

‘Politics makes strange bedfellows’: the Internet in the 2004 European Parliament election

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Abstract

This paper looks at the use of the Internet by a range of political actors at the 2004 European Parliament (EP) election in the UK. Specifically, it looks at the websites of a sample of a hundred websites built by significant political actors, including parties, candidates, the media, individual citizens, and NGOs in order to assess the amount and nature of electoral information supplied and engagement opportunities provided. Drawing on previous, limited studies of the use of the Internet by national parties in UK elections, these questions are addressed in the framework of the EP electoral context and contest, taking into account citizens’ use of the Internet for election purposes. Theoretically, the paper builds on the concept of the ‘websphere’, which postulates a wide analytical focus on a range of online political behaviours by a range of actors involved in the production of information and engagement opportunities using the Internet. Methodologically, the process entails the identification, sampling, quantitative coding, qualitative annotation and content analysis of UK campaign websites between mid-April and EP Election Day, 10th June 2004. The paper provides qualified support for previous findings that the online campaign, or the lack thereof, largely reflects the apathy and disillusionment of the press, national politicians and print and broadcast media with a distinctly second-order election. However, there are three important qualifications to this bleak perspective. First, those regional parties, candidates and government agencies which were active online provided a number and variety of political information and engagement opportunities. Second, results suggest a specialised division of the electoral work between different producers of electoral contents, which is only in part modelled on offline dynamics. Third, information and engagement opportunities in the websphere are structured on two underlying dimensions, of which one is overtly political – a public communication vs. political communication cleavage – and one which touches upon the political economy of web-production, replication vs. innovation of techno-political practice. Finally, and most pragmatically, one might wonder why parties, candidates and the media bothered to provide any online information at all, as Britons’ use of the Internet for information at the 2004 EP election was in the lowland region of 6-7 %.

‘Politics makes strange bedfellows’: the Internet in the 2004 European Parliament election ¹

EP election: context and contest ²

The 2004 European Parliament (EP) election was a defining moment in European history. Two significant accomplishments helped envisage a momentous election. First, the ballot practically marked the enlargement of the EU to include ten additional countries, mostly among former COMECON countries, and not long after the introduction of the common currency in the EU 12. Second, elections took place just days before the European Constitutional Treaty was agreed following years of negotiations and months of gestation, which provides a common constitutional framework for the signatories. Europe is now as political a Union as it has ever been. The expectation might have been then that such momentous circumstances would have interrupted the vicious-circular dynamics of second-order elections (e.g. Reif & Schmitt, 1980).

Within this wider framework, the British case is remarkable on a number of accounts. The politics of Europe is an important feature of the elite political discourse in Britain more than is the case in other EU countries (Taggart, 2004). Europe is a perennial issue in inter-party competition for three main reasons, which have to do with politics, the media and the wider public. Firstly, one of the major British parties, the Conservatives, as well as a minor party, the UKIP, are Eurosceptical. This is unlike other EU countries, where minor parties usually oppose the EU. Secondly, large sectors of public opinion in the UK have been consistently and continuously Eurosceptical since the very foundation of the Union, in recent times especially so. Confirming the results of earlier research on EP elections, voters responded to domestic political dynamics, such as the positions of candidates and parties on national issues rather than EU level dynamics - the role of the EP, interest for Europe or about the enlargement of the European Union (European Union, 2004a). This perhaps reflects the almost exclusive media focus on domestic rather than European framing of EP campaign issues (de Vreese, Lauf, & Peter, 2004). In fact, and thirdly, a large proportion of the ‘broadsheet’ and ‘tabloid’ press are either sceptical of or openly opposed to the EU (Taggart, 2004, p. 3). According to Hall, tabloids with the highest circulation in Britain were ‘unremittingly hostile’ to the EP during the campaign. The remaining press, both tabloid and broadsheet, was appeased by the surprise prospect of a 2005 referendum on the European constitution, which marked a u-turn in Labour policy (Hall, 2004). In the past, this vicious circle generated dismal turnout rates, scant media coverage, and low profile political campaigning.

Two additional distractions paved citizens’ way to the polls in 2004. Firstly, postal vote was introduced in Britain with the intent to raise rock-bottom levels of turnout after the last general election. Postal voting was introduced as the sole voting method in four electoral regions, covering approximately 14m voters. Unexpectedly, postal voting took a life of its own as a campaign issue just days before the election, as there was considerable controversy in the press about whether the postal ballot be safe and effective, or prone to fraud, vote stealing and piloted by local sections of parties. Secondly, unfortunate timing made the election overlap with the European Cup. Although evidence here is necessarily anecdotal, we should not downplay the importance of football as a competitor for Britons’ eyeballs in the course of the campaign. This applies both to broadcast and to the printed press, which administered large doses of international football in the course of the campaign.

¹ Charles Dudley Warner.

² An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2004 Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) Conference, 19-22 September 2004, Sussex (UK). I owe a debt of gratitude to Janelle Ward for helping with the identification and coding of sites, and stimulating discussion of research methodology and results.

