The UK European Parliament online campaign: the tail that never wagged?

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Introduction

The 2009 European Parliament elections were the seventh since the introduction of direct elections in 1979. The first four in the UK were conducted using the first-past-the-post system, but the last three have been under a party list proportional system [1]. Combined with electoral dealignment within British politics (Butler and Stokes 1974, Dunleavy and Husbands 1985), the introduction of some proportionality to the electoral system has encouraged more representation amongst some smaller parties. For example, in 2004 of the 75 British seats [2] up for grabs on election night the Conservatives and Labour only won 46, whereas the Liberal Democrats, United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), The Green Party, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru all gained European representation. In 2009 this trend continued, where of the 69 British seats, the big two parties won only 39. Moreover, this masks two very interesting developments. First, in securing 13 seats Labour were only equal second with UKIP, with the Liberal Democrats (11) close behind. Second, for the first time ever the far-right British National Party (BNP) won representation at a national as opposed to local level election, gaining two list-allocated seats. If such results were mirrored in a UK General Election there would be significant media interest, but this is not necessarily the case with European Parliament elections. Indeed, turnout in the UK is consistently lower than the European average for every election since 1979, and in Great Britain turnout is on a downward trend from 37.6% in 2004 to 34% in 2009, which is less than half of those who vote in General Elections. As a second order election (Reif & Schmitt 1980; Tenscher & Maier, 2009), European Parliament contests appear to generate limited interest in Great Britain.

At the same time, there has been growing interest amongst party campaigners, individual politicians, the media and other commentators of the role of the Internet as a communication channel during election campaigns. The 2009 European Parliament elections is the third where the Internet has been used (Gibson and Ward 2000; Lusoli

and Ward 2005). The first UK election with an Internet presence was the 1997 General Election, where some of the party's provided a website (Ward & Gibson 1998). It was all fairly amateurish, and these websites essentially provided information: as electronic brochures they were interesting but of limited value. Between 1997 and the 2001 General Election there was more experimentation of the campaigning possibilities of the Internet. There was slightly more use of the Internet by parties (Coleman 2001) and candidates (McCarthy & Saxton 2001; Gibson and Ward 2003) in the 2001 election. Although websites were still fairly static in content, the parties did start to use them as resource generation tools (Gibson *et al.* 2003), in addition, the parties started to use email as a means of reaching audiences (Coleman and Hall 2001). However, in 2001 the Internet's actual impact was marginal, and it was primarily used to generate media coverage rather than to reach voters directly (Ballinger 2002). In the run-up to the 2005 election commentators started to ask whether the Internet would play a key role (Thompson 2005; Jackson 2006a). Whilst the third election at which the Internet was present did see more of a role for the technology this was very limited (Ward & Coleman 2005; Stanyer 2005). The central advance was the use of password protected email lists to mobilise activists (Jackson 2006b). Nor was there much evidence of candidates fully utilising web technologies, for example, at the time weblogs were growing significantly in popularity, but they played a very limited role (Jackson 2007; Stanyer 2006). This would suggest a very gradual increase in campaigner's interest in the Internet, but this was transformed after the 2008 U.S. Presidential campaign. Some commentators suggested that Obama's use of the Internet helped him win the election (Hamilton-Miller 2008; Stirland 2008; Greengard 2009). It is no surprise, therefore, that some UK politicians are pontificating about the likely role of the Internet in electioneering. For example, Adam Afriyie, the Conservative party shadow spokesperson on technology suggested that "The next general election is likely to be something of a technological breakthrough" (Andrews 2009). Expectations of the role the Internet may play at the next General Election are high, but was this the case with the EP elections?

Given this interest in online communications, and perhaps equally that party strategies are under less public and media scrutiny during EP elections when the contest tends to be framed as a referendum on either the government or the UK's membership of the European Union, the election could have been used as a testing ground. Innovations in

communication can be risky under the spotlight of an election, therefore with this contest having lesser importance for the majority of parties, notwithstanding the fact that EP elections present an opportunity for minor and fringe parties to have an impact due to low turnout, one would expect the Internet to feature more strongly in the campaign given this context and that it would not need more capital and manpower investments that other on-the-ground communication modes may. In the run-up to the 2009 European Parliamentary elections the Internet presented two potential scenarios. It might be the means by which more citizens became involved in a European Parliament election campaign. Alternatively, greater use by campaigners of the Internet could lead to a more introverted campaign where parties communicated more, but with a very small already interested audience. We will consider which of these scenarios dominated in the 2009 European Parliament election campaign. We will first outline our conceptual framework for assessing the role and impact that the Internet played. We will then outline our methodology to assess how the Internet was used, and then we will evaluate the nature of the Internet during this campaign.

Conceptual Framework

Considering the 2004 European Parliament elections across 25 countries, Lusoli (2005) suggested that three theoretical frameworks applied: normalisation versus equalisation; information versus engagement; and mobilisation versus reinforcement. We refine Lusoli's framework for the 2009 election to take into account three factors. First, Web 1.0 was the dominant, if not only approach to the Internet, during the 2004 election. The introduction of Web 2.0 as a concept (O'Reilly 2005) potentially changes the relationship between the producer and consumer of online political messages. Second, within a Web 2.0 context, terms such as engagement and mobilisation appear to have a slightly different meaning from that within Web 1.0. Lusoli essentially equated engagement with interactivity, but we suggest that the interface between the sender and receiver of an online message can be further divided to engagement and interaction. Moreover, mobilisation for Lusoli refers to the use of the Internet to reach those not previously interested in politics. We suggest that the evidence of the 2008 U.S. Presidential election is that mobilisation as a concept should focus on the use of the Internet to encourage visitors to do something actively for the party/candidate. Third, we assess whether ideology is an explanatory factor for party sites using different online features and tools and in particular how parties

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devote online space to informing, engaging, interacting with and mobilising site visitors. Finally we add a new concept, that of personalisation, which reflects the potentially sophisticated ways in which individual candidates can use the Internet. Our four part framework is, therefore: *normalisation* versus *equalisation; information* versus *interactivity*; *engagement* versus *mobilisation*; *party ideology* and *personalisation*.

