The Early Political Web (1995-2005):
A ten-year observational research seeking evidence of “eDemocracy” in
the information architecture of political parties web sites worldwide

Andrea RICCI

Thèse présentée en vue de l’obtention
du grade académique de Docteur en
Information et Communication, sous la
direction de Messieurs François
Heinderyckx et Jan Servaes.

Année Académique 2012-2013

The view expressed here are those of the author and do not
necessarily reflect the official position of, and should not be
attributed to the European Commission or to the European
External Action Service
To Rolando, Delphes, Emma, Greta and Matteo.

I am grateful to Pascal Havelange and Cosmin Popescu who helped me deal with the technical challenge posed by this research. I owe a big thank to Alexander Mikov from REL Software for having accepted to adapt WLV for this PhD project and to Dr. Jamal Shahin (V.U.B.-I.E.S.) for his important comments and encouraging words in a crucial phase of the drafting of this dissertation. Words fail me to express my gratitude and love to you, Delphes.
## CONTENTS

### Introduction
Transformation of Democracy, partisan press or Digital Variants of Traditional Propaganda ?
Considerations on the research perimeter, the theoretical approach, the tools and the analytical methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outline of the Dissertation Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...........................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...........................................</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Last Wave of the Debate on the “Modernization of Political Participation” ?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Electronic Townhall (1992) ......................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Minnesota Electronic Democracy Project (1994) ......................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 1996 US Elections ..............................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Symbolic “Year 2000” ..........................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 11, 2001 ....................................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obama’s Presidential mandate (2008- to date) .............................................</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 2. Literature Review (Part One): The evolution of the Normative Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defining Electronic Democracy Scientifically: from Figure of Speech to Scholarly Concept</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hagen’s typology, the elusive notion of interactivity and alternative definitions of democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becker’s TeleDemocracy ..........................................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A critique of teleDemocracy ..................................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rheingold’s cyberdemocracy ...................................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A critique of cyberdemocracy ..............................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boncheck’s electronic democratization .....................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A critique of Bonchek’s electronic democratization model .................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gibson, Römmle, Ward: From real type to ideal type ..........................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A critique of Gibson, Römmle, and Ward’s three layered models ...........................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eDemocracy and the Public Space: from Habermas to Luhmann ...............................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A critique to certain interpretations of Habermas’ public space .............................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eDemocracy as e-Government (and e-Voting) ......................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A critique of eDemocracy as e-Government (or e-Voting) ....................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy 2.0? ....................................................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A critique of research investigating the links between web 2.0 and e-democracy ..</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Literature Review (Part Two) : Alternative Approaches to the idea of eDemocracy ............................................................... 98

Introduction : Why broadening the theoretical approach...........................................98

A Cybernetic View on Web Based Party Activites ......................................................99
  Actors of political variance.................................................................................. 99
  Transmission of information, gate-keeping and load .......................................... 100
  A cybernetic approach to the political web....................................................... 101
  Measure of political website effectiveness according to Deutschsch’s Model ...... 103

A realist critique of contemporary mass parties behaviour ....................................104
  Measure of political website effectiveness in the contemporary environment of mass parties ................................................................. 108

To Inform is not to Communicate: Wolton’s Cohabitation and the Political Web ......109
  Wolton’s critique to ‘Systemism’......................................................................... 109
  Wolton’s three grand categories of information............................................... 110
  Measure of political website virtuosity according to Wolton’s Theory .............. 110

A Practitioner view on the political web : From “La Com” to Professional Political Marketing Online ........................................................................................................ 111
  Professional Political Marketing is neither a vice, nor a virtue (Seguela)......... 111
  Attack Politicks and other unintended consequence of political communication...113
  Measure of political website effectiveness according to the Communication Theories presented in this short review ................................................................. 117

Understanding the Intentions of Online Communicators : an Essential Review of Propaganda Studies ................................................................. 117
  Propaganda must address simultaneously the individual and the masses........... 124
Propaganda must be total ................................................................. 124
Propaganda is both visible and invisible ........................................ 125
Propaganda needs myths and mobilising images ............................. 126
Propaganda must be organised ....................................................... 126
Propaganda must stimulate orthopraxy ......................................... 127
Measure of political website effectiveness according to Propaganda Theories ..... 128
Information Architecture: Turning Intentions into Forms, Contents, and Functions ... 128
Applying Information Architecture Principles to Party Web Sites .................. 130
Measure of political website effectiveness according to information architecture 137

4. Conclusions for the Theoretical Section ........................................ 138
eDemocracy: Illusion, Dogma, Propaganda, Reality .......................... 138

5. The Definition of the Research Perimeter .................................. 140
Mapping the Political Web ................................................................. 140
WebSphere Analysis vs. Traditional Systemic Boundaries ............... 142
Relevant actors of the Online Para-Political System (the lato sensu Political Web) .... 143
Charismatic Leaders Web Sites ....................................................... 144
Mono-thematic Issue Sites: protest networks and radical grassroot organisations ... 145
Islamist Web Sites ........................................................................ 147
Delimiting the research perimeter to the Study of the Political Web stricto sensu .... 148
The choice of Methods and tools in the analytical strategy ............. 149
Defining the unit of Analysis ........................................................ 150
Defining the Online Source for Party Web Sites URLs ................. 150
Analytical Strategy for the Taxonomy (1st Empirical Fieldwork) ......... 153
Structuring the field notes ............................................................. 154
Towards a partial Taxonomy of the formal agents of political communication online 156
Centering the analysis on the Usability of Information Spaces......... 156
Analytical Strategy of the Global Structural Analysis of Political Web Sites Using WLV (2nd Empirical Fieldwork) .......................................................... 157
The choice for the right tool for an Information Architecture approach to the Political Web ..................................................... 158
A plethora of web analysers .......................................................... 158
Selecting the right tool: a serious technical challenge ................... 159
Analytical Strategy of the Political Webmasters Online Survey (3rd Empirical Fieldwork) .......................................................... 161
Reducing the potential for inaccuracy ............................................. 161
6. A Basic Taxonomy of the Early Actors of the Political Web (stricto Sensu)..................................................................................162

Deconstructing and Comparing Political Web Sites: Instructions and Other Details...162
Instructions and time lines: ..........................................................................................162
Party Sites as Online Newspapers and the Issue Hypermarket: .........................162
Memory, Identity and Cognitive Sequences: .........................................................164
Poetry and Music as identitarian references..........................................................165
Professional Audio and Video as indicators of excellence .....................................166
Cartoons and Animations: between visual culture and propaganda ......................167
Photographs between photojournalism and propaganda.........................................167
Selected Case: Forza Italia Parody Banners.........................................................168
The newest trend: web applications.......................................................................169
Selected Case: E-Precinct and I-Teams.................................................................169
Merchandising Mini-sites.......................................................................................170

The Three Main Families of Party Web Sites........................................................170
Protosites..................................................................................................................171
Mesosites................................................................................................................171
Neosites..................................................................................................................172
Selected Case DavetheChameleon........................................................................174

Growth and Evolution of Party Web Sites..............................................................176
External Factors in inter-stage mobility.................................................................176
Internal factors for inter-stage mobility..................................................................178
Selected Case: IKEA’s visuals become a visual standard.......................................180

Genuses of Party Web Sites....................................................................................181
Marxist Leninist.......................................................................................................181
Selected Case: the Partido Obrero Revolucionario (Argentina).............................182
The Diasporic Site...................................................................................................183
Selected case: FODEM (C.A.R.)............................................................................183
The threatened party...............................................................................................184
Selected Case: the Communist Party (Indonesia)..................................................184
Planet-Satellite : constellations and grapes of sites..............................................185
Selected Cases: Socialist Party (Spain).................................................................186
Left – Green genus................................................................................................187
Selected Case: The Green Party (US).....................................................................190
The contact / over-exposure party..........................................................................193
Selected Case: The Humanista Party (Argentina).................................................193
The attack party......................................................................................................194
Selected Case: Front National (France)................................................................196
Selected Case: Partito Radicale (Italy).................................................................197
The transmedia site.................................................................................................199
7. A Global Structural Analysis of Political Parties Web Sites using Web Link Validator (Fieldwork Two) .................................................................................................................. 213

The Political Webmasters’ Online Survey (Fieldwork Three) .................................................................................................................. 225

9. Conclusions .......................................................................................................................... 248

Selected Case: UMP (France) .................................................................................................................. 199

Discussion: Factors facilitating or constraining the impact of political parties Web Sites .......................................................................................................................... 200

Most widely adopted strategy online: isolate, collate and potentiate .................................................. 201

The numerous "pre-conditions" that constraint party sites effectiveness ........................................... 202

Does the Public Respond to Party communication online? .................................................................. 203

Unresolved Issue 1: Finding parties online .......................................................................................... 207

Unresolved Issue 2: Rhetoric and visualization of hypetexts ................................................................. 208

Unresolved Issue 3: Non reading ......................................................................................................... 209

Only Electronic Dazebaos? ................................................................................................................. 210

The s.c. Information Society and its ‘attention economy’ .................................................................. 211

Bibliography ........................................................................................................................................ 263
**Introduction**

**TRANSFORMATION OF DEMOCRACY, PARTISAN PRESS OR DIGITAL VARIANTS OF TRADITIONAL PROPAGANDA?**

Progress in information technologies and communication is changing the way we live: how we work and do business, how we educate our children, study and do research, train ourselves, and how we are entertained. The information society is not only affecting the way people interact but it is also requiring the traditional organisational structures to be more flexible, more participatory and more decentralised. A new revolution is carrying mankind forward into the Information Age. The smooth and effective transition towards the information society is one of the most important tasks that should be undertaken in the last decade of the 20th century.

The statement above, taken from the conclusions to the G7 Summit on Information Society organised by the European Commission in Brussels (25-26 February 1995), sounded for many, both in Europe, in the US and elsewhere, as the sacralization of the revolutionary changes brought to politics by the emergence of the information society. For a short while, the G7 in Brussels seemed to be the evidence that the information revolution had grasped the collective sphere, the institutions, politics and its processes. The InfoBahns appeared to be capable - inter alia - to materialise one of the pre-conditions of democracy: the full right to information.

*Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers [Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948]*.

The assertive nature of the Summit’s conclusive remarks added new energy to an existing public discourse linking electronics, networks, the internet and the web to the notion of revolution. There was no way, seemingly, to stop change affecting the polity, citizenship and democracy. Open access and universal services seemed to be key to allow electronic communities to participate and have a direct influence upon both government and politics:

*...The transformation of democracy towards a Jeffersonian model is rapidly taking place...*  

---

2. German for InfoHighways

---

11
The notions of electronic citizenry and of netizens⁵ – according to the Clinton Administration which was particularly vocal in advertising the populist transformation⁶ of politics - reflected the emergence of new, politically salient, collective behaviours deriving from the use of computer networks and the related deliv-
erance from the constraints of time and space. Against the background of the crisis of traditional mass parties, the new electronic frontier ⁷ of the information society seemed to be providing to new virtual communities the opportunity to propose (or oppose) a new social organisation, capable of bypassing tradi-
tional power gate-keepers.

My thesis is that the World Wide Web – in the first 10 years of its development – has not necessarily sup-
ported the emergence of a strong democracy. The explosive growth of the quantity of political informa-
tion online is not the evidence of the explosive growth of eDemocracy : this would be like Bimber says, a form of McLuhanism :

...the tendency to focus so closely on the idea that the medium is the message as to miss the significance that content can have⁸.

On the contrary, the empirical fieldworks reported in this 10 years long work devoted to seeking evidence of eDemocracy in the political parties sites known at the time of the research, provide evidence that a part of the World Wide Web occupied by online properties funded and developed by political parties, a section that I have called the political web stricto sensu, is essentially developing into a document repository which is complementing and, at times, deliberately substituting printed “house organs” or party newspapers.

I have decided to focus my attention on the online properties of political parties because – as Scatt-
schneider⁹ quoted by Norris suggests : Modern Democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties. I have therefore started my research assuming that the political web is as aspect of eDemocracy, but assuming that if evidence of eDemocracy can be found anywhere on the World Wide Web, that pre-
cise section of the World Wide Web should contain the maximum amount of it.

My findings do not provide a great deal of evidence corroborating the traditional eDemocracy thesis of the populist/deliberative transformation of modern politics under the effect of the internet. Even if modern political parties (such as the Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy) can organise both deliberation and decision making activities online by organising needs and wants of their constituencies through web application (Van Selm & Al.¹⁰), evidence shows that the majority of political parties around the world (identified

---

⁵ A term coined by the work of Ronda and Michael Hauben in Hauben, R., Hauben, M. Netizens : On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet, IEEE Computer Societyt Press, 1997
survey1/poltran2.htm Retrieved 04/14/1997
survey1/poltran2.htm Retrieved 04/14/1997 p.12
⁹ Schattschneider E.E. Party Government New York, Rinehart 1942 p.1 , quoted by NORRIS P. ,’ Internet World: Parties, Govern-
rd 3rd August 2000 – XVIII th World Congress of the International Political Science Association p. 2;
through the same methodology used by Norris¹¹) use the web as a document repository, has designed its site to limit person to person interaction with anyone (supporters or antagonists) and engages in forms of communication which are intentionally geared to replicate traditional and often weak forms of propaganda.

My work provides further evidence in support of Margolis and Resnick "normalization theory"¹²: what emerges from the political web stricto sensu is business as usual, if compared to real life politics. The parties’ political web appears to be the continuation, the extension of what happens among political parties offline, including in terms of propaganda techniques.

In the political web stricto sensu, person to person interaction materialises in the form of email, the use of forms, posts on blogs and more recently, it materialises through synergies with various kinds of social networks. However, this specific type of interactivity represents an ancillary function in the information architecture of modern party web sites.

A closer look to a significant sample of 626 party sites (for which content analysis is possible), reveals that blogs and other social networks have been used until 2005 as smart templates by party activists. It’s rare to find web technologies used to perform specific and formal deliberation processes, whether for the party’s internal democracy or contribute to public referenda. On the contrary, it is more and more common to spot applications aiming at enhancing partisan conversations, or “politics of animosity”¹³.

By combining the inherent shortcomings associated to the specific nature of the medium (what I call the bias of the web, with Innis¹⁴), with the specific constraints and the imperfect implementations of existing technologies, more political information posted by traditional political actors online is not necessarily turning into more communication, an interested audience, better self-government or even, truly effective propaganda.

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE RESEARCH PERIMETER, THE THEORETICAL APPROACH, THE TOOLS AND THE ANALYTICAL METHODS

I define the political web as a part of the world wide web made of web properties (or web sites) whose mission is to perform politically salient actions, such as affecting the policy agenda, starting or interrupting a policy cycle, proposing legislative texts, raising funds, training sympathizers, sharing house organs etc. In alternative to Schneider and Foot’s¹⁵ notion of WebSphere and in alternative to social networks analysis (as in Boudourides¹⁶), in the dissertation I make a distinction between political web stricto sensu (the part of the web where political parties have established an online presence) and the political web


¹³ BARTOLINI S. Political parties rise, consolidation and decline (?) in Europe: a developmental perspective Paper presented to the Conference on ‘New Challenges for Political parties and Representation’ The Univ. of Michigan Ann Arbor May 6-7, 2005


¹⁶ BOUDOURIDES M. “A review of network theories on the formation of public opinion” Paper Presented to the Euricom Colloquium Nijmegen, the Netherlands, October 9-11.2002
*lato sensu* (the part of the web where a much larger community of formal or informal actors of the political system has established its presence). The core of my research perimeter is devoted to the study of the political web *stricto sensu*, and, specifically, to the external functions of political parties.

Having focussed my work on a considerably large universe, I have deliberately decided not to study any of the actors of the political web *lato sensu*, such as online grassroots activists, charismatic leaders, or terrorist/anti-regime groups or loose political movements.

I have also decided not to study eGovernment and eVoting, two applications which are often used as synonyms of eDemocracy. As I argue in my literature review, if we agree with Rousseau that democracy is about the construction of the public will through discourse and deliberation, and if we agree that at the same time, democracy is a set of rules which provides and guarantees the fairness of decision making processes, eGovernment and eVoting are autonomous / independent variables. One can enjoy the provision of public services without engaging in deliberative processes and one can have eVoting without public willingness to go to vote.

Academic research on eDemocracy has often pushed itself away from reality, locking itself in the study of ideal-types. The many theorems deducted from the axiom of *information revolution* have mostly focused on the birth of new political entities (through the analysis of pilot experiences run by local governments or by grass-roots activists). The reality of daily politics in Europe and in many other countries worldwide is more of a disappointment. Against this background this work takes a different view and aims at drawing - on the basis of a broader theoretical background - an alternative approach to the concept of eDemocracy, and hopefully, a more realist vision of the impact of the web on existing and traditional political actors, specifically political parties.

Electronic or deliberative democracy enthusiasts such as Grossman, Barber, Fishkin, Shane or Shapiro have focused on positive epiphenomena and have isolated ruptures instead of framing their research on integration and evolution. Methodologically, these normative perspectives avoid engaging into very large empirical validations and tend to bound their arguments by inductively studying circumscribed events.

Throughout the dissertation, instead, an attempt is made to frame the actors and the factors observed in the political web through a wider theoretical framework describing the evolution of the ecosystem (and its cultural, communicational and technological components) in which the traditional mass party is inserted.

The literature review in therefore organised in three sections.

---

17 GROSSMAN, K.L. 1995 Id.
18 BARBER, B., *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, University of California Press; (February 1, 2004)
The first one is devoted to a review of some of the most relevant examples of classic (normative) eDemocracy theories. In this section, by re-visiting the classic work of Bonchek on electronic democratization I have specifically tried to emphasize the crucial role of low market entry costs in the rapid growth of the political web.

In a second section of the theoretical background, I have broadened the levels of analysis by exploring approaches and works which are often systematically omitted by traditional eDemocracy scholars, even if they provide a realistic view on the most controversial aspects of the evolution of contemporary politics.

The classic works of Verba and Deutsch, but also those of Wolton and the doctrine of an important practitioner like Seguela provide foundational concepts to analyze political communication on the net because this emphasize the key role of gatekeepers, the importance of load balancing in party communication (and the risk of overload in the so called information society), the difference between a demand driven political marketing and an offer driven one.

The writings of Poguntke, Lawson, Dalton and Wattenbeg have been instrumental to describe the contemporary phenomenon of distrust for political elites which, alone, represents the biggest reality check for all normative approaches to eDemocracy. Finally, through the contributions of numerous authors such as Cunningham, Jovett and O'Dowell, Taylor and Ellul I have tried to test – in a communication science perspective - the value added by the web in the context of a propaganda campaign.

While much of the existing research on politics on the net focuses on phenomenology of the functioning of virtual communities, sui generis experiments of participatory democracy, pilot projects carried out at local level or during specific electoral contexts (notably Presidential races), we know little (on a global scale) of the “inside” structures of these web sites, of the way they are programmed, of the data behind the information, of the type of information linked hypertextually, of the programmes and their functions. In other words we have little information on the specific, detailed information architecture of political parties web sites. For this reason it has been necessary to introduce a third complementary module to the theoretical foundations of this work to introduce the writings and the concepts of Rosenberg, Morville and Kahn on information architecture.

We know little about the specific aims of the makers of these web properties. We only have partial information on who has originated these sites within the party organisation, who runs them, how they relate to political opponents online, how they evolve in the course of the years and what economic drivers motivate parties in investing in this specific medium. To understand these factors it's been necessary not only to interview the players, but also to acquire new metrics and new tools to compare in a cross sectional analysis sites across the world. By scanning the structural (programmatic) features of a given web site (in our case parties) we can draw conclusions on the intentions behind forms and functions, on the external communication functions independently from the language of the content shared through these web sites.

A long and complex preparatory work for this dissertation was necessary to finding a technical method to allow detailed structural analysis (i.e. an information architecture analysis) of party web sites with the aim of comparing programmatically (i.e. from a programmer’s perspective) the role played by form, func-
tion and usability in the maximum amount of frequencies within the observed universe. After few years of unsuccessful pilot projects, this task has been performed successfully using Web Link Validator from REL Software.

The empirical framework of the dissertation is based on the largest collection of political parties web sites available at the time of writing. The unit of analysis has been identified through the same method used by Norris, but the final number of party sites scanned exceeds some 823 cases the universe studied by Norris\(^2\). The scope of analysis is therefore global and comparative in contrast with the micro approach supported by most of the scholars, so far. The aim is to recognize differences and commonalities of usage across regions of the world or across parties belonging to the same ideological roots.

Rather than a collective case study, the dissertation (whose overall methodological approach is summarized in the table below) moves from empirical generalizations to testable hypotheses by adopting a statistical paradigm and macro approach, resulting into a large scale longitudinal analysis, a cross sectional study of political parties online, followed by a comprehensive global party webmasters survey.

This type of research is largely dependent on the solution of significant data-collection problems: therefore a great deal of energy has been devoted in repeatedly collecting data from the universe (change over time was assessed between 1995 and 2005, and in some cases even beyond, until 2009) both through direct observation and field notes, survey and electronic collection (with an ad hoc software solution combining scripting with off-the-shelf software).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paradigm</th>
<th>Unit of Analysis</th>
<th>Data Collection Method Used</th>
<th>Data Analysis Technique</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STATISTICAL PROGRAMMATIC</td>
<td>Largest AVAILABLE, source chosen (through a methodology similar to Norris 2001-2003) organised and verified collection of political web sites available at the time of the analysis.</td>
<td>Observational Research (longitudinal analysis to predefined web sites 1995-2005), field notes, direct data collection through specific softwares (info. Architecture cross sectional study), online survey</td>
<td>Statistics (Cluster Analysis, correlation, PCA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROGRAMMATIC (STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS / INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE ANALYSIS)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Methodological approach adopted for the dissertation

Through a mixed descriptive and explanatory analysis, the dissertation – after having mapped and organised in a basic taxonomy the main type of web properties owned by political parties online - aims at identifying the variables and causal relationships that define the web as a medium for political parties.

Specifically, the dissertation attempts to understand through the analysis of the statements of the webmasters and the information architecture of the web sites, the intentions of the creators of political parties web sites. Similarly, the dissertation attempts to find – in the early political web - evidence of the concept of eDemocracy as described by the classic literature and understand which type of online presence is more or less apt to stimulate citizens’ involvement in decision-making and therefore, potentially, enhancing the democratic process.

My research does not include any section aiming at studying the user perception or interest for party sites or their real effectiveness in an electoral perspective.

Specifically the dissertation aims at answering the following research questions:

• **What sort of political performance and usability (i.e. capacity to converting online visitors into active party supporters and voters) is actually achieved worldwide by political parties?**
  ◦ In an information architecture perspective what are the indicators of political performance and how they compare?

• **What are the observable intentions of political party activists online?**
  ◦ Are these intentions coherent, with their programmatic implementation and with the observable results (i.e. the usability of political web projects)?

• **What is the main functional character emerging from the political web as it is today?**
  ◦ What type of interactivity is achieved? Is there enough evidence to say that deliberation is the dominant trait of the early political web?
Outline of the Dissertation Structure

In the dissertation, an inductive approach is used to extract significance from large datasets originated by the analysis of political parties sites online. The extraction of data is guided by a multi-level theoretical framework as described in the picture.

The prologue reviews the main milestones of the public debate on eDemocracy.

The literature review (chapter 2-4) opposes classic to realistic theoretical approaches to eDemocracy, and finally stresses the importance of information architecture as an objective solution to the analysis of party communication online. Deficiencies in each theoretical level are identified. These include insufficient research on political parties online, a methodological approach which avoids “inside views” on web properties created by political parties etc.. These gaps are meant to be filled by new research based on improved evidence (extracted with a programmer’s approach from the observed entities), methods / indicators (based on the structures of the observed universe), concepts (information architecture) and values (usability).
Chapter 5 is devoted to clarify the limits of the research perimeter and to expose the analytical strategy chosen in the empirical part of the dissertation. Specifically in chapter 5 I describe the long process through which Web link Validator has been retained as the best tool to scrutinize the factors of performance of party communication online.

From chapter 6 to 8, the dissertation explicitly enters the empirical realm. In chapter 6 I propose a first, basic taxonomy of the actors of the political web stricto sensu by linking together homogeneous phenotypes of party sites identified online through a longitudinal large scale study. In chapter 7 I present the findings of a first global structural analysis (a cross sectional analysis, in fact) of 2073 political parties web sites using Web Link Validator. An extensive statistical section compares data and shows how limited is the person – to – person interactivity found in the observed universe. The interpretation of these data confirm the preliminary findings of chapter 6 and suggest that a significant portion of observed web sites engage largely in publishing auto-referential material, mostly limit interactivity to a functional mailbox.

Chapter 8 aims at validating the findings of the observation campaigns reported in chapter 6-7 through the results of a questionnaire submitted to 108 political party webmasters on the main motives behind the usage of the web in politics. The results highlight the relative/ancillary role of the web in the overall communication apparatus of political parties and place the online strategy of the party not necessarily in a perspective of rupture, but in a continuum of communication activities targeting essentially like minded individuals and the media at large.

Contrary to most of the classic (normative) literary references reviewed in chapter 2, the three empirical sections offer mechanisms to understand the global reality of today’s political web: far from the utopian discourse, there is little debate on the political web (let aside the search of a compromise between opposite views), and more and more (weak) propaganda implemented trying to achieve more with less. The cost of high end online activities remain prohibitive for the largest majority of the players thus reducing even more the incentives towards engaging into deliberative processes which require both specific technology and considerable human intervention to treat each external contribution. A minority of advanced actors have managed to efficiently weaponize the web, expressing at its best the kinetic energy of the web (or its bias, in Innisian terms).

In the conclusive chapter (9), drawing from the overall theoretical framework, the conclusions of this work suggest that the web is indeed producing change in the political sphere, but is not necessarily helping the development of democracy. Rather, as Wolton suggests, the political web created by parties is worsening the communication gap between political elites and fluctuating electorate: more political information on party web sites does not necessarily mean more communication, better understanding and improved identification of compromises between opposite political views.

I conclude by exposing a number of research opportunities to apply, to adapt, or to improve the approach proposed. Specifically, I suggest as a promising research field for future works cases of high impact political propaganda on the web, such as the promotion of political violence online or extreme political discourse as the one found in populist parties web sites.

THE LAST WAVE OF THE DEBATE ON THE “MODERNIZATION OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION”?

The impact of media on Democracy and the modernization of political participation have been at the centre of a considerable public debate for decades.

The interest in this nexus has never decreased, as political participation has never ceased to decline worldwide in the past decades, as Kamens, Dalton, Goldstein and Ridout, Gray and Caul, Trent and Friedenberg and others have noted. Conversely, growing public frustration for incumbent political elites, existing electoral systems and, more broadly, representative democracy has generated considerable research on the reasons and possible solutions for the crisis in which traditional mass parties are seen to have entered.

Interestingly enough Converse, Verba and Nie, and Conway suggested that turnout rates were higher in the late 19th century precisely due to modest levels of information available to the public (and a greater sensitivity of the public itself to emotional appeals). Conversely, according to these authors, more information increases scrutiny, exposes flaws and weaknesses, increases the reverberation of negative advertising, all leading to decreasing turnout and greater discontent for politics and politicians.

This said, media, and in particular newer media, have been much more often seen by a majority of scholars as one of the keys capable of raise turnout (because the public is provided more access to relevant information to motivate its choices) and to introduce change in the way the political system works. As An...
key suggests, scholarly attention has, in this respect, progressively shifted from one technology to another: radio in the 1940s; television, cable and telecommunications between late 1960s and 1980s; and then the web in the 1990s.

Organized in cyclical waves, the public debate on the modernisation/improvement of political participation systematically accompanied the most significant presidential elections in US history, in particular when the result of the elections had been marked by a particularly effective media strategy. This occurred with the first televised presidential debate on September 1960 with between F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, but also in 1980-1984 with Ronald Reagan, in 1992 with the campaign involving Bill Clinton, George Bush and Ross Perot, in 2004 when Howard Dean and then John Kerry raised respectively 1 and 11 million US dollars on the Internet.

The Electronic Townhall (1992)
Ubois underlines that few really understood what an electronic townhall was when in 1992 Clinton, Gore and the head of the Reform Party Ross Perot, dominated much of the coverage with their keen interest in promoting the use of electronic media in political participation. The debate on the political uses of the internet and in particular on electronic democracy (or eDemocracy) peaked between 1994 and 1995, sustained by almost an avalanche of events, announcements, reports, surveys and pilot projects.

As in the past, the US elections triggered the avalanche. Albeit its poor vocabulary, the 1994 Presidential debate was carried out for the first time both on TV and online; first on the proprietary service GEnie, and then on other online services.

In 1994, in a ITU meeting in Buenos Aires Vice President Al Gore gave an important speech on the Global Information Infrastructure. The speech integrated accurately most of the rhetorical figures used by eDemocracy advocates at that moment (underlined text is mine):

_These highways or, more accurately, networks of distributed intelligence---will allow us to share information, to connect, and to communicate as a global community. From these connections we will derive robust and sustainable economic progress, strong democracies, bet-_
ter solutions to global and local environmental challenges, improved health care, and--ultimately--a greater sense of shared stewardship of our small planet....

The development of the GII must be a cooperative effort among governments and peoples. It cannot be dictated or built by a single country. It must be a democratic effort.

And the distributed intelligence of the GII will spread participatory democracy. In a sense, the GII will be a metaphor for democracy itself. Representative democracy does not work with an all-powerful central government, arrogating all decisions to itself. That is why communism collapsed. Instead, representative democracy relies on the assumption that the best way for a nation to make its political decisions is for each citizen—the human equivalent of the self-contained processor—to have the power to control his or her own life. To do that, people must have available the information they need. And be allowed to express their conclusions in free speech and in votes that are combined with those of millions of others. That’s what guides the system as a whole.

The GII will not only be a metaphor for a functioning democracy, it will in fact promote the functioning of democracy by greatly enhancing the participation of citizens in decision-making.

And it will greatly promote the ability of nations to cooperate with each other. I see a new Athenian Age of democracy forged in the fora the GII will create35.

The speech had an enormous impact and further emphasized a sentiment of widespread optimism with regard to the web. Esther Dyson, a well-known analyst, digital entrepreneur and journalist, stated in a press interview: Computers create a community and give power...the electronic democracy is inevitable36.

Peter Lewis, from The New York Times, commented on the Congressional Campaign of that year with an article entitled Internet emerges as a vital link in political arena37. The House Speaker, the Republican Newt Gingrich, in a clear attempt to respond to the rhetoric of his political opponents, multiplied speeches, books and political initiatives such as the launch of Thomas, the interactive computer program which was intended to open the Congress’ work to the US population38.

36 Quoted by HIGGINS S., 'Electronic democracy wins votes : corporate PC users take to BBSs to express views ; online services’ ; PC Week, 1997 Vol 9 N.°20, Pg 19
The Minnesota Electronic Democracy Project (1994)

New political debates online, all re-using the Bulletin Board System model, proliferated in the States. Two Minnesota graduate students started one of the most interesting participatory projects of the moment, the Minnesota Electronic Democracy project. The project generated two significant spin-offs sites, still working today: www.e-democracy.org and Democracies Online (dowire.org) both created and run by one of the two students, 25 years old Steven Clift, who later became one of the most well-known eDemocracy evangelists.

In 1995, when newly-elected French President Jacques Chirac reactivated the country's nuclear defence policy, public protest against French nuclear testing at Mururoa Atoll drove New Zealand’s first experiments in electronic democracy through the political use of email

A conference organised in the same year tough, not a bomb, had greater consequences for the electronic democracy debate, at least.

40 MC DONALD M., 'Tests trigger an e-mail protest wave', The Dominion, Wellington, July 17 1995

The European Commission organised in 1995, the G7 Ministerial Conference on the Information Society in Brussels on 25-26 February. The event was a true première for the Institution, both in policy terms (as the implications were global) and in methodology (as the organisation of the event required a very complex negotiation process involving the Member States on one side, international partners and UN Agencies, and the European I.C.T. industry).

Through numerous rounds of video-conference, the European Commission identified a list of 11 international pilot projects capable of demonstrating the potential of the Information Society and stimulating its development. The Commission took the responsibility of the Global Inventory Project, a sort of global directory aiming at giving visibility to the most interesting Information Society Projects of the moment. One of the 11 projects was about e-Government and was operationally coordinated by the UK and Canada. The scope of the project was:

... to exchange experience and best practice on the use of on-line information technology by administrations on the establishment of procedures for conducting electronic administrative business between governments, companies and citizens.

The Summit avoided entering in politically sensitive and potentially controversial discussions on voters’ apathy and discontent with political elites. In parallel, however, the Commission hosted an eDemocracy mailing list in one of its first web servers located in the Information Society Project Office, a newly created unit with the DG meant to somehow mirror the US Information Infrastructure Task Force.

In February 1995 the Commission set up the Information Society Forum (consisting in 88 experts representing the European Parliament, academy, media and NGO community) as a new and authoritative source of reflection, debate and advice on the challenges of the Information Society. Two of the working groups discussed eDemocracy. The Forum produced rather interesting results, that were not always in sync with the popular discourse on eDemocracy. For example in one of its reports it indicated clearly that a certain degree of caution was necessary with the emerging forms of online political communication:

Some claim that the interactivity of the internet will transform democracy. While there is an impressive range of electronic debate on the internet, one should be cautious about the ex-

---

41 Information and communication technologies
42 "MISSION OF THE IITF: While the private sector will build and run virtually all of the National Information Infrastructure (NII), the President and the Vice President have stated clearly that the Federal government has a key leadership role to play in its development. Accordingly, the White House formed the Information Infrastructure Task Force (IITF) to articulate and implement the Administration’s vision for the NII. The task force consists of high-level representatives of the Federal agencies that play a major role in the development and application of information technologies. Working together with the private sector, the participating agencies will develop comprehensive telecommunications and information policies that best meet the needs of both the agencies and the country. By helping build consensus on thorny policy issues, the IITF will enable agencies to make and implement policy more quickly and effectively...". From THE INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE TASK FORCE in IBIBLIO The Public Library and digital archive URL: http://www.ibiblio.org/nnii/NII-Task-Force.html Accessed 24/09/09
tent to which these might be considered representative given deficiencies in the current level and quality of participation. For example, one major consideration in evaluating the quality of such participation is the integrity of the information upon which decision-making is based.

The ISF supports experiments and applications which extend the potential of electronic media to further citizens’ democratic involvement in our political systems and the information society in general. However, it recognises that unless and until there is more widespread access and the demography of that access is better understood, these cannot be considered to be properly representative. In facing up to the challenge the electronic media pose to traditional political communication, the ISF would like to encourage initiatives designed to ensure the integrity, authenticity and accuracy of data on the internet, as well as to monitor opinion-testing techniques, and to expand access.44

The important caveat of the IFS went unheard. The interest for eDemocracy continued to increase globally between 1996 and 2000, both directly – as a results of the resonance of the speeches of key political leaders – but also indirectly, through the process of globalisation of the Information Society Policy, jointly stimulated by the US (Global Information Infrastructure), the EU (Global Information Society), the G7 (G7 on Information Society), the OECD (Directorate of Science and Technology) and at least five UN Agencies45.

Amidst a general euphoria for eDemocracy, the Economist that year dedicated a cover to the Future of Democracy46 and W.B.H.J. Van de Donk, I.Th.M. Snellen and P.W.Tops published Orwell in Athens: a perspective on Informatization and Democracy47, one of the first major monographies about the use of ICT in Politics across Europe.

The 1996 US Elections
In 1996 the largest ever conference on the World Wide Web was organised in Paris and eDemocracy officially became part of the electioneering bandwagon48. The US Press, waiting for the upcoming elections, called the existing political sites fun and informative:

The White House site includes Family Life at the White House and sound bites and photos of Socks, the First Cat.

At Senator Bob Dole’s site you can design campaign posters, send friends Bob Dole postcards, and download Dole screensavers.

45 Notably the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force, Telecommunication Development Bureau at the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the World Bank’s InfoDEV Programme, UNESCO’s Communication and Information Sector, UNDP’s ICT for Development
48 CLENAGHAN C., ‘Escape route aplenty with electronic democracy’, Scotland on Sunday, April 20 1997
Conservative Republican candidate Alan Keyes offers speech scripts and background information at his site. Voters can also purchase the Best of Alan Keyes video and Alan Keyes T-shirts.

In the same year the Canadian Calgary Herald reported:

...electronic democracy is going to be a huge thing between now and the end of the millennium. Those politicians who are with it quickest have the most to gain...

In 1997 the British press noted the country’s first steps into the Political Internet, journalists remarked that Altavista was already capable of pulling up more than 2000 pages related to electronic democracy.

In 1998 more than two-thirds of the 1998 US congressional candidates had operating websites. In the US Senate 75%, or 51 candidates, had websites.

The posting of the Starr Report, detailing Clinton’s relationship with Monica Lewinsky, was described as historic, even if the coverage noted:

...while some 70 million Americans now have access to the Web, nearly 200 million others don’t....

The same year, Roza Tsagarousianu, Damian Tambini and Cathy Brian edited Cyberdemocracy. Presented by the press as a truly international book, the work described the experiments in cyberdemocracy in Bologna (Iperbole), Santa Monica (the P.E.N. system described in more detail further on), in Amsterdam (Digitaale Stadt), and in Manchester (Information City initiative).

In the media discourse, as shown by the selection of themes in the G7 on information society, a very thin line separated eDemocracy from e-government, electoral participation and participative democracy at local level.

One of the most quoted features of the Internet became its ability to cut red tape:

51 MCGOOKIN S., ' Somewhere, there may be a parallel political universe', Financial Times April 4, 1997, Friday London Edition
52 FUTRELLE D., 'Net.Cetera : virtual democracy is still a long way from utopia', Newsday, July 27, 1997
53 DULIO D. A., GOFF D., THURBER J.A.: 'Untangled Web: Internet use during the 1998 election (World Wide Web)' in PS: Political Science & Politics March 1, 1999 No. 1, Vol. 32; Pg. 53
55 BRYAN C., TAMBINI D., TSAGAROUSIANOU R., Cyberdemocracy: Technology, Cities, and Civic Networks; Routledge, 1998
56 NISPEROS P. B., 'Host to host : electronic democracy at work', Business World Nov 5 1998
'Electronic democracy', commentators said, is inspired by two overlapping dislikes - of bureaucrats and of politicians – and by two ideas for making these groups more likeable.

In 1999 The Times suggested:

... the formal political process, with five-year election cycles and little formal opportunity to participate in the meantime, seems antiquated. Caught between competing trajectories, one towards global forces, the other to fast and responsive local choices, the British Parliament appears, to many people, both impotent and irrelevant. It is here that the electronic revolution can be decisive, either further increasing the sense of a Parliament that is out of touch and disconnected, or helping to harness the enormous potential of the new electronic technologies, if not quite to build a new electronic democracy, at least to help to give Parliament new relevance and new connection in a world changing so fast it sometimes seems to be spinning out of control. Electronic modernisation can be the key to greater democracy. If change is shaped and guided, if the State enables rather than abdicates, the modern world can be both fairer and more democratic.

The Symbolic "Year 2000"

Approaching the symbol of the year 2000, other analysts suggested what seemed to many a new conceptual leap: from eDemocracy/e-government, to e-voting:

Though political participation on the Internet is still developing, many proponents of e-politics advocate an emerging form of government known as electronic democracy, or voting online. Still in preliminary stages, proponents hope the concept will increase political participation and voter turnout. Although no government system is based on electronic democracy, the concept has been put to the test on smaller scales.

Albeit sound and relatively numerous, dissenting opinions on eDemocracy, such as those of the Boston Globe or The Independent (or others, see below), grabbed again little public attention:

It's obviously easy to set up and knock down straw ideals of the different aspects of electronic democracy. Still, as policy-makers often wish for technological fixes that are painless and easy, no one should think electronic democracy is such a fix. With eyes open, one can see that electronic democracy offers great promise for making our government better, a lifetime of challenges for policy-makers and a bumper crop of headaches and rewards for administrators.

57 [EDS] 'Electronic Democracy : the PEN is mighty', The Economist Feb 1. 1992
58 GOULD P., 'Internet offers a new world of democracy', The Times Nov 15 1999
59 RUST M., 'Cyberspace trendy tool for political campaigns', Minnesota Daily via U-Wire December 2, 1999
One has only to look at the quality of political or religious discussion on even the more civilised bulletin-board systems such as Cix or the Well to see how little political debate would be improved (by online media) 61

Despite all this Internet cheerleading, electronic democracy remains an elusive dream. Though politicians glibly talk about e-mail and the Web, very few use these tools to their fullest potential. As a result, the Net has been pestered by political posturing. 62

Activists have embraced it in a big way, but the Web is still not a tool to motivate the general public...I don’t see an electronic democracy, but it is a spiffy new tool for dealing with elites, activists and people who mobilize others. 63

In 2000 Tracy Westen64 wrote on the National Civic Review an article entitled eDemocracy: ready or not, here it comes echoing the tone and the arguments of Dyson, and matching the enthusiasm of Graeme Browning author of Electronic Democracy: Using the Internet to Transform American Politics65.

In 2001 the site eActivism hit the headlines by proposing to federate all US legislative action alerts, updates on targeted bills and votes, and reporting on key US congress members. The site exploited the CapvizXC66 technology which was capable of embedding advocacy routines (pre-formatted requests to readily available mailing lists of Congressmen) within any given website.

61 BROWN A., 'Invasion of the cyber-Members ; Democracy – well, the government and MPs – is slowly getting netted', The Independent March 20 1995 URL http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/invasion-of-the-cybermembers-1612022.html Accessed 21/09/09
62 HUFFSUTTER P.J., 'Lawmakers, Internet fail to click', The San Diego Union-Tribune Jan. 1 1996
63 NYHAN D., 'When Politics Meets the Web', The Boston Globe May 15, 1998 [In an interview to Dr. Bruce Bimber, author of numerous works in the field of the Political Internet]
64 WESTEN T., 'E-Democracy: Ready or Not, Here It Comes' in National Civic Review, Fall2000, Vol. 89 Issue 3, p217
65 RANEY, R. F, 'A Second Chance: The Potential Of Politics Online'. Inter@ctive Week, 07/03/2000, Vol. 7 Issue 26, p22; BROWNING G. Electronic Democracy: Using the Internet to Transform American Politics, Cyberage Books; Ed. : 2 Sub (1 Juin 2001)
66 'Mobilize your grassroots with Capwiz', Capitol Advantage.com Web Site URL http://capitoladvantage.com/capwiz
Few paid attention to the fact that precisely this type of high performance application was in reality going to do more harm to democracy than political apathy. In June 2001 the Congress Online Project revealed that the US House of Representatives alone was inundated by 48 million emails in the year 2000. In 2001 both Chambers received 117 million inbound messages. A true communication crisis.

September 11, 2001

Then, in September 2001, the Al-Qaeda-led attacks on U.S. soil changed everything. The global war against terror suddenly re-organised news-gathering and political priorities. Simply put there was no more attention for much else than the anti-terrorism policy, which - ever since - completely dominated the political agenda. Every administration had to re-organise and provide its contribution to the fight, regardless its core business: from the customs (improved border control) to the Ministry of Finance (fight against Hawallah), from telecommunications (protection of critical infrastructure) to innovation (IT applied to intelligence analysis), everyone was called to help extinguish the fire. The tone of the headlines


The Congress Online Project is a two-year (2001 - 2002) program funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and conducted jointly by the George Washington University and the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) to examine the use of Web sites and other forms of online communications by congressional offices. E-mail Overload in Congress The Guardian reported that in 2002 the Members of the UK Chambers received one Million email a month. See [Staff and agencies] ‘Commons email traffic soars’ http://www.guardian.co.uk/Internetnews/story/0,7369,748602,00.html The Guardian Web Site Wednesday July 3, 2002
changed drastically: Americans wanted to know what had gone wrong. Security agencies started to scrub sites of sensitive data\(^{68}\), and Islamist sites started to be in the radar screen of both scholars, media, and intelligence community. The Online PoliTicker\(^{69}\) a specialised newsletter on online politics, started a new permanent news section called *America under attack*. The political elite reviewed its priorities world-wide. In the US, anti-terror eavesdropping replaced the digital divide as a policy objective\(^{70}\). Between 2002 and 2005 the Bush Administration was accused regularly by the major media and by the main consumer associations of denying the existence of a digital divide in the US and of jeopardizing the work of the Clinton administration in this field.

The Bush administration has responded to progress in bridging the digital divide by cutting technology funding for low-income communities.

In the budget proposal released on Monday, the Bush administration seeks to eliminate some programs aimed at closing the gap between digital haves and have-nots. The biggest cut is to the *Technology Opportunities Program* (TOP), a federal grant program designed to bring aid to communities that are lagging in access to digital technologies. Under the Clinton administration 2001 budget, the program distributed $42 million in grants to 74 different non-profit organizations. In 2002, that number fell to just over $12 million. Now Bush wants to eliminate the program altogether.\(^{71}\)

The Bush administration was also criticised for its poor record with regard to eGov projects. Clearly the attention of the U.S. Government was elsewhere.

In the meantime also in the UK, the BBC reported on the government’s growing difficulties with e-Government.\(^{72}\) The attention of the critical mass of the non-specialists had shifted away from technologies, eDemocracy and the Information Society. Critical views on the eDemocracy phenomenon became more vocal. In April 2005 Michael Cross of the Guardian wrote:

---


69 PoliticsOnline Web Site URL: [http://www.politicsonline.com/content/main/politicker/politicker.asp](http://www.politicsonline.com/content/main/politicker/politicker.asp)


Whatever happened to eDemocracy? The short answer is that it's not dead, but is gestating. And some radical pre-natal surgery may be needed, including the eradication of the present widespread confusion between e-voting and wider forms of eDemocracy.

In the same article, Stephen Coleman, professor of eDemocracy at Oxford University, declared to the Guardian:

_E-voting has always been unimportant. I've always thought that replicating things that are already done quite well is not the brightest use of new technology._

While enough evidence is available in my view to note that a downturn for eDemocracy started in 2001, Chadwick, in contrast, considers that (since Howard Dean's blog fuelled campaign in 2003), a new series of success stories has generated a new trend in internet politics (the widespread impact of online video during the 2006 midterm elections and the proliferation of Web 2.0 social media during the 2007-2008 contest).

I maintain that between 2005 and 2009, not a single major political leader expressed views on the debate on eDemocracy. In Britain the matter had been meanwhile downgraded to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Surrounded by a much noisier debate on diplomacy and the use of force, climate change and the international financial crisis, some of the original stakeholders – notably local governments in France (Issy Les Moulineaux, organiser of the World eDemocracy Forum) Italy, Britain (for example the city of Bristol, Australia, Canada, and with them early professional electronic democracy strategists like Steven Clift and Phil Noble, CEO of PoliticsOnline – continued on a somehow reduced scale the public discourse on eDemocracy, essentially framing it in terms of e-voting or as part of the political campaigner toolbox or as expression of a vibrant electronic civil society in countries such as China and Iran.

A new generation of pilot projects and appeals attempted to gain new public attention in the wake of the 2008 US Presidential Elections. But the momentum was lost and the attention gone elsewhere, maybe in Iraq or Afghanistan, maybe in the NY stock exchange.

73 CROSS M., ‘ePublic: Cover story: Traditional systems get our vote: The internet may have revolutionised how we live, but it has yet to transform how we vote - despite strong government support. Michael Cross discovers that there's more to eDemocracy than e-voting’, April 20, 2005, The Guardian (London) - Final Edition
75 [EDS.] ‘The World eDemocracy Forum announces finalists of the 2009 e-Democracy Awards’, September 16, 2009 Wednesday NEWS Press (English)
77 Hilton S. ‘Developing Local eDemocracy In Bristol: From Information To Consultation To Participation And Beyond’, September 1, 2006, Aslib Proceedings, Vol. 58, No. 5, Pg. 416-428, September 1, 2007,
79 [EDS.] ‘Voter ID card key to electronic democracy’, August 3, 2009 Monday Irish Examiner OPINION
80 IPPOLITO L. ‘La Società Civile Elettronica; che Cresce da Teheran a Pechino’ 21 giugno 2009 domenica Corriere della Sera; Pag. 14
81 [EDS.]’Myspace And Mtv Team Up To Promote Electronic Democracy For Youth Online’, Voa News January 22, 2008 Tuesday 5:11 AM EST, ‘More Than 3 Million Citizens Served in 2006 as Neighborhood America’s Solution Drives Public Participation in eDemocracy, Citizen Journalism and the e-Community, December 6, 2006 Wednesday 1:00 PM GMT , Business Wire
Obama’s Presidential mandate (2008- to date)

Although the subject of eDemocracy is far from being at the centre of the public attention, the megatrend started in the late 90’s continues to generate a steady stream of low intensity “buzz” on eDemocracy, both in developing countries (such as Nigeria, Brazil, Colombia, Ukraine, or Peru) and in developed ones, notably at local level. U.S. companies, leveraging on the results of previous waves of eDemocracy awareness raising campaigns, have tried to penetrate new developing markets, including Europe, to establish online campaign businesses. Simultaneously, some of the most prominent eDemocracy evangelists (the editors of PoliticsOnline and the administrators of the French city of Issy Les Moulineaux) have teamed up (and consolidated their campaign through the WorldWide Forum on Electronic Democracy). European research projects on eParticipation, as well as political fora led by institutions such as the Council of Europe, have provided additional resonance in some European countries.

The tone of some of the news stories published recently on eDemocracy, seems the exact replica of some of the most enthusiastic accounts, 15 years ago:

*OnlineCitizen lawmaking seems ideally suited to today’s Web. Government social media and online deliberation resources, coupled with widespread access to broadband in many nations, and much improved Internet access to laws, combine to furnish citizens with abundant means for participating in the creation of laws online.*

*The way to be heard is online, as government prepares itself for a digital rebirth.*
ible African American presidential candidate and the first female front-runner. This is also the first national political campaign in which interactive social networking websites such as MySpace (with its 110 million Internet users) are playing a significant, perhaps crucial, role in youth voter education and participation.\textsuperscript{96}

Fifteen years of criticisms and analysis have not affected the public debate on eDemocracy, which continues, arbitrarily mingling together, in the same rather approximative definition of democracy, lawmaking, governance and electioneering. I will provide some arguments in support to this bold statement later on, in the literature review.

\textsuperscript{96} PHILLIPS A. 'Voa News: Myspace And MTV Team Up To Promote Electronic Democracy For Youth Online' Tue, 22 Jan 2008 US Fed News
2. Literature Review (Part One): The evolution of the Normative Approach

INTRODUCTION

An unusually large literature review paves the way to an equally unusually large (certainly by scope) empirical section in this dissertation. The multi-level theoretical background proposed in the next few chapters is, as a matter of fact, a direct consequence of the overall approach to my research. One needs to apprehend in detail the peculiar nature of the intellectual constructions of traditional eDemocracy scholars to realize how their arguments are airtight from the influence of other theoretical backgrounds (from say, political science, history, or communication sciences). To move beyond the traditional “normative/idealistic” approach of classic eDemocracy scholars (technology enhanced politics) one needs to integrate new frameworks.

For this reason, I have tried to collect in this section a set of quite diverse references. All have one common element: they can provide a reality check opportunity to the traditional eDemocracy discourse.

From the realm of political science we can adopt a different type of optics to look at eDemocracy, specifically the classic systemic analysis optics, which offer us the benefit of concepts like gate keeping, load and homeostasis in political communication. Then, always from the realm of political science, we can consider what scholars are saying on the recent evolutions of contemporary political systems, on the decline of voters’ participation, the changing role of mass parties as aggregating forces, the growing public distrust towards politics and the growing dependence of parties on marketing techniques more than on ideological support.

From the realm of communication a humongous amount of potential contributions could be relevant to analyse eDemocracy and the role of the web 2.0 in its potential development, but it would be beyond the scope of this dissertation to present here a comprehensive theoretical review of communication science scholarship. However, the specific issue of the intentions behind the communicative act seems to be of great importance in the context of eDemocracy as there cannot be true deliberation without the intention to confront, to debate with someone else. It is therefore necessary to understand – at least in essence - how communication scholars view the evolution of the so called “information society” in communication terms and how they have attempted to trace the borders that separate persuasive communication, from propaganda and information sharing.

Finally, after having opposed normative to realistic theoretical backgrounds we need to find a third way, a compromise, to dissect the research perimeter chosen for this work in the most objective way.

While much of the existing research on politics on the net focuses on phenomenology of the functioning of virtual communities, sui generis experiments of participatory democracy, pilot projects carried out at local level or during specific electoral contexts, we know little (notably on a global scale) of the “inside” structures of these web sites, of the way they are programmed, of the data behind the information, of the type of information linked hypertextually, of the programmes and their functions.
We have little information the specific, detailed information architecture of political parties web sites. For this reason we must introduce a third, but complementary module to the theoretical foundations of this work to introduce the writings and the concepts of Rosenfeld, Morville and Kahn on information architecture. Only by using an objective – programmatic – interpretation of the parties’ activities online we can make the difference over the traditional attempts to evaluate the emergence of eDemocracy.

I will start the theoretical section by moving away from the public (media) debate on eDemocracy to enter in the scientific realm, by presenting the tortuous evolution of the scholarly concept of eDemocracy.

**DEFINING ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY SCIENTIFICALLY: FROM FIGURE OF SPEECH TO SCHOLARLY CONCEPT**

Contrary to most media accounts, Electronic democracy emerged as a figure of speech almost 30 years ago, in 1979 when a young media researcher, Anne Saldich, now a personal coach, published with Praeger *Electronic Democracy: Television’s Impact on the American Political Process*. The metaphor was reused as such five years later by Kathy Sawyer of the Washington Post, in an article on U.S. presidential televised debates. It was only in 1987 that the rhetorical device was used in connection with interactive communication technologies, notably in a Washington Post editorial by David Broder on Christopher Arterton’s work *TeleDemocracy: Can Technology Protect Democracy*.

Electronic democracy became a story and progressively a concept, between 1990 and 1992. First, the expression was used to describe the achievements of projects such as P.E.N. (Public Electronic Network) in Santa Monica or the WELL (Whole Earth Electronic Link), a bulletin board system at the origin of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, an important NGO still active today in the defence of digital rights.

Later, as we have seen in the previous section, it became part of the 1992 Presidential race when Ross Perot promoted the development of Electronic Town Meetings and one of his supporters, Dave Hughes, a retired Army lieutenant colonel, created a pro-Perot gateway to channel online support to the candidate. Hughes was at his second political online project: in the 1984 presidential primaries he had set up the online campaign headquarters for Gary Hart.

---

97 ROSENFELD L., MORVILLE P. . Information Architecture for the World Wide Web O'Reilly UK December, 2006; the first 1998 ed. was authored by Morville alone.
KAHN P. LENK K., Mapping Web Sites , Rotovision, 2001
The term teleDemocracy emerged in 1984 during the U.S. presidential primaries and similarly to the early use of the expression electronic democracy, it referred initially to a global change in the practice of the U.S. presidential race, mainly related to the impact of communication technologies. Later, in 1987 and 1991 the term described political participation projects often characterized by a strong focus on cable TV and its interactive potential.

Alternative figures of speech such as virtual democracy, or the much more successful eDemocracy emerged only later, in the mid 90’s: the first in 1995 with an article by Maureen Dowd on Newt Gingrich and Alvin Toffler’s references to new forms of computer enhanced leadership, the latter, thanks to the Minnesota eDemocracy project launched in 1994 by Steven Clift, mentioned above, in the previous section.

In some 30 years, the terms electronic democracy and its contracted form eDemocracy (the two are used as synonyms in the dissertation) have been used in almost 1600 articles in various pay-per-view publications and 2.330.000 web pages contain either or both expressions. Still, a part from an entry in Wikipedia, the neologism is not defined neither in the Britannica, nor in the Larousse, nor in Encyclopedia.com, a meta-search engine which queries more than 4500 different dictionaries in English.

As Gibson, Römmele, and Ward correctly point out, electronic democracy is used as a catch-all concept:

> It combines different empirical phenomena such as the Websites of political parties or parliaments, electronically mediated debates on political topics, community networks, electronic voting or even the provision of administrative services via new digital media.

