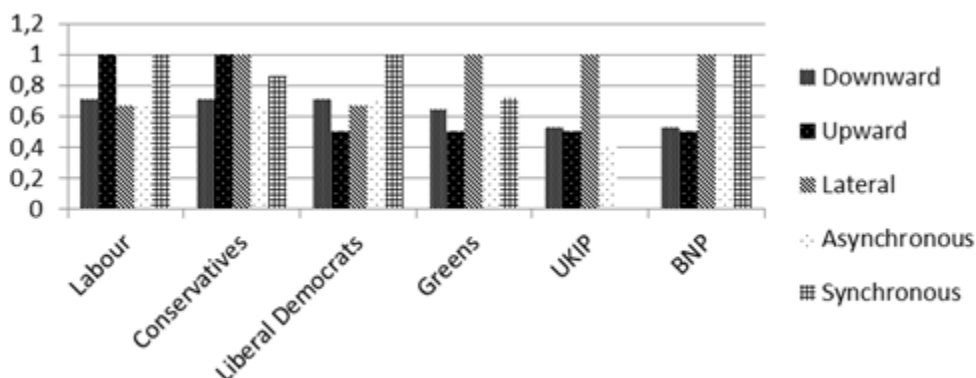
15 The research adopts the traditional method of content analysis, counting features within the websites of the six most prominent political parties that stand in a majority of constituencies across the nation and are so deemed to represent all areas of the nation (Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, Green, UK Independence Party and British National Party). The first four parties have representation in parliament, though in the case of the Green party that is only one member. All have representation in the European Parliament. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats formed a coalition after the 2010 General Election and so are jointly parties of government; Labour is the official opposition. The parties' proximity to government and position in the electoral landscape may impact upon their strategies. The analysis was first conducted during the final week of the 2010 General Election and, to facilitate the comparison between an election campaign and a permanent campaigning strategy, repeated during the last week of May 2012; what can be deemed a normal week in politics when parliament is sitting but there were no specific controversies surrounding any of the parties that may lead to greater or lesser focus on their communication. The features are firstly categorized as per McMillan's schematic, outlined above, following the categorization strategies employed in a number of recent studies (for example Gibson & Ward, 2000; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). A second categorization strategy aligns the features specifically to indicators for a hypermedia campaign. For each set of categorisations we develop an average performance score (calculated as a percentage score by dividing the number of features appearing by the maximum possible for each feature category), this is a standard measure which allows direct comparability between parties and across time (Farmer and Fender, 2005; Schweitzer, 2008; Vaccari, 2008; Larsson, 2011). A third measure is based on the network effect. Our measure focuses on the cumulative number of registered online fans, friends, followers or subscribers the party has across the major social networks they use, these are Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Cumulatively we are able to determine the extent to which parties adhere to the principles of communication within Web 2.0 environments, utilising the standard McMillan schematic. Secondly, the extent to which they adhere to the core tenets of the hypermedia campaign, utilising an adapted schematic based on Howard's core descriptors. Thirdly, we can assess the extent to which the parties are harnessing a network effect and the extent of their potential reach within the online communication ecosystem, this is completed by generating potential reach scores focusing on the number of subscribers they have online. We use here the number of fans on Facebook, followers on Twitter and viewers on YouTube; each individual could potentially share material and, if the calculations of a potential network effect have validity, their network reach is the amount of fans, followers or viewers squared. This latter measure offers an opportunity to test whether smaller parties are able to gain an equalisation effect in terms of reach by using the online environment.