In this wide electoral context, the campaign contest was far from exciting. By the end of the campaign

none of the key stakeholders were satisfied: voters expressed dissatisfaction (turnout was low), journalists were unhappy ('the campaigns were boring'), and politicians were unhappy with what they saw as malfunctioning media (de Vreese, 2004, p. 2)

A quantitative and qualitative survey of Britons' attitudes to the EP election concluded that

there was very little recall of political issues at stake with the exception of TV personality Robert Kilroy-Silk standing for election on a UKIP platform, but a considerable amount relating to the possible failure of the authorities to despatch ballot forms by the stipulated date, or indeed the ability of the postal service to deliver them in time (Curtice, Boon, & Rustin, 2004b, p. 25)

The electoral contest was particularly quiet in Britain, with no remarkable events punctuating a rather dull political campaign. Even though History was in the making, neither its makers nor the public seemed to notice. In general, British main parties were way more concerned with local elections than with the European election. The Labour manifesto tackled more vigorously the national economy issues and the Tories that any European issues, at the sound of 'Britain is working, and Labour in Europe is delivering for the British people – don't let the Tories wreck it again' (Labour Party, 2004). Tony Blair made only two appearances in the course of the campaign, possibly following a rare pollsters' agreement that he would be a liability more than an asset in the EP campaign. Though European elections have always spelt trouble for large, governing parties, the Conservative did not capitalise on Labour's weaknesses. Facing three challenges, the Conservatives were unable to respond in kind (Taggart, 2004). First, there are inconsistent views on Europe internal to the party, ranging from stark scepticism to pro-Europeanism; second, their call for a vote on the EU Constitutional Treaty was pre-empted by Tony Blair's announcement of a referendum; third, they faced friendly fire from the right flank, as the UKIP tapped into the euro-sceptic, protest and right-wing sentiments of large sections of their electorate. The Conservative campaign eventually settled for a 'Britain first' combination of bashing of EU 'fraud and waste' and red-tape, upholding British political leaderships, economic competitiveness and 'way of life' and strongly opposing the Constitutional Treaty (Conservative Party, 2004). Even the Europhile Liberal Democrats were accused of fighting the campaign more on the wave of the Iraq war than on support for European issues (Taggart, 2004). The only party fighting a truly European campaign was the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) – whose front man pledged not to set foot in Brussels if elected, and to try to withdraw Britain from the EU. He was duly sent to Brussels, along with eleven other MEPs for the UKIP, which increased their numbers in the EP by an unexpected ten, or five hundred per cent. In fact, the UKIP received plenty of media attention (Hall, 2004), only in part due to its overtly Euro-sceptic stance, made clear in their minimalist Manifesto (UKIP, 2004). The document called for Britons to 'say no' to EU membership and membership fees, the EU constitution, unlimited EU immigration, and the Euro. Media coverage was mainly a result of the high profile of the party star recruit for the election, Robert Kilroy-Silk, former Labour MP and presenter of the eponymous TV show 'Kilroy', and the support of a number of media celebrities, including actress Joan Collins. Kilroy himself received twenty times as much newspaper coverage as the Labour party front man (Hall, 2004).

Theoretically therefore, the very nature of EP elections, especially low attention and attendance, and a softly fought electoral campaign should make them ideal for experimenting with new information and communication technologies. First, as the EP elections are second order elections parties and candidates can tap into a larger number of floating voters. Second proportional representation makes it easier for minor parties and independent voices to be heard, as compared to tightly organised and fought general elections, under first-past-the-post rules. Third, voting turnout is generally much lower at EP elections, and we can expect government

agencies as well as parties to try and boost turnout. Finally, governing parties are likely to suffer electoral losses, while larger political parties are likely to do less well than smaller parties (de Vreese, 2004, p. 4), thus opening up electoral space for less-organised forces. In practice however, turnout in the EP election was the highest ever to be recorded in Britain, for a number of reasons. These which include the introduction of postal voting in four regions for 14m citizens, the import of UKIP's aggressive media strategy, concomitant local and London elections, and unusually robust local parties' campaigning (Curtice, Boon, & Rustin, 2004a). In addition, we should also note that electoral candidates, especially for major parties, canvass and otherwise campaign much more in UK than any other EU country, except perhaps for Ireland (European Union, 2004a, 2004b). Therefore, even though turnout has steadily decreased in Europe since 1979, from 63 % to 46 % in 2004, and UK turnout has always been well below the EU average, we witness a reversal of turnout fortunes in the last round, to the highest ever level at 39 %. On the other hand, this very increase in fact demonstrates the significant potential for candidates, local, regional and national parties to mobilise voters on the day on Election Day. Possibly using the Internet.

Internet and elections

There are two important issues connected with electoral campaigns and new media. On the one hand, there are the innovations new media bring to the administration of the electoral process. For instance, new media tools for the identification of voters, the distribution and management of voting rights (e.g. the digitalisation of the electoral roll, under way at the UK Office of the Deputy Prime Minister), the informatisation of election management, and the actual use of new media to cast votes – i.e. e-voting. On the other hand, there is the issue of how online campaigns are fought in cyberspace, which has attracted wider media attention. There are five empirically significant aspects to online campaigns. First, the importance of the Internet as a tool for organising and managing local electoral campaigns: election software, internal email, IT in the local party office. Second, the importance of the Internet in mobilising supporters, attracting funding and raises candidates' profiles in nation-wide contexts, witness the Howard Dean Internet campaign at the US presidential primaries. Third, there are the public aspects of the campaign, whereby the government, Quangos, selected charities and NGOs work in partnership, usually supported by ICTs, in trying to boost turnout. This is especially the case of the newly commissioned UK Electoral Commission at the last EP election (Marshall & Lloyd, 2004). Fourth, there is the spontaneous involvement of citizens in electoral campaigns and politics more in general, via online communication like blogs, online diaries, mailing lists and advocacy websites. Finally, the transition of print and broadcast media to the Internet implied a qualitative and quantitatively different form of engagement of traditional producers in covering the electoral campaign.