Precisely for this reason, the literature related to electronic democracy is as large and diverse as the number of interpretative models used to define the concept.
The ranges of theories scholars have used to analyze empirical evidence were strongly influenced by the mood of the public discourse. Timothy Wedig\(^\text{109}\) correctly notes that, generally, a trend opposing pessimists and optimists has dominated theoretical contributions in the field of eDemocracy. Approaches ranged from technological determinism (utopian visions based on the transformational power of technologies), to instrumentalism (dystopian visions emphasizing the role of humans in shaping society with deliberate use of tools), to situationalism (those, like Margolis and Resnik who believe that the organisation itself is the primary determinant of outcomes related to internet usage\(^\text{110}\)), to technoskepticism (who view technology with suspicion, and suggest that internet usage by an organisation is likely to produce unpredictable and unintended outcomes\(^\text{111}\)), to an approach based on the sociology of communications (the transformation of public opinion through the filter of the 'public sphere'), to an approach underlining the importance of the economy of communications (with increased emphasis on notions such as access costs and disintermediation, as in Bonchek).

Methodologically, scholars have applied inductive methods based on direct observation and occasionally, statistics, essentially focusing on the phenomenology of pilot experiences or a small number of cases, mostly based in a single country or region.

The emergence of simultaneous trends and counter-trends does not allow to isolating single, specific or coherent patterns, but rather clusters of scholars and typologies of concepts. In the coming sections the most relevant strands of traditional (normative) literature will be analyzed in an historical perspective, from the oldest to the newest. In each case, a short deficiencies assessment will be attached to the analysis of the model; an overall critique of traditional scholarly approaches to eDemocracy will close the chapter.

Hagen’s typology, the elusive notion of interactivity and alternative definitions of democracy

Martin Hagen dissertation\(^\text{112}\) is often quoted as a starting point for many literature reviews in the field of eDemocracy. The author proposes a useful definition for electronic democracy:

*Concepts of electronic democracy, as I define them, refer to theories which regard computers and/or computer networks as central tools in the working of a democratic political*

---

\(^\text{109}\) WEDIG T., "The Internet and Political Organisations : Force Tool or Wildcard?", PhD Dissertation, Graduate School of University of Maryland, College Park (2007) Downloaded from UMI

\(^\text{110}\) [For situationalists] The Internet therefore fits into the equation as a supportive element for other organizational activities, assisting in building trust, communicating group goals and facilitating collaboration, for example, but it is not suited for being a driving force. Therefore, we can conclude that the use of the Internet by political groups will not produce different outcomes by itself. Rather, groups which have organizational and resource advantages in place will be have success in applying the technology, while organizations that rely on the Internet to the exclusion of traditional mobilization tactics will not. Internet usage by organizations may provide a multiplier effect for successful organizations by increasing the speed and reach of group communications, but the properties of the Internet will not automatically create positive outcomes for an organization. .. Internet will not, in fact cannot, foster democracy because existing unequal social and political dynamics are far more likely to be reproduced through the technology than they are to be overcome. This position has more to do with notions of experiential democracy than with the Internet itself, stating that in the absence of experience with truly democratic processes, individuals will simply reproduce the structures that they known", Wedig (2007) Id. p. 62-67

\(^\text{111}\) Techno-skeptics says Wedig, are those who view technology with suspicion, and suggest that internet usage by an organisation is likely to produce unpredictable and unintended outcomes. Among the Techno skeptics Wedig correctly, includes the views of Barney who views the internet as a complex machinery with a high potential for surveillance and as an instrument of power in the hands of the elite, Noam, whose less polarized view posits that, unless safeguards are established, there is equal opportunity for negative democratic developments in the political web than positive ones and finally Lofgren and Willim that building on the place of magic in modernity, suggest that there is a conscious and aware suspension of belief in the attitudes of both buyers and sellers of technology ; even though all parties realize that the claims are exaggerated, they will believe because they very much want them to be true .

system. An ‘Electronic Democracy’ is any democratic political system in which computers and computer networks are used to carry out crucial functions of the democratic process - such as information and communication, interest articulation and aggregation, and decision-making (both deliberation and voting).  

and a **typology of models** that adequately resumes and classifies, in an historical perspective covering the mid 90’s, the three most significant variants of the concept: **teleDemocracy, cyber-democracy, and electronic democratization**.

All the authors advocating these models share the same basic assumption, the belief that the *proprium* of new information technologies - fast(er) modes of data transmission, opportunities for many-to-many-communication, abundance of information, and new user-control features - can influence effectively the way modern political systems work.

Although the term *interactivity* is a recurrent one in all these theoretical frameworks for eDemocracy, it is under-defined (to quote Rafaeli) and used in rather different ways by the authors reviewed in this section. As Mahmoud and Auter note, the term is used with dissimilar meanings in many fields of science and the very scholars in Computer Mediated Communication have diverging opinions on the subject.

The term is interchangeably used in an information science perspective to refer to *message to message relations* (when a message or an hyperlink are related to a number of previous messages/links and when links and messages develop relationships between themselves). The term is also used to refer to *human-machine interactions*, when a user is taking control of a device through an interface. Finally the term refers to (web mediated) *human to human communication*, for example when party followers collaborate, communicate and generate re-action in some politically meaningful way.

The latter interpretation is obviously more meaningful for the objectives of this research. In the closing section of this chapter I will re-iterate this point in greater detail.

Finally, it’s worth mentioning at this stage that much of the variance in the models of eDemocracy is also largely induced by a dissimilar interpretation of the term democracy, which is viewed by some in its representative form (as in Finer), by others in its direct form [either in its deliberative expression as in Fiskin, Pennock, Cohen and Seidenfeld or in its participative one as in Dahl or Bobbio].

---

113 HAGEN, M. ‘A Typology of Electronic Democracy’, Online paper http://www.uni-giessen.de/fb03/vinci/labore/netz/hag_en.htm, Accessed 04.08.08
114 HAGEN, M. ‘A Typology of Electronic Democracy’, Online paper - on the University of Giessen Web Site URL http://www.uni-giessen.de/fb03/vinci/labore/netz/hag_en.htm, Accessed 04.08.08
115 RAFAELI S. ‘Interactivity : from new media to communication’. In HAWKINS, R.R., J.M. WIEMAN, and PINGREE S. (Eds.), Advancing communication science: mergin mass and interpersonal processes (p. 110-134). Newbury, CA: Sage
117 Democracy is “a state where political decisions are taken by and with the consent, or the active participation even, of the majority of the People. . . . [L]iberalism, though recognizing that in the last resort the ‘legal majority’ must prevail, tries to protect the minorities as it does the civil rights of the individual, and by much the same methods. . . . Liberal democracy is qualified democracy. The ultimate right of the majority to have its way is conceded, but that way is made as rough as possible.” Finer, S. E. 1997. The History of Government from the Earliest Times Vol. III: Empires, Monarchies and the Modern State. New York: Oxford University Press p 1568-1570)
BECKER’S TELEDEMOCRACY

The first and oldest variant – teleDemocracy¹²⁵ – is associated to pilot projects involving early forms of technological convergence, often centred on the usage of cable TV in political participation. The concept has been shaped in the early 80’s by the pioneering work of Ted Backer¹²⁶, promoter of the *Hawaii Tele-vote* project, of Amitai Etzioni¹²⁷, prolific communitarian thinker, and by their critic, Christopher Arterton, who published in 1987 an homonymous work assessing the effectiveness of 13 pilot teleDemocracy projects.

TeleDemocracy resolutely promotes the adoption of direct democracy. The concept is centred on a human-machine type of interactivity. Technology is seen by teledemocrats as capable of giving citizens leverage in self-governance: the public is first empowered by accessing large volumes of relevant information for their decisions and then maximizes its democratic control by deciding through televote.

Pivotal for the teledemocrats was the disapproval of the incumbent political class (and classic representative democracy), considered to be too distant and unfit to deal with 21st century problems, as Toffler¹²⁸ suggests. The arguments of the teledemocrats were reinvigorated by the Presidential Campaign of 1992 which brought in the forefront of the political rhetoric appeals to bring government closer back home and pseudo events organized by Ross Perot and later by Al Gore and Clinton to demonstrate the new leadership’s interest for interactive ‘chat’ sessions with potential voters.

---


¹²² "Democracy provides opportunities for 1) effective participation, 2) equality in voting, 3) gaining enlightened understanding, 4) exercising final control [by the people] over the agenda, and 5) inclusion of adults." The political institutions that are necessary to pursue these goals are "1) elected officials, 2) free, fair and frequent elections, 3) freedom of expression, 4) alternative sources of information, 5) associational autonomy, and 6) inclusive citizenship." (from Dahl Dahl 1998 see below, p. 38 - 85


JANKOWSKY N., LEEUWIS C., MARTIN P. NOORDHOF M., van ROSSUM J., "Teledemocracy in the Province: an experiment with public debate and opinion polling Internet based software", Paper Presented to the Conference Media and Politics, Section : Internet and Democracy, Brussels 27.02-01.03 1997


¹²⁸ TOFFLER A. The Third Wave, New York Bantam (1980)
The most significant scholarly references for teledemocrats were political scientists such Robert Dahl, Benjamin Barber, and James Fishkin, all advocating deliberative models of democracy. Dahl’s vision was based on the assumption that the maximization of the citizens self interest was closely related to the acquisition of freely available information through telecommunication networks. This information would have allowed a randomly selected minipopuli of a thousand adults to take rational decisions for the whole community and contribute in a non binding way to the works of elected decision makers. The works of Barber and Fishkin reinforced the perception of the difference between an old and thin democracy and a newer, stronger one (as in Al Gore’s ITU speech) based on community networks, neighbourhood assemblies, televised town meetings and computer augmented forms of civic culture.

A critique of teleDemocracy

With its references to evolutionist models and to classic rhetorical figures or myths used as mobilisation devices, it’s the most impractical and ideologically loaded variant of the concept. It centres the cogency of its arguments almost exclusively on the assumption that progress (intended as continuous improvement) is both natural and irreversible. Change in American politics is unstoppable as it is propelled, according to Grossman, by two forces:

...the two-hundred-year-long march toward political equality for all citizens and the explosive growth of new telecommunications media, the remarkable convergence of television, telephone, satellites, cable and personal computers.

Each of the teledemocrats myths is reinforced and validated by other myths. Each myth contains a portion of truth. Each myth creates a powerful call for propaganda-like orthopraxy (correct practice), because it recalls deep, collective sentiments such as the thirst of justice, freedom, self-fulfilment, security etc. The narrative of the most recurrent myths - notably in Becker - is paraphrased below:

---


A description of the minipopulism mechanism is provided by FORBES: "To ensure that decision makers, and not just scholars, are aware of the aspirations and opinions of ordinary citizens, Dahl makes a second important suggestion similar to the one ... for advisory councils selected by lot. He proposes that minipopuli of about a thousand citizens be selected at random from the general population. Several could exist at any one time, and each would serve for a year as a kind of parliament to consider a single important issue. Their members, who could serve on such a group no more than once in a lifetime, would remain in their own communities, with their own friends and acquaintances, and (by) would meet by means of the telecommunications network. Each minipopulus could seek advice of an advisory committee of scholars and would be served by an administrative staff monitored by the advisory committee. It could hold hearings, commission research, and engage in debate and discussion. By the end of its year it would be expected to indicate the preference ordering of its members among the most relevant alternatives in the policy area assigned to it, its decision would not be binding on any legislative or administrative body, but the elected decision-makers (Senators, Congressmen, etc.) would have to reckon with its existence and recommendations, for it would reflect public opinion at a higher level of competence", in FORBES.H.D., 'Dahl, democracy and technology', in DAY R.B., BEINER R., MASCIULLI J., Democratic theory and technological society M.E. Sharpe Inc. 1988


132 For a broader critique to the notion of direct democracy see HASKELL J. Direct Democracy or Representative Government?: Dispelling the Populist Myth (Westview Press 2000)


---
**People First:** people are fundamentally interested in politics; the lack of communication and information links with the political realm generates a vicious circle (lack of information, lack of interest, lack of participation); the provision of the missing link, re-creates a lost condition, a forgotten state of connectedness and community.

**The lost time of the Founding Fathers:** it is necessary to go back in time and re-gain through futurist technology such as the Internet, the living conditions of Athens and its agora; of the founding fathers’ new England with the Town Hall rituals; this dynamic is en-rooted in the political tradition of the United States (references to Jefferson, Madison and Dewey) and Europe. It is part of our civilizing mission to invent and re-invent democracy.

**David vs. Goliath:** one of the main engines which generate the current crisis of the political system is the power accumulated by capitalist lobbies that control both the political agenda and the key figure in the constitutional institutions. Technology improves social order and de-stabilises status based classes through the democratization of knowledge; The democratic empowerment of the people through IT and the Internet represents a challenge to the establishment and for this reason teleDemocracy does not succeed in becoming a mainstream reality in the current political process.

**The unstoppable evolution:** historical analysis proves that the evolution of democracy has been accompanied by the evolution of technology; crescent degrees of representativity have been accompanied by crescent role of media in politics; to the first and second technological waves corresponded, a first and second democratization waves; today we have reached a situation in which the Internet is the driving force of a process of disintermediation which destabilizes traditional powers (media, large corporations, government); the nation State and its power architectures vaporize under the pressure of new, interconnected, global forces or actors: we are now living in a world with third wave technologies and actors (this includes the new ones and some of the old, converted) and with a second wave, completely outdated democracy. Direct participatory democracy is the natural step forward; it is a reality, currently experienced by any Swiss man and women and finally the sole kind of democracy compatible with the new, Internet - altered balance of powers.

Christopher Arterton in *TeleDemocracy reconsidered* had already relativised some of the arguments of Naisbitt, Toffler, and Becker, the main supporters of the idea of the third wave politics. After examining evidence extracted from 13 teleDemocracy projects, Arterton had concluded that the biggest problem was voters’ dis-attention:

---

134 The reference here is to Toffler’s Third Wave: the American futurist reviews the phases of human civilization diving them in three wave: first wave corresponds to the agricultural revolution; second wave to the industrial revolution; third wave to the information age. To each wave corresponds - inter alia - a form of government


137 TOFFLER A., The Third Wave, Bantam (May 1, 1984)

138 BECKER T.L. ‘TeleDemocracy : Bringing power back to people’ in Futurist 1981 vol.15(6) pp. 6-9
Among the projects examined, competition for the attention of potential voters has been the most persistent problem encountered by project organizers, especially by those who have sought to conduct plebiscites 139.

The key to explain the success of certain political participation experiences was – not surprisingly - the integrated media approach of the overall campaign strategy, more than the individual role played by digital media:

*The plethora of media is the single most difficult institutional barrier they face...* [those who have chosen broadcast television because that medium has the most extensive reach to the citizenry, have discovered that] despite the capabilities of the medium, repetition and the use of multiple channels are necessary to involve anything approaching all the people. *The most successful of these plebiscitarian projects, the Des Moines Health Vote, relied upon frequent public service advertisements, newspaper articles, radio talk shows, and even billboards and bus placards in addition to top public affairs broadcast programming....* 140

Arterton had pointed to the process of channel/content multiplication as detrimental to the effectiveness of I.T. based political campaigns. Both cable TV, videotex, computer conferencing systems exhibited limitations as vehicles of political discourse. Back then, and still today as I have stressed in previous research also with Heinderyckx141, new media are still elite resources, which may divide digitally, as much as they can connect:

...*As a medium of dialogue, each of these vehicles may be conveniently used by modest numbers of communicators; the emerging technologies do not promise that everyone can have his or her individual say in a national dialogue....* 142.

Other problems deriving from multimediality are that every content competes with every other content (politics vs. entertainment for example) and that the capital of attention is non-extensible, as Neumann143 pointed out in 1991 in *The Future of the Mass Audience*:

...*Another major problem, shared with cable television, is that videotex and computer carry material pertaining to a wide variety of human activity. As a result, in a single medium, politics comes into direct competition with these other facets of life for the attention of citizens.* 144

---

139 ARERTON F.C. Id.
140 ARERTON F.C. Id.
142 ARERTON F.C. Id.
144 ARERTON F.C. Id.
Arterton had also well understood the economics of new political media, which are capable on one side of reducing part of the costs of political participation and at the same time require major financial investments for the main agents (parties, government, institutions) of the political system.

The principal observed impact of the use of technology for democratic politics is to reduce the cost and burdens of participation for citizens. These costs may be financial or they may be associated with time, travel and information necessary to participate politically. Technology does not however, reduce these costs and burdens across the board...

...The project amply demonstrated the capacity of technology to involve citizens in policy discussion, but it also documented how costly and extensive are the exertions needed to achieve even a 25 per cent rate of involvement. 145

Arterton’s comment of media efficiency echoes the notion of opportunity cost (in political participation) introduced by Deutsch146 to argue against the idea of technology enhanced deliberation:

Across the range of project designs, technology served to distribute the burdens between those who would elicit participation and citizens who might become involved. Generally speaking, the lower the burdens placed on citizens, the greater the demands (both financial and in an obligatory sense) upon project organizers...through electronic voting systems, a much larger number of citizens can be induced to participate in a plebiscite than will attend a discussion; but the organizers of plebiscites must be held to higher standards of openness in view of their more substantial control over the agenda of policy considered...if institutions that have functioned quite smoothly through direct human contact now begin employing technology to conduct communications, they may incur additional costs of operation. There is no evidence that technology can open up the political process while saving money.

In sum, Arterton’s criticisms revealed that the teledemocratic model was de facto highly dependent on the traditional constraints of second wave political campaigns:

• first of all of the trials relied on a mechanism of representation, since the deliberation unit was a group of people chosen randomly to represent population at large. There was no real mass participation.

• Secondly the deliberation processes were not fully inclusive as the very existence of the project was constrained by funding both on the side of the political offer and on the voters’ side.

• Thirdly the model was not entirely centred exclusively on interactive technologies as its effectiveness required a multi-stage process where face to face meetings, traditional media (notably successful and compelling TV programmes) and a strong public relation campaign were essential for the overall dynamics of the participation.

145 ARTERTON F.C. Id.
This model is unfortunately not fit to address the research questions of the dissertation. With teleDemocracy there is no need for empirical backing as it is a model that assumes axiomatically that there is no alternative to direct democracy and no doubt that the objective of greater participation is at reach. In teleDemocracy there is no need for empirical validation, there is no performance or usability issue, as there is no doubt that these technologies are naturally, constitutionally effective.

Furthermore, this model lacks of a proper notion of political system, as it is supposed to work in a strict idealistic dichotomy: citizens that wish to be empowered by technology on one side and government on the other, threatening people’s liberties and constraining collective development through the inadequacy of its political offer. Notions like party pluralism and opposition are absent in this model.

With regard to the acceptability of the deliberative democracy model a more detailed criticism will be exposed in the overall gap assessment.

RHEINGOLD’S CYBERDEMOCRACY

Cyberdemocrats focused in the early 90’s their attention on the specific political relevance of computer networks, notably USENET, Bitnet and list-Serv Services over the Internet. The origins of the concept were linked to the notion of cyberspace as defined by novelist William Gibson and then re-elaborated by Howard Rheingold through his book The Virtual Community.

Cyberdemocracy, like teleDemocracy, promoted the adoption of more direct forms of democracy opposing the collective strengths of a community without centre, to the hierarchies of a centralized government.

Their prime concern, notes Hagen, was to (re-)create (virtual and non-virtual) communities as a counter-base to centralized forms of government.

Cyberdemocrats developed the notion of cyberspace as a spaceless space, a powerful equalizer, the gateway to a virtual class of self empowered netizens pursuing material wealth, intellectual freedom and collective intelligence, while resisting to the State, seen as a threat to the maximization of self interest.


Cyberdemocrats had a somehow larger and deeper impact than teledemocrats on both the public opinion and governmental circles in the early 90’s.

Cyberdemocracy built on liberal values and their materialization into achievements of the WELL community (whose members were portrayed as capable of collective achievements both on line and IRL, in real life). It also built on libertarian ideas of Third Wave authors and scholars of the Progress and Freedom Foundation (PFF), whose Magna Charta for the Knowledge Age was, according to Hagen, the first attempt to create a political theory of cyberspace.

The Charta – whose authors promoted the idea of Cyberspace being the latest American frontier - was indeed an ambitious effort to redefine in a cyberdemocratic perspective both ownership of property, market rules, freedom and government duties. However, its idealistic claims had dubious practicality and were carried out essentially as a tactical/instrumental opposition against the political rhetoric of the incumbent Democratic government. De facto, the group on one side fed the Presidency and REP. Newt Gingrich with new and powerful rhetorical devices (the Athenian age, strong democracy etc.); at the same time they attacked (on political and not scientific grounds as it is shown by the extract of the Magna Charta below) Gore’s Information Superhighway and the Presidency’s methods to achieve change:

*Cyberspace is the land of knowledge, and the exploration of that land can be a civilization’s truest, highest calling. The opportunity is now before us to empower every person to pursue that calling in his or her own way...*

*The challenge is as daunting as the opportunity is great. The Third Wave has profound implications for the nature and meaning of property, of the marketplace, of community and of individual freedom. As it emerges, it shapes new codes of behaviour that move each organism and institution -- family, neighbourhood, church group, company, government, nation -- inexorably beyond standardization and centralization, as well as beyond the materialist’s obsession with energy, money and control.*

*Turning the economics of mass-production inside out, new information technologies are driving the financial costs of diversity -- both product and personal -- down toward zero, demassifying our institutions and our culture. Accelerating demassification creates the potential for vastly increased human freedom.*

*It also spells the death of the central institutional paradigm of modern life, the bureaucratic organization. (Governments, including the American government, are the last great redoubt*
of bureaucratic power on the face of the planet, and for them the coming change will be profound and probably traumatic.)

In this context, the one metaphor that is perhaps least helpful in thinking about cyberspace is -- unhappily -- the one that has gained the most currency: The Information Superhighway. Can you imagine a phrase less descriptive of the nature of cyberspace, or more misleading in thinking about its implications? Consider the following set of polarities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY</th>
<th>CYBERSPACE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIMITED MATTER</td>
<td>UNLIMITED KNOWLEDGE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CENTRALIZED</td>
<td>DECENTRALIZED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOVING ON A GRID</td>
<td>MOVING IN SPACE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOVERNMENT OWNERSHIP</td>
<td>A VAST ARRAY OF OWNERSHIPS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BUREAUCRACY</td>
<td>EMPOWERMENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFFICIENT BUT NOT HOSPITABLE</td>
<td>HOSPITABLE IF YOU CUSTOMIZE IT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WITHSTAND THE ELEMENTS</td>
<td>FLOW, FLOAT AND FINE-TUNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNIONS AND CONTRACTORS</td>
<td>ASSOCIATIONS AND VOLUNTEERS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIBERATION FROM FIRST WAVE</td>
<td>LIBERATION FROM SECOND WAVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CULMINATION OF SECOND WAVE</td>
<td>RIDING THE THIRD WAVE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Comparing polarities between Cyberspace and Information Superhighway

A critique of cyberdemocracy
The value of cyberdemocracy with regard to the research questions dealt by the dissertation is its reference to computer mediated communication (human to human interactivity) and its capacity to prepare the ground for the more sophisticated economic analysis on the efficiency of the web as a medium, carried out in the model of electronic democratization.

In terms of its capacity to address some or all of the research question, this model is not really suitable as it closely matches teleDemocracy, notably in its axiomatic architecture and its essential purpose. Cyberdemocracy isn’t really an heuristic model, but a political argument rich in symbols and (again) in myths whose main aim – materialised in the Magna Charta - was the polarization of the public opinion on ad hoc controversies raised against the Clinton/Gore Presidency.

Criticisms on the political effectiveness of virtual communities will be exposed further on in the next section devoted to Bonchek’s model of electronic democratization.

BONCHECK’S ELECTRONIC DEMOCRATIZATION

In contrast with teleDemocracy and cyberdemocracy, advocates of Electronic Democratization did not want to establish forms of direct democracy, but intended to use the Internet and specifically, the web, to improve representative democracy.

Focusing on a functional analysis of the representative political system, and building on the works of Karl Wolfgang Deutsch\textsuperscript{150} and David Easton\textsuperscript{151}, authors like Mark Bonchek\textsuperscript{152} and James Snider\textsuperscript{153} saw (correctly) improvement deriving from the augmentation of mediation mechanisms, notably through reduced access costs, high volume information feeds, greater complexity in online interaction. The notion of many-to-many interactivity – already identified by cyberdemocrats – is further developed in Boncheck’s “netcast model”, giving birth to issue networks and social networks:

Unlike personal or broadcast media, the Internet is a many-to-many medium, supporting communication among group members. Unlike broadcast media, the Internet has low setup costs and supports two-way, interactive communication. Unlike many other media, the Internet is very rapid and the cost of transmission is virtually independent of distance or location. Finally, the Internet’s use of digital information allows for manipulation and processing of the information along the transmission path.

These differences between the Internet and other media open new channels for communication among political actors. Political organizations are able to communicate directly with each other, bypassing the press as an intermediary. Citizens are able to communicate interactively with existing broadcasters and many political actors become their own broadcasters. Finally, new network-based channels open alongside existing channels, supporting a greater variety and flow of political information\textsuperscript{154}.


\textsuperscript{154} BONCHEK M.S. ‘From Broadcast to Netcast: The internet and the flow of political information’, Harvard University, PhD Dissertation Cambridge, Massachusetts April 1997, p.6
critique of Bonchek’s electronic democratization model

Bonchek’s model does address particularly well RQ1 of the dissertation as it provides a comprehensive and in many ways correct framework to assess Internet’s performance (or in Innisian terms, the bias of the web) as a political tool i.e. the capacity of the internet – precisely because of its own specificities as a medium – to convert a passive audience into an active supporter of political parties. The effects of the internet on the flow of political information are, according to Bonchek:

1. An all-channel structure of political communication in which all political agents are directly connected to each other

2. Disintermediation, i.e. bypassing of traditional intermediaries, and a shift from gatekeeping to brokering for these intermediaries;

3. Formation of virtual organizations based on shared interests rather than shared geography;

4. Integration of social and issue networks, such that personal relationships form more easily around political issues and personal relationships are enhanced in existing issue-oriented networks;

Illustration 5: The Difference between a traditional broadcast structure and a netcast structure Boncheck
5. Greater propagation of political information through duplication and re-transmission between social networks across weak-tie relationships;

6. Increased volume of political information;

7. Integration of personal, broadcast, and network media either simultaneous transmission, repackaging, and rebroadcast;

8. Resource bias in who uses the Internet for political communication towards those with higher income and education;

9. Heterogeneity of sources for political information, expanding the diversity of opinion to which citizens have access and may be exposed to;

10. Narrowcasting of customized and targeted messages to specific communities of interest.

This model is a suitable starting point for research as it is articulated and does not claim the need to end representative democracy, but instead, tries to identify in which way interactive technologies, and notably the web, can improve it.

Furthermore Bonchek, in his PhD dissertation *From Broadcast to Netcast*\(^ {155} \), brings valuable statistical evidence based on a range of case studies including e-mail mailing lists, Usenet newsgroups, online petitions, and the World Wide Web. The cases taken into consideration by Bonchek are all U.S. based and include the analysis of 350 mailing lists, 209 newsgroups, the activities of few issue groups, an online petition, and few case histories, including the analysis of the ’96 Presidential election and a document survey on the White House web site.

This said, Boncheck’s acknowledges that his results are based on the activity of individuals that actively retrieve political information. In other words, the bias introduced in the selection of the survey unit creates results that prove that the political web is systematically used efficiently, leading to the impression that there is no difference between the potential impact of the internet and the measurable impact of the internet on political information flows.

When Bonchek notes:

> With the Internet, all political agents are connected directly to each other in an allchannel structure of communication. Digital information is able to move easily between personal, broadcast, and network media. Network media cross issue and social networks, creating new links between the public, political organizations and the government

\(^ {155} \) BONCHEK M.S. *From Broadcast to Netcast: The internet and the flow of political information*, Harvard University, PhD Dissertation Cambridge, Massachusetts April 1997
The reader is led to believe that the author is suggesting that the majority of netizens do have a concrete impact on politics (comparable to the one parties or media are known to have), either because they affect the policy agenda or because they interrupt a policy cycle or start a new one.

While noting that a “radical expansion of political participation” is constrained by universal internet access, the author does not scrutinize the political performance of the web from a usability point of view (i.e. how the structure of the web, its information architecture, impacts on the actual user activity). Bonchek assumes (in 1997) that change (beneficial to U.S. democracy) had already started to occur:

“Electronic Democratization ... is defined ... as the enhancement of a democracy, already assumed to be initiated, with new communication technologies in ways that increase the political power of those whose role in key political processes is usually minimized. We assume that such Democratization brings more people into power ...

When Boncheck correctly raises the economic argument of the decrease in access costs on the web:

> Political activity requires the expenditure of resources. Standing in line at the polls, traveling to meetings and events, and making phone calls requires time and money. Writing letters to a government official requires literacy and political knowledge. Organizing a demonstration requires planning skills and personal connections. Citizens’ ability to bear the costs of an activity influences their participation in that activity. If the cost of an activity exceeds the benefit, a citizen is unlikely to participate. To the extent that the Internet lowers the cost of communicating and gathering or distributing information, we would expect participation to increase.

...He misses to note that only certain access costs have decreased on the web, but many new costs have emerged through the implementation of effective/attractive political web sites, as suggested by specialised journalists such as Miley and Ubois and also, by analogy, by Arterton.

When Boncheck correctly links the flow of information to political participation:

> The more engaged citizens are in the political process, the more likely they are to participate. If changes in the flow of information produced by the Internet affects citizens’ engagement in the political process, then participation levels would also be expected to change.

157 BONCHEK M., Id. p.197
158 MILEY M., ’Good interactive sites take time, hard work’. Mac Week, pp. 32-34 (1996, April 1); UBOIS J., ’Ten essential steps for maintaining a web site’, Mac Week pp.28,30 , (April, 1)
He does not analyse the findings of authors like Neumann, Graber, the Markle Foundation and others who had pointed out that audiences consume information selectively (prefer entertainment to politics or only visit site with content that reinforces their existing views), and that information found on the Internet lacks of quality, clarity, impartiality and context. An argument which, among others, is further developed by Habermas in his critique of the decline of the public space which will be presented further on in this section.

When Bonchek notes that every political actor connects to every other actor online (Bonchek’s all channel structure) he highlights a pattern which is potentially true (because of the hypertextual nature of the web and the mesh of interconnected political web sites available online today), but the claim is fully plausible only when one qualifies:

- which actors are politically relevant (by nature, size, role etc.), and which are not and
- what is the nature/quality of the link and what causal relation exists between the link and the effects produced on the political system

The connectivity potential does not guarantee the actual creation of links, their direction and relevance. There is no guarantee on the architecture and scope of the final mesh.

Bonchek is right when he underlines that links are part of a communitarization strategy. But the Web is made of links and more in depth evidence on the real impact on politics is needed to prove that a link is politically relevant.

---


163 For example, the press at large includes all sorts of actors (from bloggers to local newspapers) including many which do not really play a significant role in the way the public agenda is set; almost the same could be said for non governmental organizations whose largest majority does not succeed in playing an effective/operational role in political life; finally even government (which is organized in periphery and center, in local, regional and national structures) is far from being the homogenous, monolithic, single entry point structure which would be needed to fully validate Bonchek’s hypothesis.

164 The social connectedness online should be measured in the same way we measure social capital offline. There are various categories of connectedness: on one extreme one may find hyperlinking (not yet mutual hyperlinking), on the other, the kind of connectedness that exists between two assiduous bloggers, among members of a mailing lists or peer to peer (sharing) platforms (this latter if we admit that in addition to movies, cracks and serials, also politically relevant material is exchanged...).

165 For example a change in the policy agenda, the interruption or the start of a policy cycle etc. Providing this type of evidence is very difficult in the political realm and almost impossible in large scale studies: most of the actors online protect very attentively the secrecy of the log files generated by visitors on their sites, so real evidence is hard to collect. There are however alternative ways to assess online behaviours one of which consists in studying web usability through the exact type of HTML programming used to enable interaction. In one of my fieldworks I will show through this method that Boncheck’s channelling is de facto most of the time implemented by online parties worldwide in a mere personal/individual dimension (through one to one connections, through a mailto command or through a post/send comment command).
Let's now discuss briefly Bonchek's interpretation of the very popular notion of Internet driven disintermediation\(^{166}\), a pivotal element of Rheingold's cyberdemocratic theory. Bonchek notion of disintermediation is based on the idea that political web sites may oblige mainstream media to end their gate keeping activities and to engage in information brokering.

As individuals and organisations develop the capacity to publish their own information and as the web integrates with personal and broadcast media for the delivery of information the public may turn to the press not as a source of information but as a guide.\(^{167}\)

The argument of Bonchek, popularized by media and derivative research, led many to expect a massive shift of audience from traditional to new sources (virtual organisations, activists sites, parties web sites etc.) on performance, quality and reliability grounds. What the very recent surveys reveal instead, however, is quite the opposite. For example, my own own research and the 2008 / 2010 PEW reports (described in detail in the empirical section) suggests that:

- Age matters: younger generations tend to use more computers and the Internet in general.
- Sex matters: women tend to use less the Internet.
- Marital status and the size of the family both have positive impact on web usage (and on other media)
- Higher revenue and education are strongly correlated to web consumption
- A higher opinion leadership index is correlated to the usage of new media.

Similarly, when Bonchek insists of the value of virtual organizations (i.e. organizations which exists because of the net and only for the net), when he insists on the notion of disintermediation he omits to consider that these organisations – freed from a gatekeeper – still have to gain access to their wider audience. In other terms these organisations, after having get rid of all intermediaries, may remain - ceteris paribus - completely invisible to the political system (or may make only anecdotal appearances).

Political effectiveness is (in large part) a function of the visibility capital and much of this capital is still granted by powerful gatekeepers such as incumbent parties and main-stream media. Furthermore, a virtual structure cannot survive without turning claims into petitions, or legal actions, and all this requires

---

\(^{166}\) The disintermediation rhetoric (it is almost identical in the business and in the political context) promotes concepts like these: For the first time in the history of mankind, consumers are dictating what they will accept from producers...The traditional business models no longer work. The successful Web sites prove this point. Just look at America Online, Mottley's Fool, Priceline, Amazon,-com, to name a few. Yes, the Internet did start as a culture which promoted freeness...The Internet is changing the way I transact our business and personal affairs. It is not a passing fad. It is a permanent and fundamental paradigm shift that is taking place. For a critical analysis of disintermediation in the business environment: HAMMER M., 'The Myth Of Disintermediation: Distribution chains are becoming obsolete, replaced by distribution communities that collectively create value for the customer 'Out of the Box'" (Section), InformationWeek Web Site URL : http://www.informationweek.com/794/94uwmh.htm Accessed 08.09.2008; CHIRCU A., KAUFFMAN M., 'Strategies for Internet middlemen in the intermediation, disintermediation, reintermediation cycle', Online paper 1999 URL http://misrc.umn.edu/wpaper/WorkingPapers/ck_em_MISRC_WP_1999.pdf Accessed 07.08.2006; CHIRCU A., KAUFFMAN M., 'Analyzing Market Transformation in the Presence of Internet-Driven Disintermediation:The Case of Online Travel Reservation Providers'- Online Paper 1999 URL http://misrc.umn.edu/wpaper/WorkingPapers/ck_HICSS99SubmittedForRevision_MISRC_WP_1999.pdf Accessed 07.08.2006 ; KRICHEL T., WARNER S., 'Disintermediation of Academic Publishing through the Internet: An Intermediate Report from the Front Line', Online Paper 2001 URL http://openlib.org/home/krichel/sants.html; King J. Disintermediation/Reintermediation; in Computerworld 1999 URL http://www.computerworld.com/managementtopics/ebusiness/story/0,10801,37824,00.html

\(^{167}\) BONCHEK M.S., Id. p. 136
real life transfer of resources. It is not plausible to claim that the political performance (i.e. capacity to converting online visitors into active party supporters and voters) of a group mainly depends from the specificity of medium used by the group to function.

To conclude, albeit with limitations, electronic democratization is an interesting and suitable model to study performance online (RQ1) as it provides – with its economic approach - a robust starting point to detect enabling factors for political actors to establish a presence on the political web. Finally, Bonchek promotes a model with strong empirical backing, which, much more realistically than teledemocracy, aims at showing the potential improvement of representative democracy through the web. It should be noted however, that Bonchek’s model does rely on a large cross sectional analysis and does not address RQ2 (the parties behaviour online) and RQ3 (the question of the main functional character emerging from the political web today).
Gibson, Römmele, and Ward propose a significantly different approach to Hagen’s typology. They criticize Hagen’s inductive attempt to clarify, in an historical perspective, the hesitant development of the electronic democracy concept through the lens of real types. The major shortcoming of real types according to Gibson, Römmele, and Ward is their incapacity to:

\[\text{distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant... As a consequence, most of the available models of electronic democracy are somewhat fuzzy and hardly able to give us a clear idea what electronic democracy is all about and how to distinguish it from other types of democracy.}\]

The three authors choose the ideal type as a heuristic device: to define what electronic democracy should be (in contrast to what they perceive the current concepts of electronic democracy to be). They therefore propose a three layered concept of eDemocracy which:

- **Participatory Democracy**
  - **Conception of Democracy**: Individual is part of the political community
  - **Democratic Design**: Direct democracy via electronic means
    - Direct participatory system of representation via electronic means
  - **Participatory Behaviour**: Taking decisions via electronic means
    - Deliberate via electronic means to prepare political decision
    - Getting political information via electronic means to learn about political decisions and decision making processes

- **Liberal Democracy**
  - **Conception of Democracy**: Antagonism between individual and political community
  - **Democratic Design**: Strictly representative system
    - Indirect system of representation
  - **Participatory Behaviour**: Voting

Table 3: Gibson, Römmele, and Ward’s three layered model (Table © Gibson, Römmele, and Ward 2004)

**emphasizes political participation as a core value in the process of decision making (conception of democracy), sketches three different strategies for institutional/structural reform to make democracy more participatory via new digital media (democratic design) and aims at**
influencing individual behaviour by increasing all types of political participation via the use of new digital media (participatory behaviour)\textsuperscript{168}.

Simply put, Gibson, Römmele, and Ward consider current concepts of eDemocracy under-complex in institutional terms. They lament a lack of understanding of the architectures of democracy: projects (and therefore concepts) do not address specific institutional designs of the forms of government. They oppose a liberal conception of democracy where:

\begin{quote}
Individuals are perceived as consumers and private beings who do not care much about political involvement, who develop interests apart from the political community and who are sometimes in conflict with the political community.
\end{quote}

Precisely because they ironize against those that think that individuals have more important things in their mind than politics, they see an important role for electronic democracy. Their electronic democracy concept materializes a participatory model close to the vision of Fishkin and close to a certain interpretation of Habermas' public sphere concept: participation as a way of life, participation as the opportunity to choose the best option.

The third level of their concept (see in Fig. “participatory behaviour - taking decisions”) is so central to their ideal type that they consider alien to electronic democracy every form of political communication. The main focus of their attention is therefore the integration of technology into decision making processes: every other phenomena (retrieval of political information, the exchange of ideas in a USENET/Google group/Social Media, or digitalized public relations such as discussion fora run by parliamentary bureaucracy) are outside the scope of their analysis.

A critique of Gibson, Römmele, and Ward’s three layered models

The analysis of a catch all concept like electronic democracy imposes sometimes to make certain conceptual exclusions and categorize what a scholar considers to be the constituting elements of the field of analysis. In this respect the attitude of Gibson, Römele and Ward is correct.

However, their opposition (ideal vs. real types) is more a rhetorical device in support of their claims then grounded theory or a precise reference to Weber’s ideal types\textsuperscript{169}.


\textsuperscript{169} Weberian ideal types are always extracted from an empirical experience: Perhaps the best way of thinking about ideal types is as ‘idea types’; that is, something which the sociologist works out in his or her head with reference to the real world, but selecting those elements that are most rational or which fit together in the most rational way. Thus the ideal type of bureaucracy embraces those aspects of real bureaucratic organizations that fit together in a coherent means–end chain. Implicit in Weber’s work is the notion that constructing an ideal type is a way of learning about the real world. This is situated within a rationalist view of the human sciences: namely, that we all share a rational faculty, and the fact that we can think and act rationally gives order to the world. Thus, by constructing a rational ideal type, we learn something of how the world works. We can then learn more, by comparing the ideal type with reality, looking at how and why the real bureaucracy might differ from the ideal type. We do not end with a model of what a bureaucracy is, or of what it should be, but of what it might be if it were entirely rational. In this way we can learn much from the sources of apparent irrationalities in real bureaucracies. , from A Dictionary of Sociology | Date: 1998 term: Ideal type URL http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O88-idealtype.html Accessed 070808

Both Habermas and Luhmann make a priori assumptions about ontology in the context of a social science epistemology. Weber, on the other hand, recognizes that in the social sciences we cannot make such a priori assumptions about which philosophical ontology can be applied to a specific problem. Hence, Weber formulates the notion of an ideal type epistemology. The context in the exact sciences is the statement of empirically-based laws. But in the non-exact sciences there are no laws and therefore there are no real types. Hence, in contradistinction to the implicit notion of real types in the exact sciences, Weber explicitly formulates a notion
The three authors' ideal types appear to be idealistic types, constructions that serve a moral model, rich in value judgements materialized by their definition of liberal thought (the dominant paradigm of modern democracy) as they suggest. Gibson, Römmele and Ward inscribe their work in the trajectory defined by Robert Michels\textsuperscript{170}: they suggest to bypass parties (seen as sources of oligarchy) and media (as primary source of information for the party system), and propose to introduce forms of participatory democracy through electronic consultations organized by MPs within existing parliaments:

*Electronic consultations, for example, allow a more representative sample of citizens to voice their opinions on pending legislation and to deliberate with each other as well as with policy-makers in the wake of political decisions. Parliaments could also decide to adjust established principles of public access to the technological potential of the Internet to open up the parliamentary process to public scrutiny and to use new digital media to publicize public information in far-reaching ways.*

The scope of this dissertation is not to criticize in detail Michels. I will therefore suffice to say that even when parties exceed in their role of gatekeepers, their mediating/organization function is essential to the functioning of a political system (as shown among others by Sartori\textsuperscript{171}, Gunther and Diamond,\textsuperscript{172} Neumann\textsuperscript{173}, Ware\textsuperscript{174}). It simply unrealistic to call for their elimination. This has been proven in Italy (see Barbera\textsuperscript{175}), where some intellectuals have seriously debated this hypothesis as a way to tackle to root causes of the country’s political instability.

It is equally unrealistic to imagine electronic consultations organized by modern parliaments with the involvement of the public at large: these votes would either become empty rituals (if executed in shared competence mode with MPs), or would not improve the system (if, for competence issues, they were relegated to decide on issues of minor relevance), or would generate unworkable processes. The complexity, the technicality and the sheer size of legislative amendments in contemporary legislative bodies is such, that the real issue is a different one. The challenge – if any – is how to frame the increasing reliance of parliaments on pressure groups, lobbies and partisan think tanks\textsuperscript{176}.

\textsuperscript{171} SARTORI G., The Theory of democracy revisited, Chatham, Chatham House 1987, SARTORI G., Democratic Theory Wayne Univ. Press 1962
\textsuperscript{173} NEUMANN, S. [Ed.], Modern Political Parties, IL: University of Chicago Press. 1956.
\textsuperscript{176} LIEBERT U., ‘Parliaments and Majority Rule in Western Europe’, Chp. 13 Parliamentary lobby regimes URL http://www.uni-potsdam.de/db/vergleich/Publikationen/Parliaments/chapter13.pdf Accessed 31.08.11
The three authors’ own attempt to validate empirically their claims gives them an opportunity to measure the gap existing between their views and the actual situation within three European parliaments.

...This analysis produces two main findings. First, in all three parliaments, personal websites are not used in a way to consequently implement the model of a direct, participatory system of political representation. Only a minority of members uses their websites to increase public dialogue and to learn more about the policy positions of their constituents. Furthermore, only a minority of members increases access to crucial information on the parliamentary process via their websites. 177

The theoretical approach of Gibson, Römmele, and Ward leads to impractical operational conclusions. Their empirical validation, however, provides a stimulus for this dissertation as it invites to discover if there is a link between the behaviour of the MPs sampled in their surveys and the parties that employ them. Similarly, their focus on the possibility to increase public dialogue on the political web raises the issue of the intentions of this dialogue, its purpose and the difference between structured, unstructured dialogue and formal deliberation.

The closing scientific deficiencies assessment section will provide additional evidence of the importance of the pragmatic identification of the existence of a political dialogue led by political parties online. We still very much need to understand which type of party engages in which type of interaction and with whom; we have to understand how parties view the influence they manage to project through the web; how effective they think the web is in terms of mobilisation, agenda setting, orientation of the public debate, and overall political stability.

In such an actor-driven perspective, as Kane and Patapan underline, political parties’ activities online are indeed a primary target of analysis178.

177 GIBSON, RÖMMELE, WARD (2004) Id. p.82
One of the conceptual models which has most influenced the interpretative process of the change brought by the Internet in politics is Jurgen Habermas’ *bourgeois public space*. Habermas suggests that the public space emerged in eighteenth-century Britain as a by product of the expanding capitalist society. In the process of achieving independence from both the Church and the State, capitalists gave increased support to the *world of letters* (theatre, art, coffee houses, novels and criticisms) thus developing a new space where educated critique could emerge in autonomy from traditional powers. As Habermas observes, in the bourgeois public space, *conversation [turned] into criticism and bon mots into arguments*. Increased support for free speech, a struggle for Parliamentary reforms and a struggle to establish independent papers, facilitated by relative cheap production costs, were all complementary dynamics converging into the public space.

De Sola Pool, Hauben, Hunter, Gaynor, Thompson, Beckdael, Scott and Märker, Jensen / Danzinger / Venkatesh, Karakaya, Polat have all focused their analytical efforts on new media, the web, Usenet, newsgroups and, more lately, blogs and online forums as *technologies of freedom* and leverages for the opening and dynamization of the political realm intended as a communication space. For some of these authors, cyberspace is the closest approximation to Habermas’ public space. The notion of participatory/deliberative democracy in cyberspace seems to coincide with Habermas’ *ideal speech*, the tool through which the public reaches, rationally, greater understanding of issues of collective importance.

As Gaynor in particular suggests:

---


183 THOMPSON G., ‘Weblogs, warblogs, the public sphere, and bubbles’ (Saginaw Valley State University - Online paper) URL: http://www6.svsu.edu/~qtf/Transformations_piecerev.pdf Article printed in Transformations, published by University of Queensland, Australia, Sept. 2003


185 Oliver Märker of Zebralog and Markus Beckedahl of netzpolitik.org make reference to the notion of Öffentlichkeit as the space is created through communication and mediates between issue publics, media and personal encounters. See the posting ‘Technologies of Freedom? - A Seminar about the Internet and Democracy’ in Tobias Escher Blog - Oxford Internet Institute URL http://people.oi.ox.ac.uk/escher/2008/08/01/internet-and-democracy-seminar/
for Habermas, the public sphere is a discursive arena that is home to citizen debate, deliberation, agreement and action. Here individuals are able to freely share their views with one another in a process which closely resembles the true participatory democracy advocated for electronic networks.  

Gaynor’s views strongly echo communitarian / deliberative concepts of democracy (as seen in both teledemocrats and cyberdemocrats):

...The public sphere, therefore, manages to generate a political space which respects the rights of the individual and strengthens community. Because the communication which takes place in the 'ideal speech situation' is free of institutional coercion, dialogue in the public sphere can institute democratic discourses on the grassroots level. If the rules of Habermas' 'ideal speech situation' can be transferred to current electronic networks, the possibility arises for a democracy which can truly represent both citizen and community interests.
Similar views are defended by Märker and Beckedahl’s\(^{188}\) definition of public space which, re-elaborating Bonchek, makes references to lowered access costs, to the emergence of personal communications, to the disintermediation process:

A critique to certain interpretations of Habermas’ public space

There are several ways to respond to the arguments of those that view the development of the political web through the lens of Habermas’ public space.

One consists in criticising the foundations of Habermas’ theoretical construct, suggesting with Luhmann, that public opinion is not a \textit{rational} process to reach consensus or orient public choices, but an \textit{irrational artifact}, generated by the repercussions of Communication.

\textit{[Public opinion underlines Luhmann is the materialisation of] the autistic universe of politics itself. Considering the discipline [of public opinion] as a starting point of a rational choice, following the tradition that still perpetuates today (notably with Habermas), is an abusive interpretation}\(^{189}\).

\begin{itemize}
  \item one-way / broadcast
  \item high communication costs
    \begin{itemize}
      \item limited bandwidth
      \item selection bias / gatekeeping
    \end{itemize}
  \item producer-consumer distinction
    \begin{itemize}
      \item passive audience
      \item hierarchy
    \end{itemize}
  \item time and space constraints
    \begin{itemize}
      \item national
      \item news cycles / synchronous
    \end{itemize}
\end{itemize}

\begin{itemize}
  \item one-2-one & broadcast / interactive
  \item low communication costs
    \begin{itemize}
      \item information abundance
      \item access to audience / visibility
      \item pluralistic / unmediated information
    \end{itemize}
  \item shift consumers to producers
    \begin{itemize}
      \item active users
      \item horizontal / equality
    \end{itemize}
  \item no time and space constraints
    \begin{itemize}
      \item transnational
      \item always on / asynchronous
    \end{itemize}
\end{itemize}

Illustration 6: The public sphere features according to Märker and Beckedahl - PowerPoint Presentation © 2008 Märker & Beckedahl


In this sense, the discourse developed online in political blogs and social networks – being deprived (as notes Zhang and Witschge) of both its ‘reason giving requirement’, ‘mutual respect/politeness’, ‘diversity/opinion heterogeneity’ and ‘moderation’ would equal to mere opinion and not to public opinion. Zhang (et al.) interestingly enough have recently demonstrated that reasonable arguments and mutual respect do not occur simultaneously in the real world.

Messages are either too brief, too partisan, too sarcastic or simply “strange” to be considered serious. Habermas himself in recent manifestations clarifies in this respect (in line with Luhmann’s notion of loss of identification of the communicational transactions) that the internet on one side extends the communication connections in an egalitarian way (towards egalitarismus) while on the other annihilates the achievements of the public space. While in the bourgeois public space critical attention was directed evenly towards all socially relevant topics, in the Internet access to the topics is decentralized (precisely through a plethora of virtual communities), discussions are non moderated and the contributions of intellectuals lose weight, diluted in a huge flow of comments.

An alternative way to approach the critique is to deny that the idealtype suggested by Habermas is truly materialised by the political web. In this respect Mc Chesney has carried out an empirical work (based on the penetration levels of new technologies such as the web) and concluded that the notion of digital divide creates the condition of a partial public sphere. Norris has added another dimension to this critique, suggesting that the digital divide segments social sectors with different degree of interest in politics: groups already active in politics are favoured by the changes brought by the web in the political realm.

Together with Maliandi I will also argue in the empirical part of the dissertation that it is fairly difficult to respect with online parties communication the so called Alexy-Habermas principles of discursive equality which frame the ‘ideal speech situation’. Discursive equality implies that:

1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.

2a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.

---

190 On the multiple conditions for true deliberative online political discussions see: Zhang W., Cao X., Ngoc Tran M. "The structural features and the deliberative quality of online discussions", in Telematics and informatics (2012) http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2012.06.001 Retrieved 05.12.2012; but also WITSCHGE T. "Online Deliberation: Possibilities of the Internet for deliberative Democracy" Paper submitted to Euricom Colloquium 'Electronic Networks & Democratic Engagement' October 2002

191 Zhang et al. "The structural features and the deliberative quality of online discussions", Idem p.11

192 FRANKE G., "Participatory Political Discussion on the Internet", Votes and Opinions 2:2 (July/August) 1996, p. 22-25


194 MCCHESNEY R. W., Corporate media and the threat to democracy, New York : Seven Stories Press (1997)


2b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.

2c. Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires and needs.

3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2).\textsuperscript{198}

The reality check provided by my fieldworks will show that the currently dominant information architecture on the political web precisely inhibits equality and *discursive simmetry*.

Finally also Thomson resizes the public sphere relevance of blogs and views them simply as a source of competition for mainstream media:

The degree of symbiosis between more public-sphere-oriented weblogs and news media suggests that they will prove not to be so revolutionary a change as once thought. However, they do shift the dynamics of news presentation considerably: the sort of news consumer who used to hit the newspaper racks like Holly Hunter’s character in Broadcast News, the confirmed news junky who a decade ago might have juggled television, radio, and print sources of information, is now able to supplement or supplant mainstream sources with online sources, including weblogs as well as institutional feeds and advocacy sites. Because of the internet’s status as new media, instead of a few prized news sources, more capable of being kept under ideological if not social and political control, there are now hundreds of likely feeds from millions of potential sources.\textsuperscript{199}

A third way to approach the critique is to recognize that the lesson of Habermas has been only partially adopted to frame the political web, in the framework of instrumental attempt to ennoble an ideological view of electronic democracy.

As Boeder\textsuperscript{200} and Webster correctly note\textsuperscript{201}, Jurgen Habermas had already noted the paradoxical evolution and decline of the bourgeois public sphere towards the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

\textsuperscript{198} Quoted from HORNBY R., It is nigh impossible to think of ‘the ethical’ or moral consciousness outside of the sphere of language (i.e. Communication). A discussion in relation to the ‘Discourse Ethics’ of Jurgen Habermas ROY ROGBY SITE URL \url{http://royby.com/philosophy/pages/ethics.html} Accessed 24/09/09


\textsuperscript{200} BOEDER P., ‘Habermas Heritage: the future of the public sphere in the network society’, Essay drafted in the course of P. Boeder’s MA in Journalism studies – Cardiff University (2000) also online URL \url{http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue10_9/boeder/} accessed 21.08.08

\textsuperscript{201} WEBSTER F., *Theories of the Information Society*, Routledge (2002). See in particular Chp. 7 ‘Information management and manipulation: Jurgen Habermas and the decline of the public sphere’, p. 171 onwards,
Through what Habermas calls a process of *refeudalisation* the precarious balances between capitalism/private property and public sphere tilted towards the former leading to the expansion of MPs’ private power, to the business of financing of political parties and think tanks, to lobbying and manipulation of the public opinion by organized economic interests.

Webster recognizes in the German social theorist’s contribution an opportunity to apprehend the development of the drift of the so called information society in the direction of *information packaging*, and *propaganda*:

*Universal suffrage may have brought each of us into the political realm, but it has also brought the primacy of opinion over the quality of reasoned argument. Worse than this weighing of the vote without assessing the validity of the issues, the extension to everyone of the suffrage coincided with the emergence of ‘modern propaganda’, hence the capability to manage opinion in a ‘manufactured public sphere’.*

As Webster correctly points out

>[with the information society]... the potential for and practice for information management and manipulation are immensely enlarged.

... *Propaganda here is presented as systematic and self-conscious information management and as a requisite of liberal democracy. It involves both dissemination of particular messages and also the restriction of information, an activity including censorship.*

Karim equally notes, using Ellul, that a certain *propaganda drift* is inherent not to the basic policy notions of National Information Infrastructure and Information Society but to the way they are materially channelled to society at large in the public discourse.

---


203 Webster notes echoing Ellul’s concern for the multiplication of propagandas: “…Reading Juürgen Habermas on the history of the public sphere, it becomes impossible to avoid the conclusion that its future is precarious. Even in its heyday the ‘bourgeois public sphere’ was an incomplete means of meeting the German philosopher’s ideal of ‘undistorted communication’. His account of its more recent development is more gloomy still, an interpretation of trends which puts him well inside the mainstream of the most pessimistic Frankfurt School theorists. The views of Habermas’s former teacher, Theodor Adorno, are especially evident: capitalism is victorious, the autonomy of individuals is radically reduced, the capacity for critical thought is minimal, there is no real space for a public sphere in an era of transnational media conglomerates and a pervasive culture of advertising”, WEBSTER F. (2002) ibidem p. 166


206 Both related to the development of the concept of eDemocracy

207 I personally argue that these two policies are not genetically, structurally propagandistic, as a State could perfectly well aim at implementing them with stricter definitions, and accurate metrics. They become propagandistic – as Cunningham notes in The Idea of Propaganda - when their epistemology becomes weak and defective; when (for example) there are no systematic measurements on the penetration of technologies in given societal layers and no quantitative objectives are defined in view of being achieved politically. The fact of not achieving agreed thresholds would imply a political responsibility anyway, but would protect both the policy and the politicians from the accusation of being manipulative.
To conclude it is necessary here to distinguish essentially between the relevance of the claims of those that have dialectically used Habermas concepts to validate the emergence of electronic democracy and Habermas’ original lesson.