5. Understanding political communication online

16 Firstly we explore the different styles of communication used by UK political parties according to the McMillan schematic. Figure 1 shows the data for all parties at the 2010 General Election, Figure 2 the comparable data from 2012. During the election we find some disparity in strategies. Labour as the incumbent delivered an above average amount of information, but this was not out of step with their main rivals. However, they were one of the strongest performers in collecting data from visitors and allowing public, synchronous conversations to take place. The Conservative party matched them in upward communication flows, had a site which was strongly linked into an online network through lateral or horizontal flows and performed strongly, if slightly weaker than Labour, for synchronous communication. The Liberal Democrats, as an overall percentage of their site, clearly encouraged synchronous

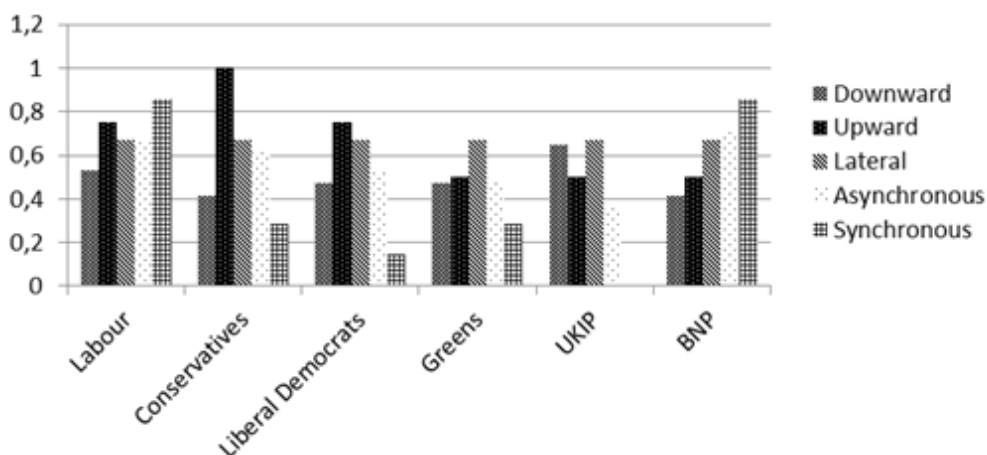
communication, as did the British National Party; the website of which contained a very large participatory community feel. The Green Party website lacked the sophistication of rivals but equally offered a range of communication flows; it was the site of the UK Independence Party that was anomalous overall. UKIP were heavily linked, provided information in a number of formats, collected some data but offered few options for private, asynchronous communication and had no features at all that permitted synchronous communication flows. Overall, however, we see election campaign websites offer multiple communication flows; parties inform while collecting data, most are strongly networked through hyperlink usage, and most permit both asynchronous and synchronous to take place via their website or linked presences.

Figure 1: Average feature use in 2010 per category in the Macmillan schematic



17 Within the context of the permanent campaign (Figure 2) we find a shift in strategies. Labour, moving from incumbent to opposition retains a focus on permitting asynchronous conversations while also encouraging upward communication which focus on the retention and mobilisation of their supporters. In contrast the move from opposition to government sees both partner in the coalition, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, remove most features that permit synchronous communication. The Green Party retains a low level of sophistication but balanced use of features, UKIP did not develop synchronous features and the British National party retain their characteristic use of the website to build a community. Overall the online presences of all the parties became less complex, with a reduction in feature use. Equally the provision of information in large blocks, documentation or press releases, is much reduced. The clear focus by all parties was on three activities: getting supporters to volunteer to campaign for the party; donate; and join. Websites act as a recruitment and mobilisation tool; this, despite the fact that there was no election campaign, indicates there is perceived value of an active membership at all times.

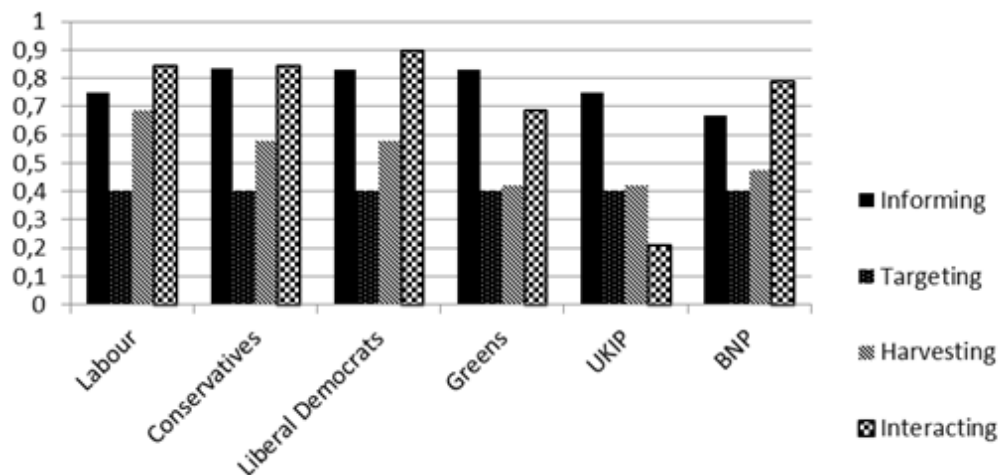
Figure 2: Average feature use in 2012 per category in the Macmillan schematic