Normalisation versus equalisation

The successful diffusion of any new technology is likely to lead to a discussion about the impact of that new innovation on existing power relationships, within both society and the body politic. Early optimists suggested that the greater use of the Internet by individual citizens would 'level the playing field' (Rheingold 1993; Stone 1996; Bimber 1998). This equalisation hypothesis implied that existing power elites' dominance was upheld by their greater access to the traditional media, but the Internet allowed other political actors to bypass the media and speak to voters directly. Initially, the equalisation hypothesis required only that smaller political parties were more likely to have an Internet presence. Research has increasingly focused not just on whether such smaller political parties have a website, but more importantly how they use it. In particular, are smaller political parties more likely to utilise the interactive elements of Web 2.0 applications (Jackson and Lilleker 2009a)? To assess the equalisation hypothesis requires not just identifying who has a website, but also how they use it.

The normalisation hypothesis, however, suggests that the use within politics of any technology merely reflects existing power relationships (Bellamy and Raab 1999), and so with the Internet there is 'politics as usual' (Margolis and Resnich 2000). Therefore, existing political and electoral inequalities are reinforced, not undermined, by the Internet (D'Alessio 1997; Agre 1998; Davis 1999). The access larger political parties have to the traditional media offline, and their greater resources, drive more traffic to their online presence. The normalisation hypothesis implies that the larger parties would be both the most likely to have an Internet presence, and that it would be the most technically sophisticated.

A middle ground exists between these two approaches, an ebb and flow taking into account country specific political cultures. The evidence for the normalisation hypothesis has been provided in candidate-centred countries such as America, whereas in party-centred countries, such as the UK the evidence suggests some support for equalisation (Gibson *et al.* 2002). Whilst the larger political parties do tend to dominate online in the UK, the smaller parties have been able to use the Internet to bypass the media. For example, in the 1999 European parliament elections smaller parties made as sophisticated use of their websites as the larger parties(Gibson and Ward 2000), and in the 2005 General Election smaller parties gained members, secured some funds and directed activists in a way normally denied them (Jackson 2006b). Moreover, the evidence in 'peace time' between elections is that smaller parties, though not their elected politicians, are more likely to utilise the opportunities provided by Web 2.0 applications (Jackson & Lilleker 2009a & b). The 'ebb and flow' approach requires a more subtle understanding of how political actors use the Internet, taking into account what opportunities it provides them compared with other political communication channels.

Hypotheses 1: All parties, independent of levels of support or previous electoral standing, will offer equally sophisticated (in terms of the overall feel and experience offered) web presences given the opportunities for impact within the context of an European Parliament election.

Information versus interactivity
Researchers have consistently considered whether political actors' online presence is merely content-led, or also seeks to develop longer-term relationships (Gibson and Ward 2000; Rainie and Horrigan 2007). Where websites are essentially informational, then the focus is on what messages the party or candidate wants to impart. Hence, such websites are viewed merely as one-way communication channels, and have been criticised for being 'virtual billboards' (Sadnow and James 1999) designed to impart political information such as party policies. The use of the Internet in the UK at the previous two EP elections suggested primarily informing as the purpose for party and candidate websites (Gibson & Ward 2000; Lusoli and Ward 2005). Whilst generally one-way content-driven websites are criticised because they do not fully utilise the opportunities the Internet presents, there is some evidence that

many visitors to websites primarily want just information (Ward *et al.* 2005; Jackson 2008), and that it can shape their voting behaviour (Tolbert & McNeal 2003; Jackson 2008).

Interactivity is a contested concept, but O'Reilly's (2005) view of an architecture of participation is placed at the core of Web 2.0 applications. As noted by Bimber and Davis (2003) interactivity requires information flowing in multiple directions, hence we seek to identify whether two-way communication is potentiated. Rafaeli (1988) suggests that interaction requires participants to converse in a linear and logical way, and we suggest that this is a means of assessing online interactivity. In an era of Web 1.0 applications there was limited evidence of interactivity during election campaigns (Gibson and Ward 2000; Bowers-Bowen & Gunter 2002; Lusoli and Ward 2005; Coleman & Ward 2005). Theoretically the architecture of participation at the heart of Web 2.0 encourages a richer experience between the host and visitor, so that ideas and opinions can be directly discussed through blogs, discussion forums and social networking sites (SNS). Such interactivity encourages the visitor to interact both with the host, but also potentially with other visitors.

Hypothesis 2: Party and candidate online presences will offer rich experiences that combines information with engaging features, and opportunities for user-to-site and user-to-user interactivity.

Engagement versus mobilisation
We suggest that the terms engagement and interactivity have been intertwined, but that whilst both are based upon two-way communication, they are subtly different. Engagement played a key role in Obama's 2008 U.S. Presidential campaign in that it used tools such as filesharing which made the visitors experience more pleasant, and they probably stayed on site longer. Thus engagement can be linked to the notion of stickiness (Jackson 2003), and so features that make a site experientially stimulating, attractive and allow visitors to interact with features such as click-thrus, sharing, audiovisuals and interactive games come under this heading. This reinforces the distinction made by Jennifer Stromer-Galley (2004) between interactivity as a product, a low-level form of interaction with the site that shapes an experience, and interactivity as process which mirrors conversation and is thus redefined as

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interactivity. Interactive features allow visitors to interact in some way with the host or other visitors, and offer the potential for two-way or three-way participatory dialogue (Lilleker & Malagon, 2010).