The first are not suitable to respond to our research questions, whereas Habermas intuition of the decline of the public space towards propaganda, and the distinction between public opinion and mere opinion open a whole theoretical framework which should be used as a background for the empirical validation of my research, notably with regard to RQ3 (What is the main functional character emerging from the information architecture of the political web, as it is today?).
In this section, I am going to focus on two variants of the concept of e-Democracy popularized by both scholars, media, and political elites:

- eDemocracy as a synonym of e-Government (or e-Governance as for Bekkers\textsuperscript{208}) and
- eDemocracy as a synonym of e-Voting.

The first variant [eDemocracy as eGovernment] appears in scientific contexts where governmental reform processes are discussed and their feasibility analysed. For example, Mendez and Trechsel\textsuperscript{209} define eDemocracy as:

\textit{...All electronic means of communication that enable/empower citizens in their efforts to hold rulers/politicians accountable for their actions in the public realm.}

They explain that eDemocracy can use different techniques:

1. for increasing the transparency of the political process;
2. for enhancing the direct involvement and participation of citizens; and
3. for improving the quality of opinion formation by opening new spaces of information and deliberation.

Along the same lines, Welch, Hinnant, Moon and Jae, see eDemocracy as an instrument to linking citizen satisfaction with e-government services and trust in government\textsuperscript{210}. eDemocracy is seen by Rousseau and Rivero\textsuperscript{211} as a policy to unleash the economic potential of knowledge societies, or coupling information technology with access to authority.

\textsuperscript{211} ROUSSEAU D.M., RIVERO A. (Carnegie Mellon University), 'Democracy, a way of organizing in a knowledge economy' in Journal of Management Inquiry June, 2003 SECTION: Vol. 12, No. 2; Pg. 115
Kakabadse and Kuzmin refer to it as a model to reinvent democratic governance:

The electronic bureaucracy model [which] refers to the electronic delivery of government services. ... The goal of this model is to allow for easier, quicker, and cheaper transactions with government on behalf of businesses and citizens and to reduce, over time, the size of the public sector.

The information management model has more effective communication, bridging individual citizens and decision makers. ... Using multimedia such as touch-screen kiosks in public places (libraries, shopping malls) or personal computers from home, citizens can obtain government information or send messages to their representatives or government agencies.

The populist model enables citizens to register their views on current issues. It is most often equated with direct democracy.

The civil society model refers to the transformation of political culture, and it can be appreciated only within the context of the broader transformations brought about by communication technology. Its goal is to strengthen connections between citizens and promote a robust and autonomous site for public debate. 212

---

Watson and Mundy suggest a three stages reform strategy (initiation, infusion, customization) for the introduction of eGovernment and imply that governments, as organisations, will implement eDemocracy. Watson and Mundy’s conclusion is supported by countless public events all underlining publicly European political elites’ commitment towards eGovernment and eDemocracy:

- In England, even amid delays and criticisms to the Transformational Government – Implementation Plan, both Conferences of the Hansard society, the e-Envoy and the eGU (the e-Government Unit, the largest unit in the cabinet office) have all proven the government’s strong determination to lead in the ability to access public services electronically at all times of the day, also with an emphasis on e-participation.
- In France, notwithstanding the critical attitude of President Sarkozy towards e-voting as a solution to abstensionism, twelve World eDemocracy Forums and Awards (between 1999 and 2011) have been organised by the entrepreneurial André Santini, Member of Parliament and City Mayor of Issy les Moulineaux.
- In Germany CeBIT the Hannover IT Fair has almost yearly played an active role in promoting industrial solutions for eGovernment
- In Italy, Prodi’s Governmental strategy - whose implementation also depends on the network of Municipalities and the effective information relay from the ForumPA (a yearly event organised in the capital) - clearly connected eGovernment to eDemocracy

- Lors du 4e forum de l’e-démocratie qui se tenait à Issy-les-Moulineaux le vendredi 26 septembre 2003, Nicolas Sarkozy s’est dit favorable au développement du vote électronique en France. Suivant les recommandations émises par le Forum des droits sur l’Internet, le ministre de l’Intérieur a toutefois souligné qu’il convenait de procéder par étapes. Il a notamment précisé que les dispositifs servant à voter devaient rester sur les lieux de l’élection ou être reliées à des réseaux spécifiques: il faudra donc attendre avant de voter sur internet. Pour le ministre, l’internet n’offre pas, à l’heure actuelle, suffisement de garanties par rapport au vote traditionnel: C’est une affaire de pur bon sens: qui pourra garantir que c’est la bonne personne qui a voté? Qui pourra garantir qu’elle n’était pas menacée pour être obligée de voter pour tel ou tel candidat? Ne confisquons pas le processus électoral au nom de la technologie Le vote sur internet sera toutefois expérimenté sur des scrutins locaux: référendum dans les communes, élections aux Chambres de commerce ou aux Chambres de métier. Si Nicolas Sarkozy se montre prêt à développer le vote électronique, il estime que l’utilisation des nouvelles technologies pour les élections ne pourra, à elle seule, faire revenir les citoyens vers les urnes. Où bien le débat politique et la décision publique portent sur les enjeux réels de la vie de la société et alors les citoyens sauront se servir de la technologie pour se faire entendre; ou bien l’on s’en tient au pur spectacle de la politique et les citoyens zapperont encore plus vite sur les idéologies, les programmes et les hommes politiques, peut-on ainsi lire dans son discours. Selon le site d’information 01Net, Sarkozy aurait rajouté, lors de sa conférence, que le vote électronique n’est pas le moyen pour convaincre ceux qui sont trop farouches pour comprendre que voter c’est important”. LINDIVAT. A ’Phrase du jour: France / Sécurité’, on 29/09/2003 16h47, URL: http://www.transfert.net/a9352 Accessed 21/09/09

221 “The Government intends to reform public administration to make it more responsive to the needs of users (individual citizens or businesses), provide modern services and create public value while ensuring ease of access and interaction. … As the e-government system advances it will also become a powerful tool for stimulating citizens’ involvement and participation in decision-making, sparking evolution towards innovative models of eDemocracy”, from MINISTERO DELL’INNOVAZIONE (Italy) Web site URL http://www.mininnovazione.it/eng/egovernment/strategia/modello.shtml Accessed 08/08/0/08
last but not least, in the European Commission framework for Research and Development, eDemocracy has been framed as a sub-element of the larger eGovernment action plan which, itself, has been inserted in the Lisbon strategic goals\textsuperscript{222} (for a comprehensive review of eGovernment implementation in Europe see Heinderyckx\textsuperscript{223}).

European Commission (notably the Directorate General for Information Society) has clearly connected eDemocracy to the issue of the democratic deficit\textsuperscript{224}, and has made a commitment in 3 specific R\&D themes (Knowledge Management, Workflow/Monitoring and eParticipation) with the explicit objective to re-inforce democratic participation and democratic decision-making in Europe\textsuperscript{225}.

\textsuperscript{222} "eGovernment should have a strategic focus: the achievement of the Lisbon goals, reduction of barriers to the internal market for services and mobility across Europe, effective implementation of national policies and regional or local development" From: 'The Role of Egovernment For Europe's Future', COM(2003) 567 final {Sec(2003) 1038 } Communication From The Commission To The Council, The European Parliament, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions, URL: http://europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/2005/all_about/egovernment/communication/index_en.htm Accessed 2005


\textsuperscript{224} "...Large scale disaffection with the existing democratic process...[which]...manifests itself in low voter participation in elections, low engagement in party politics and expectation gaps based on socio-economic divisions" From DG INFSO eDemocracy web site URL: http://europa.eu.int/information_society/activities/egovernment_research/focus/eqParticipation/index_en.htm Accessed 08/08/08

\textsuperscript{225} Quoted from DG INFSO Web Site (Accessed 08/08/08) http://europa.eu.int/information_society/activities/egovernment_research/focus/eqParticipation/index_en.htm
As I have noted above, the Council of Europe and the European Commission DG INFSO have continued, well after the decline in public visibility of eDemocracy after 9/11, to recommend their Member States to make use of the opportunities afforded by the discipline to strengthen democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes.226

Let’s now briefly touch upon the second variant [EVoting as eDemocracy], portrayed by many in the public debate as the most obvious evolution of traditional forms of electronic government. Also in this instance, it is not entirely a theoretical construct, but more a figure of speech, an association relayed by numerous industrial events and their media coverage. For example:


Table 5: Main sub themes of EC eDemocracy R&D - Source DG INFSO eDemocracy web site © EC DG INFSO 2007

Themes

Knowledge Management – In order to serve the citizen, public administration needs to be open and transparent. The complexity of legislative procedures and processes, the volume of associated information and the multiplicity of actors means that tools need developed to assist the general public navigate through the democratic system. The main benefits will be for the citizen.

Workflow/Monitoring - ICT can bring significant improvements in productivity to the legislative process. These benefits, related to efficiency, accessibility and transparency, are monitored and reported on by the use of process redesign and automated workflow. This supports transparency and accountability, the main benefits will be within the government administration.

EParticipation - The classical model of democratic involvement is being challenged. New models of engagement, for example enabled by collaborative technologies, are developing which allow expression of individual political will. These new models tend to be issue specific and suited to communities of engagement which are virtual and fluid.
• in surveys sponsored by Booz Allen Hamilton with the Centre for Information Policy Research at Harvard227 or by the Bertelmann Foundation with the company of one of the re-known eDemocracy Evangelists Phil Noble228 or by IBM’s Institute for Electronic Government229

• In the margins of the UN Earth Summit (September 2002), when the First Online Global Poll on the Environment and Sustainable Development issues was organised;

• In Europe in 2003 when the Greek Presidency led by George Papandreou deployed a successful site http://evote.eu2003.gr (later discontinued by the other Presidencies), and an extensive e-vote questionnaire was submitted to 175,000 EU citizens;

• In 2004, in Thailand when the term was associated to the introduction in the country of Electronic Voting Machines230;

• In India when in 2004 one million Electronic Voting Machines were used for the elections in 700,000 polling stations231;

• And finally in the US when a panel of computer security experts evaluated as inherently insecure the Secure Electronic Registration and Voting Experiment, or SERVE232

A critique of eDemocracy as e-Government (or e-Voting)

Lusoli’s two theorems on electronic democracy provide a clear explanation on the origins of the two interpretive variants presented above. Lusoli’s first theorem suggests – as I did in the opening sections of this chapter – that the political momentum, has been critical to the development of the concept of eDemocracy:

_The growth of the Internet has met the rhetorical needs of the ‘democratic deficit’ from its very inception... We argue here that a policy window has appeared with the convergence of a paradigmatic shift in society, due to the introduction of the new technologies, and a urgent need for democratic restructuration’ in terms of political participation, and ultimately political equality_233.


231 “It is difficult not to admire India's electronic democracy: the scale, the sheer logistics, the likelihood - notwithstanding a 40% illiteracy rate - of achieving a higher turnout than our 59% in 2001, and of at least reducing the massive fraud and corruption that has traditionally bedevilled the country’s elections”, ‘Perspective: Longest Election With Quickest Count; Chris Game Asks If I Could Learn From India's Elections’, Birmingham Post May 12, 2004, Wednesday Copyright 2004 Midland Independent Newspapers plc Birmingham Post May 12, 2004, Wednesday SECTION: First Edition; FEATURES; Pg. 10


eDemocracy has been the rhetorical device of a generation of local, national, international politicians that has competed in the policy arena using the myth of change and innovative governance, and created a semantic equation between their political offer, their political identity, and a set of exemplary electronic government pilot projects.

In the second electronic democracy theorem, Lusoli (quoting also Hoff, and van Bastelaer & Lobet-Maris) proposes the notion of an iron triangle as the main engine behind the structural development of electronic democracy:

The basic idea is that the construction of electronic democracy is not limited to the ‘linear’ electoral circuit between legitimation-seeking elites and the people. Rather, new media industry and government constitute third interested parties, thus creating an ‘iron triangle’ of rhetoric.

By this interpretation, the introduction of a new technology, its diffusion and adoption are shaped by three forces, corresponding to the main actors involved in the process: the producers and consumers of the technology, and the institutional framework of production/consumption.

It should be noted in this respect that the concept of the triangle strongly echoes the notion of interactive loop (la boucle interactive linking industry/research community, users, and governments), suggested by Michel Carpentier Director General of DG XIII, (then renamed DG Information Society) as the main engine for the Information Society policy.

The strength and the importance of the two notions is their cyclical behaviour and their interactivity: governments and political leaders trigger the process, but the process is also leveraged and re-triggered by consumers and by the pressure generated by industrial innovation and marketing.

The role of governments is pivotal in channelling change. ‘By either stalling, unleashing or leading technological innovation [the state] is a decisive factor in the overall process, as it expresses and organizes the social and cultural forces that dominate in a given space and time’ Though not only the state drives change, governments are driven into change by the sheer force of the discourse, fuelled by participation and industry concurrent discourses. The widespread perception, amplified by media, industry and academic hype that we are entering an ‘information revolution’ makes it ‘politically untenable for governments to be seen to be doing nothing’.

This context explains why the notion of eDemocracy as e-Government is promoted essentially by political elites (local and national governments in Europe but also the main European Institutions) and echoed by partner communities (research, industry and political constituencies).

---

234 CARPENTIER, M. Keynote Speech delivered at the Université d’Eté de la Communication (Hourtin - France), 1996
The political/industrial foundations of this interpretative model weaken its capacity to respond to the dissertation research questions.

Advocates of this model (correctly) see the Web as a potential vector for change, transparency, accountability and governance: a catalyst for progress and devolution. However, this form of techno-optimism not only postulates that the effect of technology is always transformational, but also creates a model where different institutional processes (the delivery of public services, electoral processes, forms of citizens’ participation) are arbitrarily amalgamated in a very broad definition of democracy. Democracy, as recently noted by Hilbert[^235], is concerned about Rousseau’s process of moving from the volonté particulière to the volonté générale: the construction of the public will through discourse and deliberation. At the same time, democracy is a set of rules which provides and guarantees the fairness of decision making processes and the equality of socio-economic and cultural conditions of a given community.

I argue that the quality of the delivery of a public service is not a dependent variable of the political orientation of the elite which rules a given administration.

A stricter and more pertinent definition of e-government should focus on the notion of public service, or, more exactly, on the provision of faster, simplified, cheaper, computer supported, web enhanced public services. The notions of political debate and deliberation are a complement for e-Government projects, but not a necessity. Political debate and participation are not a pre-requisite for the effective provision of official forms, the payment of taxes, the granting of licenses, the delivery of financial support or permits and so on.

Let’s now focus shortly on recent conceptualisation of e-voting. Their relevance for our research is very limited as they essentially re-propose with very little change the same arguments and the same type of human machine interactivity found in Becker. It is however worth noting the remarkable coverage that this debate has generated since the contested election of George Bush[^236]: a debate that, once again, does not succeed in going far enough to explain why the country with the highest media and technology density per capita, features the remarkable figure of 100 million non voters[^237].

[^236]: The core media argument for the re-opening of the debate was: the most technologically advanced nation, fails to provide its citizens a new president because of an outdated analogue voting technology
[^237]: More than the actual number of voters (1996 data) see DOPPELT J.C., SHEARER E., Non Voters: America’s no show, Sage 1999
Contrary to the expectations of Oostveen and van den Besselaar\(^\text{238}\) the speed, or the reliability, or the accuracy of an e-Vote solution, if and when we can count on these features\(^\text{239}\), has nothing to do with people’s motivations to vote. I argue that once one subtracts the dogmatic spin and the industrial interest, Internet voting looks just like another opportunity to vote, almost like allowing people to vote on Sunday, or to vote late at night, or to get a day off to go to vote etc. It’s a device which one day may become a safe and inexpensive, but it’s not enough to be a structural cause to enhance political participation.

DEMOCRACY 2.0?

A few new approaches characterize the scholarly production of the last ten years. The first concern the political relevance of Web 2.0 applications, such as social networking, Youtube and Wikipedia. The second, analysed from page 81 onwards, scrutinizes specifically party web sites activities and bears the greatest resemblance to my own work.

Scholars belonging to the web 2.0 stream include Kreiss\(^\text{240}\) (who investigated the case of Howard Dean, the prototypical example of peer-driven politics), Pasek, More and Romer\(^\text{241}\) (who investigated the relationship between indicators of social capital and internet used of sites such as MySpa ace and Facebook), Gaines and Mondak\(^\text{242}\) (who studied the relationship between Facebook membership and specific political clusters).

Hilbert\(^\text{243}\) is among those who see that MySpace\(^\text{244}\), YouTube, Facebook, Digg, Twitter and the Blogosphere are indeed capable of overcoming the tradeoff between group size and depth of argument. He views (echoing Bonchek) the Web 2.0 as capable of overcoming the public irrationality by providing multidirectional and massively parallel communication networks with adequate expertise on the issues at stake. The user-friendlyness and the quality of human to human/message to message interactivity allow the Web 2.0 to avoid the preformulation of standardized opinion polling which straitjackets public opinion expres-


\(^{244}\) On the political use of MySpace: KEEGAN V. ‘No escape - virtual reality is here to stay’, The Guardian, Thursday 1 June 2006 http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2006/jun/01/newmedia.comment
sion. As Segarra underlines, *Now, politics is personal, is individual, is targetable, is viral* 245. Hilbert complements his analysis by underlining the technical potential of tagging, visualization of arguments (tag clouds), semantic web and intelligent agents to *blend individual opinion of the masses into the democratic formulation of the common will.*

With two major publications with Oxford and Routledge on this domain, Andrew Chadwick 246 is one of the loudest voices of the new generation of scholars engaged in the study of the links between Web 2.0 and democracy. While recognizing that the rational critical discourse (materialised in the *often romanticized "Athenian" or "public sphere" models*) has proved notoriously difficult to embed in political organisations, Chadwick believes that Web 2.0, as defined by O'Reilly247, truly provides an *alternative approach to a new politics*, rich in incentives structures. In an interesting discussion mimicking the structure and a good part of the arguments of Bonchek, Chadwick proposes seven meaningful principles that make Web 2.0 valuable for politicians:

*The Internet as a platform for political discourse* 248: This principle refers to the technological changes associated to the Web 2.0. From static pages, the web is now a mesh of *networked services* providing opportunities not only for a “head” of mass market products, but also for a much longer “tail” of niche content creation application, such as blogs, YouTube, MySPace and the others which strive providing much lower access costs than previously available for the same type of publications249.

*Collective Intelligence:* the core idea of this principle is that a *distributed network of creators and contributors, the majority of them amateurs, can, using simple online tools, produce information goods that may outperform those produced by so-called authoritative, concentrated sources.*250 The idea, popularized by Lévy251 and Rheingold252 since the mid 90’s, promotes the idea of the “little brother” *surveillant gaze of citizen-reporters*, enabled by tools such as VLOGs (video blogs), Flickr and the likes.

---


249 "The theory of the 'long tail' is that online commerce and distribution is changing the economics of the media and entertainment industries. Ever wondered why a city center cinema, record store or bookseller has so few titles? It boils down to this: traditionally, movie studios, publishers and record companies tend to try (it doesn't always work) to create small numbers of 'big hit' products because the sunk costs of developing a film, book, or album can be more quickly and predictably recouped. Similarly, real space retail outlets (cinemas, city center record stores, booksellers) can only afford to sell 'hit' products because the relatively high cost of providing shelf or screen space for low-selling niche products makes it risky. The long tail idea is that online distribution significantly reduces these costs, resulting in a sales/products curve like the one above. Because consumers can now be presented with a hugely expanded range of products, businesses can be built upon many products that have low sales, not just the traditional model - few products that have high sales." CHADWICK A. Andrewchadwick Archived Blog URL http://internet-politics.andrewchadwick.com/archives/cat_ch02concepts.html Accessed 12.09.11


The importance of data: The main claim associated to this principle is that the Web 2.0 provides the opportunity to collect and aggregate unprecedented amount of data; a feature which simultaneously enhances the would be political pundits but also those that intend to exploit for political marketing purposes the wealth of personal information accumulated on platforms such as FaceBook.

Perpetual experimentalism in the public domain: The underlining idea is that the experimentalism one can observe on public “betas” for consumer applications can now be transferred (as a paint of modernism) to political behaviour, with greater cooperation between developers and users.

The creation of Small Scale Forms of Political Engagement through Consumerism

The Propagation of Political Content across Multiple Application: Chadwick explains these two principles (5 and 6) as the capacity of the Web 2.0 of mashing together of different data [originating for example from smart phones directly connected to Facebook or Flickr accounts] in pursuit of goals that differ from those originally intended by the producers of those data [the reference here is on the growing phenomenon of amateur “witness reporters”]

Rich user experiences on Political Websites: this last principle refers to the emergence of AJAX (Asynchronous JavaScript and XML) code and Abode FLASH (files with the flv extension played directly within a given HTML page) videos on political web sites. In a truly significant step forward in development terms, AJAX allows to run mini applications inside a web browser, thus adding a new dimension to human-machine interactivity. FLV videos are the core technology enhancing tools such as YouTube, Vimeo or Daily-Motion: their production does not require professional production techniques and their usage in politics has been popularised by both Barack Obama and David Cameron in theirs campaigns (notably in 2007) and investigated by many, including including Gulati, Williams, Klotz, Church, Kaprf, Wallstein, Vatrapu, Medina, Robertson and Ricke 253.

Chadwick complements his analysis alerting on the growing role played by usability as key to tame the complexity associated by the sophisticated micro apps of Web 2.0. At the same time Bonchek's arguments on the lowered access costs are combined in Chadwick with the notion of threshold in collective action:

A threshold is here understood to be a function of an individual’s calculation about the expected utility of participating in a given activity based on the likelihood of participation by others...254

On the Web 2.0 the threshold for action is low because of the high likelihood of the participation of many others; because of this, suggests Chadwick, many citizens seem to find mixing together sources of digital content originally created by others to be a compelling and worthwhile experience in its own right.


254 CHADWICK A. ‘Web 2.0 : New Challenges ... (2009), Id.
A critique of research investigating the links between web 2.0 and e-democracy

Chadwick’s works play an important role as they somehow update Bonchek’s conclusions more than 10 years after the American author. However the British author is victim of the same temptation than his American predecessor.

The first flaw in his posture lies in the idea that we are facing a new politics with the Web 2.0.

This is a recurrent and understandable scholarly temptation.

Advocates of deliberative or rationalist democracy think that the so called web 2.0 is a particularly well-suited medium to encourage the expression of the rational, natural tendency of every citizen to participate in an informed way to the management of issues of common interest. A similar interest is shared by media scholars such as Joke who makes the hypotheses, against the background of the decline of newspapers readership, that the increase of political information on the web can recreate information circuits for modern citizens.

As I have noted in the first section of the literature review, the so called web 2.0 re-opens a long standing debate in political science on the determining factors for political participation. In the late 90’s, many - together with Bonchek – argued already the emergence of a new politics. The question is systematically re-proposed by mass media at every US Presidential election or at every uprising around the world where new technologies have been reported to have played some sort of role (for example China, Israel/P.A., Egypt, Burma, Iran, the Arab Awakening etc.).

The birth of a new politics has been repeatedly certified (in good faith) over and over in the past century.

In the late 1960s, during John and Bobby Kennedy’s political campaigns, Penn had already used the expression new politics in a work underlining both the new themes, the new words, but also the new campaign methods and technologies that had emerged with the Kennedy’s. A change in campaigning had led, according to Penn, to a change in participation (the so-called bandwagon effect) and ultimately in a change in politics, incarnated by the new, young leadership.

The key concern at that time was the analysis of the role (in terms of communication, persuasion and information sharing) played by the new dominant medium, the television. As Crespi and Mendelhson suggest:

For many observers of the political scene, one of the more pressing problems that is posed by the new politics relates to the control of the allegedly direct effects of polls and of political telecasts upon voters.

In the 1930s and 1940s the foundational innovation for political participation was the role played by radio in political campaigning, particularly by Roosevelt, but also during the war, as Crespi and Mendelsohn note

The radio campaign of 1932 saw the demise of the torch-light parade, the front porch campaign, the focus on local speech-making, and exclusive dependence on the printed page. A new technique for appealing directly to millions of voters was projected into national politics. No longer would the American national political campaign be waged almost exclusively in unfamiliar public surroundings that were boisterous, emotion-arousing, and crowd-dominated. The new arena now was the familiar, quiet, private setting of the potential voter's own home. With radio, the foundation for the new politics -- participatory politics -- was set in the voter's living room. ...Roosevelt's promise of talking matters of public concern over with the people directly via radio came to fruition the very first year of his administration. The newly-elected President took to the airwaves no less than 84 times between March 1933 and January 1934.\(^{258}\)

In sum, it can be argued that the political arena generates permanently the expectation for change and that this expectation is multiplied when the context or, better, the political system, is already in transition due to a variety of co-factors (including new technologies).

I argue against Chadwick's conclusions that the quality and quantity of change is not sufficient to re-engage a discussion on the impact of the internet on democracy; at least without taking full advantage of the criticisms that many have already raised to the conclusions of those that have studied the subject in the late 90's.

The Web 2.0, as the term implies, develops, in a continuum, the first wave of Web technologies. In this perspective, AJAX is the continuation of Java; YouTube is the logical follow up after the portals set up by QuickTime, Real and Windows Media Player in the late 90's; community blogs (as noted by Karpf\(^{259}\) ) act as quasi interest groups and forums for collective action by providing creative template which provide re-cognition in a visually cluttered world. Facebook and MySpace are derivatives from the early blogosphere created using Blogger. Flickr is a derivative of early image organisers such as Picasa (created in 2002) and the logical next step after the Web Photo Gallery export introduced in Photoshop 5.5 in 1999. Twitter is a derivative of the convergence between Short Message Service (SMS) and blogs. And so on.

---


\(^{260}\) The expression is taken from the mission statement of KeynotePRO see URL [http://keynotepro.com/](http://keynotepro.com/) Accessed 13.09.11
We are not therefore facing a completely different technological context, there is no rupture with the past, but only an improvement which, on one side creates new combinations with incumbent technologies (Chadwick’s Hybrid Media System) and on the other, does not necessarily invalidate the criticisms made against Boncheck’s netcast structure.

Huisman in this respect argues that: “the general optimism surrounding Web 2.0 is very similar to the romanticized ideal of e-democracy in the 1990s, while e-democracy itself is an ideal to be pursued but never attained”.

The second flaw of the intellectual posture that posits the emergence of a new politics from the Web 2.0, is related to the lack of nuances in the conclusions of the argument.

Arguing that increased accidental exposure to news is one of the most significant changes associated with web 2.0 and online social networking sites does not allow to conclude that serendipitous discovery of news has actually started with the Web 2.0.

Arguing the emergence of a “monitar citizen” does not allow, per se, to conclude that the monitoring is accurate, timely and effective. The identification of a social behaviour does not entail the conclusion that the given behaviour is becoming determining or dominant. Venturing conclusions about the impact of the Viewertariat upon agenda-setting, framing and actual behaviour such as voting should be avoided, as Chadwick himself acknowledges.

In 2004 the Internet penetration in the U.S. was 75%, 77.2% of US users at work enjoyed a high speed connection, but only 57.4 of the U.S. population voted.

As Glaser pointed out brilliantly:

Astroturfing is becoming the defining trope of our times. Participation, transparency and interactivity is the dominant rhetoric, and our obsession with “open door” talent shows propagates the myth that the salt of the earth can make it good if they just try hard enough.

But in reality, income inequality is at a record high. Rates of social mobility in Britain are dire. Power is increasingly located in ministerial government, lobby groups and commercial interests. The unquestioning belief in the grassroots revolution coincides with a drastic erosion of the power of ordinary people.

---


265 GLASER E. ‘Touching up the grassroots Belief in ordinary voices is exploited by PRs and politicians skilled in the dark art of astroturfing’, guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 24 June 2009 22.30 BST
Barack Obama, whose successful Presidential campaign (according to Castells267) has been determined by the Internet, opened the White House for questions between March 24 and 26, 2009. The, not-so-new-idea was to allow U.S. citizens to question the President on the state of the country’s economy in the course of a special event. Ex post analysis revealed that during the event, 92,937 people have submitted 103,978 questions and cast 1,782,650 votes.

What was the effect for them and for the nation? A decent amount of buzz (few tens of articles, some of which underlining, once again the the U.S. President had made history268), dubious results both in terms of political communication (the top four questions both relating to the budget and the economy were all about marijuana269), one presidential joke (Obama reacted to the top questions by stating "I don't know what this says about the online audience' and then went on saying that the legalization of marijuana was not a good strategy to grow the economy270) and very little, in policy terms (the site was perceived as a one-way-only medium and as a transparency theatre271).

Successful e-democracy – in the terms of Chadwick – can create the conditions for intermediary groups to emerge thanks to a plurality of different socio-technical mechanisms. At a certain moment however these "granular" intermediaries have to plug into real policy making and must materialise their importance by projecting a real influence, winning over the combined gatekeeping power of professional journalists, elected and unelected public servants.

LATEST RESEARCH ON POLITICAL PARTIES WEB SITES

A final group of scholars which is important mentioning in this review is a cluster of Empiricists that have devoted efforts since 2001 to study – in an inductive way - the actual behaviour of party web sites, notably during elections.

The interest of their work for this dissertation is that it offers a patchwork of findings covering portions of my own research perimeter. These findings also appear to fit the theoretical shift (or the change of tone from techno optimism to techno pessimism or techno realism) that Wedig272, Norris, Dahlgren and others had noted in the analysis of the impact the of the web in politics in the late 90’s -early 2000.

The main findings of these authors can be grouped in this set of conclusions:

---

270 [EDS.] ‘Caught in the net’, Mon, 04 May 2009 Publisher: New Statesman
272 WEDIG T., ‘The Internet and Political Organisations : Force Tool or Wildcard ?’, PhD Dissertation, Graduate School of University of Maryland, College Park (2007) Downloaded from UMI
Political Parties Web Sites Show Standardised Content and Poor Interactivity

Fabienne Greffet in her 2002 comparative analysis of six political parties online from France and UK notes – in contrast with techno determinist views - that all the parties observed use (in discourse terms) the same standards: the history of the party, its organisation and its leaders profile are always part of the structure of a political web site, thus indicating a strong inclination to respect a normative (and not open/creative) approach to the online communication.

Greffet notes that differences among party web sites can be related to the different context from which they emerge (level of techno density or need to respond in a domino effect to opposition’s activities on the web). More importantly, Greffet notes that party sites tend to hide the statistics of the usage of their site, that in French sites bulletin board tend to develop little traffic and to be dominated by a minority of users, and that the hypothesis of an externalisation of the debate to unofficial web sites (often managed by one person) does not seem to represent a realistic alternative to develop political participation.

Kalnes273 in a similar study conducted in Norway on 8 party sites, insists on the standardisation element (all 8 observed sites had heir own Domain) and notes the dominant role of e-mail as communication device to interact with the party online. Kalnes also notes, building on Bonchek: For all minor parties, and to some non-leftist parties, there is a potential compensation in websites providing a comparatively cheap and direct communication channel.

Another confirmation of the standardisation of political web sites comes from Sudulich274 and her survey of 6 Irish political parties web sites. In her work Sudulich identifies a correlation between party organisation (centralised vs. decentralised) and adoption of content standards (one-way communication features versus interactive / two way communication). Sudulich posits that the more vertical the internal structure of the party, the less interactive the site (the more based on presentations as suggested by Margolis and Resnick):

*This implies that the internet is not bringing about a renaissance in internal party democracy. Rather it is politics as usual; existing hierarchical structures determine the way the internet is used. The findings presented here would support cyber skeptical attitudes indicating that the internet has great created expectations, which have not turn into reality. The iron law of oligarchy applies to some parties more than others, an those having the most oligarchic and hierarchical organization realize little levels of online effective interaction*277.

---

275 "Instruments capable of facilitating bilateral or even multilateral communication and interaction and which involves the party, its members and occasionally Internet surfers". SUDULICH, 'Irish Political ...(2007) Id.
276 SUDULICH, 'Irish Political ...(2007) Id. p10
277 "There is no interaction between the organization and Internet users; the relationship is entirely unilateral". SUDULICH Id. p. 8
Similar results underlying the self-referentiality, lack of interactivity, negative campaigning, neglect of the distinctive media-specific qualities of online communication, and finally the reiteration of traditional offline patterns in campaign rhetorics in political web sites come from Schweitzer, with an analysis of German political web sites during the 2002-2005 national elections, in Delakorda in a recent survey of Slovenian parties web sites, and in Rommele. Additional criticisms for the non-innovative use of the web by political parties comes from Newell with an analysis of the 2005 German Federal Elections.

Van Selm, Jonkowski and Tsaliki find, comparing three Dutch Political party sites and three political functions (information provision/deliberation/decision), that they follow similar (standardized) patterns in information provision, but substantial differences regarding political deliberation and political decision making. Discussions were buried in the “third level” of web sites (meaning that users had to search that feature to be able to use it). Only in one case discussions were possible between citizen-to-authorities (the rest being discussions between peers – citizen/citizen). The decision making component was the least evident of the three in all the sites observed.

Political Parties Web Sites Have Modest Impact on Audience

On the receivers’ end, Lusoli and Ward between 2002 and 2003 conducted an online questionnaire among the party membership of the UK Liberal Democrats and Labour. The survey revealed on one side that (not surprisingly) the observed party members were heavy internet users, on the other the survey revealed that for 60% of the interviewees, the sites had not lead the interviewees to increase their activism.

In the overall 39% of respondents who had claimed to have reacted in a way to the party web site stimuli, the levels of reactivity / per indicator were very low, ranging from 2 to 14%:

Around 11 per cent claim email led them to contact the party or other party members, while another 10 per cent claim email was functional in getting them to volunteer some time or work for the party. Figures for web activation are even smaller, the peak being ‘contacting the party as a consequence of a site visit’ (9 per cent). Both email and the Web appear to

---

have very little impact on the more 'institutional' party activities, such as attending branch meetings or rallies. Overall, the data suggest that ICTs are of limited value in actively mobilising the membership.  

Lusoli and Ward conclude by saying:

Technology alone is unlikely to revive the aggregative functions of parties. The extent to which parties adapt ICTs for participatory (and, indeed, other) purposes is largely dependent on their own strategies and resources. Rather than parties being swept aside by a technological revolution, they are likely to adapt and incorporate technologies to reflect their pre-existing characteristics and goals.

Similar results concerning the population visiting the web sites (primarily confined to politically active groups) have been reached by Boogers and Voerman who corroborating contributions from Norris, suggest that political parties web sites are used by political activists to finding information about the programmes rather than engaging in online political discussions:

...Political Web sites are only partly able to involve people in politics who have thus far remained aloof. Visits to political Web sites are primarily confined to politically active groups. Political Web sites are successful in reaching young people, a group which is usually less politically active but which uses the Internet more intensively.

Another expectation of political Web sites is that they enable direct contact between voters, political parties and politicians. On political Web sites that offered these services, they were only used sporadically. For most people the primary reason for visiting a political Web site was finding information about the positions of political parties, about the parties themselves or about the election campaign. Political Web sites are used far less for online discussions or for contacting parties and politicians by e-mail.

Similar results emerge from Muhlberger's work on online discussions which shows low rates of political content (9.8% of all discussion), no evidence of value or core political attitude polarization online, limited evidence of mobilization.

---

288 NORRIS P. ID. 2001
Finally Pedersen and Saglie\textsuperscript{290} in a survey carried out in 2003 on 16 Scandinavian (Danish/Norwegian) parties report that almost 70\% of the responders never visit the party sites (4\% only visits it once a week). Between 95 and 97\% of the respondents says that they had never participated in the previous five years in electronic debates arranged by political parties. Between 85 and 87\% of the respondents never receive an email from the party’s central office; only 17\% uses mail to keep contact with other party members. The use of email and in particular e-newsletters is further analysed by Jackson in 2003\textsuperscript{291} with a survey covering 51 UK parties, again with mixed results:

\textit{E-newsletters reflect a ‘politics as usual’ approach in that it is only Parliamentary parties which so far have grasped the opportunity they represent to reach key audiences. However, when we look at the benefits of an e-newsletter two of the three minor parties suggest that, to some degree, e-newsletters help ‘level the playing field’ between the major and minor parties. This effect should not be overstated but the technology provides them with a cost-effective means of reaching both members and non-members.}\textsuperscript{292}

**Old Media Remain the Preferred Choice for Online Users - Aesthetics and Usability Matter**

In another work covering web sites of political parties in the UK, the US, Germany and Australia Lusoli, Ward and Gibson in 2003 provide a \textit{six factors explanatory grid} for the entry of political parties in the political web\textsuperscript{293}:

- Information provision to public and the old media
- Campaigning – direct e-mail, fund raising
- Targeting the youth audience
- Symbolic significance - the ‘mark of modernity’
- Virtual infrastructure /efficiency gains
- Soliciting voter/member feedback and participation

They also tackle the epistemological question of the lack of statistical data on usage of political web sites by extracting sense from a set of recent surveys carried out in the US, Australia and UK\textsuperscript{294}.


\textsuperscript{293} Namely: Pew Center data gathered in the lead up to the 2000 Presidential election; Work Foundation report in the UK on data gathered in an ICM/Guardian poll prior to the June 2001 General Election; the Australian Election Study (AES) conducted in November 2001 just after the Federal election of that year

\textsuperscript{294} 62\% of Americans had access to Internet at the time of the 2000 US presidential elections, 59\% of Australians during their 2002 federal elections and just under a half of UK population (49\%) was online at the 2001 general election. In the US almost one third of those online were searching out election related information, the figure falls to around 15\% for the British and Australian elect-
In this respect the three authors note that while data suggest one on side that a significant number of people were online during the most recent elections in the 3 countries analyse, on the other, the percentage of those using the web to search political information were considerably lower and party sites were not at all the preferred choice for searching political information. This thesis is challenged by Ward in a survey on 46 political parties and youth organisations during the 2004 European Parliament elections but is supported by Inoue with a fieldwork carried out surveying American college students during the 2000 US Presidential elections (the survey confirms a preference for old media and selective attention leading online users to visit only sites of their preferred candidates).

Lusoli, Ward and Gibson close their work noting additional relevant data emerging from focus groups revealing the importance of the technical/aesthetical quality of political web sites in the eyes of voters and the actual size of online users (13%) having actually visited a political site.

Illustration 9: Where do online users go for their information (Sources: Australian Election Study 2001; Eurobarometer 53.0 April/May 2000) Graph © Lusoli, Ward and Gibson 2003


297 ‘...Voters did make quite fast decisions about the merit of the site and while a good site did improve their overall impression of the candidate or party, a bad site was received very critically, again due to the labour involved in finding the information. Issues about cost and complexity of using the medium actually did not arise. Overall, the authors of the study concluded that image was almost everything in that a professionally designed site with sophisticated graphics and text written specifically for the site (i.e. not scanned documents) had a strong positive impact on voters. There was a clear tendency to equate technological competence with professional competence in office. In terms of the specific content of the sites, those most preferred were one’s where ease of navigation was prioritised through menu bars, site maps and search engines, and where policies were clearly and succinctly set out’. LUSOLI, WARD, GIBSON , The Internet and Political Campaigning: the new medium comes of age? (2003) Online Paper URL: http://www.esri.salford.ac.uk/ESRCResearchproject/papers/online_political_campaigning.pdf Accessed 08.09.2008

298 “Individuals who used the internet were first asked whether they had ever visited the websites of a range of organisations such as parties, charities or protest networks. A grand total of 252 or 13% of the overall sample reported that they had. Those individuals were then asked as a follow-up whether this interaction had left them more or less likely to become involved with the organisation. The effects of this activity was almost entirely positive for all organisations, particularly for the more loosely coordinated anti-capitalist and protest groups. A majority of those contacting these groups via the net actually reported that they became more involved with them as a result of their experience, with one in ten of those contacting the single issue networks actually becoming more actively involved. For parties the net result is still in the right direction with around 30% of those who have sought out the parties on line reporting that they become more interested as a consequence of doing so.” Lusoli, Ward, Gibson (2003), The Internet and Political Campaigning... Id.. p.16
Drummond\textsuperscript{299} in a complementary survey on 30 first time voters (age 18-24) raises with regard to the usability issue two important points:

- the need to review political web sites through a specific, multi-criteria method (in his case the EWAM framework\textsuperscript{300}), an issue which was previously studied by Gibson\textsuperscript{301} in terms of purpose and effectiveness,
- the identification of contact and conversion efficiency (the capacity of a web site to turn a hit into a visit and a visitor into a loyal supporter), a pivotal value for a political site effectiveness.

**Online Activists Perform as an Independent Segment of the Audience**

Among online users a specific category related to *single issue activism* appears to be particularly benefitting from online information. The finding is supported by Norris who suggests, by analysing data from more than 30,000 interviews of the European Social Survey 2002, that *civic oriented* and *cause oriented* types of activists seem to strongly correlated with the use of the web for political purposes (a similar pattern is found by Inoue in third party voters behaviour):

...Knowledge society in Europe has indeed had the greatest positive consequences for politics by strengthening cause-oriented and civic-oriented activism, rather than by encouraging mass participation in campaigns and elections. ...This type of organization is exemplified by new social movements, transnational advocacy networks, alternative social movements, protest organizations, community activists and development workers, single-issue causes from all shades of the political spectrum, as well as minor parties... By contrast, established political parties and traditional interest groups can be expected to adapt far more slowly to the knowledge society, because they are capable of drawing upon alternative organizational and financial resources, including legal authority, full time paid officials, press officers, lobbyists, and grassroots fee-paying mass memberships.\textsuperscript{302}

A similar view is supported by Bentivegna\textsuperscript{303}.


\textsuperscript{300} The criteria are search (in which way sites can be found), information, system quality, design, navigation, credibility, privacy and intent


Affluence is correlated with the deployment of complex party sites - spatial analysis is relevant

The largest empirical work belonging to this group of recent works is Pippa Norris survey on 134 European political parties web sites, extracted from the Electionworld.org site. The survey both provides the first global evidence of party activity online and a confirmation that there is a correlation linking affluence, democratic activity and rich media environment and parties online presence.

In the survey, Norris notes that multiple interactive mechanisms are offered to users (the ability to email party officials (offered by 89% of websites studied in the survey) and join online (75%) to ways to submit messages (66%), contact candidates (73%), join party discussion groups or list serves (53%), and volunteer services (48%)), that party sites essentially reinforce existing opinions in users and that, overall, the sites:

are not simply 'top-down’ channels of information, or party propaganda, instead they also facilitate ‘bottom-up’ communication from citizens to parties and elected officials.

Norris concludes by saying:

..Party websites are likely to have greater impact on pluralism than on directly widening participation among disaffected groups, because these resources mainly reach citizens drawn from social and political groups which are already most likely to be politically active, interested, and engaged. Like traditional news media, politics on the Internet serves primarily to reinforce civic engagement. While representative democracy is likely to be strengthened by this process, by further activating the most active, it is unclear whether the hopes of advocates of direct democracy will be realized through this development and whether other groups on the Internet can be persuaded to turn off their games, their online shopping, or their music downloading for enough time to lend sustained attention to the political world.

The second largest dataset (of 118 party web sites) is provided by Ackland and Gibson with a seminal survey based on the VOSON project for the study of online networks and related technology (http://voson.anu.edu.au/). The survey is based on a new methodology tested in 2004 on a study concerning 27 Australian political parties.
This survey – probably the most advanced at the time of writing in terms of social network analysis applied to political entities online – provides through a spatial analysis construct called horizontal analysis by Ackland and Gibson, the first evidence of the effective use of the web’s proprium (hyperlinks) as a political tool for communication and online visibility.

The findings underline that extremely polarized actors (notably far left and Greens in the sample) achieve more than others online in terms of network building and sharing audiences through hyperlinks. In addition, findings suggest that the images that parties are creating online largely mirror their offline ideological outlooks.

Political parties in developed countries are opening points of presence on the Web 2.0 with mixed results. Borge and Padrò-Solanet have been among the first ones to explore the early steps of European political parties on the Web 2.0. On the basis of the contributions of Lusoli, they tested (in a survey of Catalan parties) the hypothesis that cyberactivists that are not official party members are becoming more important as campaign activists and public opinion mobilisers.

Langlois and Elmer in Canada have noted that the emergence of Web 2.0 is accompanied by the creation of a state of permanent campaign, by the emergence of a new type of actor (bloggers and journalist bloggers) and by shortening of the news cycle (which gives prominence to a political coverage based on short but intense political events).

In the same year Kalnes analysed how Norwegian political parties were bewildered by the emergence of Web 2.0 (with specific regard to Facebook, blogs and Youtube) and their performance on these new tools reflected (in line with the normalization theory approach) their real share of votes, even with lowered threshold for public participation.

Similar conclusions concerning the partial change and the imperfect implementation of Web of Web 2.0 technology by parties (a Web 1.5 as in Kalnes) comes from Jackson and Lilleker’s analysis of the first attempts by U.K. parties to use social networks. An interesting contribution on Chadwick’s idea of Hybrid Media System (and in my view, an indirect contribution to the normalization theory as well) comes from Karan, Gimeno and Tandoc Jr. in their analysis of the role played by the integration of mobile communications and social networks in the Philippino Campaign of the GABRIELA (General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Leadership, and Action) Women’s Party during the 2007 Elections.

A critique of Latest Research Findings on Political Parties Web Sites

Moving away from the shortcomings of early scholars of electronic democracy towards the fieldworks of empiricists of the impact of the internet in politics, more and more reality checks emerge in the literature. Some of the claims made by Bonchek in his 10 effects of netcasting, as well as some of the 7 dimensions of the Political Web 2.0 Chadwick describes, are nuanced by new empirical verifications.

Reality is more of a disappointment. Existing hierarchical structure determine the way the internet is used by parties. Party sites are auto-referential, lack interactivity, do not increase activism, and are the result of a deliberate marketing positioning which aims at acquiring the mark of modernity to speak (at a modest cost) to the youth audience.

The overall content of this last group of scholars is certainly suitable to respond to our research questions, notably RQ1 and RQ2.

Two issues emerge however from their research: on one side they require to be analysed collectively as the reach of their findings is almost by definition partial (as they focus on specific aspects of the phenomenology of the Political Web stricto sensu), on the other the size of their fieldworks (with the exception of the last two) is not adequate to reach wide ranging theoretical outputs and justifies additional research based on much larger datasets.

Norris’ specific conclusions on her important fieldwork however deserve to be studied with particular attention as they raise fundamental issues related to the exact definition of interactivity in party web sites.

As I was suggesting in the beginning of this chapter, the notion of interactivity is, in the words of Rafaeli314, an under-defined concept:

As a way of thinking about communication, it has high face validity, but only narrowly based explication, little consensus on meaning, and only recently emerging empirical verification of actual role.

Jensen315 notes that interactivity is a multi-discursive concept, a concept which is understood differently in several contexts from medical (interaction of between two medications), to engineering (interaction between materials under stress), from sociology (social events), to communication studies (interpersonal communication, or Lazarsfeld ‘two step flow’ model), to informatics (interaction between machines, between messages in a thread, between man and machines).

Rogers316 deals with the various dimensions of communication systems interactivity by introducing the notion of a continuum. “Interactivity is the capacity of the system to ‘talk back to the user’, almost like an individual participating to a conversation”. This capacity is present in all ICT tools in a variable scale, with lower (Press, Radio, TV, Film) and higher (BBS, videotext, VOD etc.) degrees of interactivity. Rafaeli also


88
builds a continuum but emphasizes the the concept of responsiveness, *a measure of how much one message in an exchange is based on previous messages*. Along the same lines Steuer adds a second dependent dimension (vividness): *the ability of a technology to produce sensorially rich mediated environment*.

New multi-dimensional concepts of interactivity come from:

- Szuprowicz\textsuperscript{317} who divides information flows in three categories: ‘user to documents’, ‘user to computer’ and ‘user to user’ (whether it is point to point, person to person, multipoint, multi-user etc.).

- Laurel\textsuperscript{318}, who suggests a continuum based on 3 dimensions (frequency of interaction, number of choices available, how choices affected matters); with this framework high interactivity corresponds to a user who can frequently interact, has many options to choose from, and can significantly influence the outcome.

- Goertz\textsuperscript{319} who revisits Laurel model adding a fourth dimension: the degree of choices available, the degree of modifiability, the quantitative number of the selections and modifications available and the degree of linearity or non-linearity (‘the user’s influence on the time, the tempo and progression of the reception or communication’).

- finally Heeter\textsuperscript{320}, clearly inspired by usability/information architecture concerns, suggests six dimensions of interactivity, namely

  - **Selectivity**, i.e. the extent to which users are provided with a choice of available information;

  - the amount of effort users must exert to access information;

  - the degree to which a medium can react responsively to a user;

  - the potential to monitor system use;

  - the degree to which users can add information to the system that a mass, undifferentiated audience can access;

  - the degree to which a media facilitates interpersonal communication between specific users.

---


\textsuperscript{319} GOERTZ L.”Wie interaktiv sind Median ? Auf dem Weg zu einer Definition von Interaktivität”, Rundfunk un Fernsehen, n.4 1995 quoted by Jensen F.J. p. 197

\textsuperscript{320} HEETER, C.”Implications of New Interactive Technologies for Conceptualizing Communications”, in SALVAGGIO J.L. and BRYANT J. [EDS.]: *Media use in the Information Age: Emerging Patterns of Adoption and Consumer Use*, Hilldale, New Jersey 1989
For the scopes of this dissertation\textsuperscript{321}, the concepts highlighted by both Szuprowicz, Laurel and Heeter allow a much finer and qualitative understanding of political parties web sites performance. In contrast with the approach of Goertz – which emphasizes the wealth of options available – political web sites fail or succeed if they match the users constraints and aspirations. These online properties provide opportunities for both human to document and human to human interaction. They could – at least in principle – turn the choices made by the users into high impact political action (referenda, petitions, referrals, recalls, legislative initiatives). They finally are able to offer, a large gamut of content types, can facilitate interpersonal communication between political elites and constituencies and open the gates channelling needs and wants towards policy makers.

Against this background I argue that Norris has analysed her data in an approach which is similar to Goertz: she therefore identifies valuable interactivity in a series of services which would otherwise be classified as variants of Sudulich’s \textit{one way communication} (such as personalised e-mail). Norris also emphasizes the importance of activities which do not necessarily affect matters (as in Laurel), as these do not result in more deliberation, negotiation, understanding and persuasive communication (Norris includes in the list of communication functions money donation; acquisition of goods, search facilities but also examples of Ellulian orthopraxy such as calls to join volunteer services or join the party). Norris assumes that the plethora of email directories are going to be used by users online and that party officials will actually respond to these messages (the so called \textit{contact and conversion efficiency}). This cannot be entirely validated by the data she presents. Furthermore even if this type of transactions were actually taking place online, they would remain invisible for the overall audience of the web site (the 5th dimension of interactivity described by Heeter) and they would not constitute a support for the democratic mechanisms of negotiation or dispute settlement.

\textsuperscript{321} Additional classifications can be found in MAHMOUD A.E.B. and AUTER P.J. ‘The Interactive Nature of Computer Mediated Communication’ in \textit{American Communication Journal} Vol.11, N°4, Winter 2009
CONCLUSIONS: AN OVERALL CRITIQUE TO TRADITIONAL EDEMOCRACY LITERATURE

In this chapter I emphasize on one side the optimistic posture of the literature on eDemocracy produced in the late 90’s and in recent years, with the emergence of the Web 2.0/Democracy 2.0 debate; on the other, I note the simultaneous evolution of part of the theoretical reflection (the scholars that I call the empiricists) towards a more critical, realistic direction.

Many contributions have been constructed to support the postulate of the political revolution occurred on the net with the emergence of the Web 1.0 and 2.0. Rather axiomatically, many have posited that the web has essentially positive effects on democracy as it compensates a set of latent (and natural) societal needs for values such as transparency, the need to be informed about public issues and the need to play an active role in the preservation of well being and self interests.

Considerable criticisms have been advanced against these interpretative models on electronic democracy in the past twenty years. These criticisms have been so numerous and sometimes so cogent to make us wonder whether it really still makes sense to talk about electronic democracy, as the arguments loaded in this expression often hinder our capacity to apprehend realistically what technology can bring to improve politics.

Thirty years ago, Arterton dismantled empirically the claims about the thaumaturgic powers of televote not only by highlighting the role that traditional media mix still played in engineering a mobilisation campaign, but also by warning against the considerable latent costs of these projects, and the systematic dis-attention of the electorate.

Others, like Ornstein and Schenkenberg322 or Calabrese and Borchert 323 attacked the plebiscitarian model; or like McChesney and Norris criticised its imperfect materialisation (by referring to the notions of a partial public sphere, or to the political implications of the digital divide).

I will focus here on three sets of arguments which support a critical view on e-democracy and on the Web 2.0 as an enabler for political participation. One has been offered recently by Huismans, the others date back few years and have been made by Sartori - which I have often quoted together with Servaes324 - and Margolis and Resnick.

Huisman and the e-democracy illusion

Huisman325 organises his critique against the illusion of e-democracy and the power of Web 2.0 in resuming his critique in five themes:

325 HUISMAN M., 'E-democracy, an illusion to be pursued but never attained' 17.03.11 Online Paper URL: http://www.oneplanetone-world.info/uploads/e-democracy_paper.pdf
1. Deliberative Spaces & the public sphere: the romanticized ideals of the public space are unrealistic as forums lack of any deliberative discussion and are dominated by atypical partisans and ideologues. Quoting Chadwick he supports the idea that while face to face interaction usually imposes the well known demands of basic civility; the removal of such discipline from the online environment makes it much easier to express views that are on the margins of the social and political acceptability. Racism, sexism, and all manner of other prejudices flourish online, where individuals can hide behind the cloak of anonimity or pseudonimity, both widely accepted practices in cyberspace\(^\text{326}\).

2. Participation: Huisman in this respect quotes Bimber\(^\text{327}\) (who found little evidence of a link between the collection of political information online and voting activities); Chung (who provides evidence that online politics do not stimulate mass participation by citizens), Blom, Carpenter and Blowe (who show the role of “dominators” in online discussions as true enemy of deliberation). He also attacks Xenos and Foot notion of co-productive interactivity of the Web 2.0 by stating like Nielsen that most users don’t participate very much. Often they simply lurk in the background. This idea known as the “90-9-1 rule”, implies that only one percent of Internet users accounts for most contributions. Huisman finally adds on this point: The interactive features and participatory culture of Web 2.0 do not necessarily do anything or lead anywhere. The function on a social networking website like Facebook to ‘like’ someone or something for example does little if anything to the (online) democratic discourse\(^\text{328}\).

3. Digital Divide: on this theme, already explored by Norris, Rice and Haythornthwaite, Ricci and Heinderyckx\(^\text{329}\) and others, Huisman speaks of new electronic aristocrats encarnating gaps not only within developed countries but in particular between some modern countries and the rest of the world.

4. Echo Chambers: moving ahead from the notion of partial public sphere, citing Sunstein, Huisman re-proposes the role of online forums as echo chambers which corrode democracy as people on the Internet tend to seek out like minded people to have their (political) views reinforced rather than challenged by other views and perspectives\(^\text{330}\).

\(^{326}\) HUISMAN M., ‘E-democracy, an illusion...Id.


\(^{328}\) HUISMAN M., ‘E-democracy, an illusion...Id.