6. In search of hypermedia campaigning

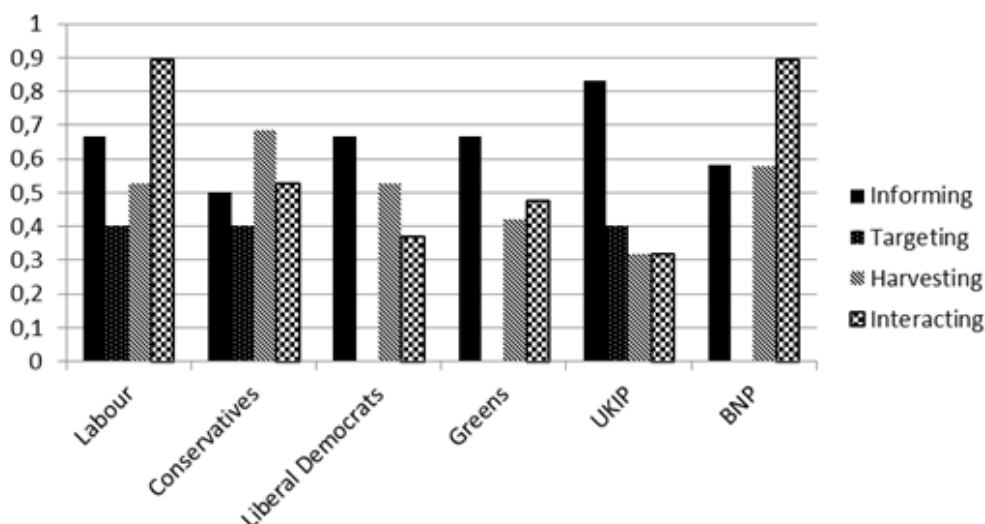
18 Aligning feature use with the core precepts of the Howard hypermedia campaign strategy we gain a slightly different picture (as shown in Figures 3 and 4). The 2010 general election campaign for all parties concentrated on informing, although the websites of Labour, the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and British National Party offered more features as a percentage of the overall number that allowed visitors to interact with one another and, at least potentially if not in practice, with members of the higher echelons of the party. There is little evidence that parties had a clear strategy for narrowcasting, suggesting their websites are catch-all environments. Equally, the parties were similarly disinclined to harvest data using sophisticated methods with Labour providing most means for collecting data from visitors and the three minor parties (the Green Party, UKIP and BNP) being least interested. The paucity of data collection may well be a feature of resource imbalances, and that parties do not have the mechanisms in place to use this data strategically. They therefore use overt means of data collection, such as signing up to email lists which are easily managed, as opposed to leaving cookies that can collect data about the visitor, their onsite behaviour and their interests based on offsite browsing or search behaviour. We thus gain an indication of election campaigns in the UK as mixing informing and interacting though, as we indicated in a more in-depth study of the use of Web 2.0 technologies at elections, interactivity took place within controlled and often closed off environments, such as forums where visitors had to sign up and sign in, rather than in open spaces on the website (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). It was only through widespread use of social networking sites, particularly Facebook, where interaction was controlled at a minimal level and public conversations (permitting reading and writing by any visitor) could be observed.