However diversified the electoral websphere, the bulk of the analytical attention to new media and electoral campaigns has been devoted so far to political parties, especially in Europe and Asia, and to election candidates, especially in the US. Evidence suggests that British parties and candidates have been less than active in providing engagement opportunities on the Net, since the 'first Internet election' in 1997. Based on content analysis of party websites and a survey of party web-managers, Gibson and Ward concluded that online strategies were failing on the accounts of looks, interactivity and contents, thus missing the opportunities provided for by the medium (Gibson & Ward, 1998; Ward & Gibson, 1997). Parties were found to be particularly inept on attracting and engaging voters to their sites, which were used mainly as an additional tool for dissemination of information. However, smaller parties fared somewhat better than larger parties. Based on different data about the same election, Yates and Perrone assessed the accessibility, interactivity, content and presentation of five main parties' websites, along with the content of three party-devoted Usenet groups (Yates & Perrone, 1998). They noted the lack of creative contents, as the Web was 'treated as another 'broadcast' communications channel' –

reflected in the lack of navigation tools, multimedia elements, and interactive elements. Even more despairingly, Usenet group for different parties were found to be especially 'on message' with party spiel, mainly focussing on Labour party policies. Two years later, the situation had not much changed. Gibson and Ward completed a survey of 12 major and minor parties' websites at four time-points during the 1999 EP election (Gibson & Ward, 2000). They content analysed UK parties' websites for accessibility, campaign commitment and quality of delivery. In general, parties did well in terms of information provision, reasonably well concerning mobilisation (though they maintained rather than enhanced routine-times online opportunities) but were almost completely lacking in interactivity. Interestingly, political parties did not become more active online in the course of the campaign. Finally, major and minor parties did equally well, considerably better however than non-parliamentary parties (not fielding candidates). The last finding was qualified by Margolis and colleagues, who argued that even though minor parties did well in the UK, at least comparatively with the US, larger parties were much more visible than small parties, as they received wider coverage both in the online and in the offline media (Margolis, Resnick, & Wolfe, 1999). The 2001 general election saw candidates and local parties mount hardly more sophisticated online campaigns. (Ward & Gibson, 2003). While only between 21 % and 25 % of candidates / local parties set up websites, the average site provided candidate biography (92 %), policy information (64 %), membership or volunteering appeals (63 %), and press releases/news - 51 % (p. 198, table 3). However, interactive opportunities were virtually absent, as only 14 % of existing sites had surveys/polls, and half this figure online discussion facilities (p. 199, table 4).

Three years down the line, the situation might have changed. The growth of Internet penetration from 32 % in 1999 (the last EP election) to 56 % of the British adult population in 2004 would suggest a note of cautious hope for parties and candidates to disseminate their spiel to a growing online public. However, research suggests that the Internet is still a secondary, supplementary medium for the supply of most political communication in the UK (Lusoli, Ward, & Gibson, 2002), as well as for its consumption (Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2002b). This proved dramatically true of the EP elections. According to EU figures, 10 % of Britons looked for information on the Internet in the fortnight preceding the election, slightly higher than the EU average (8%). This compares most unfavourably with television and radio (80 %), then newspapers (66 %) ads in general (66 %) and personal discussion – quite high at 41 % (European Union, 2004a). A substantial difference with traditional media is that Internet use for information implies Internet access, currently at just about fifty percent in Britain, plus an active strategy by the citizen, as the web-in-a-box benefits less from traditional media serendipity of 'coming across' information.³ Asking the same question, a post election survey found that only 6 % of Britons in fact used the Internet to gather information (European Union, 2004b).⁴ The post-election study concludes that 'the public's experience associated with the electoral campaign is essentially passive. In other words, information is addressed to the potential voter, rather than the voter seeking it out' (European Union, 2004b, p. 33). Results from ICM research are even more disheartening, as only 4 % of the population reported using the Internet for political information (Curtice, Boon, & Rustin, 2004b, pp. 7-8).⁵ Based on the same data, a

³ Q7 Political parties and candidates will campaign for the next European elections. For each of the following propositions, tell me if you have been in this situation or not? j) You have searched for information on the European elections on the Internet. Fieldwork: 28 May – 07 June, N = 994.

⁴ EB 162 post election survey (21-24 June). Strikingly, this is the only value to decrease of all media considered. Possible explanations are: small sample but low incidence, e.g. ± 1.85 % for each survey at 95 % confidence level; internet information was accessed one-off and respondents are likely to underestimate, whereas exposure to other media was protracted; respondents discount looking for results on the Internet after the election.

⁵ ICM post-election survey. Random quota sample of 8,512 British residents aged 18+ by telephone on 11-29 June 2004. Q17. In the run up to the elections on June 10th did you... a. Use the Internet at all to get information about the elections. However, a sampling strategy which strongly under-samples London

study found that those seeking electoral information online were both Internet savvy and interested in politics. They were young (8% 18-24 YO), more likely to be male (6%) than female (4%) and from Asian backgrounds (9%). Voters (6%) were twice as likely as non-voters to look for information, while those interested in politics were three times more likely (6%) than those uninterested (Curtice, Boon, & Rustin, 2004a, p. 30).⁶ Unlike other media then, it seems that Internet fails to attract a critical mass of eyeballs required for the efficient and effective production of content by campaign actors.