We also suggest that the traditional use of the term mobilisation may not be applicable within a Web 2.0 era. Where Lusoli (2005) described a conceptual framework of mobilisation, this meant then that it attracted those politically interested offline, we suggest that this term is better referred to the situation where the party/candidate seeks to mobilise visitors on their website. Such mobilisation includes donating money, joining a party and registering as a supporter. Engagement is more likely to be used to those visiting a party/candidate for the first time, be it on- or off-line, but mobilisation centres on the generation of resources from those already aware of the party/candidate. We suggest visitors may be drawn into a three stage process, from being engaged in the site and so the host to registering to receive further information, and then finally to become a more active supporter. While clearly this will not be a route taken by every visitor, this would be an ideal and so engagement and mobilisation should be key functions of party websites during elections.

Hypothesis 3: Parties and candidates will use their websites to engage with visitors, and attempt to mobilise them into supporting them actively either online or offline and pledging support at the ballot box.

Ideology

In theory party ideology not only shapes policy, but also the nature and modes of communication. Given the more communal and participatory ethos of social democratic parties there is an expectation for these to provide more engaging interactive websites, while the authoritarian right would be expected to adopt a more informative and less inclusive style. Sudulich (2009) studied four countries (Italy, Spain, Ireland and UK) and found that it was indeed left-wing parties which were more likely to exchange ideas with the electorate. Furthermore, in a comparison of the French presidential candidate's websites it was the left wing Segolene Royal that offered the more inclusive style as compared to the candidate-centred campaign of Sarkozy (Lilleker & Malagon, 2010). However, it is also noted that parties of the right have been quicker to adopt new technologies and may offer the more sophisticated

sites (Copsey 2003), and adopt Web 2.0 specifically (Jackson & Lilleker 2009a), which to some extent was born out with the studies of Sudulich and Lilleker & Malagon; hence it will be interesting to assess if ideology does play a role.

Hypothesis 4: parties of the left will offer more engaging and interactive sites with greater community inclusion, while parties of the right will be more informative and party centric and communication on their sites will be more closed and controlled.

Personalisation

Up until the 1960s British political culture was highly structured and partisan. There was a high level of party identification amongst voters (Johnston and Pattie 1996), and at the same time the party structure dominated political communication. Gradually this edifice has been challenged, so that voting behaviour is more volatile, resulting in more political parties with electoral representation, and individual politicians can utilise communication channels such as the Internet to reach voters. We suggest, therefore, that one growing trend amongst politicians, be they elected or seeking election, is the growing emphasis on personalisation. In studies of the style of presidential and prime ministerial campaigns this has become known as demotic campaigning (Busby, 2009), suggesting political candidates seek to celebritise their image by both appearing ordinary and as possessing an aesthetic character simultaneously (Turner, 2009). Candidates have traditionally provided a short (or sometimes not so short) biography, both the personal and political details they wish to stress in their election address. Personalisation suggests something more than this, namely that the candidate seeks to provide information about themselves which might positively shape the image of them (Stanyer and Wring 2004). By stressing their personal non-political interests such as hobbies, family life or favourite books they might come across as likeable human beings, and so more electable. Certainly, this sense of creating a hinterland has been identified in the use of the Internet by MPs (Auty 2005; Jackson 2008; Jackson and Lilleker 2009a). It is not that the Internet is the only means by which personalisation can be promoted, but it has clearly made it easier to achieve.

Hypothesis 5: Candidate sites will adopt a highly personalised approach to campaigning marketing themselves as potential representatives, as opposed to simply promoting themselves as members of a party.

Methodology

This research project was part of the 23 country CENMEP comparative study of the use of the Internet during the 2009 European Parliament elections. It was the successor to the 2004 Internet and Elections Project (Jankowski *et al*. 2005), but differs from its predecessor methodologically. Whereas the 2004 project used web sphere analysis (Foot and Schneider 2002), and so sampled a wide range of political actors, our research focused only on parties and candidates. This was because the 2004 project found that these were the actors most likely to make use of the Internet during the campaign (Van Os *et al.* 2007).

Research was conducted in the last seven days of the campaign, on the basis of a random sample of both political party and individual candidate websites. Two researchers content analysed 26 party sites, and 76 individual candidate websites. Inter-coder reliability was established using two methods. First, the two individual researchers conducted a pilot content analysis of a test website managed by the CENMEP organisers. Then the two researchers tested five real sites to ensure 100% reliability of their scores. Depending on the exact answers there were a maximum of 214 units on the coding sheet.

The data was assessed using three different variables: party versus candidate, size of party; and seniority of candidate. Identification of party and candidate was obvious, and party size was divided into three categories, based on representation within British political institutions. Major are the three big parliamentary parties (Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats). Minor describes the five parties who have parliamentary, national or local council representation. The twelve Fringe parties have no form of elected representation. Seniority of candidate was determined by where in their party's list they appeared, divided into equal thirds of top, middle and bottom [3]. Irrespective of whether the party had any chance of gaining representation, where they were in the list indicated their internal importance. We assume that those in the top of the list were a party's leading figures in that region, those in the middle

were developing their profile and those at the bottom were just beginning to raise their internal profile.