Figure 3: Average feature use in 2010 per category for hypermedia campaigning



19 As with observations based on the McMillan schematic, we find in 2012 for Labour and the BNP interactive features more widely used, but by the governing coalition partners a significant reduction. An information provision strategy appears to predominate, targeting being abandoned by all but Labour, the Conservatives and UKIP, but data harvesting has increased slightly. This reflects the greater use of upward information flows which attempt to involve supporters and convert them into activists and members. What is noticeable for Labour and the BNP is attempts at crowdsourcing, getting visitors to the site to share material. As noted this is a relinquishment of control, as the shared material can be framed positively or negatively, but may extend the reach of the parties who use that tactic.

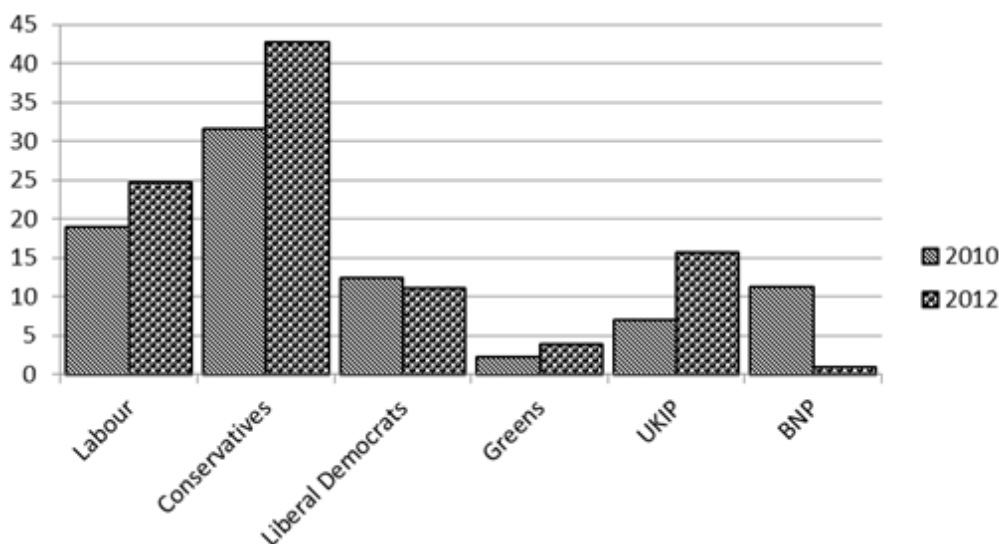
Figure 4: Average feature use in 2010 per category for hypermedia campaigning



7. UK political parties and the network effect

20 Figure 5 compares the reach of parties within social media platforms to gain an indication of their online popularity and potential reach. As we would perhaps expect, the situation for most parties is to find their online reach be extended, as for many organisations and individuals fans and followers accumulate over time and there are few instances where fans are lost unless the organisation acts in a way that their supporters find antithetical to the values of the organisation or their expectations. That would appear to be the case with the Liberal Democrats. Although the difference is small the trend is downward and coincides with a dip in popularity following the party joining the Conservatives to form a coalition government. Support for student tuition fees, following them foregrounding their opposition to the policy as a key element of their election manifesto, was one area in particular that angered some of their support base, particularly young people who may be more likely to demonstrate their support for parties on social networks. In overall terms, however, support online does not match support offline. While the Conservatives were ahead of Labour in the polls going into the 2010 election campaign, that was soon reversed. There has not been a clear increase in support for Labour online; rather their online reach has increased at the same rate as their main opponent in electoral politics. The only other anomaly is the drop in support for the British National Party; this however is a feature of their withdrawal from Twitter and YouTube and limited use of Facebook.