Research questions and methodology

This study considers the amount and nature of the supply of information and engagement opportunities using the Web, and how any differences between political actors are modelled on pre-existing patterns of campaign engagement. We build here on the concept of the *websphere*, defined as the ‘hyper-linked set of dynamically defined digital resources spanning multiple Web sites deemed relevant or related to a central theme or “object”. The boundaries of a Web sphere are delimited by a shared object-orientation and a temporal framework’ (Foot & Schneider, 2002). According to theory, an *electoral* websphere encompasses a number and variety of political actors bypassed by traditional content analysis of campaigns. In research practice however, the concept of the websphere has been largely applied to specific subsets of political actors: the candidates to presidential election in the US (Schneider & Foot, 2002), the candidates to mid-term 2002 elections in the US (Schneider & Foot, 2003). In the larger theoretical context of the websphere however, a number of detailed expectations can be derived from the campaign context / contest sketched above, and from the literature on political parties and candidates’ use of the Internet. Specifically, we expect that:

1. Information features will be prominent on engagement features
2. Candidates will feature prominently on parties in the campaign
3. The media will cover the issue only to a limited extent
4. Candidates and parties will mount ad-hoc, adversarial campaigns
5. The government will use of the web to mobilise voters
6. Citizens will create websites to a very limited extent

We also expect that the engagement opportunities will build on the interactive characteristics of the Internet, what ‘added value’ the Internet has to offer to an online campaign strategy. Conversely, we expect run-of-the-mill, information campaigns to be more concerned with the dissemination of information.

The analysis of the British EP election websphere is articulated here on the identification, sampling and coding of websites from different producers.⁷ All sites produced by twelve political actors potentially relevant to the 2004 election were identified. The producer types were: business, portal, professional, candidate, citizen, party, press, Trade Union (TU), NGOs, educational and religious. Sites were to be included in the identification corpus where they had a

and the South East might have contributed a smaller sample of people with Internet access, and who used of the Internet for politics (Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2002a). Also, the survey did not ask Q18 about coverage of the election in different media in relation with the Internet. Q18 In the run up to the European Parliament election, how much coverage of the election did you watch on – a lot, a little or hardly anything at all?

⁶ In this case, the baseline percentage is 5 %, calculated for Britain rather than UK.

⁷ The study is part of an international research undertaking – the Internet & Election Project – which considers the import of the Internet for electoral campaigns in seven Asian countries, the United States, and eleven EU countries during the June 2004 EP election. See <http://oase.uci.kun.nl/~jankow/elections/> and <http://www.ntuy.edu.sg/home/trkluver/asefhome.html>

'realistic potential' to include election related content. In excess of 50 hours were spent on the identification of sites between 3 April and 7 May 2004, on the close of candidate nominations. The identification strategy was articulated on search engine enquiries, political websites directories, and ad hoc-searched tailored to specific producers. Specifically, Google.com and Yahoo.co.uk were interrogated with multiple syntactic variations on the string 'European + Parliament + election + 2004 + UK', also including producer types. The first 50 entries on each results page were then followed, and the site explored for the potential to feature election related material. Entries listed in web-directory enquiries were pursued individually, and assessed for the potential to feature election related. For government sites, we used the GK Soft portal (www.gksoft.com/government/en/gb.html), which listed in excess of a thousand government websites. The same directory was used for party sites, and complemented with the UK Electoral Commission website, and major party sites for lists of regional branches. For NGOs, websites were identified using directories compiled by commercial, governmental and educational institutions (e.g. www.direct.gov.uk, www.cre.gov.uk/navigate/links.html, www.psr.keele.ac.uk/parties.htm).⁸ For TU we used the comprehensive list on the Trade Union Congress website at www.tuc.org.uk. For candidates, we used the BBC website, The Guardian newspaper website, and ad hoc Google searches for 'Name + surname + EU + election'. For citizens' sites – mostly weblogs – we snowballed from site to site to reach saturation (139 sites were eventually visited).

For websites identified as 'potentially relevant to the electoral web-sphere, we recorded URL, languages, name of site producer, country, producer type, referrer URL and search strategy, plus additional notes where necessary. Ten days before the election a sample of 100 sites was randomly drawn from the corpus, stratified by producer type. Quotas were set at 30% for candidates, 15% for parties, 10% for government, 10% for NGOs, 10% for trade unions, and the remainder distributed across other producer types. One week to three days in advance of the election the websites in the sample were screened for the presence of election-related material and coded for 27 features, broadly divided in procedural, information, technical sophistication and engagement (see Appendix A). Two coders were instructed to travel the websites two directories deep in search of codable features. While the argument has been made that the quality of the front-page reflects the overall contents of the sites (Farmer, Spiker, & Fender, 2001), a strategy which hierarchically explores two levels below the surface of the site, or 'two clicks away' was chosen to gauge the structure of the engagement and information on offer, rather than solely or principally the graphical attractiveness and provision of features. In addition, screen shots of interesting websites were taken, as well as notes during the process of identification and coding, to provide additional contextual information to the quantitative study.

Inter-coder reliability was measured against a master coding tasks consisting of ten websites drawn from a range of political actors likely to be involved in the campaign, and sampled from a common pool of websites identified at 'potentially relevant' to the election. The coders working on this project attained 'simple agreement' in excess of 80 % on each coding item against the master results, and were in agreement with each other on average 84 % of the times. No items were dropped due to low ICR reliability, which is a positive function of the training component of the project (see Jankowski & Van Os, 2004, p. 12 fw.), and sustained communications between the coders. The sample was coded at one single data-point before the election. While in the American context there are good reasons for coding electoral websites at different data points, in order to capture the evolution (or otherwise) of the campaign over time, UK and European campaigns tend to be shorter, less eventful and overall less dynamic (Gibson & Ward, 1998). This is true of local components of electoral campaigns (Ward & Gibson, 2003, p. 200, table 5), and equally we expect media contents rather than features to change in the course of the campaign.