The overall aim of this paper is to identify how political parties and individual candidates used the Internet during the election campaign. This will be achieved by testing the above hypotheses through these five questions:

1. To what extent is the Internet used as a tool by all parties and can evidence of equalisation of sophistication of use be detected?
2. To what extent is the information heavy Web 1.0 approach to web use being supplemented with Web 2.0 features that offer an engaging and interactive experience?
3. To what extent are visitors to party and candidates' online presences encouraged to get actively involved in the campaign?
4. Is there any evidence that party ideology is a factor determining the selection of Internet-based features?
5. To what extent do candidates demonstrate a personalised approach to campaigning?

Normalisation of web use and equalisation between parties

While it is clear that for most parties, though not all even in 2009, a website is a de rigueur tool of campaigning, the structure, composition and content varies massively. There are however general observations we can make. Major parties offer the richest websites in terms of the amount of content, the overall user experience, and so can be described as the most engaging purely in terms of the technological sophistication of design. Parties with a lower level or no representation at all clearly have fewer resources, and thus there is a lower level of technological sophistication. However, this is supplemented through the use of free media such as hosting videos on YouTube, photographs on Flickr, and having profiles and fan pages within social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace. Such tools are not the preserve purely of the minor parties in order to redress the imbalance between the quality and sophistication of experiences visitors may have on their websites. All parties seem to be attempting to extend their digital footprint. and are exploiting the opportunities

offered by free platforms with large memberships. Thus the imbalances remain between parties as is shown in figure 1.
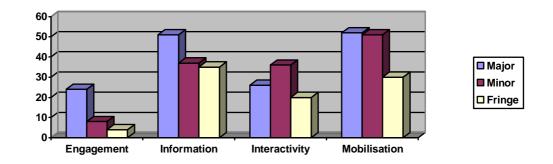
Figure 1: Number of features appearing on party websites by type as percentage of total possible.
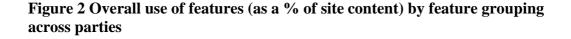

When counting the average use of a feature, which will be introduced and broken down in the following section, major parties have the largest number of features that offer engagement, eleven features appearing across major sites falling to seven for fringe and six for minor parties. In particular, it is the features that require the greatest technology that are the preserve of the major parties such as hosting videos of speeches, animated features, downloads, interactive event calendars or areas for site or party members. Major parties use 10 out of 18 possible features, minor parties use three and fringe six showing a diversity across parties independent of size or resources. While not universally available across the sites of all parties as we shall see, it is across major party sites such elements are most prevalent. Information is well served across all parties, with major parties offering an overall larger amount of different packages of information. There is a consistency with interactivity, and here it is the use of social networking across all parties that achieve some level of balance as no parties offer much in the way of interactivity within their sites. Major and minor parties are the most likely to offer a range of features designed to mobilise visitors to their sites, again this is linked to technology however, with some fringe parties unable to support donations, online joining or provide shops due to the weak infrastructure of their sites. That is not to suggest, however, that these are featured on the sites of every major party and so there is clearly a strategy as well as a resources question to the inclusion or dis-inclusion of features.

This numeric perspective does not support the equalisation hypothesis. There is little evidence to suggest that minor and / or fringe parties are seeking to gain greater attention from browsers of party websites by offering more sophisticated experiences to visitors to their sites. Unlike the 2005 General Election (Jackson 2006b) or during peace-time (Jackson & Lilleker 2009a), smaller parties are not offering a more interactive experience to visitors as a means of reaching out to new audiences and engaging with them in conversation in an attempt to mitigate against the low attention paid them by the media. This suggests that smaller parties take a pick 'n' mix approach to when and how they use the Internet.

Overall party use of all features of the possible architecture for a website seems limited for all categories. Equally, adoption is fairly sporadic and so there are few sites that could be described as offering a wide variety of features and tools for visitors. In simple numeric terms, it is clear that major parties offer visitors the richest experience with a range of features providing differing functions. This enmeshing of information, engaging and interactive features alongside invitations to become more involved is common of the professional hypermedia campaign (Howard 2006).

These observations are only partially born out when examining the visitor's average experience of visiting party web presences. Major parties appear to offer the richest, and perhaps most rounded experience combining information with engaging features and opportunities for interaction. Minor and fringe parties clearly opt for a more interactive strategy, and it is within their sites we are most likely to find forums, opportunities to ask questions and clear opportunities to engage with the party and candidates. In particular, the British National Party made a deliberate attempt to build a community within the party's website, which is consistent with previous research on the use of the Internet by far right parties (Copsey 2003; Jackson & Lilleker 2009a). Not to the extent of that achieved by Obama, however their forum, question and answer sessions and push poll features provided the party with a platform to engage with their online audience. However, the libertarian pro-EU Libertas party offered a range of interactive features and clearly made a deliberate attempt to engage with visitors on issues relating to membership of the European Union. This suggests a diversity in usage that perhaps relates more to strategic objectives than ideological perspectives. Equally, while fringe parties have to provide information in order to get

their message across and gain visibility so their high percentage in this category could be expected, this is vastly overshadowed by their use of interactive features as is shown in figure 2 and table 1. While many fringe party sites are predominantly informative, they supplement these sites and some degree of interaction is taking place upon social networking sites, file sharing and video hosting sites. These are used by smaller parties to both enable them to have a voice within the political marketplace, possibly in order to engage with voters, but also to make up for their paucity of resources. However, this still places them at a disadvantage as they are not alone on these platforms, and so resources appear to still counter the equalisation thesis. It appears politics as usual (Resnich and Margolis 2000) in terms of hierarchy in an online environment, as well as across offline or traditional media. However, when focusing purely in percentages, fringe parties may have less overall features but appear to be most willing to move into free and interactive areas and, in case of the English Democrats, use Facebook as their primary web presence. This implies some evidence for the ebb and flow midway point between normalisation and equalisation.