\(^{330}\) HUISMAN M., ‘E-democracy, an illusion...Id.
5. Quality and Quantity of Information: in contrast with Chadwick’s notion of an era of informational exuberance, Huisman views the Web 2.0 and the participatory online culture as cause of information overload (which Servaes sees coupled to the phenomenon of pleonastic exclusion), leading to more and more information to become rapidly irrelevant or difficult to find. “In the absence of gatekeepers, everyone can post anything on the Internet”, thus resulting in a multiplication of both fabricated information, gossips and rumours. Finally Huisman quoting Lazarsfeld, Schramm and Roberts, re-proposes a classic theory that inverts the causal nexus between consumption of media and interest in politics: people who are already interested in politics tend to use media to reinforce those interests, while people who are not or less interested tend to avoid political news and information.

Giovanni Sartori’s critique of electronically enabled forms of direct democracy

Sartori since 1987 has continuously criticised all calls for web enabled deliberative forms of direct democracy. He criticised the exasperated eulogy of activism and, specifically the attitude of those that do not suggest a path to participate better, but simply ask to participate more, .... with the view to learn how to participate.

Sartori has warned against the zero sum game rationale of plebiscitary democracy, the risks of polarization and the decline of the notion of politics as the art of compromise. He also noted as remarkable shortcomings, the dependency of the plebiscitary model on polls (and the risk of flaws in the design of the questionnaires), on media (and the risk of political drifts, manipulation and economic control of free flow of information) and finally pointed out the contradictions of a model which calls for citizen power and at the same time cannot get rid of a mechanism of issue selection (see the mechanism of minipopulus in Dahl), channelling and gate-keeping (which simply cannot be delegated to the public at large).

Sartori reminded that sheer size of contemporary political issues makes it impossible for the demos to deliberate on everything, like in ancient Greece. The problems are too complex, and often out of the community’s reach, out of the community’s sight. The community itself does not succeed in relating with its parts as suggested by Luhmann and Habermas; it’s simply incapable of perceiving itself. The information overload and the economic and political pressures organised on the flow of media information turn moving from information gathering to episteme into a challenge. It’s an illusion to achieve, electronically, direct relationships between all the members of our (contemporary) communities. The public debate that would result from this, would be partial, amputated, and the meaning of direct relationship between all the members of the demos would simply vanish.

At the same time, with this type of direct eDemocracy (the eDemocracy of the homo videns as Sartori calls it), a large, non expert audience (always a sub-set of the universe of those having the right to choose), would be called to decide on urgent, serious and even dangerous matters without any form of preparation. Issues would move from nowhere (the issues we are not aware of) to my place and would be judged as private matters. As Sartori puts it:

---

331 "As a result of the enormous numbers of channels of communication, which forces the audience to a continuous selection-exclusion of information sources”. Servaes, J. ‘Knowledge is power (revisited): Internet and democracy’, 2005 Online URL http://www.comminit.com/democracy-governance/node/218584 p. 10
332 HUIJSMAN M., ‘E-democracy, an illusion...Id.
I should pray God to preserve us from this push-button democracy (or the triumph of the inexperienced) 334.

Margolis and Resnick’s Normalization Theory of CyberSpace

Margolis and Resnick with their work Politics as Usual: the cyberspace revolution completed the critical excursus against early notions of electronic democracy and opened with their normalization thesis a brand new interpretative model, not really for electronic democracy, but for the set of phenomena that more simply were categorized as the impact of the Internet in politics.

The normalization thesis emphasizes the fact that:

...Cyberspace is taking on the characteristics of ordinary life...simply becoming another arena in the ongoing struggle for wealth, power and political influence 335.

There is an extensive political life on the Net, but it is mostly an extension of political life off the Net ...Campaigning on the web might capture the attention of those who are unreachable by traditional campaign techniques, but for now, a web site seems merely to demonstrate that a candidate is aware of current trends and is committed to the latest technology...It is truly utopian to believe that the internet could transform politics radically in advanced industrial society by making politics more like a conversation among equals than a series of elaborate presentation that attempt to elicit support and approval of relatively passive consumers....A randomly selected online citizen is certainly more able and, for now, probably more willing, to air personal and political opinions than his or her counterpart offline, but this is not sufficient reason to conclude that cyberspace will transform the nature of citizenship in advanced industrial countries in the next century. As virtual reality comes to mirror the real world, cyberspace simply becomes another arena in the ongoing struggle for wealth, power and political influence,336

What is being put on the majority of political web sites underline Margolis and Resnick are not interactive discussions, but presentations:

...The internet does have a distinct advantage over the broadcast media because it enables a citizen to stop the show and concentrate on an interesting aspect of the presentation and if, desired, to download and preserve it for future consideration or mark the site for a return visit.337

334 SARTORI G., Democrazia: cos'è, Rizzoli 1993 pg 83-87
335 MARGOLIS, M. RESNICK D. Politics as Usual... Id p.2
336 MARGOLIS, M. RESNICK D. Politics as Usual... Id. p. 7-17
337 MARGOLIS, M. RESNICK D. Politics as Usual... Id p. 17
Margolis and Resnick, like Sartori, dismiss full direct democracy as a viable option in contemporary politics:

> It is unlikely that there will be a massive increase in political participation because of the Internet...even if direct democracy were a good idea – and there are many reasons to believe that it is not better than representative democracy – it simply will not happen. Direct democracy is not appropriate for a complex industrial or post-industrial society...Public policy issues are too complicated and citizens too distracted to devote the time and effort to public affairs that such a society would require...The changes that the Internet will bring to modern democracies will be important, but hardly revolutionary.338

In contrast with the models suggested by Bonchek, Hauben & Hauben339, Mann340, Mc Gookin341, Phillips342, Rheingold and Schwarz343, which saw in the new political web an opportunity for the emergence of virtual political organizations and minor parties, and in contrast with what Schweitzer calls the innovation hypothesis (defended by Bentivegna344, Gibson and Ward345), Margolis and Resnick posit that cyberspace is politics as usual and view the fate of new political organizations much more dependent from the message than the medium.

For Margolis and Resnick online entities are bound to generate real-world shits of power and resources to become meaningful politically:

> ...Some believe that democratic process in advanced societies could be invigorated if the minor parties of today used the internet to get their message of hope and change across to the broad mass of the citizenry. Unfortunately, there is little evidence to support that belief. The access of marginal movements to a new and powerful medium of mass communications has not led them to make significant headway in the real world. The problem seems to lie more in the message than in the medium.... Whatever new exposure minor parties and movements have gotten by entering cyberspace has yet to be translated into real-world shifts of power and resources.346

---

338 MARGOLIS, M. RESNICK D. Politics as Usual... Id. p. 207-208
340 MANN B., , Politics on the net, Indianapolis, IN Que Corp.(1995)
341 MC GOOKIN S. 'Internet may give stimulus to democracy' Financial Times (1995, December 27),
343 SCHWARTZ E., Net activism:how citizens use the Internet, Sebastopol, CA Songline Studios (1996)
346 MARGOLIS, M. RESNICK D. Politics as Usual... Id. p. 207-208
A broader research framework as a Pre-Requisite to Better Understanding the Multiple Influences of eDemocracy on Political Parties Online Strategy

Almost twenty years after their birth, early models of eDemocracy continue to survive to their criticisms. While the public debate on Web 2.0 and politics continues to be impermeable to dissenting opinions, a sufficiently explicit and consensual theory to explain the resilience of proto-democratic concepts has yet to emerge.

As Margolis and Resnick note in *Politics as Usual*:

> Notwithstanding the paucity of evidence regarding their impact on elections or public policy, party, candidate, and interest group Web sites will continue to grow in number and sophistication. They or their equivalents will play important roles in politics on whatever forms the Internet cum-Information Highway cum-World Wide Web eventually takes. It seems doubtful, however that their impact will be to democratize or otherwise bring about fundamental change in American politics.

I argue, together with Lusoli, that the paradox of the resilience of the idea of eDemocracy to all forms of criticisms is the result of a true system of influences co-operates to re-propose this debate under ever changing angles. In such a system, several actors (institutional, industrial, pundits) and factors (sectoral and national policies, development of new media, sectorial competition and more), generate a ripple effect on the different segments (from the global level to the actor level) that compose the global system of the actors in this field.

I argue that this interaction generates a true megatrend which is immune to the effects of both theoretical criticism or empirical validation. In this way, eDemocracy has moved from figure of speech, to scholarly concept, to ideological vector.

I have suggested in the first part of this review that simplistic interpretations of the impact of the Web 1.0 or 2.0 on the political realm are neither plausible nor useful to understand whether or not we are facing a scenario of rupture or integration in the field of political participation and in political communication.

I have tried to show in this literature review that arguments are often locked in the circumscribed realities of pilot projects. As Margolis and Resnik but also Chadwick note there is still little empirical investigation on the online behaviour of political parties. Only two comparative analyses, by Norris, have attempted to study political parties web sites from a global perspective. Their unit of analysis however, only covers a maximum of 1250 political parties web sites identifiable online through major metasites.

In the next section I will proceed by enlarging the theoretical realm already discussed so far and introduce a set of complementary concepts deriving from both:

---

347 MARGOLIS, M. RESNICK D. Politics as Usual... Id. p. 72
348 MARGOLIS, M. RESNICK D. Politics as Usual... Id. p. 207-208
• political science: specifically the link between external communication function (within a party structure) and the growing gap between political elites and constituencies in both developing and developed countries

• communication sciences: specifically the concepts that allow us to understand the intentions of parties online and to distinguish political communication, from political communication/marketing and propaganda

• information sciences: specifically the concepts that explain the effectiveness of a web site and define the art and craft of information architecture and usability

The intent is to further develop the contrast between a normative and a reality checked approach to eDemocracy. Too often eDemocracy scholars have kept their argument air and watertight from any form of critical review simply by isolating their research from the contamination of political scientists, communication specialists or simply programmers.

The rather large complementary theoretical overview that follows aims at providing just the essence of the ‘lost debate’, while at the same time loading with new concepts the empirical part of this research.

Political and communication sciences are providing new angles of observation based on the actual behaviour of parties as competing actors in the management of the declining public attention to politics. Information Sciences are providing a completely different framework of analysis for the understanding of party web sites as “intentions turned (through software programming) into specific forms and functions”.

In the empirical section of the dissertation I will finally try to respond to this dissertation’s research questions by validating my assumptions with a set of fieldworks conceived on the largest sample of party web sites (2073) available at the time of writing from the same source used by Norris's theoretical references acquired with Rosenfeld, Morville and Kahn I will try to study the specific object of my analysis, both from the outside, through their phenotype, from the inside (with an novel methodology inspired by concepts deriving from information architecture) and from a party policy perspective (by interviewing party webmasters).

Using a (strictly objective) web programmer’s approach in the analysis of web site interactivity (along the lines of Heeter), and scrutinising the results against the background of Wolton's theoretical contribution (discussed later in the following chapter), I will attempt to provide a wider interpretative framework on my findings of the interactivity in party sites.
3. Literature Review (Part Two) : Alternative Approaches to the idea of eDemocracy

INTRODUCTION : WHY BROADENING THE THEORETICAL APPROACH

I have concluded the previous section underlining that the topic of e-democracy needs to be studied further, by taking wider optics, both theoretically and empirically.

I have already stressed that many traditional eDemocracy scholars have pushed themselves away from reality. The most recent empirical works (from 2001 onwards) on the activities of parties online suggest that reality is more of a disappointment if not a disaster in communication terms. We now need to make several extra steps – theoretically speaking – to give weight to the critical voices of the youngest scholars of eDemocracy. To achieve this we must enter new scientific realms and add new levels to pave the way for a new empirical research in this domain.

Many in the research community have already incorporated in their analytical framework an assumption which links the origin of e-democracy to the failure of incumbent political actors to respond to “third wave politics”, to the “new politics” introduced by the Web 2.0, and, more broadly, to the public dissatisfaction with political elites.

In this section I intend to go deeper on the issue of public discontent with politics, and test the validity of the politological assumptions underlying the notion of e-democracy. I argue that the theoretical foundations of this assumption have rarely been explained, and therefore the aetiology of e-democracy remains rather axiomatic.

Broadening the theoretical framework to include more literature from political science may help understand whether parties have modified their external communication functions because of the crisis of confidence or simply adapted them to match the pattern of behaviour of their competitors on the political market.

Similarly, literature from media and communication research will help understand the intentions of political parties online. The scope is to ascertain if – as some say – political parties are programmed to produce (both online and offline) only propaganda, if they receive incentives from their ecosystem to perform a politics of animosity online or whether they are free to materialize alternative intentions and organise true deliberation or crowd-sourcing of political needs and wants.

I should clarify that my aim here is not to engage in an extensive review of all the information and communication science literature available on such a huge field of analysis. I will nevertheless try to show how the most representative literature is emphasizing (with Habermas) the degradation of the communication environment in which parties operate, and how it’s not necessarily easy to identify clear-cut indicators to separate information provision, from persuasive action and propaganda on party web sites. To
deal with this problem, I will also try to provide arguments in favour of the identification of markers with a higher degree of abstraction, such as the directionality/inclusiveness of the flows of party communication online.

Finally, to complete the theoretical excursus, having dealt with the issue of the underlying intentions of online party activities, I will focus on the literature that describes the technical (software based) models that turn intentions into online structures. I will therefore introduce the concepts of information architecture and describe the art and the craft needed to turn political communication objectives into real (programmatic) implementations online. This section will serve the purpose of providing an objective way to relate to our research field.

This last section will also be the juncture to the methodological section of the dissertation.

A CYBERNETIC VIEW ON WEB BASED PARTY ACTIVITES

The classic and often seminal studies of Almond,449 Wiener,450 Lasswell,451 Easton,452 Parson,453 and Deutsch454 have helped re-framing the study of politics as the study of influence and the influential, viewing it as the result of the action of communicating agents and communication channels.

Norbert Wiener’s Cybernetics set the conditions to measure the effect of amounts of energy/information channelled on any type of target, including social groups. Wiener’s conceptual framework made it possible to envisage analogies between the dynamics of communication engineering with those of power engineering.

Karl Wolfgang Deutsch in Nerves of Government demonstrated that an information centric approach is, in his words, a rudimentary, but autonomous method to measure the cohesion and therefore the behaviour of political systems.

Deutsch noted that a political system (a set of institutions, political organisations, interest groups etc.), just like a human body or a machine, is a complex of interconnected, interoperable, interdependent and communicating components. Deutsch also stressed that system’s cohesion is manifested through the covariance of its parts: in other words, change occurs simultaneously in every component of the system. Modifications within the system components occur according to similar patterns (positive covariance), opposite patterns (negative covariance), or through complex, diversified ways (mixed covariance).

Actors of political variance

In a cybernetic approach to politics, each system component shares with the others a common objective:

---

351 LASSWELL H., Propaganda Technique in the World War (1927 - Reprinted with a new introduction, 1971)
EASTON D., A Systems Analysis of Political Life, New York (1965)
353 PARSONS, T., The social system, Glencoe, Ill. Free Press (1951)
355 The operational test of interdependence
• preservation, quest for public space or power, reinforcement of identity (as in Verba)
• to attain and maintain existing scope, or adapt, or integrate new ones (as in Deutsch)

Each system component develops functional attitudes:
• (needs and wills) input, production and output as noted by Almond and Verba
• (needs and wills) gate-keeping as noted by Easton,

Each system component maintains and protects a set of formal and informal rules which define what is inside the system and what is outside it.

The political system is therefore to be viewed as a set of interconnected components organised in quasi hierarchical levels. Deutsch in Politics and Government identifies 10 of them: from the smallest level represented by the individual, then the family and the other primary groups, then the small settlement (or hamlet, or clan, or small tribe or neighbourhood in cities), then large villages until reaching world affairs, with the performance of the UN system at the tenth level. A boundary zone and a boundary line marks the end of the political system and the start of what Verba and Easton call the parapolitical system i.e the part of the political system which needs to convey its formal needs and wants through the institutional filters of the formal actors of the political system or is bound to impose its influence with alternative means, including, sometimes, violence.

Transmission of information, gate-keeping and load

Transmission of information is the founding principle of the dynamics of a political system. The information channelled within a political system is made of needs, wants, which are converted into demands by a set of actors which play the role of regulators/gatekeepers.

These regulators are not necessary located within the core of the elite system, but can also be in its ecosystem (media, or interest groups). Gatekeepers filter and select part of the needs expressed by the sections of the system they are in contact with. Gatekeepers discard and suppress the rest of the needs and convert a minority of signals into the appropriate form understood by the target subsystem. They convert needs into formal demands.

In theory, this conversion/encoding mechanism could be linear: the gatekeeper (the political party) should be able to encode and channel as much signal as received from its societal interfaces. What happens frequently, however, within a political system, is that the volume of needs becomes unmanageable through the existing gatekeepers. In this case either gatekeepers are bypassed or the system is stressed by input overload. If the channel available to transmit the demands across the system is not capable of handling the load, the channel (the medium) is stressed by an output overload.

Deutsch states that in a political system information (or demands) is channelled - with more of less accuracy - according to a specific scheme (or path). Transmission is also conditioned by a set of variables which include:

• direction of communication,
• geographical scope,
• internal organisation (affecting routing and timing of communication),
• technologies and languages used,
• and finally values (as influenced by the organisation mission or external context\textsuperscript{357}).

At a broader, systemic level the conditioning factors are:

The overall scope of demands (do they intend to maintain the system or to change it?)

The directionality of demands (which subsystem is the target of the demands - government or opposition?)

The explicitness of demands (are these demands latent or have they been completely converted to fit the channels and modus operandi of formal politics?)

Deutsch also noted that information (or demands) is received by the target with a degree of sensitivity comparable to the degree of instability of the target itself. The greater the political stability of a target, the lesser its sensitivity\textsuperscript{358}. Social change, and the act of steering are therefore an effect of the reception, within an unstable political system, of specific information such as strikes, social uprising/unrest, new political ideas, polemics on media and ultimately propaganda. Along the same principles, social cohesion is a function of the quality of the transmission/reception process\textsuperscript{359} implemented virtually by all the sub-components of the political system.

A cybernetic approach to the political web

The application of a systemic and cybernetic approach in the study of the impact of the web in politics has led many scholars to assume that citizens are indeed animated by a sincere interest in politics and that they prefer to vote rationally, on the basis of an adequate information picture.

On these bases, Boncheck and Chadwick (to quote just two of the many others that share these views) suggests that the web, with its interactive structure, is a (quasi) perfect catalyst for mass democracy. The web provides the means to get immediate (political) feedback; it easily gratifies online volunteers because of its objective effectiveness (its bias over time and space); it implies new cognitive patterns for political competence; political information is potentially abundant, ubiquitously available and constantly updated.

In principle, each political actor has the opportunity to replicate its own modus operandi online. On the political web, parties have the opportunity to fight their opposition and build coalitions, trade unions have the opportunity to negotiate with capitalists, activists have the opportunity to call for action, media have the opportunity to relay information and lead, with other opinion leaders, the political debate.


\textsuperscript{358} DEUTSCH K.W. \textit{The Immobility – Emergency Cycle} (in Politics and Government Id. p. 4)

\textsuperscript{359} Cohesion of both organisations, societies, ethnic communities depends on their capacity to transmit information with more or less significant losses and distortions. The less the loss/distortion of information, the less the noise introduced along the channel the more efficient the given channel or command chain.
The parapolitical presence online, as emphasized by Friess, McCaughey and Ayers, Pickerill, Dartnell, Hick and McNutt, Loader / Nixon and Rucht 360, develops as quickly as the political system, providing a strategic resource to activists, special interest groups, lobbies, freelance journalists, intellectuals, charismatic leaders, pundits, but also to diasporas, persecuted minorities, non-recognized states, insurrectional groups, hate groups, extremists and terrorists361.

Terrorism in particular - as we have noted in previous chapters - needs the oxygen of publicity provided by the web, notes McNair362:

[as it] can have significance as a communicative act only if it is transmitted through the mass media to an audience. Unless it is reported, the terrorist act has no social meaning.

The boundary separating political from parapolitical groups is extremely thin online. Just a click away.

This is particularly true with regard to political parties on line, if one considers the significant number of fringe parties, the importance of which has already been stressed by Norris.

Similarly to the off-line gatekeepers (or according to Mann and Belzley better than offline gatekeepers)363, each political website is technically capable of retrieving instances, wants and needs communicated electronically by supporters to the gate-keeper, for example the party webmaster or the party representatives whose e-mail address is specifically given to online users for targeted queries.

Because the web is both a mass and a personal medium, it enlarges the meaning of gate-keeping:

- everyone can theoretically become an effective gatekeeper, potentially filtering instances from a mass community and to a mass community (an example of this is the mediator/broker role of a blogger) ; and

- established gatekeepers can be easily bypassed online by a cohort of gate-openers: everyone is – at least potentially - at reach (this is Bonchek’s dis-intermediation argument referred to traditional media online). This entails that gatekeepers have strong incentives online AND offline to engage in strategies that reinforce discrimination, isolation, rebuttal and denial of undesirable initiatives, needs and wants.

As Weare364 suggests building on the all channels structure suggested by Bonchek:

---


361 Although the definition of a terrorist organisation is the object is considerable debate, I refer here to organisations which seek political objectives, are involved in a power struggle (or a mutually declared war) and use un-discriminated political violence as their main weapon

362 MCNAIR ID. p.181-186

363 Gatekeeper liability is systematically more likely to be effective in the modern Internet environment than it has been in traditional offline environments MANN R.J., BELZLEY S.R., 'The Promise of Internet Intermediary Liability', William and Mary Law Review 47.1 (2005), Questia, 30 Aug. 2008 <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5012451522>.
The Internet will increase the volume and speed of information travelling through channels, thereby changing the mix of feedback moving up through channels and information moving downward. Interactivity combined with the convergence of differing forms of communication will also strengthen the interrelationship between channels. For example, downward communication of information through the Internet can lead to direct and rapid e-mail feedback. At the same time, countervailing effects may impede existing channels. The fragmentation of the mass media will make it harder to reach a national audience and filtering technologies allow users to shut out unwanted messages. Over all, the changes in communication channels will alter the quantity and distribution of political information, thereby altering processes and outcomes. For example, legislatures may find it increasingly difficult to include secret riders to bills as their activities are more rapidly disseminated.

Technically it’s also possible to integrate several functions on the web; therefore the functions of communicator, channel and gate can all insist on the same, single structure: the website.

Each political site channels as much signal as possible towards a precise direction (a political region of the web, a relay etc.) in order to obtain a reaction (attention first, then persuasion and/or action). Each site can reach its homeostasis by attaining its existential goal: promoting its part of the political system, mobilising potential supporters against the opposition.

Homepages can be structured to match the system’s information requirements: materialize the party’s position in the political system by accurately describing its structures and strengths, adapt to the changes in the country’s political life (by responding with statements to the political events of the week) and integrate new sections to better respond to the needs expressed by the audience.

Websites can legitimately be expected to be loci where political goals change through continuous debate. Communication targets (for example, voters, public opinion leaders, journalists, researchers in think tanks) can potentially reach their own informational homeostasis by actively seeking political content diffused by political sources online.

Each individual site in the entire political web is expected to create an appropriate load of information to match the targets’ needs. The nature of this load (high or low) affects the targets’ capacity to receive and digest this information.

Political actors online can, theoretically, use, fully and rationally, notions such as time, gain and anticipation to programme informational action, to define highly effective communicational strategies, and adapt to the rapid changes of the opposition (or the electorate).

Measure of political website effectiveness according to Deuthsch’s Model

On the basis of Deutsch model, effective political websites could be therefore:

Those that succeed in avoiding, input overload, providing the right output load, using the right scheme (or coding) for the specific need (imbalance) anticipated in the targeted community.

A REALIST CRITIQUE OF CONTEMPORARY MASS PARTIES BEHAVIOUR

Alongside with other contemporary scholars such as Kircheimer’s and Ware’s, Lusoli and Ward describe the recent evolution of the systemic functions of mass parties in stark contrast with Duverger’s classic definition of party as the collection of communities:

Parties allow for the controlled selection of the elites, the training and the incorporation of cadres and sub-elites, the articulations of interests around programmatic platforms, the aggregation of interests in quasi stable coalitions, ultimately the allocation of political values according to socially negotiated preferences.

The era of mass parties is most certainly over, suggests Rogers. Parties discriminate, and in so doing they are not any more constellations, but monads. The indicators of this transition are numerous, both quantitative and qualitative: a declining party membership, decreasing levels of activism, a shift towards more individualistic modes of political engagement (as described by Dalton and Wattenberg), a de-aligned electorate, devolution, lower levels of trust in politics, the declining engagement of the working class, depillarization, de-confessionalization de-ideologization, the rise of party leaders and antagonists to the party establishment all threaten the linkage role (as in Lawson) parties have played in modern democracy.

As Poguntke suggests:

366 WARE A., Political Parties and Party Systems, Oxford University Press 1996
369 ROGERS B. ‘From Membership to Management? The future of political parties as Democratic Organisations’ in Parliamentary Affairs vol. 58 n 3, 2005, 600-601 p. 609
Party is abandoning aggregation functions toward more electorally rewarding articulation functions

Kriesi\textsuperscript{377} suggests that the decline of traditional cleavages does not entail the end of the structuration of politics by social divisions, but more the emergence of \textit{new segmentations} within the middle class:

\textit{There is ample evidence for the existence of a social division between two segments of the new middle class which not only have significantly different value orientation, but also make significantly different political choices.}

\textit{[There is a] Possible emergence of a cleavage between the new middle class winners and the underclass losers in the current rat race to modernity.}

This dynamics is coupled with the emergence, as suggested by Thomson, with reference to the British Labour Party under Blair of a \textbf{leader centred organisation}, where:

\textit{The colonization of state positions by parties cadres concede the leadership a greater degree of independence.}

Threatened in its legitimacy, parties move, as Bartolini\textsuperscript{378} suggests, from competition avoidance, to the \textbf{politics of animosity}. Animosity is materialised into the \textit{third age of political communication} as Blumler and Kavanagh\textsuperscript{379} underline; a type of communication:

\textit{[which is] seemingly home to both Machiavellian and discursive models of politics}

\textit{Tensions ... exist between the positive opportunities afforded for promoting civic awareness and the downsides in the rush to embrace infotainment and the sway of politics-smearing journalism.}

\textit{[where tensions exist between] Politicians' enhanced opportunities to promulgate their line and their vulnerability to the framing power of journalism.}


\textsuperscript{378} BARTOLINI S., 'Political parties rise, consolidation and decline (?) in Europe: a developmental perspective', Paper presented to the Conference on 'New Challenges for Political parties and Representation' The Univ. of Michigan Ann Arbor May 6-7, 2005

\textsuperscript{379} BLUMLER J.G. AND KAVANAGH D. 'The third age of political communication: influences and features' in Political Communication 16:209-230, 1999 p. 225
The role of Media and, in particular, the role of television is seen as key to the transformation of parties from labour intensive organisations, to capital intensive organisations. While ever more limited resources are available for parties, Rogers stresses that a growing number of political organisations consider that:

*a market orientation is a necessary step for a party seeking electoral success*\(^{380}\)

Furthermore, the impact of political marketing on the electoral processes and on internal party democracy is viewed by Lilleker, De Chernatony and White as negative, as it results into failed re-branding operations (such as UK's New Labour re-branding described by White\(^{381}\)), or into a progressive strategic convergence towards the centre\(^{382}\), summed to the tapping on the disloyal, undecided or floating voters. While attention to the news media and party messages is positively associated with levels of political knowledge and participation (see in this respect Norris\(^{383}\) notion of *Virtuous Circle*), the role of negative political communication or the Berlusconization of media (a term coined by Wika\(^{384}\)) is still viewed as influential in the decline of traditional mass parties functions.

Against this theoretical background, it becomes plausible to say that a factor analysis aiming at identifying the root causes of modern parties’ presence online would not necessarily conclude that technology alone explains the progressive development of the political web.

It would be more appropriate to frame the presence of political parties online as the result of the combined effect of multiple factors playing in the ecosystem of party politics.

---

380 ROGERS B. ‘From Membership to Management ? The future of political parties as Democratic Organisations’ in Parliamentary Affairs vol. 58 n 3, 2005, 600-601 p. 609


Illustration 10: A scheme resuming the impact of the ecosystem changes on the internal functions of the party
For example, in the cultural/ideological realm (or sub-system), de-pillarization, de-confessionalization de-ideologization, have simultaneously and drastically reduced the predictability of electoral outcomes, increased the competition levels within the political arena.

In the technological realm (or sub-system), television has completely restructured the electioneering economy providing a premium to those that can afford this particular medium and relegating the others to developing alternative strategies based on a digital media mix (where the WWW gets – for many parties - the lion’s share, for its very advantageous cost/contact ratios).

In the communication realm, in the absence of ideology and in the middle of a generalised convergence towards the centre of the political offer of many parties, animosity plays the centre role, driving attention on the personalities, shortening the news cycle and the attention span and incrementing the role of gossips and rumours.

In the past 10 years, as the Demos report coordinated by Bartlett, Birdwell and Littler 385, populist parties have grown in strength across Western Europe, developing against the cultural/ideological, technological and cultural background I have just described. What’s new is that these parties, such as Lega Nord or Vlamse Belang 386, have moved from being fringe parties to protagonists or at least significant political players, by developing an articulated narrative which mixes criticisms against globalisation, international capitalism, EU’s influence on national sovereignty, foreign immigration, erosion of the European culture, the growth of Islam in Europe, to attacks against incumbent parties policies in the field of security, welfare and industrial policies. What’s also new is that these parties progression in the real world has been mirrored online with a very robust presence on social media. Online supporters of populist parties are essentially disgruntled democrats: young men (63% under 30), slightly more likely to be unemployed, incline to cite immigration as a reason for joining the movement, with low levels of trust in both national and European political institutions and with low levels of trust in the justice system.

These young men seem to be the ultimate by-product of politics of animosity: they overwhelmingly believe that voting matters, and disavow violence, but do not believe that politics is an effective way to respond to their concerns. These supporters are particularly dynamic and active. Street protesting and demonstrating are – inside this community - actions which are positively correlated to the statement that “violence is acceptable if it leads to the right outcome”.

The impact of online politics carried out by these populist party activists is far from being fully assessed, and the authors of the Demos report clearly state that they do not intend to suggest that supporters of populist parties are inclined to violence. Interestingly enough, however, they stress – notably making an explicit reference to the Utoya tragedy in Norway:

... the [Utoya] attacks highlight the potential for extreme rhetoric to lead some individuals to conclude that violence is the only answer. Certainly, some populist groups convey a sense

---


386 Those studied by Demos are Bloc Identitaire ('Identity Block'; France), the British National Party (UK), CasaPound Italia (Italy), the Dansk Folkeparti ('Danish People's Party'; Denmark), the English Defence League (UK), the Front National ('National Front'; France), the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV or 'Dutch Party for Freedom'; the Netherlands), Die Freiheit ('Freedom'; Germany), Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPO or 'Austrian Freedom Party'; Austria), the Fremskrittspartiet ('Norwegian Progress Party'; Norway), Lega Nord ('Northern League'; Italy), Perussuomalaiset ('True Finns'; Finland), Sverigedemokraterna ('Sweden Democrats'; Sweden) and Vlaams Belang ('Flemish Interest'; Belgium)
that the existence of Europe itself is at stake (often citing demographics and high immigrant birth rates), and that mainstream society, politicians and the media are either ignorant to the threat or complicit.

This specific and recent survey is therefore another piece of evidence that our Western political system is not necessarily facing an explosion of opportunities for deliberative democracy online, but the steady growth of anti-systemic movements (extra parliamentarian political extremism being another typology of these movements) which do attack the ideological foundations of our democracies, which are based on solidarity, equal rights and peaceful coexistence.

**Measure of political website effectiveness in the contemporary environment of mass parties**

The combined effect of cultural/ideological, technological and communication factors reduces the cogency of the argument that underlines the determining role of the web in creating the specific system of incentives that has changed the external functions of political parties.

I argue that the Internet is a cofactor (and not the strongest, if we think of the television) in the technological realm, and that the external communication of mass parties is conditioned today also by the transformations in the communication and cultural/ideological realms.

The scholars reviewed in this section suggest that the impact of the ecosystem in which a modern mass party is inserted has very practical and concrete consequences. Re-elaborating the theoretical framework described in this section one could say that to maximise the effectiveness of its online presence the party monad, the party of animosity should:

*Avoid to 'disappear' in front of a charismatic leader web site, provide political content aiming to aggressively capture the centre with forms of infotainment, abundant audio-visual content, emphasis on people and charisma (more than ideologies), and a concise, fast paced coverage on political issues*

An aggregative party – strong in its linkage function – should instead

*Devote considerable efforts in producing new political ideas, constantly relaunching the debate among members - in the basis of the Alexy-Habermas principles of discursive equality and increasingly refining the political output on the basis of the online deliberation processes.*

Let’s now leave political science and enter the field of communication.

As an information and communication sciences scholar, Dominique Wolton strongly criticizes the application of classic cybernetic models in social analysis. He suggests that this is precisely the way a form of technical ideology manifests its hope to improve the rationality and functioning of society. Systemism itself is a:

...Sort of ideology of rationality which is applied both with regard to the relationship [that society builds] with nature and with regard to the functioning of society and human relations.

Wolton’s critique to ‘Systemism’

Systemism with its linearity, with its rigorous description of the causal links creating covariance is welcomed by many (notably cyberdemocrats and techno-optimists), suggests Wolton, as a new humanism:

There are many who in good faith dream of human and social relations working with the same effectiveness than cybernetic models, systems theory and networks.

This intellectual posture is based on the fallacious idea that more information creates a sort of automatic communication. Wolton instead suggests that non communication constitutes the horizon of communication, more information on the web is rarefying communication:

Today messages are innumerable, technologies are almost perfect, and receiver and more and more numerous, heterogeneous, and reluctant [This is not only the result of] linguistic differences, but also representations, cultures and clashing visions of the world.

Wolton posits that if we want to avoid falling into the illusions of technical ideologies (the Internet generated neo-reality, a world where everyone sees everything and knows everything), it is indispensable to re-establish the discontinuity between rational thought, systemism, technologies and the functioning of human and social relations. The corollary of this theoretical statement is that our regard on human evolution should change:

...Progress in human communication is not proportional to technical progress; [it’s necessary to] separate communication and technology notwithstanding the fact that for a hundred years the two have been linked in the same emancipation dynamic.

---

388 WOLTON D., Informer n’est pas communiquer, Paris CNRS Edition August 2009 p. 61 - 68
389 WOLTON, Ibidem p. 18
390 WOLTON D. Id. p.11
Wolton’s contribution opens fully the issue of the intent of communication processes in the political web. If with Wolton, systemic approaches induce authors like Gibson, Römmele, Ward to emphasize the deliberative potential of the political web, what other categories could be used to frame these phenomena? Neutral informative communication? Persuasive political communication? Sub-propaganda/Facilitative communication or Manipulative political communication?

Wolton’s three grand categories of information
Wolton considers that three grand categories of information can be integrated to any support, including party web sites:

- information-news, linked to the press
- information-service, which is typically expanding through the internet
- information-knowledge, linked to the development of online databases

Relational information, is a cross cutting feature which relates to the communication realm. The aims of communication can be of any sort, but Wolton identifies three specific ones often intermingled and present in different degrees and hierarchical levels in every instance:

- to share,
- to seduce,
- to convince,

Wolton therefore does not criticise what the French call “la Com” and considers fundamentally hypocritical the attitude of those that devalue persuasive political communication. La Com does not raise any concern in Wolton’s framework as it refers to the natural will to please, seduce, convince and as it targets an audience which, freed from any hierarchical or normative force, is often unwilling to adhere to the message.

What counts for Wolton is the project that underpins communication: a project that should contribute to build negotiation (which Wolton views as a salient character of democracy) between the diverse components of our society and achieve ultimately a peaceful cohabitation.

Measure of political website virtuosity according to Wolton’s Theory
Extrapolating from Wolton’s theory, virtuous communication on political web sites should:

  incarnate the triple revolution of human freedoms, democratic models and technological progress,

391 “Informative communication is taught to be neutral because it is characterized by a very special and limited use of language....Formative discourse is communication about subject matters that has attained the privileged status of being beyond dispute”. Sub-propaganda/Facilitative communicaiton is information arranged “in an effort to create a friendly athmosphere” towards a potential propagandist. The concepts of informative communication and subpropaganda are described in JOVETT G.S. & O'Donnel V., Propa- ganda and persuasion, Sage 2006 p.26-30

392 WOLTON D. Id.p.20
393 WOLTON D. Id. p.10
Vicious communication on political web sites should instead:

should boost individualism (which results from the reduction of communication to mere expression and interactivity) and communitarism (which constraints contacts into virtual spaces and denies the existence of the other) 394

A PRACTITIONER VIEW ON THE POLITICAL WEB : FROM "LA COM" TO PROFESSIONAL POLITICAL MARKETING ONLINE

Wolton’s attitude towards la com. is somehow representative of a humanistic and psychological approach to political communication which emphasizes, in line with important practitioners such as Jacques Seguela395, the oniric load of a campaign (instead of the rationality of the arguments or the auto-referentiality of communication) as the key to a passionate political participation.

Even if Seguela does not follow scientific approach to political communication, his unique experience of political campaigner (he has been in charge of the campaign of many left wing leaders such as Mitterand, Vranitzky, Jelev, Antall, Drnovsek, Kwasniewky, Jospin, Barak, Lagos) and his personal attachment to extract a doctrine from his own professional experience as a political marketer, deserves scholarly attention. For this reason, in this section I will briefly explore some of the key ideas of Seguela’s doctrine on political marketing.

Professional Political Marketing is neither a vice, nor a virtue (Seguela)

In Seguela’s doctrine, parties are not necessarily programmed to manipulate. On the contrary they have big incentives not to lie, as only truth well told396 pays off.

Professional political communication, as a realm of truth well told, is neither a vice, nor a virtue, neither manipulation, nor miracle, but a simple microphone,... an amplifier, a technique to be heard by the masses...amplification has never replaced talent397. Techniques combined to psychological intuition allow good political communication to continue to create astonishment, and avoid trivialization:

Politics’s illness is linked to a ‘too much’ of words, falseness, phrases, emphasis. Mad for its packaging, it has lost its content. It’s simple to ‘exist’ and it does not require repetition, it is sufficient to express one’s soul. Not one’s ‘ego’398.

Seguela’s views are shared by some U.S. scholars.

394 WOLTON D. Id. p.30
396 Truth Well Told is the mission statement of the advertising giant McCann Ericksson
397 SEGUELA J., Le vertige des urnes Id.p. 12
398 SEGUELA J., Le vertige des urnes Id.p.14
In particular Craig Allen Smith\(^{399}\) defines (functionally and neutrally) political communication as the process of negotiating a community orientation through the interpretation and characterization of interests, of power relationships, and of the community’s role in the world.

Similarly, Ninno and Swanson\(^{400}\) define political communication as the strategic uses of communication to influence public knowledge, beliefs and action on political matters. Boynton\(^{401}\) defines political communication as conversations flowing through institutionalized channels, punctuated by the vote. Denton and Woodward\(^{402}\) resume the above definitions stating that:

> Political communication is a process, is strategic, and is unique in terms of content. I view political communication as public discussion about the allocation of public resources (revenues), official authority (who is given the power to make legal, legislative, and executive decisions), official sanctions (what the state rewards or punishes), and social meaning (what does it mean to be an American and the role of citizen, implications of social policy, etc.). ... the crucial factor that makes communication ‘political’ is not the source of a message, but its content and purpose.

This said, this intellectual posture is criticised by those that fear:

- the potential drift of political marketing (manipulation or occupation of our emotional lives) or
- the dominant role of demand driven politics (which entails that all communication processes, from tactics to strategy should be subordinate to the perceptions of the masses).

Seguela stresses against these criticisms there a virtuous cycle can instead be initiated simply by creating political campaigns with an imaginary value added\(^{403}\). This value is the by product of offer based political marketing, the only one that can be considered democratic, adds Seguela:

> [a political marketing capable of saying] I have a vision for my country, I propose it to you [the people], whether you share this vision with me or not, that’s my vision. Certainly, many politicians, choosing the easiest way, prefer to cultivate demagogy instead of risking to state their ideas. But they are wrong, people are not what they think they are. People do not wait to be followed but wait to be guided.

According to Seguela an offer based political marketing would follow ten simple rules:

---


\(^{402}\) DENTON R., WOODWARD JR. G. *Political Communication in America* p 11

\(^{403}\) SEGUELA J., *Le vertige des urnes* Id.p.34
We vote for a man, not for a party

We vote for an idea not for an ideology

We vote for the future not for the past

We vote for a spectacle not for a triviality

We vote for ourselves not for a candidate

We vote for truth not for false appearance

We vote for a destiny not for a triviality

We vote for a value not for a job position

We vote for an active not a passive candidate

We vote for a winner not for a looser

Seguela's democratic political marketing is founded on the need to move (thanks to the web) towards real time political reactivity, from broadcasting to bespoke microcasting, from électeur to el-acteur, once manipulated, now, thanks to his mouse, manipulator. This is a notion close to Wolton’s receiver-actor: an actor who grants himself the authorisation to filter, discard and consciously critique a growing number of information he's bombarded with by the political web.

Attack Politicks and other unintended consequence of political communication

If Parties are not meant by definition to engage in politics of animosity or manipulation, they might nevertheless get incentives to do so from the ecosystem in which they are inserted.

Commenting on the phenomenon of disenfranchised polity Denton explains, partly echoing Wolton, that this is the result of three mechanisms: historical hostility against centralised forms of government (on the receiver side), identity politics, and non conciliatory discourse (on the transmitter side). Denton continues by saying:

The low esteem attached to politics can be attributed to three broad causes, each considered in the following sections of this chapter. The first is the historical American antipathy to governmental power and authority, the second is the rise of ‘identity politics’, which has

---

404 SEGUELA J., Le vertige des urnes Id. p. 24-26
undermined faith that the great polity of the United States shares the same values and goals. The third is the intensification of partisan and non conciliatory discourse, particularly in Congress.\textsuperscript{405}

Against this same background Hart\textsuperscript{406} - following Putnam\textsuperscript{407} - stresses how the television is having profound negative effects on community bonds in America by inspiring five main emotions:

- feeling intimate (or the rise of personality politics)
- feeling informed (or the effects of personality politics)
- feeling clever (or the cold comforts of post-modernism)
- feeling busy (or the frenzy of establishment politics)
- feeling important (or the temptation of alternative politics)

Television, suggests Hart\textsuperscript{408}, contributes to generating a media culture configured to respond to five emotions that make us “especially uncomfortable”: detachment, ignorance, obsolescence, inertness and impotence. TV (and with it all the media, including the digital ones, that share the same strategy) aims at producing artificial/counterfeit emotions, and offers trade-offs instead of compensations:

- instead of becoming intimate it leads viewers to a world of narcissism and introversion, passive receptivity toward outer reality, and above all, sensitivity to psychic state;
- instead of giving more control over political issues, people are now so overwhelmed by political information that they feel impotent;
- instead of becoming clever and involved people get immunized from political participation, ...so distrustful are they of appearances;
- instead of becoming busy they just don’t get involved as television makes watching and doing the same thing;
- instead of generating involvement by generating attention on issues and characters, television confuses political efficacy with rhetorical efficacy, turning unimportant people into important ones and vice-versa.

\textsuperscript{405} DENTON R., WOODWARD JR. G. Political Communication in America p 11
\textsuperscript{407} PUTNAM, R. Bowling alone: the collapse and revival or American community New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000
\textsuperscript{408} HART, R.P. Id. p. 155-160
The biggest trade-off of the media culture developed by contemporary media, including digital ones, is a set of co-factors which produce a strong incentive to alter the pattern of behaviour of all political actors. One of these factors is the proliferation of attack politics, as Pfau and Kensky detect in the American context:

Although the use of attack messages has been an intrinsic feature of American political campaigns since 1800, there is no doubt that the attack strategy seems to be much more pervasive in recent campaigns. This perception stems, at least in part, from the increased use of television advertising as the communication modality of choice for the delivery of candidates' attacks, which insures maximum possible penetration, and in part from a steady increase in the use of negatives during the 1980s.

The actual increase in the use of attack politics during the past decade is the direct result of the growing perception among consultants, who wield increasing power over strategy and tactics in contemporary campaigns, that attack politics works, and works well. Attack messages are viewed as more compelling. As a result, they are processed more rapidly and remembered longer.

While positive ads require as much as 5 or even 10 viewings to make an impression on voters, the information in a negative commercial can sink in after only 1 or 2 viewings.

Although attack politics always carries a risk that more offensive messages will result in a voter backlash against sponsors, this risk is perceived as acceptable, given the fact that over time voters tend to forget the origins of political messages while retaining their content. As a result, the former conventional wisdom that acted to restrain the use of attack politics (that it works only for challengers and then only when they use third parties to deliver the message and once they have established a strong positive base) quite literally has been turned on its head. Attack politics is now employed by both challengers and incumbents, often uses the candidate to deliver the message, and sometimes is employed early in a campaign, even prior to the use of positive advertising. The bottom line is that attack politics has arrived, and as long as it is perceived to be effective, it will remain a staple in candidates' tactical arsenals.

Hart together with Statera and Cardo, signals another factor: personality politics, which Wolton calls people-isation of politics. Dakhlia describes it as a form of pseudo intimacy generated by media vis-à-vis political elites:

---

410 STATERA G., La Politica Spettacolo Politici e Mass Media Nell’era Dell’immagine Cles (Tn) Arnoldo Mondadori Editore 1986
During the last fifty years, American politics has become personal. Research has documented, for example, that recent American presidents (Lyndon Johnson through Ronald Reagan) referred to themselves more often in their speeches than did their immediate predecessors (Harry Truman through John Kennedy) and far more often than a comparison group of business executives, social activists, congressional leaders, and preachers.

At first, Presidents Johnson and Nixon were reluctant to make self references on television, but all that has changed by now. Beginning primarily with Gerald Ford (I will work with the Congress, and I know many, if not all, in the Congress will work with me) and continuing to Jimmy Carter, presidential politics has turned confessional.

During the last forty years, American presidents have increasingly placed themselves on center stage whenever the occasion permitted. If the occasion did not permit it, they invented the occasion.

...Presidents, in short, try to dominate the people's emotional lives with their emotional lives. 412

Finally McNair 413, referring to Habermas re-feudalisation concept, notes the rampant progression of public relations and consumer (demand driven) marketing techniques in political campaigning and their effects on both costs and message:

...in contemporary capitalism politicians 'are sold' to the public, much like soap and automobiles .... Issues of public policy, when considered at all, increasingly receive their expression and discussion in thirty-second commercials'. ...The application of marketing and advertising techniques to the political process signifies something about the conduct of political life [in the advanced capitalist world]: Saatchi and Saatchi [the UK-based marketing and PR firm responsible for some of the most innovative political advertising of the 1980s] is an index of the way in which politics has been changing to become a matter of 'selling' ideas and 'delivering' up voters; a sign that 'scientific management' has entered into politics and market values have permeated deeper into social relations.

From this perspective, the notion that democracy has anything to do with rationality and 'public interest' is an illusion, since we choose our politics on the same grounds, and as a result of the [application of the] same techniques of persuasion, as we choose our toothpaste


413 MCNAIR id. p. 42
Measure of political website effectiveness according to the Communication Theories presented in this short review

To resume, different approaches to political communication highlight the benefits and warn against the misuse of professional political communication techniques. In an attempt to project the lesson of these scholars on my research, it could be argued that democratic political marketing or virtuous political communication online (capable of reducing the risk of a disenfranchised polity and augmenting rationally the public interest) should, in principle, aim at creating party sites which:

- Avoid content overload in an attempted compensation of the 'feeling of being informed' in the user community, promote values and individuals without promoting personality politics, invites the user to act and inter-act, do not engage in rampant consumer (demand driven) marketing techniques, contain partisan and suppress non conciliatory discourse

In contrast marketing driven political communication should:

- inspire Hart’s five main emotions such feeling intimate with the party, feeling informed, feeling clever, feeling busy, feeling important; should respond to all the demands and perceptions of the public regardless their moral or ethical connotations; should be partizan and should not engage in conciliatory discourse with the opponents.

UNDERSTANDING THE INTENTIONS OF ONLINE COMMUNICATORS: AN ESSENTIAL REVIEW OF PROPAGANDA STUDIES

Let’s now focus specifically on propaganda. I have tried in the previous sections to underline that both communication professionals and scholars insist that political parties are not necessarily programmed to produce manipulative communication. This however does not help us define in positive terms what is propaganda, how it differs from informational communication or persuasion and how can it be detected in party websites. The aim here is not to re-produce Cunningham’s extensive critical review of the literature on this huge topic. The purpose of this section is to reduce, at least partially, the uncertainty by identifying some of the characteristic markers of this quite controversial domain of communication. A field that some view as an acceptable analytical category for contemporary politics, and others as an outdated theoretical device or, as mere insult, as Smith III suggests.

The origin of the term propaganda dates back to 6 January, 1622 (the day of the Epiphany), when Pope Gregory XV founded the Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide as an instrument of counter-reform. Gregory wanted the new, small, congregation (13 cardinals, two prelates and a secretary) to be the caput

---

415 In popular parlance, propaganda is used as a clearly negative term to denote deliberately deceitful appeals, especially those directed to a mass audience SMITH T.J. III, Propaganda, A pluralistic Perspective, Praeger 1995 p. 1
(head) of the diffusion of Catholic faith\textsuperscript{416}. The expression \textit{propaganda} meant at that time nothing more than the Latin \textit{to be diffused}. This neutral interpretation still captivates today historians such as Taylor\textsuperscript{417}, who advocates the possibility of a new perspective on propaganda, dissociated with falsehood:

\begin{quote}
There is no real point \ldots in making moral judgements concerning whether propaganda is a 'good' or a 'bad' thing; it merely is. Rather, one needs to redirect any moral judgements away from the propaganda process itself and more to the intentions and goals of those employing propaganda to secure those intentions and goals.
\end{quote}

In this quasi mechanical interpretation, Taylor, reconnects the subject with other scientific realms (such as botanics):

\begin{quote}
Propaganda thus becomes a process for the sowing, germination and cultivation of ideas and, as such, is – or at least should be – neutral as a concept.
\end{quote}

Since Pope Gregory, in more than three centuries (and particularly after the advent of the modern 'scientific' propaganda, as Taylor notes), a real controversy developed around the meaning of the term. While Silverstein\textsuperscript{418} and Smith\textsuperscript{419} note that propaganda studies have declined and the body of literature shrunk, the usage of the term has evolved\textsuperscript{420} blurring the boundary separating propaganda from persuasive rhetoric, basic logical fallacies, advertising and education. After the classic work of Lasswell\textsuperscript{421}, in the 40's Garber\textsuperscript{422} was one of the first attempting a re-conceptualization and re-organization of the discipline; in the late 50's McGarry\textsuperscript{423} linked propaganda to the notion of marketing; in the 60's Etzioni\textsuperscript{424} discussed

\begin{thebibliography}{99}

\bibitem{416} LEVILLAIN P. Ed. Dizionario Storico del Papato, Bompiani Milano 1996 p. 1216
\bibitem{419} "By the 1940s, units in propaganda analysis-which focused on paradigmatic examples drawn from fascism, Marxism, and advertising-were a common feature of high school and college curricula. But the scholarly view of propaganda, always diverse, continued to evolve, and by the mid-1960s a new conception had emerged which was not merely different from but in some ways hostile to the traditional popular conception. Opinions differ on the precise reasons for this change. I argue that one factor was a widespread shift in the political sensibilities of American intellectuals which led to a rejection of the older approach to propaganda, especially when focused on Marxist appeals, as simplistic at best and reactionary at worst. Another cause was the spread of relativistic views; of truth which rendered problematic the central distinction between honest and deceitful communication. But perhaps the most important factor was the publication in 1965 of an English translation of Jacques Ellul's book Propaganda.... On the one hand, it inspired a number of subtle and sophisticated studies, typically of propaganda in the Western democracies. On the other hand, it set in motion an immense expansion of the domain of propaganda in which traditional distinction between conscious and unconscious, intentional and unintentional, personal and social, persuasive and informative, even mendacious and veracious communication were blurred or discarded. Perhaps for this reason, the study of propaganda entered a period of decline: Courses and units on traditional propaganda analysis disappeared from academic curricula and published research, while arguably of higher quality, diminished markedly in quantity" in SMITH T. J. III Id. p. 2. There are - as a matter of fact - more books sold in the field of political communication by Amazon or Barnes & Noble than in the field of propaganda.
\bibitem{420} PHILLIPS DAVISON W., 'Some Trends in International Propaganda Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science', Vol. 398 Propaganda in International Affairs Nov 1971 p 12
\bibitem{424} "...Persuasion suppresses the actor's preferences without changing them; it, hence, resembles influence on the surface, but there is really an exercise of power beneath. The difference between persuasion and influence is analogous to the difference between propaganda and education. When persuasive power is very effective and influence is superficial, the two are very similar, but, in general, it is not difficult to distinguish one from the other. Persuasive power works more quickly and is less costly in assets than influ-
\end{thebibliography}
the difference between persuasive power and influence; in the 70's Ralph White tried to separate morally questionable from unquestionable propaganda techniques; in the 80's Altheide and Johnson grouped within the category of bureaucratic propaganda the communicational activities of both the military, TV networks, pressure groups, and scientific organisations; in the 90's Combs and Nimmo “fused into one” propaganda, mass advertising and public relations, and called it the dominant public language of the new information society. Recently, O'Shaughnessy linked social marketing and social propaganda, Gelders attempted to separate governmental communication and information and propaganda, while Taylor in an important work which aims at proving the inextricable connection between war and propaganda, attempted to distinguish between propaganda and education, and (following Ellul) framed propaganda as a product of post-industrialization, where people become consumers.

Jovett and O'Dowell start their own attempt to define propaganda, positioning themselves between two "seminal ideas" to the study of the discipline.

One is represented by the magnitude of Jacques Ellul's definition of propaganda, the doyen of propaganda theorists, as Cunningham notes. Known for his controversial notion of indistinguishability, Ellul (less frivolously than Shumpeter) frames propaganda in the context of the societal influence of technology and media. Propaganda is for Ellul a set of methodologies, a broader phenomenon which includes private action and individualized action as well. It can materialise in many different ways, such as:

**Psychological action – the action that tends to modify opinions by mainly psychological means; often pursuing a semi-educational goal**


429 "The communication of information from the government to the citizens is a complicated, controversial issue. The difference between propaganda and objective message is often hard to discern, and its perception is always influenced by the opinion of communicator and audience. The keys to practicable, effective, and fair communication are completeness, timeliness, and accuracy." GELDERS D., *Improving Public Policy Communication in Belgium: Government Managers Can Better Inform Citizens of Proposed Policies by Ensuring Their Information Is Complete, Timely, and Accurate*, *The Public Manager* 35.3 (2006), Questia, 31 Aug. 2008 <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5018104909>.


431 « Rarely has there been a time in history when the governors have not attempted to influence the way in which the governed viewed the world, including that of their own past » TAYLOR P. M., *Munitions of the Mind* Id. p. 14


433 CUNNINGHAM Ibidem, p.18

434 Shumpeter's definition of propaganda, any statement emanating from a source that we do not like, certainly reflects the current use of the term but is not useful for our research context. Shumpeter is quoted by SALMON C.T. "Campaigns for social improvement: an overview of values, rationales, and impacts" *Sage Annual reviews of Communication Research* Vol 18 (1989).

435 The more information exists, the more interpretation is needed and the more the propagandist has the opportunity to provide this interpretation ready made in the deliberative process. See ELLUL J. *The Technological society*, New York: Vintage Books, 1964 (French edition 1954) p. 363 but also Wolton who notes in this respect that the "abundance of information creates the imperative need of knowledge to understand them."
Psychological war – which involves the stranger, the adversary, and that aims at destroying his moral; to have him doubting of the validity of what he’s doing

Re-education and brainwashing – complex methods to transform an adversary in an ally and which cannot be used but on prisoners

Public and human relations – these two grand types of action much resolutely enter the field of propaganda. This statement will provoke a scandal, underlines Ellul, but in reality it’s only about propaganda with the aim of adapting the individual to a society, to a type of consumption, to a type of activity; it aims at generating conformism - the aim of any propaganda.