Figure 5: Potential Network effect for each party: in millions



21 In terms of importance of reach, the data suggests that the Conservatives have the potential to reach around two-thirds of the UK population, perhaps close to the entire online population of the UK as a whole. Of course this is only potential rather than actual reach, however having 4.5 million supporters online is significant in terms of the ability to be heard. Whether this, or the fact that Labour have half the reach, has any significance is questionable. Having potential reach is not the same as being heard; for example there is no guarantee that any, never mind all, of the Conservatives' followers on Twitter see even ten per cent of their tweets never mind they extend their reach by re-tweeting. With the ever more customisable features offered by Facebook the same may well be true of their amassed supporters on that platform. We also cannot assess the extent to which the same people support the party on each platform and are also most likely to view their videos, although it is recognised that sharing activities on each platform may potentially reach different second level followers (followers of followers) so the potential reach may still have a degree of validity. What we suggest is that the figures give a sense of prominence within the online environment and the degree to which they have a network who are interested in the announcements of the party and that might be willing to extend their reach. The data demonstrates that the online environment favours parties prominent within politics anyway, who are likely to dominate political news coverage and, therefore, there is little sense of an rebalancing of prominence to be earned by being highly proactive communicators online.

8. Online political communication: new communication tools, new agendas

22 Our data allows us to observe the evolution of election campaigning and political communication as well as differences between political communication at times of war (an election) and peace (between elections). We find Internet use during election campaigns characterised with a balance of informing and permitting interaction, although the latter is on the whole bracketed into specific spaces of a website. The widespread usage of Facebook does widen the possibilities for interaction, although the interaction tends to be horizontal, between fans, as opposed to facilitating a vertical connection between fans and the party hierarchy. It should also be noted that the extent of interactive possibilities differed markedly between parties. Apart from UKIP all offered some opportunities, but these ranged from 267 opportunities offered by the Greens, through 560 offered by Labour to 2745 offered by the Conservatives, 5630 by the Liberal Democrats and then the most interactive site of the British National Party which offered 15,164 opportunities for interaction. The amount of material available to be shared also varied. Only 14 items on Labour's site invited sharing, the Greens and Liberal Democrats allowed 158 and 308 to be shared respectively; the Conservatives invited sharing of 2785 items while every single item, a total of 18,345, items on the British National Party website could be shared. Surprisingly, given that targeted communication is argued to be a feature of elections, none of the parties seemed to offer anything but a catch-all environment and there was little interest in harvesting data.

23 One might expect a marked difference to be visible during the permanent campaigning period. Clearly there has been for the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, whose sites both reduced the number of interactive features and the overall quantity, the latter having only one interactive space which is protected by a password. Labour have accelerated their adoption of interactive features exponentially with their site inviting sharing and commenting on almost every page. This is matched by the British National Party whose site, although smaller, offers 894 opportunities to comment on and share material. A surprisingly large amount of features focus on the mobilisation of supporters, in particular features that recruit members and seek donations. Parties also want their supporters to extend their reach and join their campaigns. The strategy of extending reach may not be successful for all parties, as this needs a support base that is active and willing to visibly show their support. If we assume that network reach is an indication of the online support base, there is clear evidence of equalisation: the parties with the largest reach are those with greatest prominence. Interestingly, we can see the reduction in support for the Liberal Democrats since they joined government as a coalition partner;

although the drop is not dramatic it might suggest that friending and unfriending (as a metaphor for becoming a fan, following or subscribing) is a symbolic act. Finally we can also find a hint of a more strategic usage of the Internet, with a marked increase in the use of features that overtly and covertly harvest data from visitors to their websites.

24 Overall we build a picture of UK political parties as adapting to Web 2.0, some of the norms of online communication, and so developing a hypermedia campaign model. Resources may well hinder the embedding of features that harvest data, for example, as if data is harvested it must subsequently be used in some way. The use of the online media mix suggests the Internet is embedded in political communication, mirroring developments visible in elections across the European Union. The Internet is also a feature of the permanent campaign and having a vibrant, frequently updated and interactive web presence is, almost, *de rigeur*. The corollary of these developments may be that members feel closer to the party, better connected with other members and perhaps allowed certain privileges; such as access to bespoke information, dedicated members areas and the ability to both offer their thoughts and be part of any campaigns. However, this would seem to be the preserve of opposition parties rather than those of government. While Labour did not eschew interactivity while in government, the closing of spaces where members and supporters could interact by the coalition government partners suggest that fears of dealing with hostile comments override the benefits that may be gained from having an active membership. We can thus suggest that parties allow interactivity when it suits them, not because it matches the demands of their supporters but if it is perceived to offer more benefits than threats. From a strategic perspective this may appear sensible, but if Abrams' argument that the Internet "about conversations, interpersonal networking, personalisation and individualism" is true for politics, restricted usage of the Internet may be unwise. Yet, as indicated, the Internet is also about power and politics, power over who has voice and who has input into the processes of decision making; there is no indication that any politician wishes to open such privileges to the masses; it is likely then that the use of the Internet will reflect an institutional view of who should have power and who should be 'doing' politics.