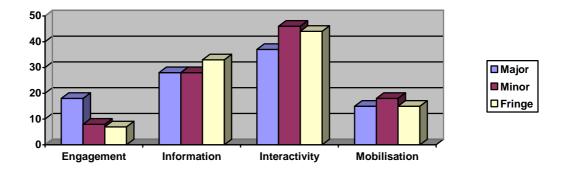**Figure 2 Overall use of features (as a % of site content) by feature grouping across parties**

Table 1 Overall average percentage of webspace devoted to feature grouping

	Engagement	Interactivity	Mobilisation	Information
Major	13	37	15	28
Minor	8	46	18	28
Fringe	7	44	15	33

Just informing or engaging and interacting as well?

The above suggests an array of feature use, and so a reasonably diverse experience on offer to visitors. Information is particularly well served as table 2 shows news, press releases, video advertisements and information on the party's position on issues and past achievements and history are dominant features appearing across parties of all levels. E-newsletters are a more post-modern take, and are becoming a common tool for keeping supporters close to the party through constant communication. Candidate sites follow a similar pattern, but this reduces with candidates at the bottom of the list having little of anything on their sites or profiles.

Table 2: Number of informational features appearing across party and candidate websites

	Party			Candidates		
	Major N = 3	Minor N = 7	Fringe N = 16	Top N = 28	Middle N = 26	Bottom N = 12
News	3	7	8	9	3	1
Media Clippings	1	1	3	0	1	0
Press releases	2	2	5	1	0	0
E-Newsletters	3	4	5	5	1	0
Newsletters	0	0	1	0	1	0
News Archive	0	0	1	2	0	0
Video/Advertisements	3	7	10	8	4	0
Speeches	2	0	0	2	0	0
Party Stance on Issues	3	5	11	5	4	2
Party History	2	5	8	0	0	0
Codes of Conduct	0	1	0	0	0	0
Party Achievements	1	5	4	12	10	1
FAQs	0	0	3	0	0	0
TOTAL	20	37	9	44	24	4

Features deemed as engaging or likely to involve or entertain visitors to Party and Candidate Websites are found to be featured fairly sporadically, as shown in table 3. Little beyond a search facility stands out as being a universal feature for parties; candidates tend to include photographs of themselves, often featuring them within the region. Mostly, features classified as likely to engage visitors are used to allow easy access to information; though one should note that many of the tools that were once seen as engaging are now reclassified as interactive. In terms of engaging visitors with the issues, only three parties, all fringe parties, offered any sort of civic education and both are packaged to persuade. Libertas is a pro-EU party that provided positive

information about the EU; in contrast WAID and UK First offered the opposing slant on their information. Therefore, there is little or no support for hypothesis 1, rather during the European Parliament elections there was evidence of politics as normal (Margolis and Resnich 2000).

Table 3: Number of engaging features appearing across party and candidate websites

	Party			Candidates		
	Major N = 3	Minor N = 7	Fringe N = 16	Top N = 28	Middle N = 26	Bottom N = 12
Animation	1	0	0	1	0	1
Photos	1	2	3	11	2	0
Audio	0	1	0	1	0	0
Podcasts	0	0	0	1	0	0
Subscribe to specific news topics	1	0	1			
Read Speech	2	0	0	1	0	0
Watch Speeches	1	0	0	0	0	0
Download Speeches	1	0	0	0	0	0
Area for Site members	1	1	0	2	3	0
Area for Party members	1	1	0	0	1	0
Language Switch	0	1	1			
National Civic Information	0	0	0	0	0	0
EU Civic Information	0	0	3	3	2	0
Voting Information	0	0	0	1	5	0
Guest Book	0	0	2	1	0	0
Event Information	1	0	0	0	0	0
Search Facility	3	5	2	8	4	2
Tag Cloud	0	0	0	1	0	0
TOTAL	13	11	12	31	17	3

As is suggested by much literature on Web 2.0 developments in Internet technology, there is a wide array of tools that offer some degree of interactivity, and party and candidate websites thus have a large list of features they can include (Anderson, 2007). As indicated previously, and shown in table 4, the most popular interactive tool is the social networking site and allowing social bookmarking. Thus parties and top candidates appear to be attempting to extend their digital footprint personally, and through supporters endorsing their sites themselves within their own virtual networks. Where social networks are used, such as weblogs, Facebook, Flickr and YouTube, profiles tend to conform to the general patterns of usage and allow users to post

comments. It is the minority, however, that offer embedded interactive tools such as polls, forums or chat facilities within their sites; possibly this is a question of resources required to manage such functions or alternative they see little value to be gained from using these media.
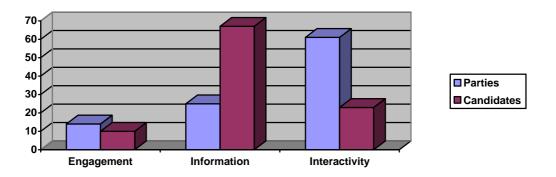
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	Party			Candidates		
	Major **N = 3**	**Minor** **N = 7**	**Fringe** **N = 16**	**Top** **N = 28**	**Middle** **N = 26**	**Bottom** **N = 12**
Blog, Visitors can tag	1	5	7			
Blog enabled comments	1	2	6	1	3	0
Blogroll	1	1	3	3	1	0
Web Feeds	1	5	2	0	3	0
Site Sharing allowed	1	2	1	5	3	1
Promote via SNS	1	0	0	11	5	1
Link to SNS profile	3	6	6	13	9	2
Social Bookmarking allowed	3	3	4	9	3	1
Commenting allowed on News	0	1	0	1	3	0
Rating allowed on News	0	1	0	9	3	1
Forum	0	1	0	4	0	0
Link to Youtube video	2	5	8	2	2	0
Link to YouTube profile	1	5	5			
Commenting allowed on Videos	2	4	7	2	2	0
Rating allowed on Videos	1	4	8	2	2	0
Link to Flickr profile	0	0	1	3	1	0
Commenting allowed on Flickr	0	0	1	3	1	0
Ask Party Question facility	1	2	2	5	6	0
Ask Cand Question facility	0	0	0	1	1	0
Create Event	0	0	0	0	0	0
Prioritise Values	0	0	0	0	0	0
Short Opinion Poll	0	2	1	0	1	0
Long Opinion Poll	0	0	0	0	0	0
Publish Poll Results	0	1	0	0	1	0
Chat facility with politicians	1	0	0	4	0	0
Chat with other	0	1	3	4	0	0