The core of the message of Ellul, that still fascinates Coombs and Nimmo⁴³⁶, is that propaganda is plural (thus the title of his classic work Propagandes). Ellul, suggests Kluver⁴³⁷, convincingly blurs the boundaries between information and propaganda and this leads him to relativise also the boundaries between politics, education and religion. All communicational contexts where persuasive power plays a role.

At the other extreme of Jovett and O’Donnell’s starting point stands Doob’s resistance to define propaganda:

A clear cut definition of propaganda is neither possible nor desirable⁴³⁸

Jowett and O’Donnell find both approaches troublesome, and insist to define propaganda in positive terms as a subcategory of persuasion as well as information:

Propaganda is the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist

Qualter⁴³⁹ similarly defines it as:

... the deliberate attempt by some individual or group to form, control, or alter the attitudes of other groups by the use of instruments of communication, with the intention that in any given situation the reaction of those so influenced will be that desired by the propagandist.

---

⁴³⁶ "The volume and the sophistication of the new propaganda is so vast, and growing, that we increasingly take it for granted as natural, and thereby, we find it exceedingly difficult to distinguish what is propaganda from what is not" in COOMBS, J.E. & NIMMO D, The New Propaganda; The Dictatorship of palaver in contemporary politics. 1993 New York Longman quoted by Jowett and O'Donnell ibidem p. 6
⁴³⁹ Quoted by SMITH T. J. III Id. p. 2
In the Figure below, Jovett and O'Dowell’s model materializes:

- the boundaries of information (which aim at producing mutual understanding with the sequence share, explain, instruct similar to Wolton’s theoretical constructs),
- from those of persuasion (which aim at producing mutual interdependency with response shaping/reinforcing/changing)
- and those propaganda (which aims at promoting the interest of one party not necessarily in the interests of the other party).

I argue that weak elements (in this otherwise elaborated attempt to bring some clarity to the subject) are the distinction between persuasion and propaganda and the overall lack of effective boundaries of Jowett and O'Donnel discourse.

Persuasion, as defined by the authors,:

*The Process of persuasion is an interactive one in which the recipient foresees the fulfilment of a personal or societal need or desire if the persuasive purpose is adopted. The persuader also has a need fulfilled if the persuadee accepts the persuasive purpose. Because both persuader and persuadee stand to have their needs fulfilled, persuasion is regarded as more mutually satisfying than propaganda*.  

---

440 JOWETT & O’DONNEL Propaganda and Persuasion p.32
is de facto indistinguishable from propaganda as both the notions of need (instead of will) of the persuader, the mutual satisfaction and the absence of manipulative intent are hard to be substantiated.

Furthermore the narrative of Jowett and O'Donnell, blending stories from Al Qaeda, Pro-anorexia websites, VOA, BBC World, television and social research, but also Hollywood, advertising companies, USIA, and USAID (following Snow and Constable) ends up portraying propaganda with an Ellulian magnitude. The end result is not very much different from the conclusions drawn by Edelstein, Hummel and Huntress, and Rohatyn, that all communication is propaganda.

A more articulated description of the essential character of propaganda is provided by Cunningham in his summary:

Propaganda is much more than belief manipulation, thought control and persuasive language. Propaganda is fundamentally constituted by a complex array of epistemic deficits. ...It poses as truth and genuine information when, in point of fact, it only uses them; it values credibility and actual belief over the higher modalities of understanding of knowledge; while it prefers to work with true beliefs and facts for purely strategic reasons, it is profoundly indifferent to the values of truth, knowledge, and understanding...

In short the propaganda, or more accurately, the propagandist, engages in a range of epistemic disservices, thereby propagating a climate of illusion... While propaganda is universally regarded as a “form of communication”, it really is something much less than that. ...

Because propaganda declines so markedly from the benign conditions of trust, truthfulness and understanding that normally figure in communicative acts...it really deserves to be called "counterfeit or pseudo-communication".

One of the implicit conclusions of the previous section is that, as Jovett notes, there is no clear agreement on what propaganda is and most of propaganda studies have been unsystematic and unfocused. The consequence of this is that propaganda analysis is itself controversial as the psychological, semantic, or moral constructs it is meant to dissect.

441 « Another form of facilitative propaganda is helping societies restore their institutions after war or conflict” in JOWETT & O’DONNELL Propaganda and Persuasion p. 28  Concerning the narrative of Jowett and O’Donnell in Propaganda and Persuasion see for example p. 10, 11, 16, 26, 28, 125, 284-285
442 SNOW N. Propaganda, Inc.: Selling America’s Culture to the World (Open Media Series) (Seven Stories' Open Media 2002)
447 CUNNINGHAM Id. p. 176, 156-157
448 JOWETT & O’DONNELL Id. p. 270

122
Jowett and O'Donnell propose a *10 dimensions grid* to analyse propaganda, most of which usable in a content analysis:

1. The Ideology and purpose of the propaganda campaign
2. The context in which the propaganda occurs
3. Identification of the propagandist
4. The structure of the propaganda organisation
5. The target audience
6. Media utilisation techniques
7. Special techniques to maximise effect
8. Audience reaction to various techniques
9. Counter-propaganda, if present
10. Effects and evaluation

This framework emphasizes the role of techniques or *devices* (such as *name calling, glittering generalities, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, bandwagon* - as in Lee & Lee and others449) which have become, as Combs and Nimmo450 have noted, *virtually synonymous with the practice and analysis of propaganda in all of its aspects.*

The purpose here is not to critically review, like Conserva,451 the specificities of tens of these various techniques. It is however worth mentioning that some of the newest and most interesting ones have been dissected by practitioners and scholars such as Kamalipour and Snow452, Chandler453, Weiner454, Dauber455, Larsen456, Lungu457, Geers & Feaver458, notably with regard to intelligence practices and war propaganda techniques, also on the web.

---

For the purpose of this dissertation, it will be enough to focus on some of the most classical constructs including the basic forms of propaganda (agitative, integrative, white, grey and black propaganda\textsuperscript{459}) or its synonyms such as disinformation, for which Jowett and O'Donnell propose two descriptive models (the deflective source model and the legitimating source model).

For the purpose of my research and to prepare the ground for the findings of the empirical part of the dissertation it will also be useful to detail here some of Ellul's trenchant\textsuperscript{460} postures of the propagandist\textsuperscript{461}. My aim is to test their applicability in the context of political parties online communication.

**Propaganda must address simultaneously the individual and the masses**

Specifically, propaganda addresses the individual for what he/she has in common with the rest of the nation (tendencies, feelings and myths)\textsuperscript{462}. Most of media have today this capacity: the Web develops this dualism a step further, it allows microcasting and broadcasting simultaneously and through "cookies", auto-profiling and Web 2.0 tagging it allows unprecedented degrees of personalization. The web 2.0 welcomes us by calling us by our name.

**Propaganda must be total**

This posture has two meanings. The first suggests that the propagandist uses all the technical means at his disposal: press, radio, TV, cinema, posters, meetings, canvassing and the web.

> Because of the media specificities one easily understands that it is not acceptable to put aside one of these instruments: they all have to be combined and used. The propagandist uses a true keyboard and composes a symphony \textsuperscript{463}.

\textsuperscript{459} "Agitative propaganda attempts to "rouse an audience to certain ends and usually results in significant change"; Integrative propaganda "attempts to render an audience passive, accepting and non challenging". The terms and the quotes come from Szanto 1978 p. 10 quoted by Jowell and O'Donnell

"White propaganda comes from a source which is identified correctly and communicates accurate information. Gray propaganda is often used to embarrass an enemy or competitor. Black propaganda is when a false source is given and lies, fabrications, and deceptions are spread by the propagandist".The term grey is clearly used to indicate the intermediate degree of effectiveness of this propaganda. The mutual creation of spy scares between US and USSR is provided as an example of g.p. by Jowett and O'Donnel

Ibidem p 53

Ellul distinguishes between pre-propaganda (or sub propaganda) and crisis propaganda. The first is slow, continuous and serves the purpose of mobilizing people (making people become mobile) by imbuing them with imperceptible influences, by making them live in a type of climate. Active propaganda or crisis propaganda is instead discontinuous and forces the individual and the masses to act.

\textsuperscript{460} The attribute comes from CUNNINGHAM's review of Ellul, in The Idea of Propaganda p. 136


\textsuperscript{462} "If one treats openly the mass as mass, the individuals who compose this mass will feel diminished and will refuse to participate. Everyone should feel targeted individually, everyone should have the impression the everyone else is looking at him, addressing to him. Only in that moment he will feel concerned, when he will stop being anonymous (even if he will continue to be anonymous)". ELLUL J., Propagandes A. Colin 1962, p. 18-20, the translation is mine.

\textsuperscript{463} "If one treats openly the mass as mass, the individuals who compose this mass will feel diminished and will refuse to participate. Everyone should feel targeted individually, everyone should have the impression the everyone else is looking at him, addressing to him. Only in that moment he will feel concerned, when he will stop being anonymous (even if he will continue to be anonymous)". ELLUL J., Propagandes A. Colin 1962, p. 18-20, the translation is mine.
In this respect the web 2.0, with its capacity to merge all media in a single experience, can allow the online propagandist to create rich media web sites integrating text, images, sound, movies.

The second meaning of this posture refers to the unilateral nature of propaganda\(^464\). Propaganda is directive, and above all, fundamentally deaf.

*Propaganda cannot satisfy itself of half victories, since it does not tolerate discussions: in its very essence, it excludes contradiction, discussion. It must coagulate quasi unanimity, the opposing faction must be negligible, or unable to make its voice heard*\(^465\)

Propaganda does not invite its opposition to discuss. This means that at least in Ellulian terms, the party sites which do not provide spaces for discussion and debate, do show one of the characteristic traits of propagandistic posture. For the purpose of this research it’s important to note that this, if any, is the single most relevant marker for the empirical validation of this dissertation, as it can be detected online with relative ease.

To conclude on this point the web, can be a land of opportunity and coexistence for both propaganda and deliberation whether in one to one, many to many, one to many mode of communication,

**Propaganda is both visible and invisible**

Ellul distinguishes between veiled and revealed propaganda. One type of propaganda is invisible and uses mystery, the other is open and declared.

*The propagandist is obliged to use both of them: open propaganda reassures the troops and is a manifestation of power, hidden propaganda is effective to get people’s unconscious engagement*\(^466\).

The situation of the current news man (*l’homme du temps présent*, a notion close to Wolton’s *dérives de l’information*\(^467\)) is favourable to propaganda. This type of man, lacking of a fundamental direction, is hypersensitive to the changes brought up by news,

*Precisely because he is in the bath of current news, this type of man is characterised by a psychological fragility which puts him at the disposal of the propagandist. Never there is confrontation between event and truth. There is no relationship between the event and the person. Current news never concern anybody.*

On the type of information environment provided by the Web 2.0 Jowett and O’Donnel note:

---

\(^{464}\) This Is Also Stressed By REYZABAL M.V. *Propaganda y manipulación*, Acento Editorial Madrid 1999 p. 38-39

\(^{465}\) ELLUL J., *Propagandes* p. 22-23 ELLUL J., *Propagandes* p. 27

\(^{466}\) ELLUL J., *Propagandes* p. 22-23

\(^{467}\) WOLTON Ibidem p. 73-76
the potential for propaganda is infinite. Anyone can spread a message, true or false, or manipulate information or even alter a picture to suit his or her own ends. The possibilities for serious mischief are enormous and have already been implemented, especially on the political scene."  

As I have noted above a fast growing body of research is accumulating evidence on the impact of web based rumours, gossips and disinformation campaigns also on brands, public health, news stories and Presidential candidates.

Propaganda needs myths and mobilising images
Propaganda works through conditioned reflexes and myths serving man’s need for orientation and divine. The web is particularly suited to both types of propaganda: through its multimedia integration it offers multiples supports for the visualization of global mobilizing symbols.

Propaganda must be organised
The existence of an organisation behind propaganda action is a corollary of the principle of continuity, duration and synergy between all media and all techniques. Propaganda always supposes an institutional factor. It requires an apparatus, a set of organisational component designed to reach a specific function or goal. It could be party based, but it could also be based on cells or agents checking on its local or nearest environment.

The introduction to the empirical section of the dissertation will describe how the political web is the result of the interaction of a whole series of actors - ranging from the individual to sui generis international organisations.

468 JOWETT and O’DONNELL Propaganda and Persuasion p. 153
470 Ellul J. Propagandes p. p. 29
471 “...Ce que nous voulons dire, c’est que la propagande suppose toujours un facteur institutionnel. Elle est liée à des faits. Elle s’exprime dans un appareil, un Apparat au sens allemand du terme; elle exige une rganisation de propagande, qu’il s’agisse du parti ou de l’Encadrement sur place. C’est une erreur considérable qui vicie toute analyse de propagande de croire que celle-ci est uniquement une affaire psychologique, une manipulation de symboles, une influence abstraite sur les opinions. C’est en partie cela qui rend un grand nombre d’études faites aux U.S.A. sur cette question inopérantes...Tant qu’il n’y a pas action de fait par une organisation sur l’individu, il n’y a pas de propagande...Vouloir dissocier les deux éléments est une simplification arbitraire qui interdit en réalité de concevoir exactement ce qu’est la propagande...”: Ellul J. Propagandes p. 32-33
Propaganda must stimulate orthopraxy

This is, for Ellul, the decisive character of propaganda. The scope of modern propaganda is not any more to modify ideas, but to provoke action.

The goal of modern propaganda is not any more to modify ideas, but to cause an action. It is not any more to make people adhere a doctrine, but to engage irrationally in an active process... is not any more to transform an opinion, but to obtain an active and mythical belief.

Ideas can be dissociated from action, suggests Ellul, therefore the imperative of propaganda is not to gain access to consciousness (and level it to a common denominator thus generating orthodoxy), but to at least obtain by everyone a form of participation.

Propaganda seeks exactitude, precision, and correctness without deliberation, choice and decision. Action must be spontaneous: propaganda must continuously short circuit thought and decision. Action must lead to irreversible ends:

Action makes propaganda irreversible: those who act in function of propaganda cannot come back. They are obliged to believe in propaganda because of past action. They are obliged to receive from it justification, authority, elements without which action will appear to them as absurd or unjust, which is intolerable. They are obliged to continue to go on in the direction indicated by propaganda, because action calls for action. They are what I call: engaged people...The man who’s acted according to propaganda has taken a position in society. Hence, he has enemies. He has often broken with his milieu, with his family: he’s compromised. He’s really obliged to accept the new milieu, the new friends that propaganda provides for him. He has often accomplished a condemnable act according to traditional morality; he has troubled a certain order: he needs to receive a justification and he plunges deeper and deeper reproducing that particular act to state it was a righteous one. He is taken by a movement which develops to the extend of occupying totally the field of his consciousness. Propaganda masters him entirely.

As I have tried to describe in the previous chapter, the Web, and particularly the Web 2.0, allows to embed web applications in political sites, offering a wide range of alternatives for mobilisation (signing petitions, writing to representatives, downloading campaign material, transfer funds, subscribing to the party, voting on online polls etc.). These include, of course, calls to vote in real elections. This said, calls for orthopraxy on the web can be detected mainly through content analysis, the feasibility of which will be discussed further on, in the empirical section of the dissertations.

472 "...C'est très rarement à la suite d'une pure idée que l'individu entreprend d'agir. De plus, situer l'action de propagande au niveau intellectuel, supposerait que l'on engage le débat individuellement avec chacun: méthode impensable. Il s'agit d'obtenir au minimum de tous une participation. Celle-ci peut être active ou passive, mais (de toute façon, ce n'est pas seulement un affaire d'opinion publique)..." ELLUL J. Propagandes p. 37

473 ELLUL J. Propagandes p. 42
Measure of political website effectiveness according to Propaganda Theories

The lesson of the propaganda theorists presented in this section provides an important (but hard to implement) test case for the empirical analysis related to RQ2. To resume this section to its essential meaning, propaganda online should be materialised by party sites which

Address, through an organised way, both the individual and the masses, create a climate of convincing illusion, exclude the opposition, perform continuous (real time) informational pressure, attack openly and covertly, use symbols and any other type of vector capable of triggering anchors in the propagandee and above all stimulate ortopraxy by diffusing commands.

INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE: TURNING INTENTIONS INTO FORMS, CONTENTS, AND FUNCTIONS

After having explored the realm of intentions, let’s now complete our theoretical excursus by exploring the concepts of Information Architecture: the art and craft of turning ideas (and intentions) into popular web sites. Although very different in nature this theoretical background has a significant importance at this stage of the analysis as it can provide – beyond idealism and realism – a technical and objective approach to the study of political party sites, notably with regard to the specific nature and direction of external communication functions.

Coined by Richard Wurman in 1975 the study of information architecture blends together notions and concepts derived from architecture, design, typography, information and library sciences.

There is a large consensus about the role played by Rosenfeld and Morville’s book (Information Architecture on the World Wide Web\(^{474}\)) to aggregate interests in this area. Rapidly after the publication of the book in 1998, information architecture started to grow as a discipline through the organisation of technical summits (\texttt{www.asist.org}), the creation of a professional groups (Institute for Information Architecture in 2005) and the production of a considerable literature (see for example the works of Reiss\(^{475}\), Everden & Everden\(^ {476}\), Gilchrist & Mahon\(^ {477}\), Mc Govern & Norton\(^ {478}\) and Krug\(^ {479}\)).

Rosenfeld and Morville offer four alternative definitions of I.A.:

---

\(^{474}\) ROSENFELD L., MORVILLE P. Information Architecture for the World Wide Web O’Reilly UK December, 2006; the first 1998 ed. was authored by Morville alone.

\(^{475}\) REISS E. Practical Information Architecture: A Hands-on Approach to Structuring Successful Websites, Addison Wesley November, 2000

\(^{476}\) EVERNDEN E., EVERNDEN R., Information First: Integrating Knowledge and Information Architecture for Business Advantage, Butterworth-Heinemann September, 2003

\(^{477}\) GILCHRIST A. MAHON B. [EDS.] Information Architecture: Designing Information Environments for Purpose, Facet Publishing October, 2003


\(^{479}\) KRUG S., Don’t make me think! A common sense approach to web usability, New Riders 2006
1. The combination of organization, labelling, and navigation schemes within an information system.

2. The structural design of an information space to facilitate task completion and intuitive access to content.

3. The art and science of structuring and classifying web sites and intranets to help people find and manage information.

4. An emerging discipline and community of practice focused on bringing principles of design and architecture to the digital landscape.

It has become consensual to frame the interventions of an information architect according to Garett’s\(^{480}\) conceptual model of “user experience”, which moves from the external and material visual design to the internal and abstract combination of user needs and site objectives.

As Dillon and Trunbull explain\(^ {481}\), the job of information architects consists in

illustrating key concepts or steps through graphics; designing site maps; creating metaphors to brand content and promote navigation; developing style and formatting templates for elements of information; conducting user analyses; creating scenarios and storyboards; building taxonomies and indices; testing user experience.

The purpose of an information architect is therefore, essentially, to develop solutions in tune with the consumer’s sensitivity. This, simply put, implies conceiving sites that do not include what “people hate about the web” (which, according to Morville, is “Can’t find it”, poor graphic design and layout, gratuitous use of bells and whistles, inappropriate tone, designer-centered-ness, “under construction”, lack of attention to the detail) and maximise what “people like about the web” (which, according to Morville, is aesthetics, big ideas, utility, “findability”, personalization).

Additionally, it is central in this discipline the idea that a performing site is (within the margin of manoeuvre made available by the financial resources of the web promoter) the fruit of a deliberate choice to blend specific contents, forms, volumes and functions. The macro building blocks of the site - the frames, the site sections, the site levels, the outward links to affiliated web sites, the pathways (i.e. parent-child-peer navigation), the availability of fora, forms, “mailto” commands, or the integration of social networks technologies are all outcomes of a set of conscious information architecture decisions. Intentions that turn into forms and functions.

APPLYING INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE PRINCIPLES TO PARTY WEB SITES

The relevance of this approach for this dissertation is significant. It provides a complementary option to understanding through a “programmatic” or software based approach, the attitude/vision guiding technical implementations online. Provided that adequate analytical tools are used it is possible through this approach to actually count the number of pages in a site (which is a reference to the concept of output load), detect the type of programming language used (which is a reference to the financial resources available and Boncheck’s concerns about the new economy introduced by the web in political communica-
count the number of times applications or scripts which can generate Heeter’s type of interactivity have been made available (a reference also to the input overload concept), the ratio between text and video (a reference to political marketing performance indicators) and so on.

As in a post-excavation analysis, through these findings it is possible to make some serious hypotheses on the intentions of the architects involved in the implementation of a given party site. Party web sites design is, as Gombrich\textsuperscript{483} and Popper have highlighted for decorative art in general, a process that follows an order and an aim which are not only characteristic, but also socially, culturally, politically meaningful.

Party sites are therefore not only meant to be popular (the User Needs box in Garrett’s model), but more importantly, they are meant to be in tune with the sub-culture the site is meant to communicate with, and evocative of the values supported by the reference political group (the site objectives box in Garrett’s model). For this reason every element that composes a party site is encoded, as suggested by Kahn and Lenk\textsuperscript{484} through precise cultural, social and aesthetic patterns and implemented under technical and human constraints (perceptual and cognitive).

\textsuperscript{484} KAHN P., LENK K Mapping Web Sites, Rotovision, 2001

Illustration 14: An Isometric Site planning Diagram showing in a 3D view the levels and the pathways within a given site - Source DDInc. PDF brochure 2006
Structurally, a performing political site is the result of a coherent project which classifies content on the basis of a specific (political) perspective, reduces users uncertainty through specific hierarchical structures (on the use of concave structures in uncertainty reduction see Kalbach485), composes shapes (in bi-dimensional page layouts) and creates an architecture of tri-dimensional volumes (as directories and sub-directories within a server’s hard disk).

Political content is stored in levels. Metaphorically, hierarchical levels represent the floors of an edifice. Practically, infinite tri-dimensional pathways can be opened by web designers to connect hypertextually content in different sections of a given site. An example of tri-dimensional mapping of web sites is Kahn’s Isometric maps such as those produced for the site planning of his company Dynamic Diagrams.

Like in architecture, political web designers have the absolute freedom to connect spaces and channel movement intentionally in specific sections through outward and inward links.

With outward links users are invited to move through the web, theoretically in all directions, including towards the opposition. With inward links, users circulate inside political sites like clients in a multi-storey megastore. The megastore traffic signs and signals are organised to maximise the opportunity for clients to see or test goods before buying. Similarly, breadcrumbs, navigations

- nested structures (featuring micro-sites within sites), or
- poly-centric structures (with multiple, very large document collections) or even
- Trompe l’Oeil spaces where users have the illusion of getting out of the site, while in reality they simply change domain name while physically remaining on the same party server.

---

Mapping political parties web sites in a bi-dimensional environment allows to appreciate visually the beauty of some of these poly-centric structures. For example using the Astra Site Manager software (the use of which will be described in greater detail later on in this work) one can appreciate complex poly-centric structures such as in the case of Yabloko (see above http://www.yabloko.ru/index.html) in July 2001 where the biggest “centres” outside the home page are the “news”, the “press”, and the huge “forum” area.

In the case of Votaberlusconi (see next page http://www.votaberlusconi.it May 2001) one can observe a completely different structure based on four static centres (devoted to presenting the party, the party line, Mr. Berlusconi’s declarations, and a dense policy platform for the Government) and one interactive (Botta e Risposta – tit for tat in English).
In the case of the Australian Labour Party (see next page http://www.alp.org.au April 2002) we can observe a third, yet original structure composed around three content repository (for people, achievements and political platform) and a much larger structure to deliver "Latest news".
In the case of OEVP (see next page April 2002) a fourth and still very different structure based on a large corpus of articles, a large grape-like structure of content devoted to Europe, then a set of smaller grapes devoted to both party programme (eTopics) and women’s role in the party (Frauenoffensive), finally a not very densely populated interactive section organised in thematic threads.
In political communication terms, a performing political site conveys both explicit messages (for example the party’s philosophy and strategy documented in downloadable formats) and coded ones (for example the party’s identity).

Explicit messages go hand in hand with functions. If the site engages in informational communication, this will materialise in pedagogical content (history and background), to event calendars and reference material (programmes, declarations, white papers, in depth files etc.). If the site is explicit in asking some form of action (including orthopraxy and the manipulation of behaviour patterns) this may materialise in inviting users to follow external links to like minded sites, downloading compressed files, posting comments on blogs, viewing films, mailing the webmaster or specific individuals, using personalised spaces on an intranet, dedicated e-mail accounts, or electronic campaign kits aiming at propagating pre-formatted content online.

News and any similar item impacting on information flows and opinion formation, from an information architecture point of view, may glue together functional blocks, performing the same architectural function of a living room in a house or of a long hallway in a megastore. News channel traffic in the other sections of a site.
Concerning coded messages, we know from the previous section on propaganda studies that in addition to pictures, cartoons, music, and film, colour plays an important role as vector of political symbols: for example red for left wing parties, green for environmentalist groups, colours taken from a country’s flag for nationalists parties etc.

A more subtle example of coded messaging is the use of rich media (particularly video and links to social networks) to underline the organisation’s *dynamism and progressive* corporate goals and strategy (the mark of modernity). It can be argued that the party’s credibility is reinforced by designing *state of the art* sites which not only match contemporary standards for usability (such as Nielsen’s influential ones⁴⁸⁶), but deliberately mimic the visual language of mainstream media, notably the press. In this type of implementation, HTML frames are for example used like columns, to replicate conventions developed in mainstream press.

**Measure of political website effectiveness according to information architecture**

Party site performance, from an information architecture point of view, is critically linked to making the right decisions on how to suppress what “people hate about the web”. At the same time the successful information architect should include in his project what “people like about the web”.

Political web sites are also about intentions, so the issue is how to make sure that these intentions are reflected in the functional variations of the site, and the development effort is put where the priorities are.

Therefore in sum, performance is found when sites

> Minimize what people hate about the web and maximise what people like about the web;
> turn concrete political intentions into lines of HTML programming code.

4. Conclusions for the Theoretical Section

EDEMOCRACY: ILLUSION, DOGMA, PROPAGANDA, REALITY

As shown in the literature review that opens this section, most of what one can read about eDemocracy is characterized by the absence of doubt, the omission of conditionality, the permanent reference to the extraordinary, the absence of objective metrics to qualify experiences as successful. eDemocracy is often framed as a dogma, an uncontested truth, the pivotal part of an Ellulian religion of modernism, or Wolton’s technical ideology, which axiomatically states that everything can improve with IT, notably leadership and governance.

As I have noted in the conclusions of the eDemocracy literature review, there are plenty of arguments to consider eDemocracy an illusion, to reuse the formula of Huijsman. A bigger lens – both theoretically and empirically speaking – is needed to engage in a new reality check on eDemocracy.

Habermas, the situationalists and a large group of empiricists have already shown that a non dogmatic view on the impact of the Internet on politics (including the Web 2.0) is possible and that it allows to contemplate also the hypothesis that the web can also worsen democracy, devalue debate and reinforce (with centripetal dynamics) concentration of power and knowledge in the hands of few actors.

In the opening of this first theoretical section I have first linked the idea of eDemocracy to the debate on the transformation of modern political parties into articulation structures, inspired by the necessity to choose a (demand driven) market orientation, rather than structuring politics by aggregating to social networks. There is great expectation in parts of the academic community on the revitalising power of technology for representative institutions. Political Parties are seen to be seeking to adapt to the internet in order to modernise and remain close to the right market segment.

By moving away from traditional eDemocracy literature I have tried to understand what motivates parties to adopt change: whether this is explainable through mere technology; or whether this has more to do with a disenfranchised polity and the emergence of a politics of animosity which requires to fight with all the tools available, notably those that comparatively speaking are the cheapest and most effective.

I have then moved to focus on the question of the intentions of online political communication (RQ2 of the dissertation) and tried to provide counter arguments to the idea that parties are unavoidably programmed to engage in manipulative communication online. Wolton’s and Seguela’s approaches do in this respect help in envisaging possible alternative scenarios, characterised by professional / democratic political marketing.

I have then approached the vast field of propaganda studies with the aim of showing that, beyond the controversies, some of the most vocal voices in this discipline have indeed provided insights as what propaganda is and how it can materialise. Without entering in the validity of the classification and the evalu-
ation of the various propaganda techniques I have proposed to focus on constructions characterised by a higher degree of abstraction. I am referring here to the Ellulian characters of the posture of the propagandee.

Following intentionalism - the unilateral/univocal essence of propaganda (propaganda as a force of exclusion), call for ortopraxy, use of symbols as triggers for anchors, have been emphasised as identifiable empirical entities and as an important conceptual references for the second part of this dissertation.

In the final section of this large literature review I have approached Information Architecture theories as a source of methodology to approach the detection of evidence of linkage functions (the deliberative sense of interactivity as in Heeter) in party web sites or alternative forms of communication architecture.

Against this considerable theoretical background, as large as the facets of the field I intend to scrutinize, the surveys to be conducted on the ground will be framed as objectively as possible in a 'programmer's approach'. In addition to this the empirical part of this dissertation will focus explicitly on creating a basic taxonomy of the early actors (of a specific part of the overall political web) and on the actual intentions of party webmasters.

For the largest empirical validation a customised analytical software has been applied on a dataset of party sites ten to twenty times larger than the largest ever explored so far by previous scholars. The aim of this empirical part is essentially to understand the main functional character emerging from the political web stricto sensu today: Heeter's definition of interactivity, true (electronic) democracy, propaganda (and which sort of), electronic dazibaos or unilateral/univocal presentations as suggested by Margolis and Resnick.

5. The Definition of the Research Perimeter

MAPPING THE POLITICAL WEB

When, in 1995, I started to get interested in the behaviour of parties and politicians online there was virtually no scholarly work on the actual performance of political actors online. My first instinct in the early phases of my PhD project was to collect the largest amount of relevant cases I could discover on the web.

The elements I had in my possession at the start of my research were essentially two: the widespread evidence that a somehow significant political presence on the web was emerging and a handful of basic, often disorganised, lists of political web sites. I basically had nothing more than a poorly defined concept – the political web – and, by consequence, a research field that seemed very difficult to circumscribe, measure, and analyse.

As I noted in the conclusions to the literature review, I rapidly came to the conclusion that my project had two main working hypotheses, or pre-requisites: I knew I could contribute to the debate only by providing a larger theoretical approach, but also by engaging into a larger empirical validation process. An holistic approach to the study of the first actors of the political web was interesting conceptually, but practically erroneous to respond to my research questions.

The range of online entities which are connected to politics or can do something politically pertinent, politically significant, is as large, consistent and interconnected as the whole political (communication) system itself, whether one views its components:

- through political science theories, defining values in favour of a society (as in Easton), or using (or threatening to use) legitimate coercive force (as in Almond and Powell), or managing power, command, and authority (as in Dahl)
- or through mass communication theory, organising the mediation of social relations as in McQuail or McNair

---

488 Both related to the development of the concept of eDemocracy
492 MCQUAIL D., Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction, Sage, 1987 p.54
493 MCNAIR B., An Introduction to Political Communication, Routledge, 1995 p. 6
The scheme below gives an idea of the extraordinary size of a holistic research perimeter: similarly to Deutch’s *continuum* of political actors.

In such a scheme, the analysis of the actors’ game, the confrontation of their respective projects/objectives online, the examination of the power struggle in their relationships (their assets and their constraints in action) are all - theoretically - essential elements to understand the possible future evolutions of the early actors of online politics. While it is key in this field to move from small data sets to large ones (a remark echoed also by Norris, Schneider and Foot⁴⁷) from a practical point of view an holistic approach is a prohibitive choice given the sheer size of each one the main components of the scheme above (the universe of media, of individual bloggers, NGOs etc.).

This raises the issue of the reasons behind a segment selection or the analytical approach to be preferred in delimiting the research field. In this respect a choice must be made between dynamic models (such as the WebSphere described in the next section) and structural/taxonomic ones.

---

WEBSPHERE ANALYSIS VS. TRADITIONAL SYSTEMIC BOUNDARIES

In a variant of traditional social network analysis applied by Tateo⁴⁹⁵ to the study of extreme right political network online, Schneider and Foot⁴⁹⁶, building on the work of Taylor and Van Every⁴⁹⁷, have suggested a multi-method approach called the Web Sphere Analysis:

*Web sphere as a collection of dynamically defined digital resources spanning multiple web sites deemed relevant or related to a central theme or object, in the sense of the ‘gegenstand’ (Object) concept from the German philosophy*

The WebSphere is the instrument of choice for analyses which aim at understanding the flow dynamics and the interactions between clusters of sites which at a given moment in time. For example this happens in the so-called Blogosphere with the dynamics between seed pages, page groups, and outbound links all visualised in 3D spaces (cybermaps) using the HypViewer software. In this sense, far from being a reductionist tool, the WebSphere unit of analysis creates manageable and the same time holistic research units.

This said, it is precisely because of the WebSphere *proprium* that this type of approach and unit of analysis has not been used in the dissertation.

As Schneider and Foot⁴⁹⁸ suggest:

*As a unit of analysis, the boundaries of a Web sphere are delimited by a shared object-orientation, a temporal framework, and an identified periodicity of collection*


---


In this sense the WebSphere is too a dynamic entity which is structurally incline to include (following the subjective choices of the user community) both formal and informal political actors, conventional and unconventional, institutions and movements, etc. At the same time the perimeter of such a Sphere would inevitably change in time.

It is therefore necessary for a research which aims at implementing a taxonomic approach, to adopt dichotomies:

- such a the one which distinguishes (like in Easton or Greer and Orleans 499), the political system from the parapolitical system,
- or similarly, the dichotomy that separates political action in conventionally electoral and unconventionally movement oriented (as in Kriesi500)

or the Political Web stricto sensu (i.e. political parties as the most important mobilising agencies following Parvin and McHugh501) from the Political Web lato sensu.

RELEVANT ACTORS OF THE ONLINE PARA-POLITICAL SYSTEM (THE LATO SENSU POLITICAL WEB)

Several alternative clusters of actors - outside the formal boundaries of the political system (i.e. those defined by the outcome of the electoral process) - were possible candidates for my analysis. This type of actor is attracting a considerable interest (as in McCaughey and Ayers502, or Meikle503, Van De Donk504, Della Porta and Dian505, Chroust506), as empirical evidence (for example a NOP survey commissioned by Gibson, Ward and Lusoli in 2002 507) suggests that they are capable of creating strong and intimate bonds with their user community.

In this type of online actor there is some evidence of a transformational effect of technology on the actor’s functional processes, and on channelling of political ideologies. Three groups were particularly attractive, specifically:

- Charismatic Leaders web sites,
- Mono-Thematic Issue Sites
- Islamists Web Sites

<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=93927078>; see also GREER S. AND ORLEANS P., The Mass Society and the Parapolitical Structure Accessed online : http://www.jstor.org/pss/2089621 30 Aug. 2008 : “parapolitical” is defined by Greer and Orleans as " ostensibly non political organisations which can represent, in political terms if necessary, an area of autonomous social value"


503 MCCAUHY M. & AYERS M. Cyberactivism: online activism in theory and practice, Routledge 2003


505 DELLA PORTA D. & DIANI M. Social movements: an introduction; Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1999


507 GIBSON, R. WARD S. LUSOLI W. ‘The Internet and Political Campaigning: the new medium comes of age ?’, Retrieved online www.esri.salford.ac.uk/.../papers/online_political_campaigning.pdf on 11.09.2010 : “Single Issue protest groups with about 70% of those visiting their websites or e-mailing saying they would not have initiated such contacts through more conventional means".
Charismatic Leaders Web Sites

Charisma, the extraordinary quality of a personality as Weber defined it in Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft, is the product of the true (or perceived, or self attributed) grace of few Saviours, leaders which emerge in extraordinary situations, politicians of the crisis. Charisma comes from the greek Kharis (grace, but also light) and is translated as a compelling attractiveness or charm that can inspire devotion in others.

As I noted in the second section of the theoretical part, parties are globally evolving into leader centred organisations, and this trend is clearly visible in the political web. From the glossy sites of the Jordanian Royals (and in particular the numerous sites set up by Queen Rania) to the more colourful African examples as with President Patassé in the Central African Republic (whose biography notes married and father of 12 children, all alive)...

While mass parties see their role declining in the formal political life, personality politics is becoming a central object of media and public consumption, thus boosting the audience of political leaders’ sites. While old ideologies strive everywhere to survive to the centrifugal tendencies resulting from the effects of a networked society, the emergence of social polarization based on identity markers such as religion, culture, ethnicity, individual political leaders raise in visibility in the Politics Show (la politique spectable), often to the detriment of the group which has initially co-opted them.

Charismatic leader sites can mimic the best strategies of political party sites either by using the latest technologies and techniques and beat them at their (presumed) favourite game: interacting with the public.

The case of Boris Nemtsov’s site is a good illustration of the comparative advantage acquired by these web properties over political party sites. His site is huge and the traffic generated by its forum remarkable. A quick look to Russian and Rumanian web traffic statistics confirms the remarkable success political leaders Web sites, often among the highest ranking sites in the top 50 national web properties. A possible explanation for the performances of these sites is that charismatic leader sites provide access to personal and hard to find (in other words truly interesting) as shown by the remarkable coverage of the site of Philipino President Erap Esercito Estrada content, such as diaries, mémoires, agendas, family photos, and personal details of the life of very important people. They do not propagate information: they create Hart’s notion of intimacy engaging in a person to person communication.

---

508 This is for example the case Barack Obama’s site, a web property which has been maintained after the campaign or the transmedia governmental site of Alopresidente the daily TV Programme hosted by the Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez

509 The site has evolved following the developments of the life of Estrada: it was immediately shut down the day of his arrest for plunder charges, and the later re-launched by Estrada himself as a political self-defence device. Today the site and its social network derivatives is used to relaunch Estrada as Presidential candidate. ...Detained Ex-President Estrada Launches Website To Tell His Side. Deposed Philippine president Joseph Estrada has launched his own Internet Website to tell his side of the story as he awaits trial on corruption charges. The Website gives the 68-year old former president an outlet to proclaim his innocence while he remains under house arrest at his vacation villa outside Manila. If convicted on the corruption charges, Mr. Estrada could face the death penalty. The site, www.erap.ph, contains reports on his graft case, charging that it is politically motivated, as well as an archive of statements put out by his political supporters. It also contains an e-mail address where readers can ask the president various questions. Estrada, whose nickname is Erap, is being held under house arrest at his sprawling vacation house outside Manila while being tried on charges of plundering an 80-million dollar fortune during his 30 months in office. [Reuters Eds.] 'Philippines' Estrada Takes Campaign To Cyberspace' http://www.reuters.com/newsArticle.jhtml?type=worldNews&storyID=8572563 ; [Eds. Newsflash] Detained Ex-President Estrada Launches Website To Give His Side http://www.newsflash.org/2004/02/hl/hi102122.htm ; [Eds.] Estrada Launches Website To Air Side http://news.inq7.net/top/index.php?index=1&story_id=37899 Accessed 08.08.2008

An alternative explanation could be provided by reusing Thompson’s remarks on the transformation of mass parties (specifically UK Labour during Blair’s leadership) into a leader centred party, whose members may become less active, and identify less with party politics and issues:

It is possible to suggest that a new model of organisation has developed - a leader centred party. ...The 'participation' of members is employed solely to strengthen the position of the leader, whilst they are at the same time sidelined as the leader builds links with external groups such as the media and business

Sites like Rashid Dostum’s in Afghanistan or Mahinda Rajapaksa’s in Sri Lanka tend blur the boundaries that separate real from acted politics, and, along the propaganda model - turn pseudo events and pseudo commitments into political initiatives. On one side, with the Afghan warlord, we are offered an example of international rehabilitation strategy, and on the other, with the Sri Lankan President we see a man of the masses using his 2 meters long home page as a war propaganda tool. In Bonchek’s terms these sites provide a fabulous opportunity to disenfranchise the charismatic leader’s political communication from the influence of hostile or inattentive mainstream media. Regardless the facts or the trustworthiness of the information, he or she exists publicly, he or she grabs (mainstream or residual) media attention, he or she defines truth and reality autonomously, as soon as his/her communication apparatus (including their personal site) is activated.

Mono-thematic Issue Sites: protest networks and radical grassroot organisations

Political controversies develop outside and of course inside the political web. In addition to true attack propaganda sections in political web sites, a separate, autonomous breed of sites is emerging rapidly, as stand alone entities, apparently detached from any formal political party. These are the cause oriented forms of activism (mixing advocacy as studied by Padovani or consumer politics, with petitioning, demonstrations and protests as noted by Norris), enabled by social networks, which, notes Ward, have the greatest organisational incentives to use ICTs for participation purposes...as they have the opportunity to gain a foothold and mobilise support at least in the short term. It’s not straightforward to place them in a taxonomy: clearly they are numerous, they belong to informal political actors, they share the traits of the attack sites and call for action with very cogent communication. Padovani notes: ...mobilising one-off protests or creating rapid but short lived ephemeral networks is where the internet may make the biggest impact...however, she continues, ..Sustaining those networks and campaigns may be more problematic since such networks are likely to lack organisational capacity.

513 PADOVANI C. “From the communicative dimension of transnational advocacy networks to a critical analysis of policy processes in the global governance of communication. The role of civil society in the World Summit on the Information Society”, paper presented in the Euricom Colloquium 'Electronic Networks and Democracy' Nijmegen, 9-12 October 2002  
514 Bouourides has written extensively on Online Activism and Social Networks Analysis applied to Opinion formation: BOUDOURIDES M., BOTETZAGIAS I. & KALAMARAS D. "Evaluating Web Sites of Online Activism" Paper for the Conference Contemporary Anti-War Mobilisations, Corfu, November 6-7.2003; BOUDOURIDES M. "A review of network theories on the formation of public opinion" Paper Presented to the Euricom Colloquium Nijmegen, the Netherlands, October 9-11.2002  
These sites are in general structured to deflect the audience attention from the author of the communication to the content of the communication. Their phenotype/functional structure ranges from the digital versions of the French J’accuse pamphlet, to forms hacktivism\textsuperscript{516}, to sites devoted to provide evidence of scandals, to pure operations of disinformation. The gamut of examples is as large as the range of controversies: claims on the corruption in Indonesia, the national movement against terrorism in Sri Lanka, the Cypriot problem, the Ivorieté issues in Côte d’Ivoire, the Armenian question, the online Intifada, the issue of Mafiocracy in Russia, the legitimacy of the attacks against Bosnia, the legitimacy of the trial of Milosevic, the Security Fence in Israel, alter-Globalization networks such as ATTAC etc.

This type of sites requires an in depth analysis to be classified in the information/disinformation/propaganda continuum: they could be either legitimate attempts of NGOs to inform web users while calling for action (white propaganda), or grey propaganda sites (part of the information shown in the site would be true and part fabricated), or black propaganda ones. They point is that they seem to be quite effective for this set of reasons:

- their iconographic support is of much greater photo-journalistic quality than the average found in party sites; the evidence they show oblige mainstream media to quote them as a alternative sources
- these sites are accurately edited and contain (in form of reports, fact files and interviews) significant quantities of credible minutiae and technicalities.
- their content covers hot issues in an original and outspoken way, often in stark contrast with the media or the political parties discourse
- their content is constantly updated by very motivated activists (see the Astra WebManager graph of Attac site in the annexes) which engage in a truly personal exchange with the audience and create expectation for new compelling stories to come
- they contain operational and logistical instructions to carry out direct action
- their content can hardly be found elsewhere, both in quantity and in quality. It is therefore a type of content which is likely to catch the attention of users and strongly motivate them even in the absence of formally organised support.

On the other hand this high impact content is hardly ponderable by the average visitor, opponents are never invited to contradict the claims of these sites, and the use of these resources often requires prior knowledge to the interpreted, understood or evaluated.

All in all they represent – more than the evidence of pluralism on the web – an additional evidence of the geometric growth of confrontational communication online. Much like charismatic leaders they represent a level of excellence which is hardly attainable by traditional parties.

\textsuperscript{516} The term has been coined by SAMUEL A.W. Hacktivism and the Future of Political Participation, PhD Thesis presented to the Department of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge Massachusetts, September 2004
Islamist Web Sites

The tactical weaponization of the internet and of the web has already been largely studied - notably by Conway - with the case of the Zapatistas in Mexico, the LTTE in Sri Lanka, the FARC in Colombia, the Hezbollah and so on. Interesting examples of the tactical use of the web come from movements such as Hibz Ut Tahrir or the Pro-Chechen Internet Agency Kavkazcentre (known to have been a precursor of the mirroring of controversial web sites, a survival technique later re-used by wikileaks).

In the last few years, the intelligence analysis emerging from the so called war on terror is revealing that one of the most important aspects of Al Qaeda after 9/11 has not been simply its physical growth, but its expansion on the Internet. Michael Scheuer, author of Imperial hubris and former CIA analyst in charge of Al Qaeda within the ALEC task force (1996-1999), suggests that Bin Laden warriors have intensified the use of the web as tactical system since Afghanistan could not be considered a secure base any more.

*The dispersion of its human resources that resulted from that fact has forced the organisation to become more virtual, to turn itself into Al-Qaeda 2.0.*

Now the base or the database (the ambiguity exists in Arabic) can exploit a full gamut of logistical tools to exchange communications and transfer money: in addition to the web (notably through internet cafés), there are cellphones and satellite telephony, radios and couriers; in addition to formal banking system, the bases uses both couriers and the hawala or hundi value transfer system (the informal banking system).

The web is a quasi perfect tool for groups which seek to organise political violence as every element of the process (from proselytism to propaganda based indoctrination to tactical / operational training) can be undertaken on the web in relative confidentiality. Since January 2002 Al Qaeda uses (without claiming the property of them) two sites Al Neda (Center for Islamic Research and Studies) and Al Ansar. Bi-weekly bulletins containing an analysis of the ongoing conflicts and of the political situation were published on these sites regularly. While the US government and its allies conduct campaign to detect and remove this and other sites, online violent propaganda continues to proliferate in numerous PHP based bulletin board systems thus creating contexts where the protection of civil liberties clashes with the enhancement of public security.

*Today the internet allows Muslim militants from any country in the world to meet, talk, get to know each other online, thus establishing a closeness in their relationship to achieve which it would have taken (in the 80s et 90s) several trips to Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan or Pakistan. The web offers a formidable contribution to what Bin Laden has always presented*
as is absolute priority: invite to jihad the maximum number of people in the maximum number of places.

These sites are the most likely to affect the dynamics of the the political web. In Innisian terms, these web sites have de facto attempted to weaker the power basis of the American Empire.

DELIMITING THE RESEARCH PERIMETER TO THE STUDY OF THE POLITICAL WEB STRICTO SENSI

If one applies a boundary less (inclusive of Easton's and Verba's parapolitical system) concept of online political system and considers both organised and non organized, institutional and informal, extra-political and non-political actors, the notion of political web becomes truly interesting, notably at global level: the combinatory potential deriving from the interaction of a much diverse and still politically polarized array of actors, opens fascinating research opportunities on the kinetic energy and the propagation dynamics generated by online political communication.

The methodological consequence of a non-finite interpretation of the political system online, obliges researchers to include in their fieldworks sites run by individuals. The result is the design of case studies based on millions of entities whose real impact in politics should be (in principle) assessed on a case by case basis. A second consequence is that the infinite perimeter of research would hide relevant case histories. While blogs with a specific technical structure (RSS, XML etc.) can be studied and measured, websites that do not respect the conventions of a blog, would be undetected, while relevant.

For this reason, the research perimeter was set wide global, while the analysis limited to a stricto sensu definition of the political web. In other words, to official political party sites and – whenever documentable – to parties having participated to political elections. In this respect i have followed the trace opened by Norris who notes (with Schattschneider) that political parties are priority research targets in the field of eDemocracy.

The consequence of this choice is the exclusion from the research filed of all the actors of the parapolitical system (such as charismatic leaders, terrorist web sites, cause based and civic based sites etc.) and all the alternative definitions of eDemocracy (such as eGovernment and eVoting).

Still, a large spectrum of specific research questions could be investigated focusing on political party sites. My key research questions therefore focus on the external functions of political parties, and largely reuse the set of RQs proposed in 2003 by Gibson, Ward and Lusoli.

521 These two categories should be considered relevant in all instances when a non political or an extra political actor becomes suddenly politically relevant as it engages into a specific behaviour

522 See http://politics.blogpulse.com/politics_summary.html accessed online 2/09/09

523 See http://technorati.com/blogging/state-of-the-blogosphere/ accessed online 2/09/09


525 When parties went online, Reasons for Establishing Websites, Which Parties are most effective online

148
I will essentially concentrate on performance issues and on the intentions of political parties online. In other words I will try to isolate the main functional character emerging from the political web today and I will try to verify if - as techno-optimists suggest - deliberation, two way communication and interactivity are the dominant traits of the political web.

- RQ1 What sort of political performance and usability (i.e. capacity to converting online visitors into active party supporters and voters) is actually achieved worldwide by political parties?
  - What are the indicators of political performance and how they compare?
- RQ2 What are the intentions of political party activists online?
  - Are these intentions coherent with the observable results (i.e. how political web projects are implemented)?
- RQ3 What is the main functional character emerging from the political web as it is today?
  - Are deliberation, two way communication and interactivity the dominant traits of the political web or what else?

Through a set of fieldworks I will also provide answers to Gibson, Ward and Lusoli 2003 RQs (When parties went online, Reasons for Establishing Websites, Which Parties are most effective online). Research questions such as Does the Public Respond? and What effects do web sites have? have not been taken into consideration in this dissertation (although elements related to the public response to political web sites will emerge in the analysis of the results of the third fieldwork).

THE CHOICE OF METHODS AND TOOLS IN THE ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

As I have tried to highlight in the literature review, the analysis of the study of eDemocracy has lacked so far of a wider lens, both theoretically and empirically. In particular party driven e-democracy has been studied by many only on a country scale.

From an empirical point of view moving from small scale studies to much wider global ones required the solution of several methodological questions. The issue was not related to the choice between qualitative and quantitative approach: both of them have been used in this dissertation (although in proportions that largely favour the role of quantitative analysis and statistics) to study the intentions of the party webmasters on one side and to scrutinize forms and functions of the political web stricto sensu on the other.

The real issues were essentially two.

- The first was the definition of the analysis unit for online parties, as, for a start, there is no embedded taxonomic resources in the DNS system to isolate political parties web sites.
The second issue was the method for the collection of data particularly for a cross sectional analysis: to keep the empirical section coherent, case by case, I needed to find several ways to acquire global data. I solved the issue with a worldwide webmaster survey, with a global manual observation (and a field notes database) and a global, software based structural/architectural analysis of web sites.

The information architecture approach in a global cross sectional study was the toughest to implement technically. I have spent few years experimenting software, conducting partial observations that I was forced to abort for technical reasons, to finally manage to develop a workable technical approach, and to define operational parameters for the scanning process to be performed on all the target web sites. While relatively rudimentary – as it is rather binary in epistemic terms (there is or there isn’t this or that function/code) – and not meant to carry out textual analysis, this methodology remains quite effective and powerful (as the quality of the parameters inserted in the scanning profile can evolve and adapt to match future software technologies).

DEFINING THE UNIT OF ANALYSIS

Defining the Online Source for Party Web Sites URLs

There is no scientific taxonomic mechanism embedded in the Internet’s domain name management system.

It’s virtually impossible to disaggregate DNS registry data in discrete sub-components (other than TLDs). There are no specific tags in the WHOIS Domain name lookup that can differentiate, say, the web site of the daily Le Soir from the Belgian CDH party.

Printed directories of Political Parties (such as Sagar’s Political Parties of the World) did not include an updated reference of parties URLs on the net at the time of writing.

Internet directories – such Google Directory, DMOZ (the Open Source Directory) and Yahoo – did not (and most of them still do not) all have an entry for politics or parties in their home pages; often their taxonomies are unreliable or incomplete.

Specialised political directories (or meta sites) provide, however, an effective alternative to explore (the party) political web. These directories are created and maintained either by traditional media (press, TV), or by Political Science Departments in major universities, or by political activists. Although few ones have global coverage, an additional set of conditionalities was needed to define the perimeter of analysis.

I therefore proceeded, in the footsteps, by searching manually the main political directories available at the time of the research; I then scanned various levels within these sites with the aim of understanding their main focus. I finally categorized four broad groups of political directories covering a wide range of issues, namely:

• Political leaders: these are lists that rank (in chronological order) world leaders and rulers, their biographies and their pictures. None of these lists includes a systematic inventory of links to leaders web sites. The main aim of these sites is to provide to journalists, researchers and political activists an up to date online resource to check changes in government.

• Parties and Elections: these contains descriptions of the party systems, electoral systems and election calendars for all countries worldwide.

• Parliaments, Governments (and public administration at large): these sites focus essentially on the various forms of public administration and on providing comprehensive jumplists to parliaments and ministries worldwide.

• Miscellaneous Political content Meta-sites: these sites present an heterogeneous mix of content ranging from political science studies (ranging from international relations, security, regional studies, or issue oriented studies etc.), factbooks, flags and maps meta-sites.

In order to discover among the various directories available, the online party meta-sites with the highest degree of granularity, I proceeded by identifying in Google a set of reference sites, i.e. minor party sites in developing countries (for example parties in Laos, Nepal etc.). The assumption was that if a websites directory did not list small, but relevant parties, it would not be a valid and reliable source. Four web-directories passed this screening:

Political Resources on the Net (www.politicalresources.net) managed by Roberto Cicciomessere in Rome (updated and operating at the time of writing this document),

Governments on the WWW managed by Gunnar Anzinger (www.gksoft.com/govt/ last update in 2002),

Richard Kimber’s Political Science Resources (www.politicsresources.net last updated on 28.05.2011 but partially operational due to the fact that Prof. Kimber has retired),

Elections around the world managed by Wilfried Derksen (www.electionworld.org was operating until 2005; today the content of the Electionworld.org site has been merged into Wikipedia)
In order to pave the way for the fieldworks carried out until 2005 I used a mix of techniques to assess these sites comparatively:

1. **reverse links count**\(^{528}\) or the number of web pages that point to the home page of the four meta-sites. Although more elaborate indicators exist such as Kleinberg’s HITS hubs score\(^{529}\), a large number of reverse links is still a valid indicator of relevance and popularity.

### Table: Alternative analysis units compared

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Resources on the Net</td>
<td>Managed by former Italian MP and MEP Roberto Cicciomessere in Rome the site was created in the mid 90's as a e-democracy project. The platform which gathers political parties, movement sites, political initiatives sites, media and government sites is the largest (also in terms of themes/genres covered) collection of all four. Several contributors participate to the site update. The site contains 5 levels for a total of 28172 Links of which 21933 are external links (77% of the site) – 20% of failed links Alexa’s Avg. Traffic Rank: 80,443 Other sites that link to this site: 1,174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Kimber’s Political Science Resources</td>
<td>Managed by Dr. Richard Kimber at the Keele University the site aims at providing, in addition to numerous political parties web sites a wide range of political science resources. The site contains 8 Levels for a total of 12643 links of which 10310 external (81% of the site) - 12% of failed links Alexa’s Avg. Traffic Rank: 41,480 Other sites that link to this site: 97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election World</td>
<td>Electionworld.org focuses worldwide elections on a country basis. Documentation, edition and design are exclusively worked by electionworld.org and its editor. Electionworld.org is edited by Wilfried Derksen. He studied law at the Nijmegen University and practices law in the Netherlands. He is the international secretary of the Dutch social-liberal party Democrat 66 (Democrats 66) and president of the Foundation International Democratic Initiative D66, the foundation related to D66 which supports like-minded parties in Central and Eastern Europe and outside Europe. Elections around the world depends on its regular contributors. Contributions were regularly made by: Mourad Ben Abdallah, Gunnar Antzinger, Hubert Descans, Franco Ferrari, Roberto Ortiz de Zarate, Juan Jorge Schäffer, Gary Selikow, Alejandro Solá, the editors of Klipsan Press and the editor of Rulers. The site contains 6 levels for a total of 4209 links of which 3549 ext. 84% of the site - 12% broken Avg. Traffic Rank: 97,118 Other sites that link to this site: 511</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governments on the WWW</td>
<td>Managed by Gunnar Anzinger the site is presented as a Comprehensive database of governmental institutions on the World Wide Web: parliaments, ministries, offices, law courts, embassies, city councils, public broadcasting corporations, central banks, multi-governmental institutions etc. Includes also political parties. Online since June 1995. Contains more than 17000 entries from more than 220 countries and territories as of July 2001. The site contains 4 levels for a total of 22366 links of which 22101 ext. (this represents 98% of the site - 16% of the links are broken. Alexa’s Avg. Traffic Rank: 40,984 Other sites that link to this site: 3,042</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

528 This is done using the command link:http://www.sitename.tld in Google, which is at present considered to be the largest search engine


11.09.2010
2. Traffic measurement with Alexa’s proprietary technology: a relative, but yet useful comparative reference for Web sites popularity.