⁸ NGOs registered only as charities were omitted.

Results⁹

Results from identification suggested that individual candidates and regional branches of parties would be fairly active in the campaign, while a number of other producers would be almost completely absent from the Web sphere, such as political professional and business organisations (Table 1). We had mixed expectations as to NGOs and Trade Unions, which had been, in effect, over-sampled by the use of website directories. We identified a considerable number of local government sites, which provided both local and EP electoral information. Table 1 below reports the total population, the sample extracted, and basic content frequencies by producer type.

[Table 1 about here]

In general, candidates were the most significant actor in the production of online electoral content, as all candidates in the sample produced a campaign website. Somewhat surprisingly, only 64 % of parties went on to build a campaign website. Looking more closely at the sample, we noticed that parties without campaign websites were actually not fielding candidates for the current election – e.g. www.ukup.org, the UK Unionist party, or www.omrlp.com, The Official Monster Raving Loony Party, thus confirming previous results (Gibson & Ward, 2000). The press and citizens alike were also quite likely to post campaign information, which perhaps points to a trend of democratisation of news production, or at least re-production on the part of citizens. Finally, government websites provided an additional amount of campaign-related information. Again, where we look closely at our sample, we find that local government and specialised electoral agencies were better than unrelated ministries and agencies in covering the election. Other producers were conspicuous by their absence. Obvious in the case of business and religious organisations, this is more striking of political professionals, information portal sites and trade unions – which made no mention of the EP election on their sites.¹⁰

The online information sphere

The online websphere was also heavily segmented by the nature of information on offer. In general, non election-specific information, such as information about the producer (88 %), was provided by virtually all producers. Conversely, election related information – issues, speeches and information related to the voting process - was provided more sporadically (Table 2, below). Also, within the realm of election information, general information such as issue position (53 %) and endorsements (29 %) prevailed on campaign specific information – e.g. speeches, calendar and information about the elections, all below 20 %. We thus note a hierarchy of political content, from obvious to more controversial, and in parallel also from general to specific. As to the technical sophistication of websites, or lack thereof, while images are now commonplace on the Web, there is extreme scarcity of audio or video files for download or streaming. Finally, content producers seem hardly concerned with the legal aspects of battling an online campaign, as a minority of sites featured statements of their privacy policy (29 %) and user rights (32 %).

[Table 2 about here]

Fulfilling our expectations, information was heavily segmented by producer type, broadly following this hierarchy of contents. General features such as biographies and contact information were very widespread. With the obvious exception of the government and

⁹ Results and differences reported are statistically significant at least at $p. < 0.05$, unless otherwise specified (\dagger , $p. < 0.10$).

¹⁰ This might depend on the very limited relevance of EP elections for Unions. However, TUs already contribute to the Labour party via the political fund. UNISON was the largest third-party spender at the EP election (see register of donors at www.electoralcommission.gov.uk).

educational organisations – which do not provide partisan information - electoral information was in fact segmented by producer type. Specifically:

- Endorsements were widely prevalent on party sites, very much less so on other sites, especially the press which was found to be largely neutral.
- Position taking on issues was the prerogative of candidates, followed by parties and NGOs (†). However, issues were hardly taken on by the press.
- Speeches were common on candidates and parties' (†) websites.
- Traditional mediators – the government (†) and parties (†) – set the tempo of the election, via calendars of events and diaries.
- Neutral comparison of positions and information on the campaign process were typically delegated to press sites and religious organisations.
- Information on voting procedures was mainly provided by government sites, plus a range of other political actors (†).
- Images were widely widespread, except on citizens' sites – especially blogs.
- Audio-video features were uncommon across the board, and limited to candidates, parties and press.
- Website users' privacy was the concern of the press and NGOs, but absent on citizen sites.
- Terms of use were prevalent on large institutions' sites: NGOs, government and press, but altogether absent on party and candidate sites.

Overall, political parties provided a broad range of web information on the electoral campaign, from the word 'go'. Although they provided little information on the campaign process itself – not their traditional function – parties outlined issues, endorsed candidates, and provided primary campaign resources such as speeches and audio-video information. Although a negligible number of ad-hoc sites were created for the campaign, two sites stand out as an interesting refraction of off-line campaign strategies. Arguably, the Labour Party main aim in the party election broadcast was to discredit Conservative leader Michael Howard (Figure 1). The broadcasts video, embellished with interactive features and some degree of humour was ported to the web at www.michaelhowardscv.com.

[Figure 1 about here]

The Conservatives' 'Putting Britain First' echoed this, and their website 'Let down by Labour' (www.letdownbylabour.com) featured a call for political posters which harnessed the canevalesque, co-productive potential of the Internet (Foot & Schneider, 2002) to produce remarkable results (figure 2).

[Figure 2 about here]

Comparatively however, government agencies fared much better at creating ad-hoc sites and campaigns, especially the freshly minted Electoral Commission; though their terms of engagement do not allow them to exploit the full potential of the Internet to *engage* citizens (Marshall & Lloyd, 2004).