visitors						
Chat archive	1	1	1			
TOTAL	22	61	77	85	56	6

In terms of the overall experience visitors would be likely to receive on visiting sites, just in terms of overall average percentages, both party and candidate sites were mostly given over to providing information but this shows a more positive view of a shift towards a Web 2.0 strategy. Figure 3 shows the extent to which, on average, party and candidates sites were engaging, informational or interactive, as an overall percentage of site content; so here this is percentage of sites as opposed to how many features appeared from a predetermined list of all that could possibly be included.

Figure 3: Levels of Informative, Engaging and Interactive features as a percentage of overall web presences

Candidate websites were basic and predominantly informational with limited use of interactive features that often related to the use of social networking sites. Party websites provide a lot of information but also a significant amount of interactive features, which is progress from 1999 and 2004 (Gibson and Ward 2000; Lusoli and Ward 2005). A partial reason for this is the sheer amount of interactive features as compared to those within the categories of engagement and information, but that is not to suggest the high figure is anomalous. Actually parties choose to use a significant number of those features; however it should be noted that many are not hosted within their site but actually relate to the adoption of free ways of disseminating images, videos and messages which come with interactivity built in. Half of all parties used YouTube to host videos and allowed visitors to comment and rate their content. Similar numbers offered fan pages across the major UK social networking sites, and again these allowed visitors to post material and interact with

one another, the host and so shape future visitors' experiences. While few parties allowed open access for visitors to shape the content in areas of their websites, this use of free social networking sites suggests a qualitative change is being offered to visitors who wish to engage further with the parties. Some candidates permitted users to interact with them and other site users through forums, rating facilities on news and through social networking sites where some candidates could be interacted with while others encouraged sharing of their material.

Thus, as argued elsewhere (Jackson & Lilleker 2009a), while the campaign may have had a Web 1.5 look to it this may be an appropriate strategy. For example, fringe parties may have to think about informing as much as engaging with visitors. However, a richer overall experience is emerging with many parties and candidates innovating online. Therefore, we can argue that hypothesis 2 is proven but only partially, though not on the sites of every party or candidate; a rich experience during the EP election would only really be found by browsers who visited lots of party and candidate sites. While some websites offer the technologically sophisticated hypermedia experience (Howard 2006), some remained in the era of the electronic brochure (Sadow & James 1999). There are no neat explanations in terms of party size among minor or fringe parties. Across all parties there is diversity in approaches to constructing a varied visitor experience.

Mobilising the web user or talking to a passive audience?
Whilst previously mobilisation has referred to using the Internet to reach those not previously involved in politics, we suggest that Obama's 2008 U.S. Presidential campaign suggests a different meaning of the term. Mobilisation is how political actors use the Internet to energize visitors to their website, and to do something for the campaign. Mobilising a broad support base was a key function of Barack Obama's online strategy (Panagopoulos and Francia 2009), and perhaps it is in this area one could expect the greatest level of innovation. While outward demonstrations of support were encouraged to some extent, this is classified as an interactive feature and may well have been influenced by observations from Obama's campaign; there was little activity that could be classified as new within the mobilisation category. As would be expected the major priorities are donating and gaining members, with all major and minor parties and a high proportion of fringe parties offering these options

for visitors to their websites. The Conservatives were the only major party not to seek volunteers, while of the minor parties only the British National Party, Scottish and Welsh Nationalists together with the Green Party sought to mobilise supporters and one fringe party, Animals Count, tried to encourage visitors to their website and Facebook group to campaign on their behalf. Some candidates offer information aimed at the region in which they are standing, but this is very few in relation to overall numbers. There is little evidence for mobilisation of supporters via online activity at the 2009 EP contest.

Table 5: Number of mobilisation features appearing across party and candidate websites

	Party			Candidates		
	Major N = 3	Minor N = 7	Fringe N = 16	Top N = 28	Middle N = 26	Bottom N = 12
Donate	3	7	7	1	0	0
Register	0	1	2	5	4	0
Volunteering	2	4	1	4	0	1
Join as Member	3	7	9	1	1	0
Voter Registration	1	1	1	2	4	1
Register for Events	1	0	2	0	0	0
Shop	1	4	5	1	0	0
TOTAL	11	24	27	14	9	2

Ideology: inclusive versus exclusive communication?

Due to the paucity of candidate sites standing outside of the party site, it is only of value to focus on the party websites. Equally, one could logically suggest that the party site would best reflect strategic differences that could be linked to party ideology. Positioning the parties involved identifying the party's position on a left-right continuum on the socio-economic axis according to EUprofiler (http://www.euprofiler.eu/) which took into account party stances on social issues, immigration and nationalism. The twenty UK parties were divided into four far left (socialist/communist), six left libertarian, two centrist or catch-all parties, one progressive right party and seven which fell into the far right nationalist/authoritarian bracket.