3. Website structural analysis which gives a measure of the sites’ complexity and granularity by counting the total number of external links.

4. Measurements of the total number of broken, unaccessible or dead external links.

5. Manual exploration to compare the quality of the information and evaluate the overall amount of party related information.

This comparative analysis was carried out in 2002, prior the case studies described in the following chapters and prior to the merging of Electionworld.org into Wikimapia. The results I obtained were the following:

- A detailed scrutiny of all the data collected revealed that popularity indicators were not useful to define the best resource to use, as popularity was greater in non specialist platforms.

- From the manual analysis it appeared that of the four metasites, two - Political Resources and ElectionWorld.org - had the largest collection of party web sites and the best of the two was also the site with the lowest popularity records of all four.

- Thanks to its much greater number of contributors, ElectionWorld.org was – in 2002 - the sole metasite which documented political parties participation (and scores) in the most recent elections worldwide.

For this feature, similarly to Norris\textsuperscript{530}, I selected Electionsworld.org as the site defining the perimeter of the overall empirical fieldwork on the global performance online of political parties.

ANALYTICAL STRATEGY FOR THE TAXONOMY (1\textsuperscript{ST} EMPIRICAL FIELDWORK)

The aim of the first fieldwork was to carry out – through an longitudinal survey - an analytical inventory of details, phenotypical attributes, architectural notions (and whenever possible content related remarks) the greatest database of political parties available online at that moment. This inventory would have allowed me to define both a typology and a taxonomy of political performance and usability (i.e. capacity of the design and information architecture to converting online visitors into active party supporters and voters) online, to test some of the performance parameters identified in the second part of the literature review, but also to identify a broad set of parameters to be used as research targets in other fieldworks.

Structuring the field notes

The data collection phase of this particular first case study was centred on a longitudinal analysis (2001-2009) supported by the development of a database of annotations related to elements that could contribute to the performance of political parties online (i.e. the capacity to convert audience in active supporters). The database, developed using Filemaker, included a media section with screen captures taken from 624 sites, 536 of which party or political movement sites, the rest being a mix of charismatic leaders sites (50), issue sites and governmental sites (recorded as a control group).

This sample was compiled through sequential (not random) visits to the lists of both PoliticalResources.net and Electionworld.org. It represents (numerically) roughly one fourth of the overall number of sites available in the Electionworld.org jumplist which I have scanned using WLV. It is also relatively balanced in terms of geographical coverage (31 from North America, 119 from South America, 30 from Central America, 22 from Turkey and Russia, 43 from Australia and New Zealand, 174 from Europe, 57 from Asia, 29 from Sub Saharian Africa, 31 from the Middle East including Yemen). The full database was constructed through 6 manual collection campaigns with repeated individual visits to each site.

A FileMaker database (http://www.filemaker.com) was used to collect and store the annotations; the software worked as a detailed logfile (and multimedia sampler) of the visits to a given site.

The structure of the database evolved along the research and was adjusted several times to match the findings of the fieldwork. As shown in the picture the database structure contained:

- A system of Coding aimed at facilitating the retrieval of particularly relevant cases
- A field describing the web technology used in the site (Java, Flash, XML, DHTML etc.),
- A description of the interactivity tools implemented in the site (interactivity is defined here with Heeter as programs allowing person to person interaction through basic mailto commands, and in particular through interactive PHP based fora, or blogs),
- A field indicating the direction of the links (internal-external) with multiple options concerning external (links to peers and likeminded, versus links to opposition)

531 Two visits or more per site
532 Letters from A(max) to D(min) or stars 5*(max) to 1*(min)
A field indicating the language of the site (local, non local, multiple),

A checker box to note the availability of traffic statistics,

A field describing the classification of the site by type of communication (relational, entertainment oriented, cultural transmission, surveillance) according to Wright's functional model.\textsuperscript{533}

A full text field for annotations

Various multimedia fields containing pictures (or details) of the Web sites. These were added in the last manual coding to keep accurate records of visual implementations.

During data collection, it became clear that it was impossible to scrutinize content in order to tag it making reference to Wright's content indicators and therefore this specific coding was dropped in the course of the analysis. Although I did not intend to perform strict textual analysis, it became rapidly clear to me that language was not really a constraint in the analysis of party sites worldwide: many of them use European languages or present an English/French version of the web site or can be translated using Internet tools. As a consequence of this I have often taken notes related to essential content analysis short of detailed semantic scrutiny.

In the process of carrying out such a big number of manual observation campaigns, it became clear that web site structural analysis (derived from information architecture theory) was - as in Schneider and Foot\textsuperscript{534} or better as in Kahn and Lenk's\textsuperscript{535} geography of information spaces- the best alternative to dissect and compare such a wide number of sites.

The strict definition of the research perimeter allowed research not to be affected by the changes occurring in the observed universe over time. On the contrary, the evolution of the same set of web sites monitored (and recoded two or more times according to the quality and quantity of changes) between 2004 and 2009 revealed new repetitive patterns that were identifiable in cases located in different regions worldwide.


\textsuperscript{534} SCHNEIDER S.M. AND FOOT K., 'Online Structure for Political action: exploring presidential campaign web sites from the 2000 American Election' The Public Vol. 9 (2002), 2, 43-60

\textsuperscript{535} KAHN P. LENK K., Mapping Web Sites, Rotovision, 2001
Towards a partial Taxonomy of the formal agents of political communication online.

The most effective feature in data collection terms deriving from these manual observation campaigns was the stream of annotations recorded during each visit in the Filemaker database. These comments and codes, re-elaborated and homogenized at the end of the process, gave birth to a subjective rating of case relevance, and helped define my basic taxonomic units, in terms of both genus and species.

A taxonomy is a method originally used in biology and botanics to classify animal and vegetal life. The use of taxonomies has evolved and has become popular also in the field of economics, business, military, education and knowledge management. I have used structural, phenotipical and functional commonalities as the main nomos of my categorization. The main objective of the analytical strategy was not to engage in a comprehensive information/linguistic taxonomy for the technical development of the whole political web and its searchability; neither it was (nor it could be) to create a comprehensive taxonomy of web properties thus creating a coherent system of ranks (such as the eight canons: domain, kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species) for the web in general or the political web lato sensu.

The families I have isolated represent three evolutionary phases characteristic of political experience online. These stages represent different degrees of commitment towards online action in the political Web. Against this background I consider that my basic taxonomy can be used for both official party web sites and for anti-regime web sites or NGOs web sites, two other actors of the lato sensu political web.

The analysis of the structural, phenotipical and functional characters of the three main families of official web sites has allowed be to isolate some 8 different genus. Each genus looks differently. Every genus shows a complex of stable functions or rationally defined service concepts, which frame a specific type of interaction between Web-broadcasters and the public at large.

Centering the analysis on the Usability of Information Spaces

Scholarly analysis of party web sites has already dissected the functions of sites using a scoring system that codes on the presence of a number of features (in the sense of web applications), this applies for example to the works of Norris (2003), Schneider and Foot.

In this dissertation the emphasis is on both forms, spaces and volumes, on signs and on the relation between signs and the related political ideologies. Together with Ackland I adopt a tridimensional approach, but I focus on the edifice of the web site (instead of a WebSphere): the consequence of this choice is an emphasis on architectural features in political web hypertextual design, as key to its usability.

536 LAMBE P., Organising Knowledge: Taxonomies, Knowledge and Organisational Effectiveness (Chandos Knowledge Management), 2007; BAILEY K.D. Typologies and Taxonomies: An Introduction to Classification Techniques (Quantitative Applications in the Social Sciences) Sage, 1994
537 The set of observable characteristics of an individual resulting from the interaction of its genotype with the environment
In this respect Paul Kahn notes:

_While a hypertext is not the world it presents similar problems of orientation and wayfinding, and a graphical summary of its structure can serve many purposes._

...Finding our way around a web site is no different than finding our way around a building. We use our eyes, we make assumptions, we look for consistency, and learn from experience. If there is no visual difference between a door that leads to a bathroom, a basement stairway, or a clothes closet, then we have to test each one to find where to hang our coat. If there is a floorplan on the wall that contains symbols for each, we will find the bathroom without having to open every door. Building a web site is not unlike building a physical structure, such as a house.

This methodological approach has been indirectly validated by Gibson, Ward and Lusoli in their 2003 comparative analysis of British, American, Australian and German political sites:

_Clearly laid out policy sections that allow voters to delve deeper and select the parts that they most want to read quickly and easily, seem to be the name of the game for successful websites._

**ANALYTICAL STRATEGY OF THE GLOBAL STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL WEB SITES USING WLV (2ND EMPIRICAL FIELDWORK)**

The limitations deriving from my first qualitative fieldwork were compensated by two complementary fieldworks.

With the second fieldwork I intended to tackle the limitations and shortcomings associated with manual analysis of web sites. By carefully choosing an adequate (in information architecture terms) software analyzer, I have run an automatic structural analysis of all the sites listed in the largest and most accurate collection at the time of the analysis (Electionworld.org).

My aim in this specific fieldwork was to collect as many factual data as possible on the technical structure of political sites web sites. By scrutinizing these data I intended to corroborate some of my findings concerning the functional objectives of party sites, notably with regard to interactivity and deliberative forms of political participation.

The third fieldwork (the Political Webmasters Online Survey) aimed at gathering an insider view on the creation and the maintenance of political web sites: on the basis of an online questionnaire I hoped to gain a good understanding on motivations and strategies that explain the state of the political web stricto sensu today.
The choice for the right tool for an Information Architecture approach to the Political Web

Political web sites do not differ from the rest of the web. They are all organised in a given architecture and each one of them is made with a given set of materials and construction techniques. It is virtually impossible for a single researcher to collect manually with a web browser information about the structural features of web sites.

For this reason it has been necessary to couple to my first subjective fieldwork, one based on the automatic usage of web analysers.

The use of web analysers in academic research is quite recent. Structural and architectural analysis of Web sites has neither acquired sufficient academic or business recognition. At least not enough, or not yet. One of the problems is that it’s difficult to agree what to measure. In the late 90’s number of pages, number of links, size in megabytes etc. were the obvious web sites structures to measure, i.e. the parts of a Web site which at the same time define what the site is or looks, and changed the least frequently.

With the multiplication of dynamic (PhP, DHTML, ASP, Javascript, AJAX based) sites, the notion of the end of a site (its lowest level) is disappearing, as new levels can be created at the request of the users.

A plethora of web analysers

A plethora of softwares have been introduced on the market to achieve structural/architectural analysis and they are becoming critical to assess performance online as they can provide useful clues on the existence on design flaws. For the sake of the dissertation their interest lies in their ability to identify specific sections of the programming which can enhance political participation.

A stand-alone Web site analytical software, is a relatively straightforward software which aims essentially at performing two functions:

- Mapping in two or three dimensions the overall structure of a site
- Counting and checking the validity of the structural elements that constitute a given site (number of links, direction of links, number of site levels, ratio between images/text/multimedia, site size etc.)

Web site analytical software – in the course of its short existence – has gone through several stages of development. The first wave of analytical software performed simple HTML verification. In a later stage, a second generation of software emerged with the aim of measuring site speed (critical in a pre-xDSL phase) and major design errors, both considered to be critical to the site performance.

More specifically factors measured by second generation software (such as WebAnalyzerTM ) were:

- number of errors generated by a given site (in particular 404 errors or broken links)
- download time of pages
- age of the pages
- quality of HTML syntax used in the pages
- number and type of file extensions used in the site

A third generation software emerged towards the end of the 90’s bringing dramatically improved mapping features (Astra, PowerMapper\textsuperscript{541}), speed (Web Link Analyzer, eVALID) and new, more specialised analytical routines such as record/playback, real time audience analysis, word count and analysis of concordances, keyword density analysis or reverse linking analysis (eVALID, Funnel Web and Trellian Internet Suite).

**Selecting the right tool: a serious technical challenge**

Selecting the right software for my empirical analysis and automating its activity has been one of the most lengthy and serious technical challenges I have had in the course of this research project. The technical analysis of the available alternatives started in 1996 and lasted until the year 2000. With few, notable exceptions, most of the software tested so far presented some drawbacks:

- lack of (or minimal) technical support: most of the software companies in this business have discontinued their development on key softwares (WebAnalyzer, Funnel Web, Astra) or do not provide support for their free softwares (Astra Site Manager). Among pure analyzers only Web Link Validator and eVALID provide real customer support, eVALID having the richest customer support of all (technical newsletters, large help site, help provided by the staff of technicians in S. Francisco etc.).

- huge RAM requirements and lack of multiplatform support: 512 Megs of RAM is the bare minimum to carry out our type of investigation (multiple processors and Giga like memory should be envisaged in future trials); most of the softwares runs on Windows, only the discontinued Funnel Web was available on UNIX and Apple Macintosh platforms.

- None of the software has been designed taking into consideration the possibility of scanning a list of sites, instead of one only. None of the software companies has integrated (so far) the very idea of doing consecutive benchmarking between sites of a given category. The only technical solution to this issue is writing a small batch processing programme through DOS command lines, then export of data in a given format (when this is available from the software, otherwise an HTML parser is needed to extract data from specific fields and export it on excel or equivalent software), then processing using a specific statistical product such as SPSS.

- Maps produced by these sites are either too simple (they do not reflect the growing asymmetric structures of modern Web sites) or too complex to interpret (such as in the case of Astra or Funnel Web which do not provide any specific help to decode in detail the maps produced by the software). In both cases, and even when using the best specialised tools in this domain (such as PowerMapper) sites are becoming too large to allow drawing manageable maps.

\textsuperscript{541} Kahn P., Lenk K. Mapping Web Sites Rotovision p9 2001
• The relationship between reverse and forward links is not represented in most of the graphs: this results in the impossibility of apprehending the environment in which the given site is inserted (basically which sites point to the party site one is analysing and to which other sites the party links to). A manual alternative to achieve this type of analysis would be the Touchgraph Google Search engine or the discontinued application Internet Cartographer.

• None of the programmes (eVALID, WebLink Validator) I have found to be most suitable for our research environment provides the possibility of analysing how a given site (or list of sites) ranks in the major search engines, nor its (link) popularity. One needs to perform this analysis using separate tools such as for example Trellian’s suite.

When comparing field experience with all the software mentioned here and in particular when comparing eVALID and WLV (our two preferred platforms) two major scientific and operational issues emerge:

• First, the so called combinatorial explosion is the real obstacle to multi-site benchmarking. This problem become apparent mainly with dynamic sites i.e. sites which are structured as databases and whose pages (a part or all) are generated on the fly by a programming languages such as PHP, asp/javascript, Coldfusion. What happens is that web analyzers call the site pages using various parameters. Being these parameters non constrained in quantity (unlimited) or order, web analyzers cannot at a certain stage distinguish which pages contain real content and which ones don’t. A different combination of variables could give in reality access to the same content, but be perceived by the software as a different page. It suffices, for example, that a site contains a mechanism to create dynamically a perpetual calendar that Web Link Validator or any other ap-
Application will attempt to analyse all the pages of the calendar. The result is combinatorial explosion. Site analysis generates an unlimited amount of levels (as if the site was tremendously deep) and machines dramatically slow down under massive memory swaps (WLV and eVALID) or simply freeze (Web Analyzer, Astra).

- The second and connected issue is that results may slightly vary from software to software: eValid seems to count more links than any other given platform, but it’s virtually impossible to assess whether the delta is referred to pages carrying actual, usable political content online.

On the basis of this background and due to WLV cost, speed, lightness in terms of memory and good reporting features, I decided to carry out the empirical analysis using WLV. Data have been exported in HTML, and then re-filtered in .csv format to be then analysed with SPSS.

ANALYTICAL STRATEGY OF THE POLITICAL WEBMASTERS ONLINE SURVEY (3rd EMPIRICAL FIELDWORK)

The analytical strategy adopted for the third fieldwork (the Political Webmasters Online Survey) has been centred on the identification of testimonials of the internal process of conceiving, producing and maintaining political party web sites. Given the global nature of the analysis unit, I opted for an online survey as the most suitable tool to collect data.

Reducing the potential for inaccuracy
The sample has been defined with the aim of reducing the non-response bias by extracting manually from the existing universe (the electionworld.org collection of political parties web sites) the largest collection of central/main email addresses from the available web properties. The result of this process was a list of 1006 email addresses. I have then administered a short 12 questions survey carefully geared to minimize response bias. The survey was administrated to the individuals identified in the party sites as the main contact persons. These were webmasters or, more generally, people in charge of the online strategy for the party.

The questionnaire was managed using the SurveyMonkey online polling platform (www.surveymonkey.com). Responses were collected between October 2004 and Feb 2005. The answers were gathered on the basis of 46 successive mail waves: each recipient got in average one start-up message and up to nine different reminders.

Responders cooperation and attention was not average: I obtained 109 respondents (10.83% of the total), 37 parties declined, 860 did not reply. The overall structure of the sample - which will be described further - did not raise specific issues of coverage error.
6. A Basic Taxonomy of the Early Actors of the Political Web (stricto Sensu)

DECONSTRUCTING AND COMPARING POLITICAL WEB SITES: INSTRUCTIONS AND OTHER DETAILS

The first step – empirically speaking – of my work has been to explore the political web (stricto sensu) and take note of converging/diverging patterns in the production of political party sites. To achieve this I have used information architecture references (specifically web design tutorials provided by Weinmann and Nielsen), and following Arrasse I have isolated a set of details (some of which content related, other phenotypical or functional or mixed) which are highly representative of the variance observable in the list provided by Electionworld.org.

These elements decline in different flavors a set of repetitive and comparable patterns that can be easily identified on a global scale in official party sites. The following sections provide a review of these commonalities.

Instructions and time lines:

Party sites do not negotiate. Party sites tell very clearly users who they are (or who they should be), what they are supposed to know and to do. The delivery of instructions (direct orders in propaganda terms are used to simplify decision making for followers) is the key character of all those sites which are turned on, active and competitive. Other sites, which look as completely static document repositories are turned off, and engage much less effectively in action oriented instructions with the end user.

Party sites almost systematically project users on a time line, suggesting that action needs to be undertaken under the constraints of the present, due to the promises of the future or remembering the past.

In 2006 both Forza Italia and the UK Conservatives delivering in their sites instructions stemming from the day’s debate. Specifically, on the Forza Italia Site, users were able to find a call for solidarity in defense of a right wing Minister (Mrs. Moratti) criticised for behaviours perceived as provocative by part of the public, during the celebration of in Milan on April 25th the Liberation Day. On the Conservative web site users were prompted a request for the resignation of Charles Clarke in Britain, following the polemics related to the (badly managed) release of more than a 1000 criminals in the previous 7 years.

---

543 Notably through his website useit.com: Jakob Nielsen on Usability and Web Design URL : http://www.useit.com
544 ARRASSE D., Le detail - pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture, Champs-Flammarion, 2002
545 I should note here again – as I noted above – that this does not represent the focus of this case study, but it’s a set of annotations which is worth reporting as they kept on recurring in the analysis of many cases in Europe and around the world, notably is Anglo-phone countries in Africa and Asia, Ispanophone countries in Latin America, Lusophone countries in Africa.
546 On that day she had actually marched in the streets accompanied by her father, former freedom fighter, and former prisoner in Dachau.
Party Sites as Online Newspapers and the Issue Hypermarket:

In several OCDE countries a trend towards the elimination of both background files and historical references (in sum, the elimination a backward oriented time line) from the front page is clearly visible. The effect (deliberately or unconsciously) produced, is to reinforce the impression that the party is pragmatic, issue driven.

This editorial choice clearly reinforces the drift of official party web sites from (could be) interactive platforms to alternative forms of mainstream press, online (see in this respect the PSOE “Prensa Boxes” in the capture on the right).

The extreme consequence of the anchoring the present is also the parossistic enlargement of size of the policy arena. In such cases parties definitely move away from the single issue model (the notion of Issue party as in Elliot, Dautrich and Yalof or in Flanagan), and reduce the efforts deriving from issues realignment as, with this method, there are fewer and fewer policy matters left out from the party radar screens.

In Forza Italia, the party policy (See on the right the capture of the navigation frame - 2006) covers virtually every niche of the political market, theoretically multiplying efficiency and opportunities for profitability. Critics could argue that this type of behaviour sums up to the materialization of an ideological hypermarket where every political sub culture can find a gratification to his or her needs and wants. Others may see in this type of behaviour a more explicit and clear implementation of a party manifesto; a resource for newcomers which faciltates the acquisition of essential information for potential voters.

This type of model is not at all exclusive to Forza Italia: it’s a normalization pattern - which originated in the US (the Gore Lieberman Site) but extended also in Austria (Greens 2002), or Canada (Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance Alliance réformiste-conservatrice canadienne 2002), regardless the political polarization of the party.

549 FLANAGAN, S. The Japanese Voter Yale University Press 1991 p. 29
Memory, Identity and Cognitive Sequences:

The role of collective political memory continues to be a shaping factor for conservative, religious and Marxist political identities everywhere around the world. Memory allows to re-link with places (as in the root of the French souvenir) or re-link with sounds and physical emotions (as in the root of the Italian term ri-membrare/re-member, or ri-chiamare/re-call, or ri-cordare/re-cord).

For this reason a large number of party sites home pages invite viewers to execute cognitive sequence which starts with the instruction to recollect what made us what we are today; the second instruction invites users to acquire the (traditional) conceptual tools to decode the present; finally the third instruction suggests to use the past to understand the trajectory towards the terminus ad quem, the ultimate political goal. A clear illustration of this sequence can be found in the 2006 Ivorian Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès web site where notre histoire, nous connaitre and actualité are one next to the other in the home page in a logical sequence.

India and Pakistan offer two additional interesting examples of memory based identity definition and cognitive sequence. On the BJP site (Bharatiya Janata Party) of Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani, in addition to a section devoted to the party history there is an important section of articles to educate visitors on the two pillars of the party philosophy (in particular to the notions of integral humanism and Hindutva or Hinduness, the latter critical to decode contemporary Indian politics).

On the Pakistani Jamaat-e-Islami site of Qazi Hussain Ahmad, a key component of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) Party, the history of the movement, the figure of its founder and finally and the movement world vision are all seamlessly interrelated in the home page. Jamaat's world vision page is instrumental to communicate with the secondary audience, of those around the world who sympathise with Jamaat's view on Islam and the West. The learning process in this case not really or uniquely for the Pakistani community (which could be reached with content in Urdu), but for the Diaspora and other Muslim readers abroad who need to understand the main pillars of Jamaat's political vision. Often highly representative of the anti-US, anti-Western sentiment which has emerged both off and online since 9/11, the main pillars of Jamaat-e-Islami political message include notions such as the US definition of Democracy, the absence of the concept of fundamentalism in Islam, the double standard of the international community with regard to the crisis in Chechnya, the injustice in many Arab regimes, the strategies of the enemies of Islam, etc.

Marxist parties are another interesting case of identity statement through memory. Two small communist parties in Brasil, the Partido Socialista dos trabalhadores Unificado, or the Partido Comunista do Brasil have a very organised and functional relationship with the

---

551 One of the components of the FORA COLLOR movement to impeach President Collor De Mello
552 One of the members of the coalition supporting Lula
past. Well after the fall of the Berlin wall, these, like many other Marxist sites, focus their home page precisely on the revival of classic theory, and on the emphatization of the importance of training in the framework of political participation.

The PSTU features a section devoted to (Marxist) theory and sells introductory works on Marxist Logic. The PcdoB Site navigation frame offers a link to pages defining the meaning of being Communist (O que é ser Comunista), links to Marxist Libraries and training booklets.

All this, is in a rather stark contrasts with the visual strategy of other extreme left parties in Europe or in Brasil: in their sites (in 2006) the memory of the past is hidden somewhere at the bottom of the home page and the philosophical references have been compressed, eroded, desaturated into a sort of subliminal left553.

In Africa, with the Ivorian PDCI-RDA Party, the past serves and supports the present. On the sides of the party logo the party founder Félix Houphouet Boigny (President of Côte d’Ivoire from the country’s independence until 1993) is portrayed while receiving the Holy Sacrament from a priest. On the other side the contemporary leader Henri Konan Bédié waves in sign of victory in a party congress.

Same reference, but almost encrypted, in the Socialist Party in Chile. Next to the Equipo Bachelet the eyeglasses of Salvador Allende and a set of animated slogans, reconnect the present to the past.

Similar examples of visual details that reconnect the reason why of the party to the history of the country can be seen in the home pages of the Union Civica Radical of Alfonsin or Fernando De la Rúa in Argentina, with the Apristas of Alan Garcia in Peru, or with the Progressive Socialist Party of the Druze Walid Joumblatt in Lebanon.

**Poetry and Music as identitarian references**

Poetry and music provide effective anchors to recall collective memories and strong identitarian references to party followers worldwide. The annotation collected in more than 600 cases suggest that this is particularly true in South Asia, notably Pakistan, Afghanistan, India and Bangladesh: for example on the BJP Party the Vande Mataram the Indian anthem composed in 1882, allows users to recall the call for in-

553 I am referring to the Austrian KPO, French PCF, Spanish IU, German PDS, French PCF, Brasilian PT 2006. In most of these web sites it was striking to note that the colour red was almost gone or largely less present than their marxist/communist counterparts in Latin America.
dependence from British rule during the Indian freedom movement. In Latin America (and in numerous left wing sites elsewhere) the *International* song is an extremely popular reference, much like the so-called *Inti+Quila songs* for the Socialists in Chile.\(^{554}\) Music entertains and reinforces a trendy attitude of the party both in Africa (the zouglou song *Bekounibé* promoting peace and reconciliation in Côte d’Ivoire on the PDCI-RDA party forum)\(^{555}\), in Italy (the *Forza Italia* hymn is available on the party site both in MP3 format and as a phone melody)\(^{556}\), and in Brasil (the jingle composed by the Partito dos trabalhadores for the 25th anniversary of the organisation).

**Professional Audio and Video as indicators of excellence**

In the last ten years professional audio and video has become increasingly popular in the political web. The development and streaming platforms are abundant and the costs of production have lowered considerably. This has led a number of actors (such as the Korean Hannara Party 2000 or the LDPR.RU of Vladimir Jirinowski) to publish video regularly, together with short news programmes. Professional video shifts the nature of the communication model used by the political web: from the press towards the television or better, towards a new type of integrated transmedia language which is typical of the modern world wide web.

The complexity of the production workflow remains however significant thus limiting the adoption of these attributes to the most committed and specialised actors. Video is the terrain of all political communication experiments: from vlogging to video based crowdsourcing (see in the previous page the mobile phone clips of UK Labour 2006). Professional audio and video productions have de facto become markers of excellence for a minority of western parties: specifically those that have chosen to reduce their dependence from mainstream media. Two notorious examples of this type of strategy are the Radicali in Italy and the French Front National. The latter in the early 2000 proposed first a LepenTV, then scaled the concept down to a Radio Le Pen in 2006 and ended up keeping a variable (and ad hoc) video/audio multimedia in 2009.

---

\(^{554}\) The works of Inti Illimani such as *La Canción Popular* or *El Pueblo Unido Jamás sera Vencido* and those of the group Quilapayun more than anyone else represent the memory of the dictatorship’s oppression Source [http://www.salvador-allende.cl/](http://www.salvador-allende.cl/) Accessed July 2006


\(^{556}\) Source [http://www.forzaitaliajovani.it/gadgets05.htm](http://www.forzaitaliajovani.it/gadgets05.htm) Accessed July 2006

166
Cartoons and Animations: between visual culture and propaganda

Cartoons and animations are much less popular: they are characteristic of the visual culture in Japan and Korea and are essentially used in Europe to visualise – at low cost - propaganda myths as suggested by Ellul and Sorel. The fears associated with the accession of Turkey to the E.U. are turned into a small shockwave file in the Belgian Front National Packman animation (2006), an attribute derived from the original Greek version produced by the Front Hellenique. Turkey is shown eating Europe like Packman in the game, country by country. It’s the contemporary version of the World War I engravings and posters. Animated GIF banners are an additional example of animations turned into propaganda tools: a selection of these tools is shown in the next section.

Photographs between photojournalism and propaganda

Photographs play multiple roles on party web sites. The subject is so large to deserve a specific research. In the context of the dissertation I will limit my remarks to what I reckon being the three most essential ones.

Whenever possible, the primary role of photographic sections in party web sites is to report, along the conventions of photojournalism, strong evidence of tragic events, such as in the case of:

- the huge gallery of images of NATO war crimes in Serbia on Milosevich Socialist Party, but also
- the massacres in Algeria pages on the site of the Fraternité Algérienne en France,
- the horrors committed by Israel on a Fateh site,

---

558 Originally available through URL http://www.sps.org.yu/agresija/uvod-agresija.htm. These images have been transferred on a pro milosevich site http://www.slobodan-milosevic.org/ws2/NATO_agr.htm
559 Visited in 1999 and then removed from the web
560 See www.fateh.org, visited in 1999 and later removed from the web
or the Qana massacre reported by the Lebanese Syrian Nationalist Party,
or the prison resistance reported in 2001 by the Türkiye Komünist Emek Partisi (TKEP/Leninist) Communist Labour Party of Turkey/Leninist.

In most cases photographs are used in party sites as illustrations, following the conventions of the publishing and advertising industry. An interesting example of the interactions between political imagery and advertising imagery is visible in the technique of the Austrian ÖVP eCards in 2002. These were online applications which allow users to send personalised emails on the basis of ready made templates and themes. An interesting example of Campaign items personalisation.

Leader’s photographs are notoriously critical to the imagery of a party. On the web they are transformed into animated GIFs (banners). Animated banners allow a very broad range of creative (questions and answers sequences, slow transitions, flashing slogans etc.). Banners can become part of the campaigner toolkit, can be mailed, or can be embedded on other web sites to reverse link on a given political site.

Selected Case: Forza Italia Parody Banners

Forza Italia somehow revolutionized the genre when it introduced in 1999 an integrated national campaign based on 3x9 meters physical posters in the main urban streets of Italy and web banners online, all using the same campaign slogans. The format – considered by some observers as having been decisive to the success of the party - was perpetuated in the following campaigns and became so popular online to be reproduced in numerous other competitions by other political parties in Europe.

It’s worth mentioning in this respect that the success of the banners led to the launch of a spontaneous bottom up propaganda campaign to use parody banners against Berlusconi (Image). The banners were structured as animated gifs: the animation started by giving the leads of the Berlusconi campaign and

---

561 On 18 April 1996, in which more than 100 Lebanese civilians were killed in the headquarters of the Fijian battalion of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). http://www.bintjbeil.com/E/un/s1996337.html

Illustration 32: Detail > Horrors of the Cana'a Massacre in a Fateh site http://resistance.jeraaan.com

Illustration 33: Detail > Forza Italia Parody Banners "A concrete engagement: more sex for everyone"
ended with more or less funny or elegant variants. Quite rapidly Berlusconi’s internet team took the initiative and rebutted proposing a competition for the best parody banner. Nobody remembers who won the competition, but the technique was used again in 2009 by one of Berlusconi’s Ministers (Mr. Brunetta in charge of Innovation and Public Administration), who, often target of caricatures because of his size and non conciliatory attitude, launched from the very site of the Ministry a competition (the jury being composed by popular caricaturists) for the best caricature of the Minister.

The newest trend: web applications
The development of ad hoc software applications and campaign toolkits is a new trend which characterizes official party sites from industrialised countries. During major campaigns, it’s becoming popular among these sites to provide sympathizers online campaign toolkits which are composed by:

- fact sheets,
- educational resources for the community,
- multimedia tools (desktop wallpapers, advertising banners in various formats, photos, logos, electronic cards),
- and pre-formatted scripts for various media (for example a sample press release, scripts for a radio intervention, Q&A to prepare for interviews).

Selected Case: E-Precinct and I-Teams
The phenomenon came to prominence during the 2000 Presidential elections in the US, when Steve Forbes invited his supporters to Lead an E-Precinct precisely on such material. Al Gore in the same election invited visitors to join the Gore i-Team and to build their own web sites (for which a set of pre-formatted building blocks were downloadable from his campaign site) to promote or, better, to propagate, his campaign.

A new generation of web applications is progressively entering the arena in conjunctions with the kits. These applications consist in pages that allow many forms of online commitment, some formal, others trivial; for example: writing a letter, signing a petition, offering financial support, subscribing to newsletters or mailing lists, downloading a document thus bringing a piece of the site at home etc..

Illustration 34: Detail > Gore/Liebermann iTeams > Build your own campaign app
With these applications there is no interaction, no communication between parties, but there is a lot of credible and irreversible commitment and this is the whole point about modern party web sites: there is little dialogue, but there is much more than simple reading. It’s the permanent call for Ellulian orthopraxy. It’s the imperative *Do Something* which is so clearly expressed in the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada (2001).

**Merchandising Mini-sites**

While online fora and debate really do not abound online on party web sites, merchandising sub-sites proliferate instead, with remarkable examples in the US, Australia, Austria, but also in Brasil. As the selection shown on the right (Brazilian PT in 2001) a lot of creativity and financial resources are poured by party organisations into merchandising. There is a strong correlation between the availability of merchandising and the higher degree of technical development and sophistication of party web sites. In Austria the Liberals got to the point of offering simultaneously: trips, merchandising and a practical link to Amazon.de.

Is this eCommerce an Ellulian full immersion in the physical and metaphorical imagery of the party?

**THE THREE MAIN FAMILIES OF PARTY WEB SITES**

On the basis of the elements described in the previous section, it seemed to me possible to group the party sites I had been visiting in 3 main families which also represent three different levels of technical and conceptual development, three types of projects blending together form, volumes and function.

The key factors I have used to define these families are the following:

- How party sites have dealt with page management (use of space – use of frames)
- How party sites have dealt with file sizes
- How party sites have dealt with usability (workflows, storyboards and pathways,)
- How party sites have dealt with Multimedia content (Animated GIFs, Java, Javascript, Flash, videos etc.)
How party sites have dealt with interactivity

Protosites
At the lowest end of the political web development one can find what I call protosites. These are properties (often owned by fringe parties) without a specific DNS, often hosted by free servers and made in autarchy by volunteers with little or no knowledge of web programming. The result is clearly amateurish and sometimes pretty chaotic, as plenty of pop up windows of sponsoring companies bite part of the visible space. Protosites in particular have poor control of:

- Colour: both text and background colour play against the usability of these sites.
- Movement: these are static web pages, deprived of dynamic component, and irregularly updated.
- Space / Volumes: the page layout of these sites shows large areas left deliberately empty, a misuse of frames conventions, and lack of control over inward links. There is no architectural conception and often sites consists of a single level (the very home page). In an attempt to keep things simple, protosites often extend indefinitely the size of the home page allowing users to find everything they need through the scroll bar. This technique creates pages which are packed with information and often quite confusing. For the record, the longest home page found in a protosite was 3.6 meter long (the Renewed National Front of Chad site in 2002).
- Photos and Graphics: protosites have no resources to buy state of the art graphics or pictures. Graphic attributes are taken from free graphics web sites, photos have wrong tonal balance or simply are not good enough to promote the characters they are supposed to publicize.
- editorials: on the basis of the partial (but significative) content observation of party sites in English, in French, Portuguese, Italian on in Spanish, it is appropriate to note that protosites are characterised by poor editorial control: the ratio between sections if often uneven, the tone is often colloquial, sometimes accompanied by an emphatic punctuation.

Mesosites
The next step in the evolution of the political web is the acquisition of a greater balance among the visual components of the site: size of text, colours, shapes are interrelated and harmonious. Unsurprisingly the Mesosite family has become in the course of ten years the largest one. For this reason I will present here schematically only two pseudo genus issued from this family: low end mesosites and high end mesosites. In low end mesosites such as the Keadilan Parti in Indonesia (2006) frames organise all the space available with a palette of harmonious colours. Rules and conventions are applied rigorously. Functions available for users are much more numerous than in protosites. The United democratic party in Belize and the Humanista party site in Argentina (both recorded in 2001) were examples of low end mesosites that shined for clarity and simplicity: two service frames on each side of the home page, and the main content in the central frame.

Users can immediately see where the main action items (download, find, or subscribe to the newsletter) are located in these sites. Key colors (often those of the national flag) facilitate content organisation and rhythm on the home page (see in this respect the 2001 version of the Union Democrata Chilena site). The usage of pictures (more sophisticated than the average, probably taken by professional photojournalists) and the format of the short articles, fully mimic the structure of online newspapers.

With mesosites parties start to adopt themes and page templates to reinforce the visual coherence. This is the key architectural feature (the visual design element in Garrett’s User Experience Scheme\textsuperscript{563}) of high end mesosites\textsuperscript{564}. From a web graphics point of view these sites aim at being representative of the most commonly agreed conventions in the publishing and advertising industries.

High end Mesosites are noticeably similar to those created by the printed press; each site section has its own physionomy (for example the main colour tone changes from section to section to facilitate navigation). These sites have been conceived through maps/blueprints before someone actually wrote any HTML code. Order and aims are clearly perceivable. Traffic is organised. Movement (in terms of animated Gifs or java, or flash) is widespread. The end user needs are the centre of gravity of these sites.

Neosites

The third and last level of development of Web sites are what I call neosites. These party sites push all the quality factors (usability, timeliness, creativity, empathy etc.) that gratify users online to the extreme level. Neosites are those sites that – in the niche of the political web - push always a step further the limits of web technology. Neosites are, in this sense, the true byproducts of competition between political mesosites.


\textsuperscript{564} This is visible in the Korean Minjoo Party which declines a bicolour theme or the Swedish Liberalerna, Social Demokraterna, the British LibDems or Austrain ÖVP, all monocromatic - all recorded in 2001
Let’s take for example the Centerparteit case (right): what strikes there (the case dates back 2001) is the control over colour. Not only colours blend together well, but every detail is checked against the working colour palette (see for example the detail of the arrows or the small read more… buttons next to each picture). The designer here is clearly a professional grown in the advertising industry: he or she has succeeded in creating a very luminous site and has projected this light on the image of the whole party. The navigational tabs are clearly inspired by the Apple web site and the imagery chosen for the site matches the standards of the best news magazines.

Neosites have another specificity in communication terms: instead of simply copying what the printed press is doing online, they go further integrating virtuously the Innisian bias of many media in a single platform and providing a truly transmedia experience for the audience.

If the agreed standard is to conceive an official party web site as a single entity, neosites – replicating the practice of single product micro-sites developed by major commercial brands - disaggregate their content into several thematic or event related sub-sites, each one with a different DNS.

We see this phenomenon clearly in the Swedish Moderat Party in their 2001 home page. The designer has completely transposed on a party site visual models developed for commercial advertising. The site is constructed by alternating literally everywhere contrasting colours (red-yellow, blue-yellow). There is no pure white, but only tainted variants all derived from the fundamental master colours (red, blue, yellow). Each of the coloured boxes visible on the forefront links to another small site (a sub-site) which develops an entire and autonomous system of parent – child documents.

We are not facing a single site here, but a planet-satellites structure. The user has the subjective impression to (completely) change environment (trompe l’oeil) and subject while he/she remains within the virtual space created by the party online.

Bo Lundgren’s page (Moderat.se 2001 ) is also worth a mention: we note here the use of personal pictures to tell the story of the man, the rotation of the pictures (which recalls personal scrapbooks), his portrait à contrejour. The leader of the Centerpartaite Daleus was shot in similar conditions : light clearly has a visual value in Sweden (I will come back on this detail later on when I discuss the adoption of esthetic model deriving from commercial sites such as IKEA).
Selected Case DavetheChameleon

If the agreed standard suggests to centre home pages on latest news and their repercussions in the political sphere, a neosite will often choose to centre the home page on something else rather than information: a fiction, a satire, a pseudo-event which at least temporarily, will hide the rest of the site behind the new feature.

The British Labour site in 2006 put in place a propaganda attack web site (Dave the Chameleon) against David Cameron, elected leader of the Conservative party in December 2005. Cameron, satirically portrayed by tabloid press as the results of a successful face transplant with Blair, was only one of the element of the context which gave birth to the site.

Labour had in those months to reinvigorate a fatigued electorate (polls indicated in the week of the operation that Labour at a 12 to 19 year low\textsuperscript{565}), the party was facing on May 4th a major local election with 4361 Council seats about to change, and in a single, very tough week, three prominent figures of the government (Charles Clarke, Patricia Hewitt and John Prescott) had been under heavy personal attack\textsuperscript{566}. The project consisted in a separate site (www.davethechameleon.com) which opened up in replacement of the regular Labour web site. The site pointed to a blog (Dave’s Blog) and to a series of regularly updated films where a voice off commented on the adventures of Dave the Chameleon, available in any colour as long as it’s blue (blue is the colour of the conservatives). A web camera reproduced live images of a chameleon in a zoo and a mailing lists allowed users to remain updated on the sites changes. Reference to the event was made on the party regular home page.

The creative team in this case exploited a classic propaganda model: a satyrical analogy between an animal and a politician (a negative framing of the character of the opponent):

\textsuperscript{565} See also http://www.icmresearch.co.uk/reviews/2006/Guardian%20-%20April/The%20Guardian%20Poll%20-%20April%2006.asp

\textsuperscript{566} Blair Ratings Sink as Voters Demand Resignations (Update2) April 30 (Bloomberg) -- U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair’s popularity sank to the lowest level in 12 years as voters called for three senior ministers to be sacked, according to a poll by YouGov Plc for the Sunday Times. http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=10000102&sid=a95Es20tyspg&refer=uk
Dave changes from one colour to another, depending on whatever he thinks his audience wants to hear. To supporters of the blue party, he changes deepest blue and tells them he is ‘Conservative to the core’. To supporters of the red party he changes into finest red, and tells them he is the ‘heir to Blair’.

And to supporters of the yellow party, he changes into brightest yellow and says he is a ‘liberal Conservative’. He flip-flops from one position to another, depending on whatever he thinks you want to hear. But underneath it all David Cameron will always remain true blue through and through.

‘I am Conservative to the core of my being, as those who know me best will testify’.

David Cameron, Daily Telegraph, January 23 2006

As I have discussed in literature review, propaganda studies show that attack messages activate a psychological process that increase attention and recollection in the audience as negative information is weighted more than positive information.\textsuperscript{567}

Dave the Chameleon combined the selectivity of microcasting (it addresses hesitant Labour voters), with the evocative power of cinema (the broadcasted video is a professional short film, conceived with a storyboard while the voice off is played by a professional comedian), with the portability of the newest multimedia solutions (the video is streamable on two platforms, downloadable in 3 different sizes and adapted to podcasts).

The conditions to activate the \textit{viral distribution potential} of the web were in principle all gathered. On 1st of May 2006 (four days before the elections) Google showed 86,000 pages mentioning Dave the Chameleon. Ninety-one news links talked about the campaign. On both Cameron’s site and on the Conservatives (see captures in the following page) there were no rebuttal, no counter attack messages.

Yet the elections resulted into a victory for the Conservatives, with Tony Blair losing 300 councillors. The conditions of Labour were too complex to be recoverable through a single \textit{campaign trick}? Was this a case showing the relative inefficiency of web strategies in local elections? Was this a case illustrating the need to deploy “total propaganda” and not only “digital one”?

GROWTH AND EVOLUTION OF PARTY WEB SITES

The identification of these three families – a constant feature of the political web over time (my observation period spans almost a decade) – also revealed repetitive patterns of growth and evolution in party web sites.

Most of the times, sites evolve moving from proto to meso status and then, in fewer cases, from meso to neo status. The move from proto to meso is not limited to developing countries (as a result of an accumulation of resources), but is visible also in several developed ones. In this respect party sites do not differ from commercial sites.

To understand these mechanisms it is useful to adapt concepts used in social change or even conflict research by authors like LaMond, Davies and Gurr\textsuperscript{568}. External and internal factors play an important role of structural accelerators / decelerators, or dynamic triggers (the S.A.T. sequence in conflict studies – see an adaptation of it in the Illustration 40, above) for inter-stage mobility.

**External Factors in inter-stage mobility**

As Norris has shown\textsuperscript{569}, there is a strong correlation between development factors (as recorded by the UNDP development index) and online political activity.

---


\textsuperscript{569} NORRIS Id. 2001
The emergence of the political web is related to a basic level of information technology know how. This must either be diffused or centralised in a State-run entity (the National State run Information Technology Centre; or the central computing department of the main university etc.). In addition to this, the national telecommunications infrastructure must have a basic international connectivity in place.

In addition to this basic requirement, the development of the political web is facilitated or constrained by the structure of the media economy in the given country.

The media economy is itself depending from a basket of factors among which the level of basic literacy, the teledensity, the penetration of the internet, the GDP per capita, the percentage of the population with higher education, the geographical constraints (desert zone and mountainous areas tend to facilitate low cost communal radios), the connectivity to global backbones, the availability of technological supplies and maintenance etc.

The availability of party web sites on a global scale may lead erroneously to think that the political web is a reality everywhere or that the existence of an online party in a developing country is the evidence of an emerging eDemocracy there. Penetration data (such as those recorded by the ITU BDT570) emerging from several developing countries shows on the contrary that printed press, radio and television (notably satellite TV) remain the dominant and preferred vectors for political communication, as Frère suggests 571. Against this background much of the offer of online political parties in the developing world seems to be directed more to the attention of the diaspora than to a local audience.

In addition to foundational structures, the etiology of mobility can be explained by powerful accelerating factors such as the diasporization of the local society, social inequalities, violent political conflicts (both past and present) and their by-products (injustice, grief, hatred, fear). According to this approach the political web (notably the lato sensu one) constantly develops in response to political violence and attempts to suppress civil liberties.

External elites (from the political ecosystem in which the party is inserted) and, as shown later, internal elites, also play the role of triggers of change as suggested by Smith572 in his critique to functionalist theories. The US Government and the E.C. in Europe have for example played an important role of accelerators by promoting a global policy for the Information Society. This policy propagation has produced its effects in several developing countries such as in Malaysia during Mahattir’s leadership, in Morocco, Syria and Jordan notably between 1996 and 2001.

The presence (or the absence) of online competition from other party sites is another powerful accelerator of stage mobility in the political web. Allied sites (regional, local or coalition party sites), antagonist sites and foreign sites do all establish a precedent, an aesthetic and functional goal, a norm for the conduct to be kept online. Party Web sites do not emerge from a total vacuum and are often the reaction to an external factor, most often foreign examples or competition emerging from a given political system, as the Webmaster’s survey will reveal, further on, in this dissertation.

570 See the ITU ICT EYE URL http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx Accessed 23.02.13
Single party systems, authoritarian systems should be seen as potent sources of structural deceleration for the political web stricto sensu (this is particularly true with regard to official party sites in the Middle East or in Burma, Laos and Vietnam).

**Internal factors for inter-stage mobility**

Internal (within the Party itself) accelerators and decelerators seem to be equally important to explain mobility. The existence of a resident (even basic) competence in the Internet field is a key factor for the start and further development of online operations. As suggested above, Protosites appear to be created, maintained and further developed by party personnel on the basis of free resources.

The party’s internal organisation (size, structure and diversification of competencies) is, on a higher level of abstraction, equally influential. As suggested by Sudulich, the greater the party structure, the greater the chances that the IT department responsible for office automation connects the dots between the numerous internal content providers and one external Internet service provider.

Additionally large parties are ontologically required to have specialised internal resources (or outsourcing capabilities) to perform political communication duties:

- Multiple leaders may simultaneously try to acquire public visibility using all the technical means available
- Multiple (local) working units may seek to give visibility to their initiatives,
- (if resources can be mobilised in this respect) Specialised communication consultants may provide additional input, as well as the resident information/propaganda unit.

My hypothesis is that the transition from protosites to meso sites requires a combination of:

- external competition (other political parties having already stepped up in the ladder of quality),
- internal leadership (a structured site requires an conceptual work, a communication strategy, a reflection on form and functions, it’s really not the type of clutter/ sequential posting made on protosites),
- funds to pay the graphical development, the hosting service based on a unique DNS and eventually a true resident WebDesigner.

As one of my fieldworks will confirm in the following chapters, internal leadership (or internal elites) is one of the key trigger factors for this change to occur: there must be a decision.
centre inside the party organisation which understands that what’s needed is not simply establishing a presence on the Web, but integrating the Web strategy in the overall political communication effort against the opposition.

It is in this logical framework that most of the party web sites enter in a benchmarking process where best practices (which can be either an aesthetic code in the visual design, a type of web application or certain high tech symbols) are identified and adopted by the members of a given political community online.

As I have already indicated in the previous sections, there are several examples of details that prove this copycat attitude both at national and regional level:

- In the UK, Australia, Spain, Suede but also in Belgium and Italy, party sites often tend to materialise online the notion of grab all party by devoting space to every policy niche
- Merchandising can be found virtually everywhere in OCDE countries.
- Constellations of parties are found in Sweden, Switzerland, Brazil, and partly also in IT
- The public availability of the party statistics (but also the presence of commercial advertising) is typical of Eastern countries such as Russia, Romania and Bulgaria,
- Animated gifs (but also Manga-like characters) are mostly found in highly iconic cultures such as Japan, Korea and Thailand
- Donations are typical in the US, Australia and Canada as they are connected to a specific and common local legislation concerning party financing
- Hyper-technological approaches such as mobile integration through WAP and equivalent services can be found in countries where there is a profound pro-modernist trend (such as Norvay, Korea and Russia)

In the course of what I call a benchmarking process, when the meso level playing field is reached, and when most of the mid size and large parties have established an standardized Internet presence online, political parties are forced to enter in a new level of competition, which only few can afford.

The neosite family in any given country is a real oligarchy of very few sites (I estimate that this corresponds to only 4% of all the 2073 party sites I have scanned in my cross sectional analysis – see later on in this dissertation) which devote comparatively much larger resources to monitor their opponents and constantly seek new techniques to beat the online competition.
Two factors strongly condition the transition to this stage:

- first the identification of significant new financial resources to cover the costs of true online projects, which are often key elements of a larger multi-media political campaign.
- secondly the re-organisation of the work-flow in the party organisation. In this phase, work-flows management becomes critically linked to the capacity of the site to change in real time and match the campaign imperatives.

The key triggers for the transition to this specific phase are major campaigns (the Kerry – Bush campaigns, for example) where an unprecedented amount of innovation appears on the stage.

Looking good online, matching the standard is preoccupation for everyone, regardless the region and the political orientation.

In some cases the transition forward is slightly more technical (better web applications) than visual, but in most cases we see considerable investments only in the visual design of the party site (see the captures from the Swedish Greens in the previous page).

Transitions are however not necessarily always oriented forward. There are also cases of (unwanted and suffered) deceleration, possibly due to the shrinkage of internal resources. For example the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro was in 2001 an example of protosite in transition. The following year it turned into a mesosite (trending upwards in terms of means). Its structure few years later (2006) practically regressed since many of the multimedia elements in Real Audio (for example Radio PMDB available in 2002) had disappeared.

**Selected Case : IKEA’s visuals become a visual standard**

The main issue associated with stage mobility is that party sites are converging progressively towards standardized forms of expression which do not necessarily represent the proprium of their specific kingdom (in taxonomic terms). The terminus ad quem is often represented by commercial advertising standards. These standards are based on what Seguela calls the onirical value of democratic political marking. If on one side it can be argued together with Marland and Quelch that political marketing can learn from consumer marketing, it can be also argued that the visual is becoming a visual standard.

---

from consumer marketing, the risk however persists that political web sites might at some stage become entirely manipulative, taking advantage of people’s deepest vulnerabilities) or might completely loose their bond with reality in favour of a “staged reality”.

This visual evolution towards commercial visual design is palpable, notably through photographs. In the previous page, a double page of the Ikea catalogue is shown next to the iconography of the Spanish PSOE-PE in 2006 (identical visual standards were used in the same year also by the Swedish Moderat Party, the Norwegian DNO, the Belgian Ecolo 2006). In all cases, in replacement of a photo-journalistic approach, one can observe a clear stereotypical transformation of reality into an ideal version: characters (true or fictional) are portrayed under the same bright light, the light of the sunny days.

GENUSES OF PARTY WEB SITES

Once defined the main families and analysed to broad set of elements that, almost like a genetic code, programme the growth of political party web site, I embarked in the categorization of genus.

The genus I have isolated are strictly related to their phenotype and the complex of visible functional patterns associated with the phenotype. In the course of this investigation I have isolated 8 genus, each one associated to a specific family.

Illustration 45: The three main party Genuses

Marxist, Leninist

Marxist/Leninist proto-sites, notably in Latin America share almost identical structural attributes: red background, basic HTML, no frames, iconography which makes reference to the historical figures of the ideology (or to the battles the movement had to combat to survive locally), anthems or other symbolic music (the international played as an automatic midi file), large display of internal house organ(s), a ratio between text and images highly unbalanced towards texts, news and documents organised vertically in a single page, from the last (on the top) to the oldest one.

http://discussionleader.hbsp.com/quelch/2008/01/how_political_marketing_can_le.html

Published 8:14 AM Wednesday January 16, 2008, Accessed 08.09.09
Most of these sites – turning necessity into virtuosity – have (below standard – in usability/information architecture terms), but decent usability thanks to the efforts of a single volunteer, and activist. Often the impoverished look of these sites gives the impression to be coherent with an ideology which criticizes both consumerism and the establishment.

The result is not less effective than bigger sites: it’s less intimidating, if often simpler to use and more fun. I reckon that precisely due to the explicit effort of doing more with less these sites do not miss the objective of being – like true movements – closer to the base. They actually are the base. Simple and popular.

Selected Case: the Partido Obrero Revolucionario (Argentina)

A good example of this genus is the Partido Obrero Revolucionario of Argentina, a small movement with declared Marxists, Leninist, Trozikst ideological roots. Its home page – characteristically hosted by Geocities (an historical provider of free hosting services now owned by Yahoo) – was in 2001-2002 a model: it was in four languages, it was small but saturated with every single Internet resource known to increase both traffic and online activity. It featured LinkExchange and RecommendIt two mechanisms which facilitated the signalling of interesting web pages between users; a link to the international politics page of Yep.com (an internet directory); public statistics on the usage of the site (a rare gesture of transparency in the political web) and finally three different WebRings (Commie Ring, Class Struggle Web Ring, Struggle Solidarity Socialism WebRing).

WebRings are flexible and extensible structures which group links belonging to a same subject areas in virtual entities: a small piece of HTML code is inserted in the page allowing users to visit with just a click another member of the ring (the site is chosen randomly). Being a member of a WebRing was few years ago a quick means to attract – for free – specific traffic. The Partido Obrero had quite exceptionally inserted itself in three different, but pertinent rings; it was therefore much easier to bump into the site both for true believers, but also for everyone else. In 2009, the Partido Obrero continues to exists online in two versions: with the old site and with the new one, which consists in an online magazine. The new site has completely lost the red background, but an introductory text still makes explicit reference to the Marxists / Leninist ideology of the movement and provided an argumentaire in support of their validity. The new site, unsurprisingly is as simple, original and effective as the old one.
Party sites aim fundamentally at delimiting their part of the political web by using forms, volumes, functions and other attributes to create a unique identity. Similarly to online communities, party sites provide services (mostly information) to a specific audience.

Within the protosite family there is an interesting genus, which I call the diasporic site, as it’s the political version of a typical online diaspora site. This type of site has been conceived by expatriates for expatriates:

- it is often based on servers located in the countries where the diaspora is located (whereas the party is located from an operational point of view in a developing country),
- its considerable content is structured to address home sick (as primary targets) instead of locals
- it contains links to numerous international media covering the country of origin, and often picture galleries of the country, local pop music, poetry, and cultural links.