Although on a more modest scale, candidate sites also offered a large range of electoral content. Understandably, a limiter number of candidates explicitly endorsed themselves. However, they provided a fair amount of issue positions, speeches and electoral information. Finally, we register the poor online performance of the press in providing varied electoral information. With the predictable exception of the BBC (included in our sample), the press failed to present and compare issue positions, inform citizens on the electoral process, and failed to provide election

calendars and links to political speeches. Other producers followed their traditional inclinations. NGOs provided little more than issue positions and limited endorsements for candidates. Reflecting their impartial stance, government organisations gave only information on the electoral process and its timing. Finally, citizens' websites presented personal commentary to the election and politics, some endorsements of specific candidates, but little more in terms of comparison or information related to the electoral process. Either the time of the 'monitoral cyber-citizen' has yet to come – or they were following football rather than a dull election.

The structure of online engagement opportunities

In absolute terms, online engagement opportunities remain relatively uncommon during electoral campaigns seven years after the first Internet election in the UK (Gibson & Ward, 1998). Overall, the only interactive feature on offer on the range of websites surveyed is the possibility of contacting the site producer. This is available on virtually all sites, with the interesting exception of citizen site, 14 % of which have no email talkback mechanisms. To us this is a clear case of *ubi major*. Relatively common is also the possibility to join the organisation (44 %) and donate online (38 %). The next most frequent activities supplied can be performed entirely online, such as signing up for e-news (35 %), contributing to a forum (24 %), and sending links from a site (26 %). Finally, features that might have an offline dimensions strike a somewhat lower key – online registration is at 28 %, distribution of material offline as well as volunteer at 22 %, and e-paraphernalia at 19 %. This leaves out the posting of support statement for candidates, virtually absent from the UK Web sphere – which has more to do with dynamics of party campaigning than with specificities of new media. In relative terms, figures for online engagement features compare equitably with information provision, whereas previous studies found a distinct prevalence of information (Ward & Gibson, 2003; Gibson, Margolis, Resnick, & Ward, 2003).

[Table 3 about here]

As information, *engagement* is also segmented by producer type and to some extent also clustered by the nature of the engagement on offer. Specifically, we found that:

- The possibility of contacting producers was ubiquitous, except for citizen sites (†).
- Joining and donating features proceeded very much in parallel ($n = 58$, $\phi = 0.82$ sig. $p < 0.001$), provided mainly by candidates, then parties (†) and NGOs (†).
- Registration opportunities were offered by candidates, and less so by government sites (†).
- E-news bulletins were most common on press sites.
- Citizen and press sites (†) provided online spaces for discussion, unlike candidates steering clear of discussion.
- Online to offline activities – such as campaign volunteering opportunities and offline distribution of material – were offered mainly by parties and candidates.
- Online to online activities – e.g. e-paraphernalia and links to send – were much less widespread but distributed across a range of actors.

Therefore candidates, parties and press – the very traditional actors involved in offline campaigns – provided the core of engagement opportunities. As concerns candidates, two general clusters were identified:¹¹ a majority of candidates offering a wide range of opportunities (60 %, $n = 18$), and a significant minority of candidates offering no or very limited engagement via their websites (40 %, $n = 12$). Thought providing similar amounts of engagement to individual candidate sites, different political parties varied more in the engagement opportunities they carried. Donations were most common, volunteering and active campaign opportunities slightly less common, while online discussion was virtually absent. This

¹¹ Two-step cluster analysis, all variables binary, BIC criterion of assignment to clusters.

suggests a campaign strategy aimed at voters' finances and time, rather than eyeballs. If this result is confirmed by more in-depth analysis, it is unusual for the UK. Finally, the press provided the widest range of communication functions, including opportunities to send links and e-news services.

Other producers were much less engaging. As could be expected, education sites and religious sites offered no opportunities to engage with the campaign. A number of actors – including NGOs, government and citizens – were engaged in activities limited to their traditional remit. Government websites were mainly interested in basic electoral functions rather than more sophisticated attempts to get people to the polls. This might be due to the fact that local governments might have more cost-effective, offline ways to convince electors to vote. As well, NGOs have a very limited function in distributing their issue position on leaflets – mainly PDF files – about their position on issues relevant to the campaign. Citizen websites were mainly blogs or places where to discuss political issues in general, the election being the issue at hand. They also provided limited opportunity to connect to the wider net by sending links, but contained no extended engagement opportunities – apart from the possibility to talk back, refer and syndicate.

[Figure 3 about here]

Finally, we were interested in the dimensionality of the electoral websphere, beyond the *emic* distinction between information and engagement. That is, we are interested to see whether there are other cross-cutting dimensions that fit the data better than our a-priori distinction. We thus modelled information and engagement items (recoded as binary) with a multidimensional scaling technique, in order to explore the conceptual space of the political websphere.¹² We uncovered two main underlying dimensions (Figure 3). One is overtly political – a public communication vs. political communication cleavage – while the other touches upon the political economy of web-production, i.e. replication vs. innovation of techno-political practice. These dimensions divide the electoral websphere in four overlapping quadrants. A 'public electoral space', top of the figure, builds on sites incorporating forums, privacy terms of use of sites, information on voting and how campaign are regulated, contact information for political actors and e-news bulletins. It strikes as a vastly 'textual' space. The 'political electoral space' (bottom) is constructed on endorsement of candidates, distribution of electoral material, opportunities to donate to and join campaigns, and volunteer. This space is truly a space of political action. The 'replication space' (right) is densely occupied by sites providing bare-minimum features almost cut-n-paste from the offline domain, such as biographies, images, contact details, but also issues and e-news, and the possibility of registering for the election. The 'innovation space' (left) is made of added-value features covering both the public and the political domains: discussion fora, comparison of positions, calendar of election and events, audio-video material and information on the campaign.¹³

Discussion and conclusion

A lethargic EP campaign, punctuated only by efforts of the UKIP, and encouraged by a push for postal voting, left much to be desired by the citizens, who were however more enthused by the dramas of the coinciding Euro cup. However, for the very few who were surfing, a notable

¹² Euclidean distances were created for 23 objects of information and engagement for $n = 60$. Proximity matrices were fed to a Proxcal Simplex routine with different numbers of expected dimensions. The two-dimensional model eventually selected as appropriate accounts for 93 % of the dispersion, stresses were 0.26 (first) 0.61 (second), and 0.14 (S, Young's). Given the high object to case ratio results should be taken as exploratory only.