Focusing on the visitor experience alone, so assessing on average what percentage of features on the sites of parties in each grouping, suggests little difference in strategic approaches (see table 5)

Table 6: Percentage of features used by ideology

	Information	Engagement	Mobilisation	Interactivity
Far left	30	32	16	22
Left libertarian	32	32	13	23
Centrist	25	29	16	30
Progressive right	26	26	17	31
Far right	24	28	16	33

Focusing on the presence of individual features, as expected parties across the ideological spectrum are equally likely to adopt any of the informational and mobilisation features; though shops seem to be provided by the right parties (5 out of seven) as compared to only 2 out of 6 left libertarian and no far left parties. In terms of engaging with visitors, the left libertarian parties offer more opportunities for visitors to share features; the right allow greater amounts of subscription and tailoring of content through feeds or issue specific e-newsletters and only two parties the far right British National Party and UK First have a guest book. However, there is a clear divide surrounding interactive features, with the left and libertarian being least interactive and the further right party the more interactive they are. There are also differences in usage of features. The far right blog more, but allowing visitors to tag and comment on entries, they also offer more opportunities to discuss politics with the party and with other visitors; the British National Party provides a publicly viewable forum though participation requires registration.. The use of free sites and the sharing and promotion via social networks is a feature adopted by all parties as is using YouTube and so allowing further comments. Thus when looking at most features we would suggest that the demands of campaigning appear to be overriding ideological constraints on communication. However, as suggested by Copsey (2003) and Jackson and Lilleker (2009a), it is the right that make attempts to appear the most inclusive and participatory in an attempt to attract visitors and gain their support.

Personalisation and the demotic turn

Personalisation was a feature of candidate websites and web presences only, and no party sites provided any personal information about the leaders, or even their current Members of the European Parliament (Figure 4). Rather, this personalisation seems to have been explored by individual candidates, and not as an overall strategy for offering some form of demotic political experience from online presences.

Figure 4: Levels of Information across party and candidate sites including personal information

However, while there may appear to have been a strategy towards personalisation, there is little evidence that many candidates gave any sense of hinterland or that ordinariness that denotes the demotic turn (see table 7). Actually the stress is upon the political biography of the candidate, rather than offering a significant amount of information about their personal lives. Some candidates, and all of those standing for the BNP, completed a quiz which included questions about sports, television, family and pets. Most however eschewed this approach, and there is a strong concentration on offering professional information, as opposed to evidence of an adoption of the demotic approach to campaigning. It may be that whilst elected representatives stress hinterland (Auty 2005; Jackson 2008; Jackson & Lilleker 2009b), candidates in EP elections do not.
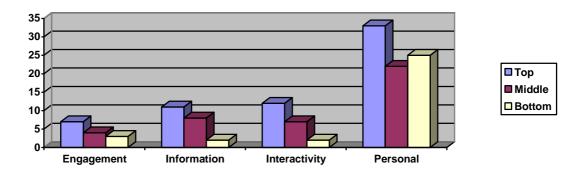
Table 7: Number of personalisation features appearing across candidate websites by position on party lists and party type

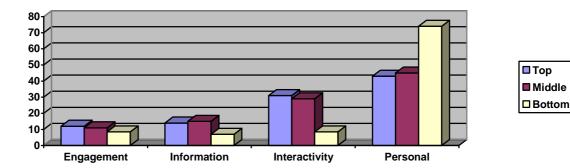|	Candidates			Candidate of party		
	Top N = 28	Middle N = 26	Bottom N = 12	Major N = 24	Minor N = 27	Fringe N = 15
Biography	21	13	8	22	13	7
Education	20	12	5	17	12	9
Political Career	19	18	7	21	18	5
Political Achievements	12	12	5	14	11	4
Place of Birth	12	12	4	14	11	3
Place of residence	13	9	7	10	11	9
Marital Status	15	7	4	14	7	6
Children	14	4	3	11	7	3
Gender/Orientation	3	1	0	2	0	2
Favourite Sports	4	2	2	3	5	0
Favourite Music	2	2	0	1	2	1
Favourite Writer	0	1	0	0	1	0
Favourite TV programme	1	1	0	0	1	1
Favourite website	1	1	0	0	1	1
TOTAL	137	95	45	129	100	51

If we focus in on candidates there is a much less complex picture to be painted than with party websites. Only candidates expecting to be elected had a website, a few dabbled with social networking but on the whole the further down the list the candidate is found the more likely they are to have little more than a static web page embedded within the site of the party that offered some basic biographical details. On occasion these details were little more than a summary of their career, and lacked even basic contact details. Looking across the features used, and adding that of personalisation here, one finds that most candidates offered some degree of personalisation, but only a few offered anything beyond personal details.

Figure 5: Number of features as an overall percentage of the potential number across web presences of candidates by position on the party lists

Focusing on the overall average user experience, as shown in table 6 the top and middle placed candidates offered the broadest range of features on their web presences. In particular, they offered a range of interactive features allowing visitors to both share information on social networks as well as comment and rate posts, videos and news items provided by the candidate. While none of this interactivity was of a highly sophisticated level that could be described as shaping the campaign, a few did open up their site to visitors to discuss issues of concern to them. In the case of the bottom candidates only one of the twelve included in our sample had their own web presences which had the feel of being a live campaigning site; though curiously it was not uniform across the board and it was only just a majority of top candidates (fifteen out of 28) and a minority of middle placed candidates (10 out of 26) that had personal and discrete sites. Thus the fact that, on the whole, these were simply information about the individual hosted within a party website gives the impression that lower list candidates focused more on personalising their presence, however this was not the case.