Diasporic sites can be the platform of choice for entire communities of political refugees, that can operate safely only from abroad.

Selected case: FODEM (C.A.R.)

An example of this genus is the Central African Democratic Forum for Modernity (Forum Démocratique pour la Modernité - FODEM). The small party chaired by Charles Massi, participated to the Presidential elections of 19 September 1999 (Massi ranked eighth out of ten candidates, and won 1.31% of the vote). Massi also participated in the 13 March 2005 presidential election, ending fifth out of eleven candidates and scoring a 3.22%. Massi was then killed in 2010 in what is considered by his family a political assasination.
The FODEM (the pictures in the annexes are related to the 2006 version of the site) is manufactured as a protosite, but in a way is an African mesosite, as its page layout closely resembles the cover pages of the African Francophone Press. The site is so packed with content to adopt a *one planet with two moons* structure, which is rare in typical protosites. There’s the main site (www.fodem.org), a site for a Yahoo based forum (http://forum.fodem.org/) and a site for the President of Fodem, Charles Massi (http://massi.fodem.org/). The richness of internal links (although a little confusing) shows that the resources to deal with content were available in 2006. The diasporic nature of the site is recognizable from a set of characteristic details: for example the home page of the site announces the new Paris-Bangui flight service, a huge section of links provides access to all the media that can be accessed from Europe (or elsewhere) to follow what’s going on in Central Africa and in its neighbouring countries, a separate page is devoted to health issues.

**The threatened party**

The specificity of the threatened party genus is that its representatives have been excluded from the political system of their country of origin and have developed the site as a form of civic resistance. With this genus we observe a form of political survival: a presence online perpetuates the party’s activity regardless the *conventio ad excludendum*.

**Selected Case: the Communist Party (Indonesia)**

The Communist party of Indonesia (see picture) is an example of this genus. The Party founded in 1914 by a Dutch socialist, was a supporting party to the anti-western, anti colonialist government of Sukarno. In the elections of 1955 it was the fourth biggest party with 16% of the votes. In 1958 a pro-US coup led to the establishment of Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia (Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia) and to thousands of arrests in the ranks of the party. Order is eventually re-established and the party joins Sukarno Nasakom policy [an abbreviation of Nasionalisme (Nationalism), Agama (Religion), Komunisme (Communism)]. In 1960 the party denounces the undemocratic management of the budget by Sukarno; its leadership is first arrested than released. In 1965 the party has 3 million members and it’s one of the largest communist party outside China and Russia. On September 30th the party, through a group nicknamed G30S, is allegedly involved in the killing of 8 generals and in an apparent coup attempt. The Suharto government arrests the Party leaders as one of the outcomes of the first session of its cabinet. Few days later an Islamic organisation organises a demonstration calling for the ban of the party. In November the party leader AIDIT is executed. The persecution and physical extermination of the Indonesian Reds starts. The party continued

576 Notably with regard to the management of space, the technical level of HTML programming, the use of primary colours (red/blue/yellow), the use of the *blink* HTML command, use of animated marquee etc.
577 One of the main characters of mesosites is to mimick mainstream media.
its activities until 1968 in Eastern Java and then, following repression there, continued from (China
Europe) abroad where delegations of the party cadres had re-organised. In 2004 restrictions on open dis-
cussions on the Communist ideology remained valid as much as the blacklists for the representatives of
the party.

What is specific of this site is the mirroring technique. The site is literally duplicated in three different loc-
ations around the world where either there is local backing for the party, or tolerance or simply ignorance
of the party controversies with the incumbent regime. The same technique is used – for example - by
Chechen organisations to resist the attempts to bring down their web sites. It’s effective, it multiplies
entry points (like a constellation of sites) and it’s perfectly feasible financially, since every mirror is hos-
ted for free.

This type of genus, with such an history, shares some of the traits of the marxist, green and of what I call
the attack genus (which will be described later): I am referring to the strong commitment of the people
in charge of the site and the philosophy of doing more with less. Unsurprisingly – like in other Marxist Len-
inist sites – we find that

• visually everything has been encoded in red, we find the Internationale and
• we notice that almost all the space available on the site is devoted to doctrine: all the references
to contemporary Indonesia are on the Yahoo Group
• finally there is a strong usage of free resources (the site has opened a yahoo group with 2221
members and offers a free email account through zzn.com, a spe-
cialised company).

Planet-Satellite : constellations and grapes of sites
We have seen in previous sections (not-
ably when discussing architectural / 3D
development of web sites and when
presenting Webrings) that the notion of
dependence / independence between like
minded political sites is important to the
management of volumes and functions.
Many protosites (with the notable excep-
tion of the FODEM) behave as quasi
autonomous systems. They are stand
alone entities. With mesosites, as we have already anticipated in the case of the Swedish Moderaterna,
online content is so rich, so complex that sites tend – in a quasi organic way – to subdivide, and then
subdivide again, like organisms do.
When this happens the site looks like a grape of sites, with a clear hierarchy between the home sites and the sub-sites, which are often thematic. I called these (often huge) structures planet-satellite in the sense that – as in certain theories on the formation of moons – both entities come from the same matter or are asteroids which have been attracted by the primary entity. It’s a typical genus of the meso-sites family.

**Selected Cases: Socialist Party (Spain)**

An example of this genus is the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE - 2006)

The party home page send users through a system of small animated banners to five satellites, all different, all with their own Domain Name. One of the links sends the visitor to the Jaime Vera Training Foundation, another to a special web site created to provide information and guidance on best practices of socialist governance at local level; another banner sends users to an online magazine; another one to the Socialist Group in the European Parliament and a final one opens a page created to provide information on similar parties in Europe.

The idea behind the technique is to provide access to a larger navigation space for users, a virtual space which is checked by the party and in conformity with its ideas. These banners turn the Socialist site into a sort of hub capable of switching attention from one side to another. It’s the materialisation of the notion of single entry point for the everything socialist.

This type of feature – based on simple banners of a maximum of 170x70 pixels – is really canonic in contemporary mesosites.

Quite aesthetic and effective on the surface, the planet satellite technique contains all the dangers associated to the Innisian bias of the web (the unintended effects deriving from hypertextuality). First and fundamentally, the technique invites people to leave the site before they have even started to visit it. This happens in particular when the destination site has no visible reverse link on the home page to make people come back to the origin. When the number of banners fills the best part of a page the user looses the notion of centre, but also the notion of destination. It’s one of the tenets of Landow’s Hypertext 2.0: the absence of a rhetoric of arrival in the World Wide Web.

An effective variant of this technique is the creation of a constellation of sites, a specific area of the political web which is characterized by a set of visibly inter-related sites. Each site works as a door to a network of affiliated sites. Constellation of sites which have been created in Italy notably by the Democratici di Sinistra or Forza Italia are good examples of this variant. If outward links are well placed (therefore are

---

578 This was true for four out of the five satellites linked by the PSOE when I drafted these line.

Constellations provide the most effective ratio between contacts and costs: their endogenous system of referrals is a natural guarantee to trap the user within a well defined universe. It’s again the bias of the web – the lack of the rhetoric of arrival – but managed in an effective way.

**Left – Green genus**

Political polarization – both in its most basic definition (left an right) or in its variants as defined by:

- Ferguson\(^{580}\) (adding the notions of Religionism, Humanitarianism, Nationalism),
- Eysenck\(^{581}\) (adding to the basic left/right axis a T axis opposing pacifism, racial equality to militarism, harsh punishment),
- Sartori\(^{582}\) (who highlights the role of the distance between the existing poles in a system, and the development of irresponsible oppositions due to the lesser or inexistent accountability of minor parties)
- Rokeach\(^{583}\) (reviewing entirely old classification through the valorisation of freedom and equality shown by parties)

has its equivalent on the political web. As Margolis and Resnick suggest in *Politics as Usual*, parties simply adapt for the technical and cognitive constraints of the web medium, their mainstream communication policy. Unsurprisingly, Left wing web sites or green sites display virtually in every country worldwide the same red or green (+sunflower) phenotype.

As we have seen already many example of left wing parties I will shortly concentrate on Green ones to give a quick example of the consistency to the phenotypical rule in all these parties. The few cases of Green parties, clearly show the importance of identitarian references in the visuals of this type of organisation. This said, as we have seen in the case of the extreme left, colour references are managed tactically and implemented in a more or less explicit way from country to country. The colour Green in certain cases is reduced to a almost subliminal reference, whereas the text (or more specifically the issues) becomes comparatively more prominent. Green parties are an interesting genus because they are an example of *multifaceted* militancy which originates several types of *species* each one adopting a specific blend of the ideological components\(^{584}\):

1. **Ecology**

---

580 Ferguson, L. W., 'The stability of the primary social attitudes, religionism and humanitarianism'. *Journal of Psychology*, 1941, 12, 283-288
582 Sartori G., *Teoria dei Partiti e Caso Italiano*, Sugarco Edizioni 1982 Chapter 1 p. 7-44
584 Die Grünen: ökologisch, sozial, basisdemokratisch, gewaltfrei. Alternative references come from the US green whose 10 principles have generated debate with the European tradition; a compromise has been reached in 2001 during the global greens conference with a list of 6 main principles which have been adopted by the Canadian Greens.
2. Social Justice

3. Grassroots Democracy

4. Non-Violence

The explicit (see box below) reference to Grassroots democracy, or participatory democracy in the key values explicitly promoted by Green parties, makes this genus and the specific species deriving from it a particularly interesting case for my research. The quotes below come from US, Canada and Brasil:

[From Ten Key Values of the Green Party Originally ratified at the Green Party Convention in Denver, CO, June 2000]

GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY Every human being deserves a say in the decisions that affect their lives and not be subject to the will of another. Therefore, we will work to increase public participation at every level of government and to ensure that our public representatives are fully accountable to the people who elect them. We will also work to create new types of political organizations which expand the process of participatory democracy by directly including citizens in the decision-making process.  

[Green Party of Canada - six fundamental principles]

Participatory Democracy We strive for a democracy in which all citizens have the right to express their views, and are able to directly participate in the environmental, economic, social and political decisions which affect their lives; so that power and responsibility are concentrated in local and regional communities, and devolved only where essential to higher tiers of governance.

This requires:
individual empowerment through access to all the relevant information required for any decision, and access to education to enable all to participate
breaking down inequalities of wealth and power that inhibit participation
building grassroots institutions that enable decisions to be made directly at the appropriate level by those affected, based on systems which encourage civic vitality, voluntary action and community responsibility
strong support for giving young people a voice through educating, encouraging and assisting youth involvement in every aspect of political life including their participation in all decision making bodies.
that all elected representatives are committed to the principles of transparency, truthfulness, and accountability in governance.

585 Accessed Online URL : http://www.gp.org/tenkey.shtml
that all electoral systems are transparent and democratic, and that this is enforced by law
that in all electoral systems, each adult has an equal vote
that all electoral systems are based on proportional representation, and all elections are pub-
licly funded with strict limits on, and full transparency of, corporate and private donations.
that all citizens have the right to be a member of the political party of their choice within a
multi-party system.  

[From the 12 Principle of the Brasilian Greens]
Democracia : O exercicio da democracia representativa, através do processo eleitoral e da
existência de um poder público eficiente e profissionalizado, combinado com mecanismos
participativos e de democracia direta, sobretudo em âmbito local, através de formas de or-
ganização da sociedade civil e conselhos paritários com o poder público.  

The importance of grassroots / deliberative democracy is coherent with the flat, decentralised structure of
the parties. It’s also coherent with the harsh debates which permanently animate this particular political
cluster: the nature and number of guiding principles of the movement, the role of the leadership (Boss
vs. Spokesperson), the meaning of living like a green (the rigor in the daily implementation of the ideolo-
gical pillars), the dichotomy between true believers (long term engagement in the green party) vs. Op-
portunists (politicians with environmentalist sensitivity in non green parties), the polemics deriving from a
too close relationship with left wing parties etc. The similarities with the strong ideological left are numer-
ous.

All this dynamism is reflected online by both the green genus and its species through the adoption of the
most recent propagation techniques, but not necessarily through the systematic implementation of online
deliberation solutions. This element is echoed in the research of Lusoli, Ward and Gibson:

Green parties were found to have the richest websites in terms of providing information and
also soliciting input from users

On Green party sites we find:

- online polls, a discussion forum, Campaign videos, a blog and RSS feeds, a series of opt-in newsletters (Israeli Green Party 2006),
- a traditional discussion forum and a blog (Greens New Zealand 2006),
in this respect it’s interesting to note that the first one is almost unused whereas there is significant traffic on the second one (it’s FrogBlog)
which is stylish and includes pictures taken by volunteers;
- eCards (Austrain Guenen – Zieloni Poland 2006)

587 Accessed Online URL http://www.pv.org.br/
- conditional (login based) access to certain sections of the site (O Verdes PT and Zieloni PL 2006)
- Media Releases in XML/RSS Feed form (Australian Greens – Scottish Greens 2006)
- A full Flash interface to navigate the site (Japanese Greens 2006)
- An fully professional streaming radio broadcasting platform, RSS feeds and a satellite site (www.mammeverdi.it) targeting mothers and aiming at providing information (see in this respect the 48 pages book ‘il bambino naturale’ downloadable in PDF format from the site) on how to upbring children with environmental principles

A considerable display of militant high technology, but not a forum or a blog in every site. And in particular nothing that can substitute or complement existing formal deliberation mechanisms.

Selected Case: The Green Party (US)
The US Green Party site is probably the Weberian ideal-type of this type of genus. Its design is a fusion of the characters of mainstream planet-satellite web sites (the intensive usage of sub-sites), of high end mesosites (with their state of the Art graphic design and with their a large merchandising section), and of niche exposure sites (the set of instructions is encoded as imperatives – the characters of this specific genus will be described in greater detail later).

It features the usual references to the Green identity, but (compared to other green parties on the net) in an elegant, almost elitist version: the green colour is deployed in a pastel palette, the Arial sans serif font is introduced by titles and banners in Trajan serif etc.. The most characteristic feature of the site is the Action Centre, a section where preformatted (but re-formattable) mail can be sent to selected representatives for a whole variety of campaigns (these data are related to the 2006 edition of the site):

- Bringing the Troops Home,
- Impeaching Bush,
- Illegal Wiretapping,
• Fairness in publicly funded elections,
• Elections reform,
• Action in favour of the Vanishing Wildlife

There is no large blog or forum on the site. Debate is certainly carried out for real, outside the web, but there is little here. On the other hand the site has been reinterpreted not as a dazebao, but as a place to do something, for example to urge visitors to donate or become a volunteer. For the most committed ones there is an impressive page of resources that help format public communication, clarify positions and guide tactically activists in their first endeavour. In sum, a resource page for propaganda! The site doesn’t debate interactively; communication is unilateral, as shown by the microwave-ready list of email forms.

The underlying web application to implement the Action Centre is derived from web apps as those developed by CONVIO\(^\text{589}\), a provider of professional online campaigners.

It is legitimate to wonder what sort of electronic democracy this type of applications bring about. The survey *E-mail overload in Congress*\(^\text{590}\) published in 2001 shows clearly the **communication crisis** between the electorate and the US Congress deriving from the usage of preformatted messages as those activated by systems like those of the Green Party. The text of the conclusions of the report sounds like the end of all electronic illusions on web based participatory democracy:

> ...Grassroot activists’ practices of encouraging and enabling citizens to send messages to all Member of the Congress are akin to flying any interested person in the country to attend a Member’s town hall meeting. The public’s expectation to receive responses from Members who do not represent them is like their showing up at the two hall meeting and demanding to be treated like a constituent. Member’s inefficient and unresponsive e-mail practices are akin to keeping constituents waiting in long lines for hours before letting them into the town hall meeting. Instead of fostering democracy, these conflicting practices and expectations of all the parties are fostering cynicism and eroding trust. This predicament requires that grass-

\(^{589}\) http://www.convio.com

roots activists, the public, and Congress all find new approaches to their online communications. The Congress Online Project recommends the following.

First grassroots activists should adopt a code of conduct to engage in electronic lobbying practices that:
Target individuals’ own Members of Congress and only their own Members of Congress
Send meaningful messages, not electronic postcards
Avoid sending duplicate messages from the same person
Encourage people to speak in their own words
Does not foster expectation that citizens should correspond with – and expect a response from – any Member of Congress with whom they choose to communicate, and
Provide complete identification information, including name, address, zip code and email address.

Secondly, citizens must recognize that congressional offices are not, and cannot be, capable of responding electronically to every American and limit their e-mails to communicating with only their elected representatives591.

591 Op.Cit p. 15 The bold is mine
The contact / over-exposure party
The main characteristic of this genus is to provide a greater than average list of methods to achieve contact between the party representatives and the audience. This specific genus represents - on the basis of my manual observation campaigns – a sort of exception in the real practice of interactivity in the political web. As I have already had the opportunity to say in the previous pages, the direct observation of several hundreds of official parties web sites revealed over the overall period of this research (01-09) that most parties limit the direct communication means on their site to the basic \texttt{mailto} command at the bottom of the page layout.

In average just a couple of e-mail contact points are provided to the end user.

A variant to this basic behaviour is the deployment of web-forms to collect visitors’ messages. Forms reduce the amount of spam received by party sites (because web robots cannot collect automatically any useful address) and speed up the logistics of the filing and reply from the party perspective. Forms also allow parties to collect accurate visitors information (which can be filtered ex post), to channel flows of communications to the appropriate internal service and, somehow, to contain the expectations of the public for a personalized and immediate reply.

Against this background the over-exposure party stands out from the crowd of the other actors online (at a comparable stage of technical development). The phenotype of the exposure party over-emphasizes instructions to act:

- by disseminating its layout with imperatives (download, subscribe, write, call etc.),
- by giving detailed information on all the physical locations where people can meet party representatives and
- by providing more than one tool on every page to connect or remain connected with the party.

The exposure web is a party site to use, not to read or to act in the policy arena.

Selected Case: The Humanista Party (Argentina)
In Argentina, in 2001 and 2002, the Humanista party (a progressive, non Marxist party member of the Humanist International) was an example of exposure party. Right from the home page, users could subscribe to three different newsletters (press releases, news from the web, general news); in the contact page there were 7 different contact forms (one for each type of question which could have answered by the party staff) and the template of every page of the site had on the top right corner three links (contáctenos, participe, subscribase). A visible \texttt{contàctenos} banner was located at the bottom of every page.

Elements of the technique used by the Humanista party can be seen in other examples such as in the Brasilian Partito Verde or the in Austrian ÖVP and KPO which all feature entire \texttt{mailto directories} (physical and e-mail directories). Due to the explosion of spamming, the directory feature is progressively disappearing or being substituted by forms or non programming solutions such as name \texttt{at} domain \texttt{dot} com.
With regards to truly deliberative forms of interactivity, over-exposure (contact) parties did not emerge as a sui generis category with higher than average levels of implementation of forums and blogs. In the overall amount of cases observed in this fieldwork only 8% of the sample hosted online fora. Furthermore while visiting the operational discussion newsgroups, it was clear that - in general - a very modest volume of activity was conducted there, certainly not comparable to the degree of activity one can detect on independent (non political) newsgroups, independent Bulletin Board System and more recently in independent blogs.

There is whole set of interesting research issue stemming from the observation of the modest use of party fora:

- Is the fact that the forum is hosted by a party a discouraging factor for online users to discuss online?
- Is the overall audience of the site not enough to generate traffic there? Is the forum accessible and usable enough?
- Is this the result of lack of political motivation?
- A matter of selection of subjects in the forum?
- The lack of moderators or the quality of moderation?

A more important question is what explains the fact that most party web site designers to not attribute a priority to creating sites which feature this type of application. I have tried to provide an answer to this question in my second case study.

The attack party

Pfau and Kenski\(^{592}\) underline that mudslinging and attack politics – the degradation of the tone of the political exchanges – is propagating in U.S. and elsewhere. Negative political communication has comparatively greater situational effectiveness than positive information: it strikes more emotionally, it’s recalled more vividly, it’s processed more deeply, it’s weighted more in developing impressions and in forming evaluations.

\(^{592}\) PF AU M. KENSKI C. Attack Politics Praeger Series in Political Communication N.Y. 1990
Several models have been provided to explain this: Lau\textsuperscript{593} suggested the role of expectations in advertising (advertising generates positive expectations and negative advertising comes as a surprise) and Joanne Miller\textsuperscript{594} proposed the figure-ground principle (negative information isn't as common as positive information, so it stands out) or the evolutionary principle (negative information may alert us to potential danger, so it's crucial that we recognize it). The recent works of Kahn and Kenney\textsuperscript{595} have indicated that negativity in campaigns leads people to learn more about the candidates’ messages (both in cases of legitimate negativity and for mudslinging) and helps framing the debate (as when Clinton, in 1992 was associated to the expression That's the economy, stupid, in his successful campaign against Bush – the expression had been coined by his campaign strategist James Carville). According to Kahn and Kenney, turnout increases as legitimate negativity and negative information in the press increase. Faber, Tims and Schmidt found that negative advertising works with people who are more involved and interested\textsuperscript{596}. Homer and Batra have proved that character attacks are less effective when voters form their overall attitudes toward the targeted candidate more on the basis of competence ones.\textsuperscript{597}

Parody sites have emerged as rapidly as official ones. We have already discussed the performance of Davethechameleon, but many others could be mentioned such as such as the infamous and now defunct porn site www.whitehouse.com. This is certainly one of the hottest areas of development of the political web, as former US Candidate Kerry underlined by hiring as strategist of his online campaign Zach Exley, former strategist at MoverOn.org, and controversial professional of attack politics online\textsuperscript{598}.

It’s not surprising that the web's bias is becoming instrumental to the development of attack politics. First of all, the web provides attack parties unparalleled reactivity: virtually no mass media provides a comparable ratio between:

* time to market/cost/multimediality

Reacting to an event by launching an attack on the web costs close to nothing to organized parties; it takes no time to react and it can be done in text, images and sound (or the three together). Secondly, the web allows the creation of an attack front: parties (and their supporters) can inter-link all their attack


\textsuperscript{594} MILLER J.M. (University of Minnesota Department of Political science) : 'Negative Political Advertising', Pedagogical Presentation, College in the Schools, University of Minnesota, 2004

\textsuperscript{595} KAHN & KENNEY, No Holds Barred Id.

\textsuperscript{596} RONALD J. FABER, ALBERT R. TIMS, AND KAY G. SCHMITT, ‘Negative Political Advertising and Voting Intent: The Role of Involvement and Alternative Information Sources’, Journal of Advertising 22.4 (1993), Questia, 8 May 2006 : ‘... Two possible explanations may be suggested to account for these findings. First, people who are engaged in politics and caught up in a race may attend more to campaign-related communication, regardless of its form or medium. People with low involvement may pay little attention to any type of political communication including negative ads and thus be unaffected by them. Another possible explanation is that more involved voters may identify more strongly with candidates, thereby increasing the influence of negative ads. For supporters of the target candidate, this should lead to a strong backlash effect, while supporters of the source candidate will experience a strong intended effect.’


\textsuperscript{598} POWERS, J. ‘Mudslingers Send Political Message; Behind the Speeches, Photo Ops and Pointed Personal Attacks Are Cagey Chieftains of Communication Working to Shape the Image of George W. Bush and John Kerry’, Insight on the News 11 May 2004: 21, Questia, 8 May 2006 http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a:o&d=5008567108 : ‘...Exley has been a firebrand electronic activist since the 2000 election, when he set up a Website called gwbush.com, where he insisted George W. Bush was a cocaine addict. The site is still in operation and sells bumper stickers such as GWBush: How Dumb Is Too Dumb? and Bush Is a Punk Ass Chump and Hail to the Thief, the title of the most recent rock album by Radiohead, though the band has said the phrase has nothing to do with Bush. Exley's connection to MoveOn.org has outraged Bush supporters, who claim it is yet more evidence of illegal collusion between the soft-money-supported anti-Bush Website and the Democratic presidential campaign...’.

communications online and augment volume, echo and reverberations. In this type of situations (which I have described already talking about grapes or constellations of like minded sites) the web creates hyper-links with other parts of the web, or to other media (such as the press or television).

In principle, in a truly efficient strategy, all actors could also reverse link: politicians on the television could re-launch a polemic by pointing to the press or the radio or the web, and so on.

The attack genus belongs to the neosites family. Its main character is its ability to push the survival behaviour (the same we have already seen expressing in milder forms by other genuses such as Marxist, some greens, threatened parties etc.) to the extreme. With attack parties the rationale behind the establishment of an online presence is certainly not meetoisn (modern political parties need to establish a presence on the web), it’s not the party image (we need to give a trendy fashionable look to the party image), it’s not political marketing either (we need to establish a presence on the web to target a specific section of the electorate), it’s the political weaponization of the web.

It’s permanent attack as an existential question.

Extreme survival behaviour is not (necessarily) correlated linearly with political threats. These parties do not risk to disappear neither online nor in the real world: quite the opposite, they often represent a threat to their political opponents, they can count on a committed electorate and on a considerable number of volunteers. They do not risk to disappear – at least in the short term – but they behave like chased parties, they never end to live in the Ellulian dimension of the permanent mobilization. They do not engage in deliberation processes because there is nothing to discuss, they don’t need to invite professional advertising companies to re-look the site, they just need to defend themselves from the ‘unacceptable, unmotivated, unjust’ attacks they receive from their opponents. And they need to do it as soon as a potential threat emerges from the radar screen. It should be clear by now that fundamental character of this genus is to be the most reactive, tactically effective and often creative of the formal political web.

**Selected Case: Front National (France)**

A good example of attack genus is the French Front National. In 2006 the site featured a splash screen to promote the main issue of the moment; the central frame gave full visibility both to the FN presence in the media and to the leader’s videoblog; two service columns proposes access to further multimedia content or some doctrine.

With the Front National we see how the attack genus:

- reacts systematically re-framing all sorts of macro and micro events as sources of political attack (see in the images attached on the right the reactions to May 9th celebrations)
- quits the metaphor of the newspaper to adopt the conventions of radio and TV (from the web to read to the web to watch and listen)
- enables militants to attack (online) mainstream media by providing them attack kits to complain against inaccurate, biased or inappropriate coverage (practice seen in the Action Centre of the Green party of the US).
• practices media autarchy by investing in the creation of its own mass media, thus reducing the dependency from mainstream media to communicate with its electorate

• integrates the most effective propaganda techniques online regardless the origin of the inspiration. For example with Les Argumentaires one can recognize a (quasi) Marxist use of the web as an educational platform for the party doctrine.

• Creates an interconnection between online and offline campaign through specific formats such as the RDV Médias marking all the appearances of the party leaders on French media, or promoting off-line actions based on leaflets and posters.

**Selected Case: Partito Radicale (Italy)**

An hypertrophic version of the attack genus is the Italian Radical Party site. Historically this party has incarnated the avant-garde in Italy for the strategic and offensive usage of media.

Sooner than anyone else in the political system in Italy, the Radical party has been capable of attracting motivated individuals which had significant technical background in both traditional and electronic media. This human capital coupled with the rather extraordinary energy and media skills of its leadership (Marco Pannella, Roberto Cicciomessere and Emma Bonino to quote just a few) has allowed the party to set up a nation wide radio, a centre for audience measurement, the first Internet based political BBS (Agora, then turned into a full Internet Service Provider), the first publicly accessible audiovisual archive of the major political events and debates in Italy (the RadioRadicale site with 160,000 recordings since 1976) and needless to say a very complex party web site.

The site is a parossistic implementation of the attack genus, for example :

• three subsites are entirely devoted to the monitoring of media (notably television and radio) coverage of the party activities : one for the party, one for the (skeleton party to quote Deutsch) coalition in which the party is inserted and one devoted to the coverage of the 2006 elections campaign.

• the most effective technique described so far are all implemented in clusters (more than one technique in the same page layout) to boost traffic
similarly to ideological protosites the site is simple both in usage and in look (the designer is not reusing advertising models), is developed on the basis of free technology (PHP), is flat (everything is a click away) and has a long vertical structure (everything is in the home page);

similarly to over exposure sites the project aims at creating a web for doing: in addition to the news content, there is a download section for pictures and software, a huge forum with 24269 registered users, 488138 messages and 22604 topics discussed, links to live feeds from the party radio, RSS feeds, a complete press review, two searchable archives, a telematic journal which is available online and as a newsletter;

similarly to planet-satellite mesosites at least 7 banners are used on the right column to give access to a system of satellite sites which includes issue sites, leaders sites, the party’s media sites and friendly sites (radicalparty.org, lucacosclioni.it, emmabonino.it, rosanelpugno.it, radioradical.it, parcondicio.tv etc.);

similarly to a neosite all existing (mainstream) media have been integrated seamlessly in a single platform: it’s a web to read, listen and watch.

les affiches of the Front Nationale have here their equivalent: a link provides access to an archive of posters, but also to an inventory of satirical cartoons and small books about the party published by a Marcello Baraghini, an historical Radical activist, founder and publisher of Stampa Alternativa, a small, but popular publishing company.

The notion of Media autarchy I have described in the Front Nationale is pushed here to a level which is hard to match: the constellation of web sites to which belongs the Radical Party site is entirely trans media, in other terms each site integrates as many media as possible. RadioRadical deserves a special mention in this respect.

Born in a 60 square meters apartment in Rome, in the 70’s the radio has grown into a fully staffed professional radio that - similarly to C-SPAN in the States - has established an editorial line based on the notion of the elimination of the journalistic filter (a significant number of events is covered live without voice over).
The Radio covers—thanks to a MoU with the Ministry of Posts and Telecoms—at least 60% of the sessions of both Chambers of Parliament between 8AM and 8PM daily; the rest of the time is devoted to the coverage of the activities of other institutions, or of major national events, fora and press conferences, regardless the affiliation of the organisers of the events.

While devoting a significant part of its activity to a public service, the radio (and other structures of the Party such as Agora or the audiovisual monitoring centre) has become a private company, acquiring the possibility of receiving contracts and grants while maintaining the right to cover the party activities. The RadioRadicale site is in reality a streaming platform for both radio and TV content: its online archive is huge and its journalistic production (27 formats) is now being distributed as an RSS feed and podcasted.

**The transmedia site**

The transmedia site is a product of political marketing. Contrary to Seguela’s vision on offer based marketing, the transmedia site has been conceived to respond to the needs, wants and expectations of the average web users. In this sense transmedia sites are representative of a subculture (ideologically and aesthetically). Similarly to commercial web sites, a performing transmedia site responds to all the conventions of the advertising industry and is a coherent fragment of an overall corporate communications strategy.

As I have suggested in the section devoted to the stage mobility of official web sites, this type of site is the byproduct of the competition between mesosites. The intent is to produce the best of the political web. The result, is often the best of the commercial web. Exploiting the web’s bias in Innisian terms, transmedia sites are based on rich media technologies and on very complex web graphics programming. Animation is pivotal for these sites.

**Selected Case: UMP (France)**

The case of UMP web site (for the 2006 Campaign) is an helpful reference for this genus both for its intents and its unexpected outcomes. The UMP (2006) is a typical, professional neosite. On the home page there are 8 moving attributes (headlines, banners that integrate a flipped page effect, graphics etc.). Colours are either neutral or match those of the French flag. In particular the content of two videos placed in the forefront seems to corroborate the hypothesis of a strong commercial advertising culture in this product.

The first video (Expression Directe : le film de l’UMP) is a speech of the party leader Sarkozy which is used as voice over to a long slide show of blue toned stock portraits. While the speech goes on, a triumphant melody trumpets hope for the future, the main message of the speech.
The video is unfortunately looks very artificial. As background for the no-nonsense, straightforward rhetoric style of Sarkozy, the video director has not picked a single French face for the cast meant to represent the French population, but a full set of what the stock photo companies call *alluring pictures of a multi-ethnic, international cast of characters*.

In a separate page, a campaign booklet and a second video (Imaginons la France d'Après) provides a second example of clumsy political marketing online. The storyboard of the video is simple:

1. there is *France before* incarnated by an array of idealised French characters, all played by professional actors posing in a sad attitude while looking through a windows, walking inside the metro, having a tête à tête

2. and *France afterwards* symbolized by an array of joyful scenes crammed with references to notorious commercial advertising campaigns. the baby in the swimming pool from the EVIAN mineral water campaign, the team of rugby players from the Belgian MAES beer or the William Lawson Scotch advertising campaigns)

The sub-site created for women ([www.agora-elles.com](http://www.agora-elles.com)) is another carefully crafted product which tries to market the feminine segment. The attempt, albeit serious and coherent, produces again unwanted results. The imagery is taken again from stock photo with the exception of the single feminine testimonial whose picture is in low definition and possibly taken from as an identity card. The colours – all variations of pink – almost hide the text and are simply a good example of gender inequality. For reference, check how this subsite compared with radically different contemporary visual conventions of feminine press online.

**DISCUSSION : FACTORS FACILITATING OR CONSTRAINING THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL PARTIES WEB SITES**

Engaging in a longitudinal analysis of political web sites is a hard, lengthy, but also fruitful process. The expectations set by the huge debate generated in the late 90's by the impact of the Information Society on politics are bluntly contradicted by such an extensive reality check.

The first findings of a manual observation campaign (in my case a real longitudinal analysis) is that the most frequently observable strategy is to try and *do more with less*. A great part of the political web stricto sensu is made of small, rudimentary web sites. Protosites and mesosistes are the most frequently
used forms of web architecture. When the means are there, instead, the political web fails to adopt its own language, information architecture and visual design and tries to mimic the commercial world. Cases like the Radical Party in Italy are truly exceptional.

A real minority of the party sites analysed in this period uses fora and engages successfully in political debates. Even in such cases there is no deliberation, no real intervention in the institutional machinery of legislative or executive powers. Nothing that even remotely matches the expectations set by most of the authors of the scientific literature of this domain. Most party sites are designed to work as dazebaos, as electronic posters. Most parties provide instructions to their audience, compete with everyone else in the political web with increasing levels of technical and persuasive sophistication. A journey to the early political web is the discovery of propagation and propaganda techniques. Even when political action is particularly stimulated, there is evidence – as shown by the Congress report Email Overload – that the effect produced by the so called Action Centres, ultimately deteriorates democracy and trust in the institutions. In sum, almost nobody seems to be doing what pundits say; and those that seem to be doing it, make things worse.

One of the striking findings in this survey concerns the directionality of communication: are party sites inviting the opposition to confront with them online? Is it easy to find a section of a party sites where, say, an important member of the opposition is invited to discuss a subject and the followers from both sides are invited to comment? The short answer is no. As suggested by Margolis and Resnick, what happens online is not different from what happens offline. Parties defend their part. Parties attack the other part. Are party sites addressing messages only to like minded people or to any type of online visitor, promoting Wolton's notion of cohabitation? Again, the short answer is that there is no discussion with the other. As Ellul notes:

> Propaganda cannot satisfy itself of half victories, since it does not tolerate discussions: in its very essence, it excludes contradiction, discussion. It must coagulate quasi unanimity, the opposing faction must be negligible, or unable to make its voice heard.

Most widely adopted strategy online: isolate, collate and potentiate.

From this standpoint, it becomes clear why the most effective and widely adopted strategy online by mature web properties is to simplify the message, eliminate all ambiguities, isolate, collate and potentiate the hottest political issues of the moment for a part of the electorate.

In doing this, party sites – have adopted the visuals of the advertising industry, but not all the practices: nobody invites voters of the opposition to compare features and switch brand. Parties do not enter in a transaction, they give instructions and they close doors to the others.

There is evidence that Blogs (and in the past 4 to 5 years social media such as flickr, facebook, twitter or you tube) are starting to be integrated in party sites, but simply as sources of templates. Blogs (or the other social web applications) are programmed to push stories out, not to conversate with the public. When parties use blogs, none of the content conventions (notably the quotes based on outbound links)
seems to be respected in the cases I have reviewed (before 2005). When parties (around 2005) used social networks either interactivity was minimal (flickr/tweetter) or audience was modest (number of friends in facebook).

It should be noted in this respect that research carried out by Lusoli and Ward\textsuperscript{599} on party activists in UK Labour and LibDem indicate that

\begin{quote}
The interactive and networking possibilities of the new media, which have excited the most attention seem to be of the least interest to members [of the party]
\end{quote}

Political parties - notably in Western countries - continue to modernise their external communication tools, but these new tools seem to be used more as status symbols than as remedies for non voters.

The longitudinal analysis I have carried shows that in very few cases the visual design or the overall information architecture of these sites can deal effectively with some fundamental constraints which limit the very access to party sites.

\textbf{The numerous "pre-conditions" that constraint party sites effectiveness}

In addition to the challenge of creating a site which is functionally / structurally performing the upstream constraints hinder the likelihood of very high conversion rates for party web sites (the conversion of passive audience into active voters).

The overall aim of this research has been to check the claims of classic eDemocracy theories by seeking evidence online in the largest array of party web sites available at the time of writing. While implementing the longitudinal analysis I was in parallel validating/identifying systematically – as Bimber\textsuperscript{600} notes:

\begin{quote}
the specific conditions necessary for the realization (of these claims about eDemocracy).
\end{quote}

In stark contrast with the assumptions of the eDemocracy utopians these pre-conditions are as I wrote already in the past together with Heinderyckx and Servaes\textsuperscript{601}, numerous. In synthesis (as the effectiveness of party sites is not a core research question of this dissertation) it will suffice here to note that the most important and intuitive one are:

\begin{itemize}
\item the intention from the side of the party to create an information architecture which is conducive to feedback, person to person interactivity and deliberation
\item the conversion of these intentions in an HTML (programmatic) structure whose usability facilitates the public response
\end{itemize}


\textsuperscript{600} BIMBER B. “The Internet and Political Transformation” Dec. 23.1996, Online URL \url{http://alishaw.sscf.ucsb.edu/survey1/poltran2.htm} Retrieved 04/14/1997, p.1

the public response itself which is the result of Kotler's personal factors:

- a set of cultural, social, personal and psychological factors which reduce the potential online audience to a real set of users, in a funnel like process
- level of skills, social connectedness, civic association and trust,
- arbitration among alternative activities online,
- time to consume online information
- technical access factors (with regard to the network),

- among the access sub-factors, two elements in particular appear to have significant relevant: finding parties online and web readability

Does the Public Respond to Party communication online?

In a typical by-polar scheme, doubts over the power of the web to revolutionise electoral campaigns continue to be mixed with new expectations raised during the 2004 and 2008 US Presidential elections: The Web Grows as a political news source, but TV dominates suggests the New York Times, the Net (is) crucial, but suspect as a survey reveals that online data seem questionable, Online Political Citizens [dubbed as the the influentials of the 2004 US Presidential elections] may be the next generation heralds of enduring change in American politics, but also The Internet has limited appeal for bringing young people into politics, Aussie Political Parties fail online test, and so on. Rainie and Smith summarise as follows, the latest findings of The Internet and the 2008 Election, a report of Pew Internet and American Life Project:

602 KOTLER P., DUBOIS B. Marketing Management. Publi-Union Paris

603 BIMBER in this respect says: “The Internet may not simply be a gathering place for the well educated, but a gathering place for the skilled, connected citizens, who also tend to be more engaged in politics than others. In this case, the causal nexus runs from skill and social resources to both internet use and political participation, rather than directly from Internet use to participation”. BIMBER B. "The Internet and Political Transformation" Dec. 23.1996, Online URL http://alishaw.sscf.ucsb.edu/~survey1/poltran2.htm Retrieved 04/14/1997, p. 30


605 SURVEY: NET CRUCIAL BUT SUSPECT: Internet users consider the Web an important source of information even though they increasingly question the credibility of online data. The UCLA Internet Report, a global survey of thousands of people on how they use the Web, found that people are less concerned about personal data and credit card information being stolen online, even though fewer are using the Internet to shop Source : Reuters – quoted by CNET on 25 February 2003 URL http://news.com.com/2100-1023-982882.html?tag=fd_top


607 [Eds] INTERNET HAS LIMITED APPEAL FOR BRINGING YOUNG PEOPLE INTO POLITICS (Circle) The Internet still lags behind other methods as an effective way for political campaigns to reach young people, but it can be a powerful tool for involving engaged youth, according to a new survey. http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/National_Youth_Survey2004/release.pdf Accessed 20-08-2009

608 [Editors] AUSSIE POLITICAL PARTIES FAIL ONLINE TEST (Australian IT) The furor over johnhowardlies.com rocketed the site to number-one Australian political Website last week, but a survey suggests party Websites are a neglected avenue for communicating with voters across the political spectrum, http://australianit.news.com.au/articles/0,7204,10184690%5E15319%5EEnby%5E15306,00.html Accessed 20-08-2009

A record-breaking 46% of Americans have used the internet, email or cell phone text messaging to get news about the campaign, share their views and mobilize others. And Barack Obama's backers have an edge in the online political environment.

Furthermore, three online activities have become especially prominent as the presidential primary campaigns have progressed: First, 35% of Americans say they have watched online political videos--a figure that nearly triples the reading the Pew Internet Project got in the 2004 race.

Second, 10% say they have used social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace to gather information or become involved. This is particularly popular with younger voters: Two-thirds of internet users under the age of 30 have a social networking profile, and half of these use social networking sites to get or share information about politics or the campaigns.

Third, 6% of Americans have made political contributions online, compared with 2% who did that during the entire 2004 campaign. A significant number of voters are also using the internet to gain access to campaign events and primary documents. Some 39% of online Americans have used the internet to access unfiltered campaign materials, which includes video of candidate debates, speeches and announcements, as well as position papers and speech transcripts.

Online activism using social media has also grown substantially since the first time we probed this issue during the 2006 midterm elections. Yet despite the growth in the number of people who are politically engaged online, internet users express some ambivalence about the role of the internet in the campaign. On one hand, 28% of wired Americans say that the internet makes them feel more personally connected to the campaign, and 22% say that they would not be as involved in the campaign if not for the internet. At the same time, however, even larger numbers feel that the internet magnifies the most extreme viewpoints and is a source of misinformation for many voters.

Notwithstanding the tone of some of these headlines and quotes presented here, the role of the web in politics remains grossly overestimated if one looks at the data emerging from surveys.

Notwithstanding the tone of some of these headlines and quotes presented here, the role of the web in politics remains grossly overestimated if one looks at the data emerging from surveys.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internet users' views about the general role of the internet in politics</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The internet is full of misinformation and propaganda that too many voters believe is accurate</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The news and information you get online is just the same as you can get anywhere else</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The internet lets those with the loudest voices and most extreme positions drown out average people's views</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The internet helps me feel more personally connected to my candidate or campaign of choice</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would not be as involved in this campaign as much if it weren't for the internet</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Pew Internet & American Life 2008 Survey > Internet users' view about the general role of the internet in politics © Pew 2008
Let’s start with the voter turnout in the US Presidential elections. In 2008 it was 63.6%, which is in absolute terms a decrease from 2004 (when the voting rate was 63.8%) and in relative terms a modest score for a country with the media density of the US. It’s therefore a blow for the corpus of theories that suggest that more information equals more participation.

The Pew Report – possibly the latest and most authoritative report in this research field – provides unambiguous data on the views of the interviewees on the role of the Internet in politics: 60% of the Internet users questioned by Pew agree to the statement: ‘The Internet is full of disinformation and propaganda that too many voters believe is accurate.’

If a record-breaking 46% of Americans has used the Internet to get news of the campaign, the majority of Americans (54%) has not. In the 2010 campaign this figure had raised to 54%. The percentage is progressing but the resistance to radical change is visible. The reasons are known. A series of personal factors (in Kotler’s terminology) constrains structurally the very usage of the Web in the US and, as we know from the Eurobarometer surveys, elsewhere:

- **Age matters**: younger generations tend to use more computers and the Internet in general.
- **Sex matters**: women tend to use less the Internet.
- **Marital status and the size of the family both have positive impact on web usage (and on other media)**

---


• Higher revenue and education are strongly correlated to web consumption
• A higher opinion leadership index is correlated to the usage of new media.

The detailed results of the 2008 Pew report confirm these statistical patterns.

The growth of the US campaign news audience, reported by Pew over the last few years, is palpable but has only a true significance for the advertising industry as it is becoming clear that campaign videos should be conceived also for the web. A measurable audience is emerging there. As much as mobile content is becoming increasingly relevant in the most recent US campaigns (2012 Pew Report survey). From a mass media research point of view it is also becoming clear that some bloggers have succeeded in becoming influential or seriously competitive sources of campaign information. In terms of gap assessment however, the main issue associated to this report is that it focuses on a very different conceptual framework. In other words it serves the purpose of isolating interesting and new advertising targets. Neither the party (the political system stricto sensu), nor the candidates are the focus of the report, but a sub-group of the political system lato sensu (specifically a new species of the genus of the opinion makers) the real impact of which is certainly not questionable in qualitative terms, but is hardly measurable both absolute and in relative terms. It’s hard to know the actual number of politically relevant activities they carry out (how many times in a given lapse of time they write or call a politician for example611), the actual impact of these activities in the political realm, and the relative value of this behaviour compared to the one shown by other sub-groups (for example mobile phone users with above the average monthly phone bills, individuals with a high degree of direct social interaction due to their membership to clubs, associations, religious circles, sport clubs etc.).

The most relevant finding of the 2008 Pew Report for this research is the overall modest number of interviewees (a maximum of 11% of all adults) that have undertaken a meaningful political action. This confirms that the significance of web driven political participation in media dense environments is largely over estimated. Deliberative action is not even taken into consideration as one of the items of the Pew questionnaire, as the research focuses realistically on content sharing and creation. This seems to corroborate the hypothesis that there is virtually no empirical case online – a part from ad hoc research or politically motivated pilot initiatives - to justify the insertion of such an item in the questionnaire.

Only 5% of the adults polled declares to have posted a message on a newsgroup, website or a blob. I find this a truly eye opening score if one thinks that this is measured after almost 15 years of debate and development of the political web and in the country that basically owns and runs the Internet.

In the exchange of fire between think tanks and pundits, consulting companies and advertising agencies, one of the most persistent and persuasive arguments in defence of the significance of the political web is that its audience is made of maybe few, but influential activists. This argument, which is in reality receivable only when referred to terrorists or other high impact communities, is based on a series of assumptions.

The first assumption is that this community is explained by the web, created by the web, and lives because of the web. The works of Bimber instead show that these communities exists first and foremost as a result of a combination of level of skills, social connectedness, civic association and trust which is applied to the web, but also to many other sources of information. In this respect it is interesting to reflect on the findings of a very recent 2011 survey by IPSOS which shows that French people consult in average 15 media sources (17 for those that have a clear opinion on the candidates and 14 for the indecided) to get political information in view of the Presidential elections.\footnote{612} The web, therefore, also for the activists is one of the elements of the media ecosystem: one on which they may have some influence but not necessarily to dominating one, neither for them personally or for society at large.

Secondly the influences thesis takes for granted that these special individuals use and/or maintain web sites, and in our case party web sites, that have an excellent performance.

Performance and communication effectiveness are not granted (as suggested by Wolton), but are generated by virtuously (and intentionally) coping with the Innisian bias of the web, or the specific attributes and limitation of the web as a medium.

In this conclusive section I will briefly review some of specific constraints deriving from the bias of the web and show how they tend to contrast with the overall objective of creating a more inclusive society, but also how they potentially reduce the political web’s overall performance.

Unresolved Issue 1 : Finding parties online

Political information must be first found before it’s used. It looks like a lapsaliusade, but finding specific content on the Internet is not necessarily straightforward. A survey of 82 major US and European web-portals and directories I carried out in March 2002 in support to this research, revealed that a minority (23.1\%) showed the theme/subject politics on its home page. Only one portal pointed to parties. Many had alternative entries such society, government, law. There is no .party domain on the net and party names or symbols can be high-jacked\footnote{613} or used in hoax or parody sites. Search engines are at present the most reliable source of party sites addresses online, notwithstanding the fact that they do not seem to be used primarily for this purpose\footnote{614}. Bottom line: political parties URLs must be intuitive and these organisations have to acquire the largest amount of relevant DNS to redirect the maximum amount of users to their actual home page.
In 44 instances, official political party sites recorded in my manual observation campaigns had URLs that looked like http://members.aol.com/AlgFis/ribat/a.htm or http://www.geocities.com/WallStreet/Bureau/6011/.

The difficulty of finding parties online is a factor that reinforces the split between the politically influential online and those that are not in tune with the new medium and may slip through the net. As Norris\textsuperscript{615} notes:

\begin{quote}
\textit{....Given the burden placed by new media on users' initiative to find sites of relevance...those who are already engaged and interested, it is argued, are logically the most inclined to go and find more information online, thus pulling them further into an upward spiral or virtuous circle of participation.}
\end{quote}

Unresolved Issue 2 : Rhetoric and visualization of hypertexts

First Concklin, but also recently Durand and Kahn, Ahuja and Webster, Schoon and Cafolla, Yatim and Baylor\textsuperscript{616}, note that the Web induces disorientation and cognitive overload. Navigating on the Internet imposes a cognitive overhead related to orientation: where am I and where am I going to? The challenge is increased by the volumes of information prompted to the users in each page, by absence of physical context and if definitely worsened by the absence of contextual graphic cues. If the \textit{rhetoric of departure} is self evident, the \textit{rhetoric of the arrival}, as suggested by Landow\textsuperscript{617}, does not exist. A strict control over volumes, signs, and all sort of physical clue defining the borders of the site is critical on party web sites. It’s safer to force a user to push the back button (the \textit{lifeline of the Web user} and the second-most used navigation feature after following hypertext links, as Nielsen underlines\textsuperscript{618}) than inviting him to visit the home page of other sites. In this respect the management of outbound hyperlinks in official party sites (particularly in the very large family of protosites) is often very ineffective: external links to other home pages are placed on the surface of the site and very rarely outbound texts are used (like in authoritative blogs) to corroborate statements and enrich articles and documents with hyperlinks to other relevant material in other servers online. There is no need to quote sources, the party is \textit{the} source.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{615} NORRIS. P. A virtuous Circle: reinventing political activism, Cambridge University Press, 2003 p. 228
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{617} LANDOW, GEORGE P. Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology. Baltimore, Md. : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{618} Users happily know that they can try anything on the Web and always be saved by a click or two on Back to return them to familiar territory Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox, May 30, 1999: The Top Ten Web Design Mistakes of 1999 http://www.useit.com/alertbox/990530.html
\end{flushright}
Unresolved Issue 3 : Non reading

Probably the most intriguing finding in usability studies and one of the most important pieces of evidence that attacks the roots of the credibility of the myth of e-democracy, is related to the way people scan Web pages instead of reading them.

Nielsen’s eye tracking research provides eloquent results:

- 79 percent of Nielsen’s test users always scanned (rapid or detailed see pictures below) any new page they came across;
- only 16 percent read word-by-word
- Advertising banners are skipped by users
- Users read email newsletters even more abruptly than they read websites
- Eye-tracking visualizations shows that users often read Web pages in an F-shaped pattern: two horizontal stripes followed by a vertical stripe

Re-elaborating a paper by Weinreich, Obendorf, Herder and Mayer Nielsen notes that in the average Web page, users have time to read at most 28% of the words during an average visit; 20% is more likely.

As a result of these findings Party Web sites should employ scannable text, using, suggests Nielsen:

- highlighted keywords (hypertext links serve as one form of highlighting; typeface variations and colour are others)

Illustration 66: Heatmaps © J. Nielsen (the text of the legend is also © Nielsen)

Only Electronic Dazebaos?

Most of the party sites observed in 6 manual observation campaigns behave as (bad) dazebaos, with large, non scannable text. An information architecture (focussing in particular on visual design) analysis of these web sites makes one wonder about their content production workflow, about the overall editorial control and about the real inclination of party sites to abide to the usability dictat.

Not only most of the party sites observable worldwide seem to be implemented with a complete disregard of these basic rules, but it seems unrealistic that the audience of this type of web properties is influential enough to change the course of elections. The issue once again is being capable of converting into active voters a community which does not amount to a country’s complete population, but what remains after one has subtracted:

- the non users of the web,
- then subtract again those who choose to watch the TV, read the press or do something else, as Norris underlines\(^{624}\),
- then subtract those that do not trust the web as good source of politically relevant information\(^{625}\) or as a source of political inspiration,
- then subtract those that have visited blogs, news sites created by NGOs or University Centres, and mainstream media online,
- then subtract those that get lost in cyberspace or get immediately out of the party site following links to other external sites,
- then subtract those that simply scan, do not read and finally
- those don’t go any further (don’t change their mind, don’t sign a petition, don’t influence their neighbours etc.).

---

\(^{624}\) NORRIS P., "Preaching to the converted", 2001-2003 Idem, p. 10

The s.c. Information Society and its 'attention economy'

The structure of the so called Information Society is likely to keep things unchanged as the equation between the overall volume of political information available and the heterogeneity of the sources available to explore it, is creating a completely inefficient attention economy, to use the expression of Davenport and Beck and to recall the lesson of Wolton. The number of politically relevant media that could potentially be consumed by the potential audience of the political web is much greater than the time available to consume them. As the competition between sources is fierce, the real significance of the political web stricto sensu in ordinary conditions, outside major elections, may not be ever comparable to the much greater influence of mainstream media, notably television.

While some research suggests that for younger users the Internet is taking the place of television, the scarcity of the time and attention budget is likely to continue to marginalise the web which shows a comparatively inefficient ratio between:

$$\frac{\text{time to consume}}{\text{Q of embedded information-knowledge}} / \text{C access costs (include learning costs)}$$

To conclude, this fieldwork offers an insight on the actual web projects implemented by political parties worldwide. In cybernetic terms, load appears to be an issue for most sites: there is too often either too little content (protosites) or too much (many meso and virtually all neosites). In political communication terms the lion's share is for the worst of the political web (personality politics, the saturation of the 'feeling to be informed', rampant consumer marketing techniques as demonstrated by the proliferation of IKEA visuals). 'Commands', confrontational communication (observed in the numerous English and French speaking sites) and a growing number of 'digital tricks' structure the toolbox of the digital propagandist. Communitarism prosers, and as Wolton puts its, more information is really not resulting in more communication. The very large political web (stricto sensu) is a new playground for Bartolini's politics of animosity.

Although this analysis has been carried out in several campaigns over a long period of time, it remains largely a very aggregative qualitative study, based on my own coding. In the following chapters the findings from two additional fieldworks will be presented to corroborate the points made in this discussion.

---


627 An average European has access through satellite to few thousands TV and radio channels available from roughly 40 to 50 satellite positions, can buy thousands of different newspapers and magazines in several languages, can listen to tens of FM/AM/SW channels on a traditional radio and thousands on an Internet radio, can listen to cable content and buy one of the tens of thousands of books published every year. At every election, the competition exerted by a fraction of this universe to grab the attention of the public during a handful of available hours is enough to either annihilate the chances of certain media to be the preferred ones or annihilate the chances of individuals of keeping a decent track of the issues and stake and the evolution of the campaign.

628 For a recent and comprehensive analysis of the role of Information Overload in individuals and organisations see the EURESCOM study Impacts of Information Overload- Study n. P947 1999 online ref. [http://www.eurescom.de/public/projectresults/P900-series/947/91.asp](http://www.eurescom.de/public/projectresults/P900-series/947/91.asp)

As I have already anticipated in the methodological section one fieldwork is devoted to corroborate the main qualitative findings on the form, structure and basic aims of party sites. To achieve this I have carried out an automatic structural analysis of all the Electionworld.org list of parties and then processed the results using SPSS.

I have then devoted a third fieldwork to understand the process of creating a party site as viewed from within the party itself. The degree of organizational change which a party must go through to produce a performing online presence is very significant. Not only there is the obvious need to procure the financial resources needed to match a given standard, but the party has to have clear ideas on what sort of standard must be adopted in the framework of which communication strategy. What is the overall aim of the site: Communicating, but with whom?

Are party site meant to illustrate the party base, the party leader, or the party leaders? Are they meant to create a web to read? A web to listen and watch? A web to use or a web to do? To answer these questions I have organised an online questionnaire targeting party sites webmasters and then reviewed the results using SPSS.
7. A Global Structural Analysis of Political Parties Web Sites using Web Link Validator (Fieldwork Two)

COLLECTED DATA

The purpose of this fieldwork was to complement the longitudinal direct observation with a structural analysis of the architectural features of political web design.