¹³ It is then interesting to see where different actors might be placed in such conceptual space. A research paper is currently being written to explore in detail the implications of dimensionality.

presence of several site producers and the features they offered are worth mentioning. Candidates were the most consistent providers of electoral content, as all candidates in our sample produced a campaign website. Political parties that were actually fielding candidates were as well consistently active. Citizens and press were also a possible source of campaign information; this may perhaps point to a trend of democratisation of news production, or at least re-production. Finally, government websites made available an additional quantity of campaign-related information for the politically interested. On the Internet, citizens could easily find balanced information on the voting process and about who the candidates were. However, they found it perhaps more difficult to find where candidates stood on issues, except for the obvious link to party policies. Partly due to dynamics of communicating campaigns in Britain, the media failed to provide comparative assessment of different candidates and candidate lists. This might also be due to the regional nature of context, and the scant coverage in the offline media, especially as compared to the local election. Finally, despite the recent kudos of blogging, our results suggest that they played a marginal role in citizen information and engagement.

Contrary to previous findings on the almost exclusive prevalence of online political information over engagement, we found that a number of engagement opportunities were provided. We identify two conflicting sets of results. On the up side, joining and donating features were provided by a considerable number of candidates and political parties. Also, a sizeable group of committed candidates and a number of political parties provided a range of engagement opportunities. In parallel, registration opportunities were offered by government sites and candidates, and less so by parties. On the down side, the press did disappointingly little to contribute to this realm. NGOs provided expected information, while government organisations gave only information on the electoral process and its timing. Citizens' websites presented some personal commentary to the election, little endorsements of specific candidates, but hardly any comparisons or information related to the electoral process.

This broad picture provides qualified support for those studies considering only candidates and parties; the qualification consists in the necessity to include the media and government as purveyors of information and engagement. Dimensional analysis suggested that the websphere is more complex than a dichotomy information / engagement would suggest. At once, the Internet provides a hybrid public / political communication for a broader range of communicators, where old strategies can be replicated, and innovative, interactive campaigns can be tested. Future research should assess how such innovative/communicative campaign dynamics unfold at the local and regional level, especially for low-intensity competition where relatively more is at stake. We are thinking specifically about how activists and local branches incorporate ICTs in their campaign repertoires, and how this affects turnout, opinion change and ultimately vote choice. Second, the agenda-setting function, if any, of citizen blogs deserved close attention, as well as investigation is required of how the Internet, specifically, the Web, facilitates the mutual shaping of official / unofficial campaign news. Third, the government, especially local councils, have a large potential to fulfil as to the use of ICTs to increase citizen participation. This is an especially interesting avenue for both experimentation and research.

Finally, we need to conclude on a note of caution. It may be more difficult to boost citizen information and participation in the UK than in other European countries taking part in EU election, mainly for reasons ingrained in the British political culture. Survey evidence suggests that many more people in the UK than EU average did not plan to vote because they are against Europe or because they never vote, or are not registered to vote (European Union, 2004a). Given this and the scant levels of Internet use for political information, one might wonder why parties, candidates and the media bothered constructing websites at all, interactive websites in particular. If the provision of un-requested and un-wanted electoral information and engagement opportunities is an indicator of a healthy political system, then the Internet may be democracy's silver bullet.

Appendix: coding scheme

a. Procedural

1. Is this site codeable?
2. Is the correct site producer type listed above?
3. Does this site provide election-related content?

b. Information

1. Does this site provide a biography, history, or 'About Us' section?
2. Does the site provide contact information for the site producer?
3. Does the site provide endorsements for a candidate or party in an upcoming election?
4. Does the site provide a list of issues positions held by a political actor?
5. Does the site provide speeches by a candidate or party representatives?
6. Does this site provide a calendar or list with prospective election-related events?
7. Does the site provide comparison of issue positions of parties or candidates?
8. Does the site provide information about the electoral campaign process in the country studied?
9. Does the site provide information about the voting process in the country studied?

c. Technical sophistication

1. Are there images on the site?
2. Does the site provide audio or video files?
3. Does the site provide a privacy policy?
4. Does the site provide a terms of use statement?

d. Engagement

1. Does the site provide opportunities for visitors to join, or become members of the organization?
2. Does the site enable visitors to register to participate in the election?
3. Does the site provide an opportunity for a visitor to sign up to receive email from the site producer?
4. Are donations encouraged or enabled on or through this site?
5. Can visitors to the site participate in an online forum or other communication space?
6. Does the site encourage offline distribution of electoral campaign or election materials?
7. Is there a feature that specifically enables a site visitor to send a link from this site to a friend?
8. Is there a feature that encourages or enables a visitor to make a public statement supporting a political actor or issue?
9. Does the site enable the user to engage in digital promotion of the electoral campaign, party, organization or voting in general?
10. Does the site encourage visitors to volunteer for the electoral campaign?
11. Does the site encourage visitors to become involved in the electoral campaign in any way other than the six previous questions have indicated?