9. Conclusions

25 UK parties use the online environment for a range of purposes, and these are illuminated in different ways through operationalising the McMillan and Howard schematics. In particular we find that features which permit user interaction are no longer eschewed, and the caution which inhibited allowing co-creation appears to have waned. Undoubtedly the reason for this is that parties are keen to gather data about and from visitors to the websites and online profiles and allowing them to leave text also leaves information. Hence we find UK parties attempting to exploit the network effect, extending their reach and harnessing the labour or their supporters to further visitors from who the party can glean further information. But, we also find evidence of parties balancing attempting to realise the potential gains from interaction against the dangers that can be caused by unrestricted co-creation. Hence parties in government tend to show greater circumspection when designing their web presences and permitting user interaction. The reasons may be assumed as the inherent cautiousness characteristic of parties, or a lack of resources to monitor and censor user comments; alternatively it may be that the real perceived value is harvesting data and if the resources are unavailable the value in risking an interactive communication strategy is diminished.

26 The lessons we thus can learn is that while parties appear to explore the potential of the affordances of the online environment, there is no clear evolutionary path. Across time and across parties there is an ebb and flow in innovation and communication style. More importantly, the data suggests that parties exploit communication for political advantage. If there is a perceived value in being more interactive then parties will experiment. If no advantage is earned they will retrench. As with any other communicative medium, the Internet does not offer a magic bullet to aid winning elections, increase supporter loyalty or enhance citizen representation. Adoption may have an impact within certain campaigns but it is not changing politics in any more fundamental way.

10. Questions

- 27 Can you imagine political parties ever fully embracing interactivity; do the cultural constraints outweigh the potential benefits?
- 28 While embracing hypermedia campaigning, resources hinder data harvesting. Should this be a priority for political parties?
- 29 Election campaigning online could be argued to be a waste of resources due to the low attention to official party communication among Internet browsers: discuss the pros and cons of using the online environment to win votes.

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Resumos

Within this article we examine the adherence to the conventions of online communication and hypermedia campaigning techniques among European political parties using UK parties as a case study. Overall we find UK political parties adapting to the norms of online communication and a hypermedia campaign model. The Internet is also a feature of the permanent campaign and having a vibrant, frequently updated and interactive web presence is, almost, de rigueur, though sophistication is hindered by resources. One corollary may be that members feel closer to the party, though techniques for achieving this are explored to a greater extent by opposition parties rather than those of government suggesting campaigning norms prevail and there is little indication parties wish to relinquish any of the power over 'doing' politics.

Neste artigo pretende-se analisar a adesão às convenções da comunicação on-line e das campanhas de hipermédia nos partidos políticos europeus, utilizando o Reino Unido como estudo de caso. No geral encontramos os partidos no Reino Unido a adaptarem-se às normas de comunicação online e a um modelo de campanha hipermédia. A internet é também uma característica da campanha permanente e ter uma presença vibrante, frequentemente atualizada e interativa na web é, quase, uma obrigação, embora a sofisticação seja prejudicada pelos recursos. Um corolário pode ser que os membros se sintam mais próximos do partido, embora as técnicas para o atingir sejam exploradas em maior extensão pelos partidos da oposição e menos pelos do governo, sugerindo prevalecer as normas de campanha. Há pouca indicação de que os partidos desejem abrir mão de algum do poder que têm sobre o processo de "fazer" política.

Entradas no índice

Palavras-chave : Reino Unido, interactividade, comunicação política, campanha hipermédia

Keywords : UK, interactivity, political communication, hypermedia campaign

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