Figure 6: Presence of features as an overall percentage of content across web presences of candidates by position on the party lists

Thus we suggest that in the context of the 2009 EP election personalisation was not used strategically but, it could be perceived as a way of filling space. This may well be driven by the party list system and party politics dominating the news agenda. However, even among the profiles of Jury Team candidates, the party that extolled politics without parties and encouraged candidates to present themselves for a primary, text message-based, vote prior to selection to the list, the successful candidates often focused purely on their political credentials and not hinterland or personal aspects of their lives. This suggests that personalisation and the demotic turn has not fully infiltrated campaign strategy, or at least it did not at the EP election.

Conclusions

There appears to be a slow progression in how the Internet is used within European Parliament elections, in particular amongst parties. In 1999, parties essentially provided information based websites and there was some evidence of equalisation or at the very least an ebb and flow, in that smaller parties' web presences were not poorer than the bigger parties (Gibson and Ward 2000). In 2004, the information features of websites still dominated, but with more interactive features being used increasingly and in particular by fringe parties. There was also some evidence of mobilisation such as encouraging visitors to join the party, make donations to the campaign, contact the site and sign up for e-newsletters (Lusoli and Ward 2005). Overall, however, there seems to be no consistent strategy for use of a website; instead parties and candidates seek to fulfil a number of objectives within the online environment. This approach appears to lead to a pick 'n' mix of features where parties and candidates choose from a range of options, perhaps steered by considerations of potential benefits and costs in terms of resources. While this may seem to be a negative finding, the analysis does indicate that in 2009 the Internet has continued to expand the repertoire of parties, and to a lesser extent candidates. The key feature of

political parties' use of the Internet in 2009 is that they have sought to expand their digital footprint, so that it appears that they are more active online, even if the reality suggests that this is a largely one-dimensional presence.

There is limited evidence to suggest support for our five hypotheses. The evidence largely suggests very limited evidence for equalisation. Rather the evidence in terms of which party is using the Internet reinforces a politics as usual approach (Margolis and Resnich 2000). However, the picture is more complex than this, if we look at the use of more interactive Web 2.0 applications then there is some evidence that minor and fringe parties made greater use of these technologies. This suggests that in terms of the sophistication of use, then some of the smaller parties seek to use the Internet to reach out. This implies limited evidence to support an ebb and flow approach (Gibson and Ward 2000; Jackson and Lilleker 2009a). Overall the use of the Internet, within the context of a low overall turnout at this second order election supports normalisation.

Whilst the existence of Web 2.0 applications such as weblogs and social networking sites might suggest greater interactivity than in 2004, there is limited evidence to support hypothesis 2. As with previous elections, information provision dominated party and candidate websites, but the architecture for a richer experience is present in some sites. However, we suggest that hypothesis 2 is only partially proven, but dependent on individual factors relating to the construction of each party and candidate website. As a consequence we suggest that both parties and candidates adopted a Web 1.5 (Jackson and Lilleker 2009a) approach to their use of websites, in that they provided some interactive features, but did not necessarily encourage visitors to voice their own opinions.

Despite the interest in Obama's use of the Internet, there is little evidence that the techniques he used have been transferred to the European Parliament campaign in the UK. Hypothesis 3 is not proven, mobilisation of volunteers seemed to be an afterthought for most parties, and was not even a high priority for all major or minor parties who may be expected to have a base that they need to activate for a campaign. There is little evidence of progression since the 2004 election in mobilising support and generating resources. This lack of progression is particularly notable given that in

the 2005 General Election volunteer mobilisation and resource generation was the most tangible advance made in the online campaign (Jackson 2006b). Similarly, as with interactivity there is very limited evidence that parties sought to enhance visitors' stay on party and candidate websites.

At least in the UK, it seems ideology does not significantly determine the way the Internet is used. However, there is no support for hypothesis 4 concerning whether right or left wing parties are more likely to use the Internet. With respect to innovations in interactivity it is the right wing parties that offer greater levels of interactivity rather than the libertarian and left wing groupings which ontologically we might expect to be inclusive. Thus it seems on the whole considerations of campaigning, and perhaps the social uses of the Internet and Web 2.0. may be more important drivers of strategy than ideology but that the right is mastering the social aspects of the Internet the best.

Despite evidence that individual politicians seek to differentiate themselves from their competitors, and possibly their party label, by seeking to manage their image (Stanyer and Wring 2004), hypothesis 5 is not proven. Though between elections British elected representatives do appear to be considering the development of hinterland and promoting the self (Auty 2005; Jackson 2008; Jackson & Lilleker 2009a), candidates standing for the European Parliament do not stress personalisation. On the whole, personalisation is limited largely to professional credentials as opposed to offering insights into the lives of candidates.

The Internet has not shaped those traits that are common to European Parliament elections in Britain such as low turnouts, limited media interest and importance of a small central party machine. There is no evidence that the parties or candidates sought to use the Internet to change power relationships, enhance interest in the campaign and nor was it a dress rehearsal for the UK 2010 General Election. Indeed, there is some evidence that the parties may actually have deliberately 'kept their powder dry' during the European Election. For example, the Conservative Party waited until October 2009 to launch MyConservatives.com, their equivalent of the engagement and mobilisation tool, MyBo used by Barack Obama. In the 2009 European parliament elections, the Internet did not challenge the traditional

communication culture of electioneering, which may suggest that the impact of the Internet at the 2010 UK General Election may be exaggerated.

Footnotes

(1) Except in Northern Ireland where the Single Transferable Vote is used.

(2) Because of the different electoral system and political culture in Northern Ireland we are ignoring the results of the three seats in this region, and focusing only on those in Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales).

(3) Given that the sample was random, the number of each category is not equal (28 top, 26 middle and 12 bottom).

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