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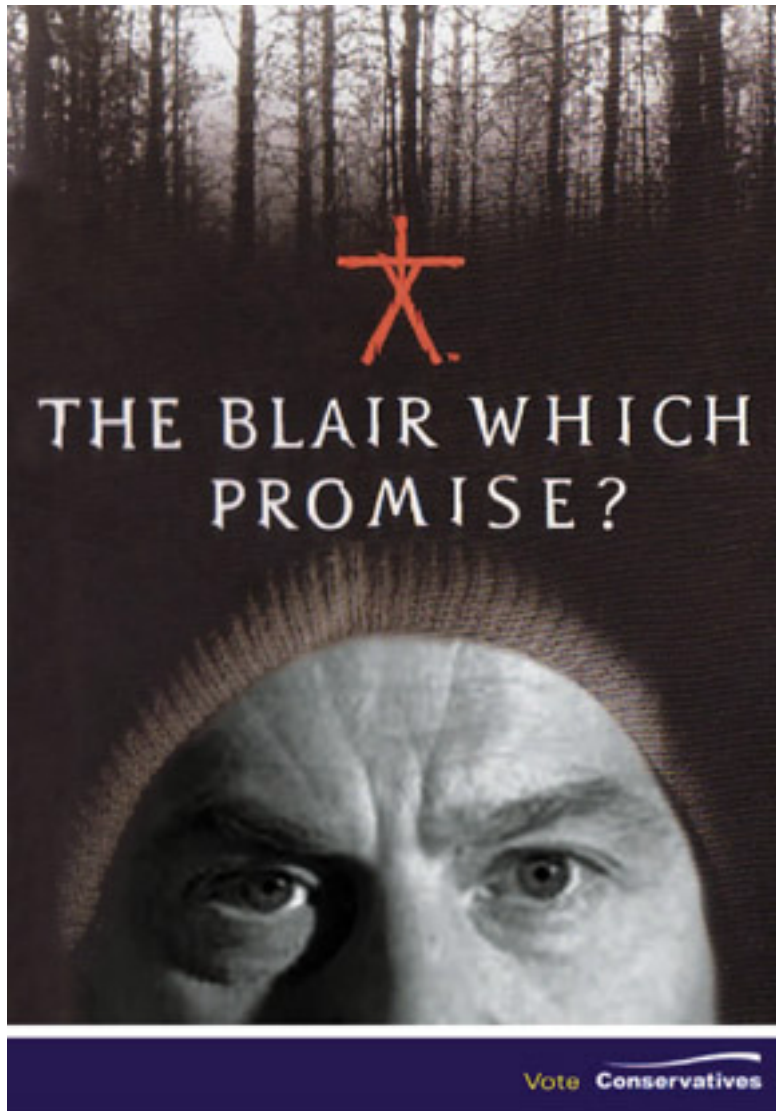
Table 1. Basic frequencies by produce type

Producer type	Websites				
	Identified (n1)	Sampled (n2)	Valid (n3)	Featuring election content (n4)	% Featuring election content (n4 / n3)
Candidate	78	30	30	30	100 %
Citizen	29	7	7	5	71 %
Educational	4	2	2	1	50 %
Government	81	10	10	5	50 %
Trade Union	75	10	10	0	0 %
NGO	120	12	11	3	27 %
Party	95	14	14	9	64 %
Portal	9	2	2	0	0 %
Press	72	9	9	6	67 %
Religious	8	4	4	1	25 %
Business	0	--	--	--	--
Political professional	0	--	--	--	--
Totals	571	100	99	60	61 %

Figure 1. Labour Party homepage, 4 May 2004



Figure 2. 'Let down by Labour' short listed entry



ART DIRECTOR: Christian Field • COPY WRITER: Jon Lea • AGENCY: Phoenix • TELEPHONE: 01372 372 372

Table 2. Electoral information by producer types

	Information features											
	About us	Endorse	Issue positions	Speeches	Calendar	Issue comparison	Info on electoral process	Info on voting	Images	AV files	Privacy policy	Terms of use
All types	88	29	53	19	12	9	10	32	94	16	32	29
Candidate	97	27	70	30	10	7	10	37	100	20	30	10
Citizen	29	29	14	14					57			14
Educational									100		100	100
Government	80				40		40	100	80		40	80
NGO	100	33	100					33	100		100	100
Party	100	89	100	33	33	11		33	100	22	11	
Press	100		11			22	11	22	100	22	56	89
Religious	100	25	25			25	25		100	25	25	

NOTES: Figures are percentages of sites including a specific information feature. Empty cells mean nil.

Table 3. Electoral engagement by producer types

	Information features										
	Contact producer	Join / become a member	Register to vote	Get email from site	Donate	Online forum	Offline distribution of material	Send links	Public support statement	E-paraphernalia	Volunteer
All types	96	44	28	35	38	24	22	26	1	19	22
Candidate	97	60	43	47	53	10	30	33		27	40
Citizen	86	29			29	100	14	29		14	
Educational	100										
Government	100		60	20		20				20	
NGO	100	67		33			67				
Party	89	56	22	22	56	11	33	22		22	33
Press	100		11	67		44		44	11	11	
Religious	100	75			75						

NOTES: Figures are percentages of sites including a specific engagement feature. Empty cells mean nil.

Figure 3. EP websphere dimensions

