spinning the web

online campaigning in the 2005 general election

edited by Stephen Coleman & Stephen Ward

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

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Logging on or switching off? The public and the internet at the 2005 general election[1]

The run up to the 2005 campaign again saw heightened expectations that ICTs (information communication technologies) might play an important role in the campaign and led to some speculation that this was to be first internet election - just as 1997 and 2001 had been predicted to be.

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

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

[1] The authors would like to acknowledge the support of the Economic and Social Research Council in funding this survey (Award No: RES-000-22-1284)

[2] See Lusoli, W. and S. Ward (2004) 'Digital Rank and File: Activists Perceptions and use of the Internet', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 7 (4), pp.453-470; Ward, S., Gibson, R. and W. Lusoli (2003) Online Participation and Mobilisation in Britain: Hype, Hope and Reality', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 56 (4) pp.652-668.

the immediate aftermath of the election.[3] Specifically, we examine who used the internet during the 2005 election campaign; what the technology was used for; why some used it while others did not; the patterns of change from the 2001 general election; and the wider implications of these patterns of adoption and use for online campaigning.

TABLE 1 SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE ELECTION

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

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

Who went online? The profile of political users

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

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

[3] The survey is based on a stratified representative sample of British adults (18+) n = 1937. Interviews were conducted face-to-face between 12-17th May 2005.

Among young people, it is students who are the most regular internet users. Around one in two students actually used the internet to gather election information. Again, in line with previous studies, male (22%), educated (23%) respondents were also more likely to access information online. Perhaps not surprisingly, those with high levels of internet skills, particularly those who are producers, rather than just consumers, of digital content, were much more likely to have used the internet as a source of election information (47% of internet users).

TABLE 2 PROFILE OF CITIZENS USING THE INTERNET FOR ELECTION NEWS

	Percent of category	Difference from average
Male gender	22	+ 7 %
Young age (18-24)	33	+ 18 %
Young age (25-34)	25	+ 10 %
University education	23	+ 8 %
Student status	47	+ 32 %
'B' social grade	27	+ 12 %
Skilled user *	47	+ 19 %
Long-term user *	37	+ 10 %

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

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

However, while internet access makes no difference to older people's likelihood of voting, young internet users are significantly more likely to vote than their non-user counterparts (+15% reported turnout). Although this does not imply causality, it provides indication that the internet is more of a 'political technology' for younger than

for older citizens. This also indicates the increasing stratification of digital Britain, as online information concerning the election is accessed both by young people who are less likely to vote than adults, but more likely to vote than non-users in their age band, and by older people who, in general, are more likely to go to the polls.

Where and how? Online destinations

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

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

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

TABLE 3 EMAIL ABOUT THE ELECTION EXCHANGED WITH DIFFERENT CORRESPONDENTS.

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

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

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

Finally, we looked at active engagement with the online campaign. Again, a small minority of users (8%) engaged in election-related online activities, including taking part in an online discussion (1.5%), signing an online petition (1%) or subscribing to election news (1.3%). Overall, citizens took very little part in the campaign by electronic means. Although, more than a fifth of the British public used the internet, in one way or another, in relation to the election, only a very small fraction used new media to engage with party campaigns. It seems that where they have a choice, as with online communication, then the public will avoid the offerings from parties. This lends some support to the contention that, whilst the public may be turned off by the parties, they are not necessarily turned off by politics or the election in general.

Why and why not? Motivations and barriers

Perhaps more interesting is to explore, at least cursorily, some of the reasons why citizens did or did not use the internet during the election, and what benefits they derived from doing so. First, we asked the main group of information seekers identified above about their reasons for use of the internet to get election information. The most frequently reported reason is that information is available online all the time, (46% of respondents) along with those who mention that online information is more up-to-date. Strikingly, a large number also indicate no specific reason for going online. Arguably, this may indicate that internet information seeking is simply becoming part of people's day-to-day life (44%). Overall, the impression is that people go online because election information is more convenient to access, rather than to engage or play a more active role in the campaign.

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

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

TABLE 4. SELF-REPORTED INFLUENCE OF THE INTERNET BY DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS.

	Age		
	Below 35	35 and above	All
More interest in the election	22.3%	15.0%	18.4 %
Helped make a better informed choice *	24.2%	12.4%	17.8 %
Encouraged to vote *	12.9%	6.2%	16.2 %
Confirmed vote decision	18.2%	14.5%	9.3 %
Changed vote decision	4.0%	1.9%	3.5 %
Encouraged to vote tactically	4.0%	3.1%	2.9 %
Encouraged to take part in the campaign	2.1%	.9%	1.5 %
Some effect *	62.7%	43.8%	52.5 %

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

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

Finally, what about internet non-users? Is there any chance to lure them into electoral politics online at the next election? Our results were mixed. First, we asked non-users (47% of the British public) whether they were planning to get internet access within the next one or two years. Around 9% answered positively, suggesting that by the next election around two-thirds or more of the electorate may be using the net. The key reasons for moving online are educational, social and commercial rather than directly political. Only 2% of prospective users value the internet as a tool to 'do politics' or to transact with the government, whereas education (46%), keeping in touch with family/friends (43%) and commercial transactions (42%) are the most prevalent intended uses. However, it may be that current patterns of information-seeking will be maintained as a significant number of respondents indicated that gathering news information was a consideration in moving online.

The 2005 online election in context

How does this compare with past elections, then? First, one needs to note that digital Britain changed dramatically, both quantitatively and qualitatively, between the 2001 and 2005 general elections. Just after the 2001 election, 33% of the British public enjoyed home internet access and 33% said that they had access to email. In 2005, more than 33% had broadband connections in the home, while 56% accessed the internet overall. More than 45% also used email. Also, digital inequality, as measured by home access to PCs, internet and broadband, has decreased between the two elections - albeit not dramatically.

On the one hand, the online political landscape does not seem to have changed that much. As the 2001 Hansard Society survey found,[4] internet users and non-users had the same likelihood of voting. This largely depends on the social stratification of internet access: both young people who are less likely to vote than average and older citizens who are more likely to vote than average are online, effectively averaging out the voting variance. In other words, enlarged access has not made the internet either a more or less political place than before.

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

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

[4] Coleman, S and N. Hall (2001) 'Spinning on the web' in *2001 Cyber Space Odyssey*, Coleman, S. (ed) Hansard Society: London, pp.19-21.

Conclusions

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

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

In the UK, by contrast, well-entrenched party machines and the relatively localised nature of election campaigning mean that currently traditional communication tools work just as well if not better. Why use email when direct mail and door knocking works better?[5] Indeed, the internet in Britain may be more suited to facilitating single issue politics and flash campaigns outside elections where innovation, flexibility and networking are at a premium.

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[5] See the perceptive comments of former MP Richard Allan on www.voxpolitics.co.uk, 29 April 2005..