The analysis covered 2073 cases: like Norris\(^{630}\) (who studied a set of 1250 parties only), I counted separately in the analysis all parties with a distinct name. The survey was carried out between the end of December 2004 and mid April 2005. The list of political parties was extracted by downloading the entire metasite of Electionworld.org (the extraction occurred 14/12/2004). The list included parties which has participated to recent elections in the given country (with documented results), but also newly formed parties and minor political movements which had not yet competed in elections.

The software used in this survey was Version 3,5 build 343 of WebLinkValidator (a specific build developed for this project by REL software). The software run 24H24 on several (up to 5) machines simultaneously on the basis of command line programming. WLV data have been first exported in HTML and then converted into a SPSS file for further analysis.

Prior to the full WLV run between December 2004 and April 2005, a successful WLV trial attempt was implemented during 2004. This attempt allowed me to find a technical solution with WLV to deal with large dynamic sites (meso and neosites structured around dynamic pages).

Several prior attempts (both manual and based on the automation of Astra Site Manager and Web Analyzer) had failed to give operational results. The softwares crashed both manually and automatically so often that it had been impossible to complete a full batch.

Technically, dynamic Web pages are:

- **Web pages** containing dynamic content (e.g., images, text, form fields, etc.) that can change/move without the Web page being reloaded or
- **Web pages** that are produced on-the-fly by server-side programs, frequently based on parameters in the URL or from an HTML form.

---

Web pages that adhere to the first definition are often called Dynamic HTML or DHTML pages. Client-side languages like JavaScript are frequently used to produce these types of dynamic web pages. Web pages that adhere to the second definition are often created with the help of server-side languages such as PHP, Perl, ASP/.NET, JSP, and languages. These server-side languages typically use the Common Gateway Interface (CGI) to produce dynamic web pages.

After having contended with difficulties related to cases of combinatorial explosion (the analysis of Jay Minju party in Korea blocked for example one machine for 213 hours during which the software had collected information about 112,818 links) I decided to introduce a constraint in the analysis with the aim to stop the analytical process once the software reached the level of 50,000 links.

The limitation had an impact on something more than a hundred cases during this survey. In less than 5% of all cases it is extremely likely that the software has generated a true combinatorial explosion error. In the rest of the cases the analysis has been carried out with the software completing 100% of the verifiable structure and switching automatically to the next site in the list.

The distribution of the data retrieved by WLV was significantly anormal (min 1 max 279202 mean 4151,86 Std deviation 14050,871).

Below, the image shows the distribution (count) of the sites on the basis of the number of links (all types of links) counted during the scanning. Some 14% of the sites (14,3%) consisted in a single link (either a single page or a broken URL suggesting that the site was not maintained any more), 3% of the sites had 2 links and 2,5% had 3. These three groups should indicatively be seen as corresponding to the description of a protosite.632

631 The full name of the party is Jayo Minju Yonmaeng
632 It would be justified to make the hypothesis that many these web properties belong to fringe parties i.e. organisations that, according to Norris “identify themselves as party and run candidates, yet lack at least 3% of the elected members of the lower house of the national parliament” see Norris Parties and Government Online Idem, p.6
Roughly 50% of the sites observed had less than 1000 links. 10% had between 1000 and 3000 links. Less than 7% of the sites observed had between 3000 and 10000 links. A little more than 4% of the sites had between 10000 and 48,000 links. This latter group should indicatively be seen as corresponding to the description of a high end mesosite or a neosite.

The meaning of the considerable amount of sites with more than a thousand (all) links should be interpreted with a technical and structural explanation. The structure of contemporary mesosites (characterized the usage of frames which contain a dynamic content) generates an amount of internal links which are *duplicata* of a same set of internal navigation links and external exit links. If the same frame is re-used in several levels of the site, the same set of internal and external links is repeated in the overall count.

A correlation analysis (below) shows the relationship between Internal Links and Static vs Dynamic pages. Internal links are strongly correlated with dynamic pages. Pure jumplists to external sites and pure internal links (from static pages to other static pages, to document archives or to internal sections of a document) are models which are progressively abandoned in favour of the meso-style.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>InternalLinks</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>InternalLinks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.606(**)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamicwebdocuments</td>
<td></td>
<td>.606(**)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0,006</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staticwebdocuments</td>
<td></td>
<td>.296(**)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0,006</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11: SPSS: Correlation Analysis showing the relationship between number of internal links and static vs. dynamic pages (Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed))

Illustration 69: Distribution of Broken Links by percentage
As my manual observation has shown, many party sites have become dense and more complex in a matter of only few years. A reinforced coherence in the design has led to an increase of sites which systematically promote a given set of orientation devices (traffic signs/links to specific sections of the site) at every level or in every section of the site.

A broader correlation analysis carried out between various categories of links (good, broken, internal external) reveals unsurprisingly that internal links (those which are under greater control of the web master) are strongly correlated with good links. The correlation also isolates the statistically significant number of sites which have gone out of control thus showing a good correlation between broken and internal links.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Internal Links</th>
<th>External Links</th>
<th>Good links</th>
<th>Broken links</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internal Links</strong></td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.132(**)</td>
<td>.953(**)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>0,000</td>
<td>0,000</td>
<td>0,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>2073</td>
<td>2073</td>
<td>2073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>External Links</strong></td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.132(**)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.172(**)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>0,000</td>
<td>0,000</td>
<td>0,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>2073</td>
<td>2073</td>
<td>2073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Good links</strong></td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.953(**)</td>
<td>.172(**)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>0,000</td>
<td>0,000</td>
<td>0,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>2073</td>
<td>2073</td>
<td>2073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Broken links</strong></td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.521(**)</td>
<td>0,028</td>
<td>.261(**)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>0,000</td>
<td>0,208</td>
<td>0,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>2073</td>
<td>2073</td>
<td>2073</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12: SPSS: Correlation analysis between good, broken, internal and external links in party sites. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
The analysis of the status of broken links reveals two extremes: one extreme of sites which have almost no or very few broken links (almost 70% of the sample) and a 12.5% of cases where almost the entire site is broken.

The geographic spread confirms what I have suggested following Norris, i.e. a strong correlation between the national level of development, the national level of technical proficiency and the poor development, maintenance and further growth of political web sites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-0%</td>
<td>608</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-5%</td>
<td>831</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-10%</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>773</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-20%</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>823</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-30%</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-40%</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2073</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 13: SPSS: Distribution of Broken Links across web sites*
The analysis of external links shows that almost all political sites (with the exception of 16.2% of the observed universe) have elected a system of external referrals. Confirming the findings of my first fieldwork, a considerable amount of party sites is (almost) made of these lists of external links. The geographical spread seems to suggest that non-users of external links are concentrated in developing countries: absence of external links may also be related to malfunctioning party URLs, or to the genus of threatened or diasporic sites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-5%</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10%</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-20%</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>593</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-90%</td>
<td>764</td>
<td>369</td>
<td>369</td>
<td>961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-100%</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2073</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14: SPSS: Distribution of External Links in Percentage of the overall universe

Illustration 70: Graph of the distribution of External Links in Percentage of the overall universe
Concerning internal links, more than 43% of the sample is composed by sites which are almost exclusively made of internal links (90-100%).

The semantic role played by multimedia in political web sites has been discussed in detail in the previous chapters. In stage mobility, the integration of more and more multimedia resources in web sites is a clear marker of dynamism. The detection of all the extensions used to produce multimedia content in web sites (namely the extensions .swf, .asf, .asx, .avi, .mid, .mov, .mpeg, .mpg, .ram, .rm, .smil, .wav, .wma, .wmf, .wmv) and the analysis of the cases they are related to, reveals that in 68.1% of the observed universe there is no sign of multimedia (a phenomenon that has no real geographical characterization).

On the other hand 14.7% of the sites have 5 or more multimedia items inside the site structures. In this particular case the geographic spread seems to confirm the hypothesis (presented above in my first fieldwork) that in developing countries there is a growing usage of multimedia resources not only for the speeches or press conferences, but to reinforce the identity of the reference community (through songs, films etc.).

Concerning the use of Flash – a technology which is giving by far the best visual results in the evolution towards the transmedia genus – the survey reveals that there is at least one swf file (often the splash screen) in 8.1% of the cases. In roughly another 8% of cases .swf files decorate pages or serve as basic navigation service. In these cases a piece of flash is embedded in the dynamic structure of the site and are therefore replicated at each level and section of the site structure.
As already mentioned in the introduction to this fieldwork, a great deal of our sample shows to have moved into advanced models of site programming.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid 0</td>
<td>1412</td>
<td>681</td>
<td>681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>841</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,00 +</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2072</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 16: SPSS: Distribution of multimedia files in the observed universe

Almost 39% of the sample shows to have a certain amount of dynamic pages (in many cases the entire structure is dynamic). Meso and Neosite clearly belong to this community. The cases showing no sign of dynamic pages (38% of the cases analysed) is clearly made of protosites, 100% of which is derived from static pages. Protosites are clearly concentrated in developing countries: this confirms Norris’ idea that “levels of democratic, technological and socio-economic development are all plausible factors that may explain the distribution [and the structure, I would add] of party and government web sites worldwide”633.

On the other hand, the spread of dynamic sites covers OECD countries and developing countries where there is a shortage of infrastructure, but not a shortage of skilled IT resources (this is the case for example of the countries in the Mediterranean region or in some Latin American countries).

A correlation confirms the role played by ASP, Java, and PHP in the size of party sites and in particular in the development of deep pages: more and more of what is contained in party sites is not on the surface, more and more meso and neosites turn into archival resources for the party community: an element which has been mentioned by webmasters polled in the second fieldwork. An evolution which may be logical and possibly inevitable but still an evolution which decreases the transparency and usability of online party sites (as the access to this content is mediated by external or embedded search engines).

The interactivity question has been measured in this survey through the detection of mailto command and the `form` and `input` coding in web sites. The spread of both indicators is abnormal in both cases.

In 34.7% of the cases there was no mailto; in 51.9% of the cases there was no form.

In 13.8% of the cases there is at least one mailto command and in 16.7% of the cases there is at least one form (although it is not said whether that the form is used to post comments and provide politically relevant feedback).

A fraction of the universe (1-2%) has multiple forms and input methods corresponding to advanced neosites (along the model of the US Green Party Action centre) or over-exposure sites (such as the Argentine Humanista party).

Through a correlation analysis it’s possible to see that there is no strong correlation between mailto and forms. Confirming one of the annotation of my manual campaign, this indicates that often web sites have either mailto or forms, but also shows that a minority of sites have both.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>788</td>
<td>380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>200</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>300</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>400</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5,000+</td>
<td>803</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>2072</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>System</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>2073</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 17: SPSS: Percentage of Dynamic Sites in the observed universe
Table 18: SPSS: Correlation Analysis between web functionalities dealing with interactivity (mailto, form and input). Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pagesprocessed Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>mailto</th>
<th>form</th>
<th>input</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2073</td>
<td>2072</td>
<td>2072</td>
<td>2072</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>mailto Pearson Correlation</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>0.260(**)</td>
<td>0.107(**)</td>
<td>0.062(**)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2073</td>
<td>2072</td>
<td>2072</td>
<td>2072</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Form Pearson Correlation</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>0.183(**)</td>
<td>0.107(**)</td>
<td>0.062(**)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2073</td>
<td>2072</td>
<td>2072</td>
<td>2072</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Input Pearson Correlation</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>0.283(**)</td>
<td>0.122(**)</td>
<td>0.062(**)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2073</td>
<td>2072</td>
<td>2072</td>
<td>2072</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 19: SPSS: Distribution of resources for interactivity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0,00</td>
<td>592</td>
<td>28,6</td>
<td>28,6</td>
<td>28,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,00</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>11,9</td>
<td>11,9</td>
<td>40,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,00</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>5,8</td>
<td>5,8</td>
<td>46,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3,00</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>6,0</td>
<td>6,0</td>
<td>52,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4,00</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>4,2</td>
<td>4,2</td>
<td>56,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.00 +</td>
<td>901</td>
<td>43,5</td>
<td>43,5</td>
<td>100,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2072</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>System Missing</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2073</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If we group forms, mailto and input we see that an important number of cases (28.6%) have no form of interaction mechanism with the public. If we eliminate from this results all cases where the 0 interact parameter is found in fringe party sites made of only one link (297 cases or 14.33% of the universe), 14.3% of the overall universe (sites made of two links or more), has no mailto command or form. In both cases a significant finding which could contradicted only by the unlikely existence of forms which are based on flash or on java, a too complex method to embed in a site a messaging application.

The geographic distribution seems to suggest in this respect that there is just a slight difference between developing and developed countries with regard to this issue.

Forty three per cent of the observed universe has 5 or more interaction items (this means for example sites with multiple email addresses to allow mail to decentralised/thematic party structures) in the site structure. If we group together those that have none or little interactivity (one or two methods) we reach 46,3% of the observed universe. Unless we define interactivity otherwise (for example like Norris), data extracted from real cases do not seem to support the hypothesis that the structure of the observed sites is largely geared to facilitate inputs from the public at large. This finding, coupled with the responses to the second fieldwork seems instead to comfort the hypothesis that party web sites are fundamentally used to post or better propagate information, rather than to pull or gather wants and needs.

DISCUSSION

The central argument of this fieldwork is based on the definition of political interactivity as a complex of web applications deriving from either the basic mailto command or from forms and other input methods used to store or update data, getting content or sending e-mail. Technically what I have instructed WLV to do, is to seek evidence of PHP and ASP client server activities.

This method provides evidence that a significant number of political sites within the very large list of Electionsworld.org do not possess the structure to match the technical requirements for even basic political participation online. In 34,7% of the cases there is no mailto; in 51.9% of the cases there is no form. In 13.8% of the cases there is at least one mailto command and in 16.7% of the cases there is at least one form (although it not said whether that the form is used to post comments and provide politically relevant feedback). A large section of the political web is therefore not playing any real role in the development of person to person interaction.

On the opposite side of the spectrum some 40% of the sites scanned (likely to belong to affluent parties or to active members of governing coalitions as Norris suggests) show a considerable amount of interactivity indicators. This interactivity however does not lead to visible results in eDemocracy terms (in the previous fieldwork I had identified that only 8% of a sample of 622 sites had an accessible forum online) and it is likely to be conceived to increase communication (articulation function) between party staffers and audience at large.

The number of sites which show strong (Heeter) interactivity indicators, summed to the significant amount of sites which show a considerable amount of links, proves that the phenomenon of meso and neo sites is growing and that party sites tend more and more at evolving from basic dazebaos to copies
of mainstream media online. They grow in content dramatically, piling internally produced articles over more and more multimedia content (audio and video). In this sense they become increasingly victims of the bias of modern newspapers i.e. the loose the Innisian ‘control over time’ (too much content, changed too often), while at the same time they keep on bearing the consequences of the bias of the web in terms of readability (too long documents get scanned and not read).

Like major newspapers political online party sites are progressively opening their structures to become recipients of public comments and reactions to hot news, and in this sense the social dimension of these sites is growing thanks to the impulsion of Web 2.0 platforms such as Flickr, MySpace, Twitter, You Tube, FaceBook and the numerous link sharing platforms.

In a political perspective this fieldwork corroborates (with hard data) some of the comments made in the first fieldwork:

In cybernetic terms, load appears to be a real issue for most sites: the highly abnormal distribution of links within sites, shows that there is either too little data (protosites) or too much (many meso and virtually all neosites).

In political communication terms, the significant percentage of sites showing a very significant quantities of links and pages shows that while parties are trying to check mainstream media (Politicians’ have - suggests Blumler and Kavanagh634 - enhanced opportunities to promulgate their line and at the same time they remain vulnerable to the framing power of journalism) one really wonders what the audience is listening to in terms of quality and usefulness for policy and decisions.

Altough the impact of party web sites is not part of the dissertation’s research perimeter, this specific structural analysis suggests that the architecture of party sites is developing in such a way to be less and less capable of injecting meaningful inputs in the circuitry of modern democratic institutions. Engaged in a frontal competition with traditional news media (and deprived of the same assets), the political web stricto sensu (and the set of interactive applications it contains) seems to be too a weak vector to channel adequate stimuli to alter and modify electoral processes or institutional dynamics.

The Political Webmasters’ Online Survey (Fieldwork Three)

COLLECTED DATA

The purpose of this fieldwork was to better understand the aims and the intentions of site producers as indicated by Schneider and Foot. The majority parties that have participated to the survey come from Europe and its neighbouring countries, something less than 30% of the responders come from Australasia, Latin America, Russia or Mediterranean countries. The overall list (see below) includes also parties from Africa and Canada.

1. Canadian Action Party, Canada
2. SDS Slovenian Democratic Party
3. GroenLinks, Netherlands
4. PDSH, Macedonia
5. Partei der deutschsprachigen Belgier (PDB), Belgium
6. Sverigedemokraterna, Sweden
7. Bulgarian Socialdemocracy, BULGARIA
8. Labour New Zealand
9. L’Ulivo (www.perlulivo.it) - Italia
10. Australian Reform Party
11. Christian Heritage, New Zealand
12. Marijuana Party of Canada
13. Herut Israel
14. SoLiDe Belgium (Flanders)
15. Estonian Social Democratic Party, Estonia
16. SGP the Netherlands
17. Communist Party of Russian Federation
18. Südtiroler Volkspartei (Italy)
19. Grüne Partei der Schweiz, Switzerland
20. Communist Party of Czechoslovakia - Czechoslovakian Workers Party
21. PS - *Belgium
22. Social Democrats in Sweden
23. PS Suisse/SP Schweiz, Switzerland
24. SoLiDe Belgium
25. Libertarian Party of Canada
26. The Democratic Socialist Party of Australia, an internal tendency of the Socialist Alliance of Australia
27. Green Party of Canada
28. ChristenUnie, Netherlands
29. SOPIONLINE.COM SENEGAL
30. New Zealand Labour
31. Meimad - Israel
32. The Australian Greens
33. Bulgarian Socialist Party
34. Swedish peoples parti, Finland
35. sp.a Belgium-flanders
36. Heyre, Norway
37. VVD The Netherlands
38. Democratic Party (DP), Uganda
39. SPÖ (Socialdemocratic Party of Austria), Austria
40. Marijuana Party of Canada
41. Green Left Weekly, Australia
42. Canadian Democratic Movement
43. Partido Federal, República Argentina.
44. Democratic Party of Slovenia, Slovenia
45. National Movement Simeon the Second, Bulgaria
46. The Social Democratic Party in Denmark
47. Democratic Left Party-DSP-Turkey
48. The Swedish Social Democratic Party - Sweden
49. New Slovenia, Christian peoples party; Slovenia
50. Green Party of Sweden
51. Green Party of Canada
52. Demokratess Partei, Luxembourg
53. CDA Holland
54. European Free Alliance-Rainbow Greece
55. Green Party of Canada
56. Democratic Alliance, South Africa
57. Democratic Rally, Cyprus
58. SDI Socialisti Democratici Italiani Italia
59. NNP - South Africa
60. Movimiento de Liberación Nacional, Guatemala

61. Malaysian Indian Congress, Malaysia
62. Jaunais laiks, Latvia
63. Platforma Obywatelska RP (The Civic Platform), Poland
64. Lijst Pim Fortuyn, Netherlands
65. SGP The Netherlands
66. Movement for Democratic Change, Zimbabwe
67. Alliance Party New Zealand
68. Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC)
69. Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) - Flanders (Belgium)
70. Independent Democrats South Africa
71. Fine Gael, Ireland
72. Südtiroler Volkspartei (SVP) Italy
73. National Movement Simeon II, Bulgaria
74. The Left Alliance, Finland
75. United Democrats - Cyprus
76. Socialistische Arbeiderspartij, Belgium (Socialist Workers Party)
77. Movimiento Libertario, Costa Rica
78. Partido Líberación Nacional, Costa Rica
79. Cesta zmeny, Czech Republic
80. Partido Acción Ciudadana - Costa Rica
81. Albanian Democratic Party - Macedonia
82. ChristenUnie Netherlands
83. Konservative, Denmark
84. Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires - Maroc
85. VVD, Netherlands
86. Bayan Muna/People First Philippines
87. Non-Custodial Parents Party - Australia
88. Green Party of Aoteroa New Zealand
89. Liberal Democrats, UK
90. SP, Netherlands, http://www.sp.nl/en/
91. The Workers’ Party of Singapore
92. Freedom Front Plus; South Africa
93. Kristdemokraterna, Sweden
94. Social Democratic Party of Switzerland
95. SolidaritéS switzerland
96. Green US
97. Green Party of the United States
98. Party of Democratic Socialism (CR)
99. Freiheits-Partei der Schweiz
100. Bulgarian Socialdemocracy party, www.bgsp.org, BULGARIA
101. The Socialist Party, Australia
102. Vänsterpartiet, Sweden
103. Senterpartiet, Norway
104. Nuclear Disarmament Party of Australia.
105. Greens wa Australia
106. New Zealand National Party
On the basis of an auto-positioning scale (1 being extreme left and 10 being extreme right) 16 respondents have identified themselves as being extreme left (two groups for a total of 15.2% of the responses), 28 have identified themselves as being centre left (two groups for a total of 26.6% of the responses), 43 responders declare to belong to centre parties (two groups for a total of 40.9% of the responses), 12 declare to belong to centre right parties (11.5% of the responses) and 6 declare to be extreme right parties (5.7%). Four respondents have skipped the question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>11. In political matters people talk of &quot;the left&quot; and &quot;the right&quot;. How would you place your party (views) on this scale?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Respondents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(skipped this question)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Illustration 71: WebMaster Survey > Sample Details > Self-positioning in the left-right continuum

Interestingly, my sample seems to confirm the idea (outlined in the second chapter) that 1996 (the year of the G7 for Information Society) has been a decisive year for the propagation of the Clinton-Gore web-prone model of political leadership. The majority of the respondents declares to have started their online party experience in 1996. The year 2000 (possibly for the symbolic implications of the date) has been another peak year for the launch of political parties online.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. When did you launch your political web site?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in 1992, or before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in 1993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in 1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in 1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in 1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>this year:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Illustration 72: WebMaster Survey > Sample Details > "When did you launch your political web site"
According to the results of question n.9 an interesting mix of volunteers activities (bottom up) and leaders’ vision (top down) seem to be at the origin of the party web site. The combined role of senior management, party leadership and advisers seem to corroborate the idea that internal elites are key triggers for the creation of the party site and for its evolution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>9. Who started the project ? (multiple answers allowed)</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the existing website</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>someone in the staff with prior IT experience</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the party leader himself</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a close advisor to the party leader</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>someone in the party senior management</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Respondents</td>
<td></td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Illustration 73: Webmaster Survey > Sample Details > "Who started the project"

The list below represents the transcript of the “Other” option:

1. we, a community of volunteers
2. This is 10 years ago, there’s nobody here that has worked that long, whom I could ask.
3. candidate
4. party members also raised that we should have a website in general meetings
5. the group together
6. Volunteers
7. Our previous director of communications, who was also a member of parliament for the party
8. The first website was created by a volunteer party worker
9. The employment
10. Party members
11. The Party Board
12. volunteer
13. It evolved
14. You should not assume the party leader is a man, it is offensive, especially considering who your audience is.
15. The decision to launch a website was taken by the party board
16. Volunteer with it experience
When asked to state the nature of the primary target of their party site, the majority of respondents answered the electorate in general. Further statistical analysis presented in this section will somehow nuance these data suggesting the existence of at least three main uses of the political web and three types of primary targets.

Militants, Journalists, and potential switchers are (in this order) the main secondary targets according to the response total. Party sites are not meant primarily to communicate with the opposition (this item gets the lowest score, 17.6% of the respondents).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the electorate in general</td>
<td>86.1%</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>journalists</td>
<td>63.9%</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>militants of your own party</td>
<td>67.6%</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the opposition</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the voters who are likely to change party in the next elections</td>
<td>60.2%</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents: 108

Illustration 74: WebMaster Survey > On the Intentions > “You have designed this site essentially to communicate with”

In the open section of this multiple answers question, some parties noted (not surprisingly) that the site responds to the need to address the youngest generation (Youth/Students/Schools), but also the diaspora (see the references to the diasporic party sites analysed above), like-minded parties (see the references to party constellations in the previous chapter), potential donors (friendly governments, the international community), and finally people all over the world.

The list below represents the transcript of the “Other” option:

- You have designed this site essentially to communicate with: (multiple answers allowed)
  1. other regional parties in Europe
  2. all over the world curious
  3. Those who are politically homeless
  4. party members in diaspora
  5. Everybody in the world
  6. broad left supporters
  7. all internet users
  8. Schools and students
  9. Party members
  10. international contacts
  11. public
  12. Friendly Governments
  13. International community
  14. the electorate and our party structures
  15. Students
  16. international public
17. pressure groups and lobbyists, potential members
18. advanced workers and youth
19. students
20. Active people in our own party

Responses to question n.°3 suggest that the web is the most important communication tool for just a sub-section of the interviewed (16.7%), as it is part of a multi-channel communication context for most of them. The answer one of the channels the party uses was the preferred one for 80.6% of the responders.

Speed and economic considerations are very important for half of the respondents: this confirms many of Bonchek’s tenets, but also my hypotheses (the notion of web’s weaponization) on the behaviour of parties which are either on the extremes of the political spectrum or completely ousted from the formal political life or banned by mainstream media.

The web is also seen as an instrument for selective marketing, to narrowcast content in precise directions (38.9%). One of the respondents stated (in other answers) in this respect, that the web gives the possibility to offer messages without noise.

A principal component analysis run using SPSS on the results of questions 2 and 3 revealed three sets of factors explaining respectively some 20%, 17% and 11% of the variance. The first set groups four specific targets of communication (journalists, potential switchers, military-
ants and opposition), thus indicating the existence of a belief in the web as a tool for selective communication. The second set suggests that if for the majority, the web is one of the party communication tools, for a portion of the universe questioned by the poll the web is indeed – as my manual observation findings suggested – the most important communication tool, precisely because of its speed and costs. The third set seems to isolate those centre aiming parties that can count on adequate resources for a comprehensive multi-channel mass communication strategy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V11 Journalists</td>
<td>0.749</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V14 The voters who are likely to change party in the next elections</td>
<td>0.660</td>
<td>-0.267</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V13 The opposition</td>
<td>0.576</td>
<td>0.344</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V12 Militants of your own party</td>
<td>0.568</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v19 part of a specific communication strategy which aims at reaching one specific portion of the electorate</td>
<td>0.397</td>
<td>-0.395</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V20 the cheapest communication medium the party can use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.763</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v21 the fastest communication medium the party can use</td>
<td>0.281</td>
<td>0.655</td>
<td>-0.264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v17 The most important tool</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.614</td>
<td>0.283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v18 one of the channels of communication the party uses</td>
<td>0.345</td>
<td>-0.568</td>
<td>0.301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v10 The electorate in general</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.746</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 20 SPSS: Principal Component Analysis > Attitudes towards the Web as a Medium (Rotated component matrix Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. a Rotation converged in 6 iterations)
In the analysis of the other results of question n. 3 one can find additional qualitative evidence concerning the very attractive efficiency of the web for smaller parties (we can barely afford anything else), but also new references to the type of selective communication implemented by certain genus such as the diasporic (the web is the Cheapest communication as with party in diaspora and those in exile). Further on in the scrutiny of the other results of question n.10 the web portrayed as a resource for banned parties, corroborating my description of the use of the web made by the threatened genus.

Interestingly, the web is portrayed by respondents also as a useful internal organizational resource (A good tool for updating party press releases for use by the media and party members – a good way of internal communication – memory reservoir), partially corroborating my considerations on the role of political collective memory in numerous conservative, nationalist and left wing parties.

1. We Can Barely Afford Anything Else
2. Good way of internal communication
3. Cheapest communication with party in diaspora and those in exile
4. The easiest way to reach the most people
5. A good tool for updating party press releases for use by the media and party members

Table 21: SPSS: PCA > Variance Explained

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Initial Eigenvalues</th>
<th>Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings</th>
<th>Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>% of Variance</td>
<td>Cumulative %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2,085</td>
<td>20,849</td>
<td>20,849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1,714</td>
<td>17,137</td>
<td>37,986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1,194</td>
<td>11,945</td>
<td>49,931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0,980</td>
<td>9,803</td>
<td>59,734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>0,948</td>
<td>9,480</td>
<td>69,214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>0,800</td>
<td>8,005</td>
<td>77,219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>0,706</td>
<td>7,064</td>
<td>84,283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>0,603</td>
<td>6,031</td>
<td>90,314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>0,494</td>
<td>4,942</td>
<td>95,256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>0,474</td>
<td>4,744</td>
<td>100,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Possibility to offer messages without noise
7. As a memory reservoir of the party

Some of the hypotheses on the growth of political websites developed during the manual campaigns are confirmed in question n. 4: the majority of respondents (43%) indicates that party sites are essentially made in-house, by a small staff of people. Some eighteen percent (18.7%) of the respondents declares that their site is maintained by one person.

This explains the important number of proto and modest meso sites; it also explains why parties are often slow to change the look and structure of their sites.

| 4. Could you describe the type and size of the staff working for the web site of the party? |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| one person, a militant of the party           | 10.7% 29                                      |
| 2/3 persons, party volunteers or staff        | 43%   46                                      |
| a staff of 5-10 people                        | 12.1% 14                                     |
| more than 10 people within the party          | 0%    0                                       |
| an external company is responsible for it     | 3.7%  4                                       |
| an external web designer & 2 administrators    | 6.5%  7                                       |
| Other (please specify)                        | 15%   18                                      |

*Total Respondents: 107 (skipped this question: 2)*

Illustration 76: WebMaster Survey > Size of the Staff involved in maintaining the Party Site

Production is sometimes outsourced to a company (3.7% - a true minority which may explain why only few true neosites are observable in the political web stricto sensu), but more often outsourced to very small teams of people. None of the responses in the other item indicates the existence of a strongly decentralized content production structure, where a significant part of party’s staff contributes to developing the site.

1. Members of staff but doing others things that just webcommunication
2. One web editor, 1/2 web-tv
3. One internal webmaster, one external web-designer
4. An external web designer & 2 administrators from the party
5. An external company but under guidance from the party’s PRO
6. An external company and party staff of 2/3 people
7. I am the website administrator, and we have a company who does our web design and maintains the site.

8. An external company cooperates with one member of staff responsible for the site.

9. An external company for maintenance + 2 staff members (not full-time) for content.

10. One person from the staff.

11. A webmaster and two editors from the party.

12. One party employee updates the site among her other duties; the basic design of the site is created by an external company.

13. An external web designer + 1 person of the staff.

14. Mix of external suppliers and in-house staff.

15. One militant and possibly members of staff.

16. 1.5 person working party staff.
More than 35% of the respondents declares to receive more than 100 mails a week (Question n.5). In this respect Question n. 6 casts more light on this subject indicating that the amount of mails received does not create an issue for the party (70% of the respondents disagree with the idea that they are receiving an unmanageable amount of mails). Less than one out of five respondents (17,9%) declares to receive less than 10 mails a week.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5. Could you tell us how many e-mails to you receive in a week through your web site?</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total respondents</td>
<td>106</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(skipped this question)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Illustration 77: WebMaster Survey > Number of emails received in a week

The combined results of question N. 5 and 6 suggest that respondents are satisfied of their party site (67% say that their militants like their site); the results also indicate that the younger generations are keen users of the site, whereas women do not appear to respond more than men to the content of the party site. Finally the National Press watches closely the party site (more than 50% of the respondents agree to this particular statement).

The majority of the respondents indicates that party sites is not the party’s leaders favourite platform to launch political messages (64% of the answers disagree or strongly disagree to the statement). This could either confirm that the web is not the preferred platform for the most important declarations of the party (and, for example, the TV is) or that the leader can count on his own web platform.

The majority of the respondents agrees to the following statements: the web is not the most important tool for the party communication strategy (58%), key messages are published simultaneously on all media available (77%), the party has created this site to allow people to contact candidates directly (63%), the biggest part of the interaction with the public happens live, in meetings - the web is used essentially to post the party documents and to give news to the electorate (73%).

The most interesting results of this question are related to the transactive / mediating role of party communication online. It is beyond any doubt that in the view of these respondents their site has not been created to invite the opposition to discuss with us (81%). If there is a politically relevant process that goes on in these sites it’s really among like-minded.
The mission statement to gather the wants and needs of the electorate splits respondents in two (54% of the respondents agree and 47% disagree). Given the margin of error of our sample, it is fair to say that half of the respondents does not see in the party’s web an instrument to collect, select and metabolize in the formal fora the needs and wants of the electorate.

This position is then clearly reflected in the architectural intentions of a very large number of party sites around the world.

The web is for many parties a tool to post documents and news: a vision that corroborates my statements on the dazebao model adopted by most of the sites reviewed in the previous chapter. This finding corroborates also the findings of Lusoli, Gibson and Ward:

*Information Provision generally emerges as the most commonly emphasized function...*

*Our own research from the UK and more recently the US and Germany reveals a strong reticence among parties to offer more ambitious participatory elements on their sites.* 636

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements about the web site of your political party (check the option which corresponds)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>our mission: like our site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it creates too many mail messages, it strains our ability to respond to all of them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the youngest, in particular, love it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>our main intention with the site was to provide a space where people talk to us directly about their problems, what they want, what they need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>women, in particular, love it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we often invite the opposition to discuss with us, on our party web site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it’s not the most important tool of our party’s communication strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it’s our leader’s favorite platform to launch political messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the national press writes it clearly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when we have a key message we publish it first on the web, then on other media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when we have a key message we publish it on all media simultaneously</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the majority of our contacts with the public happen live, in meetings, we use the web essentially to post our main political documents and give news to our electorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we created this site to allow people to contact our candidate directly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people rarely write us through our web site</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents: 107

(3 skipped this question) 2

Illustration 78: WebMasters Survey > More on Intentions Analysis

Question 7 was meant to provide factual data on the real performance (Do the public respond?) of party sites. This is obviously an important research question, although my main objective was not to focus on this aspect of the political web. The results of question 7 have been however insufficient to draw any precise conclusion, as few parties were inclined to disclose sensitive data like these: they feared that their answers could become a propaganda weapon in the hands of the opposition.

The matter is also complex technically, since there isn’t a common standard to measure audience: both hits, visitor sessions, users per month have been used to phrase this question in order to facilitate answers by non technically skilled respondents.

Only 89 parties responded to this question and the answers are reported in the list below.

Against the background of some of these specific responses, it seems acceptable the argument of Lusoli Ward and Gibson (2003), that recognize to political parties sites the potential to contact a sizeable enough segment to swing a marginal seat.
1. 1000 awstats?
2. 350,000,00
3. 3000
4. 75
5. 70,000 visitor sessions
6. 200-300 unique users per month
7. I don’t know
8. SPIP says, average 171 per day
9. 100
10. Visitors 75,000 a month, hits 115,000 a month
11. 100,000 users, 500,000 hits
12. 1500
13. 100
14. about 90,000 people/month
15. confidential
16. 2550 (Webstats)
17. 500
18. I will need to contact the webmaster
19. about 10,000 a month, See Hitwise.com.au. It ranks Australian site hits
20. 100k pages per month
21. 56,000 visits/month
22. 1000
23. 100
24. 1000+ users/mth - highly variable
25. 600
26. 5000
27. 8500 unique visitors
28. 185,947 hits
29. 25000
30. we have a guest book on the website and over 8 people sign it daily
31. User sessions per month: 180,000
32. 60,000 visits a week
33. 60,000 unique visitors per month
34. Last month 30,000 different user / internal auditing.
35. 50 visitors
36. 2093 visitors/month
37. 30,000
38. In October 2004 about 57,000 hits. The indicator is in Lotus Notes.
39. 25,000 visits per month, 3 mio hits (clicks) per month
40. 50,000 unique visitors
41. 1.5M hits/mo.
42. 6574 visitor sessions (Oct. 2004); DeepMetrix Live Stats 6.2.7
43. 100,000 visits
44. 7,500
45. 134,7638 hits per month (over 1 million a day during election)
46. Ave 9474 visits per month; ave 251,563 hits per month; ave 63,289 page views per month
47. Around 8 unique visits per day - 200 per month
48. 7900
49. 80 per week
50. 1100, visits
51. avg. 5000 visits
52. classified
53. depends on actual themes, average 500 a day
54. 68,000 visitors and 114,000 hits per month (according website statistical information)
55. 20,000 users per month
56. 4000 visitor sessions per month
57. 24,000 unique visitors/month
58. 3300 hits (webalizer)
59. 300 /day
60. 2093 unique monthly visits (67 unique daily visits) - visitor sessions
61. 19,000; indicator: downloads
62. 500 hits/ a day
63. no accurate data, sorry
64. 8,000 visitors
65. 9000 users/month
66. 30-50 different visitors/month
67. 110
68. 2000 visits/day
69. 17,544 Unique visitors
71. 22,000 users
72. 600
73. 300,000 page views per month
74. n/a
12,000 visitor sessions per day, 70,000 page views per day

500

1291 using a built-in counter

27,000 computers request our site per week

00

average values last 12 months: 319,000 hits/month, 38,750 visits. Values by http://www.mrunix.net/webalizer

NA

2000 sessions

50000

over 400 visitor sessions per month

1450

around 1300 visitors/day

20000

Very many internationally

5000 hit
The results of question n. 8 cast suggest that the majority of the parties that have answered to this survey promote the visibility of their web site essentially through low cost means (house organs, leaflet and posters, mailings). Resources are clearly missing for the large majority of the respondents to promote the Web through TV and radio (only 3% - 4% does this). Web and printed material are treated as a single cluster of tools. The web seems to be framed as another magazine, another newsletter, another house organ, or the modern version of the old party daily.

The web as a living project of the party does not seem to be really worth a specific promotional effort by the Party Leadership. The analysis of the “other” answers reveals that numerous parties are trying to explore online advertising (possibly free banners placed in like minded sites) and other low costs alternatives such as SMS and cross references placed in other promotional channels.

The list below represents the transcript of the “Other” option:

1. none
2. we buy advertising on other websites
3. writing directly to public internet forums
4. email database advertises it
5. Almost nothing, we have almost no budget
6. on-line ads
7. newsletter
8. use of broadcasting time of political parties
9. online advertising
10. put it on all party literature
11. we put our url on all our communication tools (letter-paper, e-mails, namecards,...)

Illustration 79: WebMasters Survey > Activities to promote the visibility of the party site
12. we plug it when we do other media
13. other websites
15. advertize on the internet
16. we write our URL on our presses
17. webvertising
18. Banners on other websites (occasionally)
19. by search engines
20. not advertise yet
21. it’s mentioned on all our expressions
22. we sms
23. None
24. we use political broadcasting time on national TV/radio
25. Community radio
26. We include promotion of the site within our other activities
27. website address on leaflets
28. Our web adress is a part of our logo on all our printed material

Question 10 allows us, following the example of Lusoli, Ward and Gibson⁶³⁷, to collect additional qualitative data on the reasons for parties establishing web sites:

- it corroborates - along Thomson⁶³⁸ - the role of party elites as the key engine behind the creation of the political web (42.1% declares that the party site was created because of the vision of a particular member of the organisation).
- it also corroborates Lusoli, Ward and Gibson remarks on the importance of meetoism in the establishment of a web site: one out of three respondents has indicated that a foreign experience has constituted a relevant example for their site.

In the open section of Question 10:

- the web is seen as an instrument of propagation (The aim was to disseminate information about the important aims of the party, it was very important that we had a website where we could post our main positions, Information is the first objective of our website),
- the web is an obligation (because you don’t form any kind of organisation without a website these days. It is as basic as having a phone) and indirectly confirms what Lusoli and Ward state in the analysis of an NOP survey commissioned in 2002 i.e. that voters have a clear tendency to equate technological competence with professional competence in office⁶³⁹.

---


⁶³⁹ LUSOLI & WARD, ‘Digital Rank and File.’ Id. p. 15
the web is seen explicitly as the fastest/cheapest media for extremely polarized parties, a very important notion which clearly motivates both far left and right parties (see my previous chapter), but also, in the political system lato sensu, those which are outside or against the formal political system (the parties banned by mainstream media).

Illustration 80: WebMaster Survey > More analysis on intentions > Motivations behind the launch of the site

The list below represents the transcript of the "Other" option:

1. We are banned in national media because we are the real opposition and the largest party outside the parliament. Internet is the only way for us to reach the people.
2. We wanted to make the most of the opportunity to communicate with an audience that was otherwise difficult to reach.
3. We thought it was an extraordinary and cheap way to contact people and let everyone know and discuss our opinions.
4. Obviously the cheapest best way, and someone with the talent willing to volunteer to do it for us.
5. The only way of communication, free of censorship by the government.
6. The reason is: having a place for having continuous information about our activities, our propositions, our positions. Information is the first objective of our website. It is used by student, professor, members of staff and party, journalist, ...
7. This is 10 years ago, there's nobody here that has worked that long, whom I could ask.
8. Opportunity to communicate with the electorate in an increasingly accepted way.
9. To interact with the electorate via this new medium and bring information on what we do, why and how.
10. Because you don't form any kind of organisation without a website these days. It is as basic as having a phone.
11. It became a must.
12. It was considered a necessary and easy means of further communicating with our voters and potential voters.


14. It's a logical tool for communication already.

15. Technology advancement.

16. The analysis that internet communication is (or will be) ever more important and should be utilised also by our party.

17. Because of the importance of this media.

18. It was very important that we had a website where we could post our main positions, proposals and actions and project our party image. In addition to next question 11, we are nor left nor right, we are libertarians, which places us on a different scale regarding political views. On a Y and X axis, we could say we have left and right, authoritarian down and libertarian above on a diamond shaped graph.

19. For the necessity to have a voice where our citizens can hear us.

20. It was an idea whose time had come.

21. The aim was to disseminate information about the important aims of the party.
To conclude the data collection section I will illustrate the findings of cross-tabulations calculated on SPSS with the aim of understanding the role of political polarization in the online performance of official party sites.

Left wing parties appear to be the most coherent with the closed door policy as they mainly conceive their site to communicate with their militants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In political matters people talk of 'the left' and 'the right'. How would you place your party (views) on this scale?</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 22: SPSS : Crosstabulations > Party polarization and attitude towards militants*

Comparatively only centre parties appear to be somehow open to use their sites to engage in a dialogue with the opposition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In political matters people talk of 'the left' and 'the right'. How would you place your party (views) on this scale?</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 23: SPSS : Crosstabulations > Party polarization and attitude towards opposition*
Comparatively left wing parties seem to be more sensitive to the speed of the web as a political communication platform.

DISCUSSION

This third case study brings another empirical validation to what Margolis and Resnick anticipated in *Politics as usual*. Far from the expectations of the techno-optimists, insiders do not consider the web as the most important communication tool: for them, the web is an intelligent way to do more with less. Much of Bonchek’s statements on the importance of the economic dimension of the disintermediation process are corroborated by the findings of this survey.

Far from the utopian deliberative – participatory democracy visions, party activists polled in this third fieldwork do not really see the need to engage a debate with dissenting people. The opposition is not an interlocutor, neither a source of inspiration online. By creating a web property these parties have *bought* their own part of the political web and placed a fence around it.

Half of the respondents agrees to have set up the site to let people talk with the party about their problems, needs and wants, half doesn’t and 73% percent of all respondents agrees that most of the interactions with the electorate are non mediated, thus limiting the relevance of the political web *stricto sensu* to a mere information delivery platform. Deliberation activities (ranging from pro&cons debates or real crowd-sourcing for political ideas) may happen online, but they do not seem affect or involve the majority of the polled party activists and staffers.

The meaning of the answers provided in this fieldwork is that party sites are instruments for unilateral communication; or (digital) propaganda, if we follow the definition of Jovett and O’Dowell’s (*the promotion of the interest of A not necessarily in the best interest of B*) and Ellul (*propaganda does not tolerate discussion*). On their sites parties engage in:

- A persuasive communication with pre-determined aims (sustaining militants, convince hesitant citizens to switch)
- The propagation of ideological content (in defence of one’s part of the political spectrum)
- A communication whose objective is to perpetuate or change power structures
- A communication which aims at producing orthopraxy, a congruence between the message sent to the audience and the action that this audience is meant to undertake
- An impersonal communication
• An epistemic struggle to challenge other thoughts, as Tuttle Ross suggests.

In terms of performance, some of the monthly results declared in this poll are considerable and worth the circulation of nation wide newspaper: monthly, the Russian Communists declared 100,000 visitors, the Swedish Demokraterna, the Dutch SGP (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij) declared 70,000 visitor sessions, the Belgian Socialist 90,000 visitors, the Canadian Democratic Movement 60,000, the Swedish Greens 50,000, the Dutch CDA (Christen Democratisch Appel) 100,000, more than a million hits for the Canadian Greens, the Moroccan USFP 30,000 visits, 38,000 visits for the Swiss Solidarités.

Public traffic trackers allow us to compare these figures with those recorded by less successful outfits. For example:

1. the UPKO party (United Pasok Momogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation [http://www.upko.org.my] in Malaysia: 77 unique visitors in a week and 9 to 15 visits daily[^641].

2. the Argentinian PTS (Partido de Trabajadores por el Socialismo) visitors browse only 250 to 500 pages a day (one months statistics based on Webstat[^642].

3. the Partido Socialista Democrático shows 593 visitors a months (average of the traffic measured by Extremetracking[^643])

4. Pakistan’s MQM shows 215 unique visitors in a day[^644].

Lusoli, Gibson, Ward note in their 2003 research that:

*Party sites are uniformly less well frequented, with most countries recording no more than 10% online users having visited them.*

In both successful and unsuccessful cases, the audience accumulated online is not a diverse community feeding the public space, but (ideologically) well defined groups, which defend (and circulate within) a specific part of the political web. As we have seen in the first fieldwork this audience can read, listen and watch things on party sites, but their activity (provided that they remain enough on the site, provided that they read and do not scan etc.) has, in the best case scenario, the potential to flood a MEP’s mailbox.


[^641]: Data gathered on 25.06.2006 through a Bravenet counter installed on the party site.


When the political web works – and the basic pre-requisites for load related performance (online readability, inter alia) are respected – digital propaganda and its online dazebaos have an impressive cost / contact ratio, and are efficient substitutes to printed house organs.

This said, every design flaw, every architectural inconsistency is rapidly detected and can cause prejudice to political parties. Partial evidence is emerging in this respect in Europe on the reputational prejudice suffered by mainstream parties precisely by the media coverage on their web property. Their web sites increases their alienation from the electorate and lowers even further the levels of trust in the political elite.

By scrutinizing articles appeared during the year 2005 on the Italian, Spanish, French speaking press (through a all news search in Lexis Nexis), party sites seem to generate criticism more than anything else. In Spain in two separate occasions, journalists in El Pais have put the online parties at a test and discovered that nobody was available to rapidly answer to basic mail communications. Other Spanish media pointed out that sites were confusing and difficult to use; party sites appear not to be really used by many leaders (this finding emerges as well from the answers to the third fieldwork). Only a couple of new stories (in a year of research) highlight in positive terms the efforts of the PSOE party site: the article includes details on its yearly cost (one million PSTs), its structural qualities (speed, color, interface) and concludes by qualifying the site as comparable to commercial sites (as if this, had no ethical con-sequences). Most of the references remain critical: the content is classified as propaganda de hypermercado, pictures of the party leaders are not adequate to the standards, biographies – which seem to attract a great deal of the press’ attention – are not accurate enough. In France left wing party sites are criticized as being structurally poor and lacking of originality; when parties (according to these media reports) excel online they do it because they provide a mine of data and declarations, an abundance of links etc. The French coverage of party sites is quite representative of the type of coverage seen elsewhere in Europe (for example in the Italian, Spanish and Portuguese pres): party sites are rarely quoted unless a major campaign motivates a newspaper to publish the listing of all party sites or something really remarkable happens such as the highjacking of a party name, or the creation of boycott sites such as Ras le front, Non-Au-Quinquennat.org. In France and in Italy remains however a latent and superficial fascination for the political web lato sensu, materialised by anecdotic coverage of the year 2000 electronic voting experiment in Arizona, or the use of web by the Italian Girottondi (a leftist movement in Italy both critical against the centre right coalition and against traditional elements of the Italian left).
9. Conclusions

Scholarly interest for the impact of technologies on democracy has raised in parallel to the decline of political participation. Technology has often been seen as either one of the causes of the crisis of representative democracy or as a powerful remedy to heal the negative externalities generated by party oligopolies.

The study of the impact of new media in party politics or presidential elections dates back the forties (with the outgrowth of radio) and has evolved in cyclical waves until today, covering the emergence of television, the development of global telecommunications, the birth of internet and finally what’s popularly called the Web 2.0.

The notion of eDemocracy emerges from this dynamic, but is in a league of its own.

There is no agreement on many of the terms that one needs to use to dissect its meaning. Scholars diverge on virtually every foundational concept: from the very definition of democracy and interactivity, to the core functions of political parties, to the definition of propaganda as opposed to political communication or to political marketing. As a consequence of this, there is little agreement on both what could be done in theory with eDemocracy and what is actually done in practice.

A permanent tension exist between idealtypes and real types in this domain.

Disappointed by the lack of realism of most traditional eDemocracy literature, I have deliberately opened up my theoretical framework to a very large gamut of alternative approaches. My main interest was to expose an otherwise watertight scientific domain to the contributions that political science, communication science and finally information science can bring to the discussion.

In the prologue of this dissertation, an excursus in the evolution of the public debate on eDemocracy shows how many scholars have been influenced by the public mood. A trend opposing pessimists and optimists has dominated theoretical contributions often pushing arguments far away from reality.

In contrast with this approach, thanks to a new generation of empiricists that have studied party sites since the year 2001, it is becoming increasingly clear that reality is much of a disappointment and that technology is not revolutionising politics as many have hoped.

My large empirical investigation on party sites corroborates this central thesis. The aim of this research is to prove this thesis with the largest and most global research unit of political parties web sites at the time of writing.
Such a research perimeter has not allow me to carry out a comprehensive content analysis. It pushed me – however – to identify both theories and techniques capable of providing an alternative and, if possible, more objective approach to such a diverse range of web properties.

Through political science it’s been possible to understand that both populism and politics of animosity – which both have grown considerably in the past 10 years in Europe – have deep roots not only and not necessarily in a technological change (the emergence of the internet), but in a series of trends which include: voter turnout decline, depillarization/de-ideologization/de-confessionalization of politics, the evolution of politics into a capital intensive activity, the dominant role of television in political communication, the simultaneous growth of infotainment and personality politics and so on.

Communication studies have allowed me to go further in this critical analysis and explore the relevance of the ideas of those that critique the so called information society by stressing how the promise of more information and more rational choices are in reality turning into more overload, more oblivion, more communitarization.

The choice of an information architecture approach has allowed me to cover some uncharted territory while providing a first set of data on the structures of the early political web for public scrutiny.

The intimidating issue of the identification of the most suitable tools and routines to explore thousands of sites online has been dealt with successfully. If, on one side, the project has been often slowed down or delayed due to technical reasons, the results have been rewarding, notably with regard to the acquisition of a significant corpus of knowledge on small/fringe parties online.

Finally, the enlarged theoretical framework has allowed to recognize – during the manual observation campaigns - numerous indicators of conversion (audience-voter) performance in political party sites:

- in particular one trend which links performance to political marketing and the creation of an oniric value through a visual design inherited from commercial sites
- another trend which consists in trying to create a specific, trans-media information architecture (the neosites' structure) which aims at exploiting synergically all the strenghts of press, radio and TV on the web.

The core of my research contribution, a basic taxonomy and a set of data (on the intentions and on the information architecture) resulting from a 10 years observational research on the early actors of the political web (stricto sensu), reviews with a new degree of detail the factors that define the main families (which I call protosites, mesosites and neosites) of party web sites. These clusters of homogeneous web sites share a common way to deal with space, with files, with usability, with multimedia.
In the first 10 years of its existence (1995-2005) the political web stricto sensu has clearly not engendered a revolution, neither in political, nor social or technical terms. New technology – as Norris\textsuperscript{646} put it - serve to reinforce the voice of the more affluent and privileged sectors of society.

Classic views on eDemocracy insisted on the improvement deriving from more political information online: in theory, the more information we have, the more we can compare it (and the more we can be aware of minor and fringe parties, suggests Norris\textsuperscript{647}). In practice, to describe the problem in cybernetic terms, my empirical research shows that load appears to be an issue for most party sites (and their audience): there is too often either too little content (one out of five party sites around the world is what I call a protosite) or too much (11% of the observed universe materializes in real "content caverns"). A little more than 4% of the sites (what I call high end mesosite or a neosite) had between 10000 and 48,000 links!

Is this information capable of mobilising non voters? In certain cases party web masters we have interviewed have declared that 100.000 users visit their sites.

Cyber optimists have seen in the proliferation of party web sites a sign of improved party competition. As Norris notes:

\begin{quote}
\textldots A few enthusiastic techno-savvy enthusiasts can create a fairly professional looking site using the free shareware and web hosting facilities that are easily available in many countries....search engines and portal like Yahoo, AOL and InfoSeek are important ways for people to find sites, but on the other hand, the barriers to being listed are minimal compared with the difficulties of gaining any sustained coverage in the mainstream news media.\textsuperscript{648}
\end{quote}

In this sense, the online world can, potentially, reduce the differences between larger parties (with greater resources to create sites with the latest technology) and smaller parties (which fight back with a few skilled volunteers).

Bimber notes:

\begin{quote}
If there is anything democratizing about this process, it is that the Internet is providing greater relative gain for intermediary organisations who do not have the deep pockets or extensive institutional resources of traditional interest groups and membership organisations.\textsuperscript{649}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{646} NORRIS P., "Parties and governments online", 2000 Idem, p.4
\textsuperscript{647} NORRIS P., "Preaching the converted", 2001-2003 Idem, p.9
\textsuperscript{648} NORRIS P., Parties and governments online, 2000 Idem, p.11
\textsuperscript{649} BIMBER B. "Toward an Empirical Map of Political Participation on the Internet", Paper for presentation at the 1998 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, Sept. 3-6 1998
This said, for political minorities or for incumbent parties, in the political web, like in eCom-
merce, what really makes the difference is the conversion rate i.e. the number of visitors
that turn into involved and active voters. Now, with the type of technical, socio-economical
constraints reducing the widespread access to the net, with motivational factors (trust and de-
gree of social connectedness) that may alter the individual’s response to the online information
offer, with the imperfect implementation (in terms of usability) of the information architecture
requirements for optimal political persuasion and communication online, the actual conversa-
tion rate of political parties web sites is likely to remain modest. As Bimber says:

...The main effect of the internet on mass political behaviour is the provision of
additional opportunities for civic participation by those already inclined to particip-
ate, without any widening of the circle of participation650.

Multimedia is not widespread as the public discourse seems to suggest: only 14.7% of the sites
have 5 or more multimedia items inside the site structure. There is a major piece of flash tech-
nology in only 8.1% of the cases scrutinized in 2005. In roughly another 8% of cases .swf files
decorate pages or serve as basic navigational tool.

One of the most characteristic uses of the political web I have explored (emerging from the
webmaster interviews and the detection of considerable programming in php and java) is to
provide cloud like archival services for the party community. I argue that this is happening
because parties are trying to check mainstream media and use their sites as a low cost,
contemporary version of the party newspapers of the 70s.

Although this dissertation is not investigating the specific impact of party sites, the structural
analysis carried out in the empirical validation suggests that the architecture of party sites is
developing in such a way to be less capable than what hoped by many of injecting meaningful
inputs in the circuitry of modern democratic institutions. Engaged in a frontal competition with
traditional news media (and deprived of the same assets), the political web stricto sensu (and
the set of interactive applications it contains) seems to be too a weak vector to channel ad-
quate stimuli to alter and modify electoral processes or institutional dynamics.

The majority of the respondents of the webmasters survey indicates that the party site is not
the party’s leaders favourite platform to launch messages (64% of the answers disagree or
strongly disagree to the statement). The majority of the respondents in the same empirical
fieldwork agrees to the following statements: "the web is not the most important tool for the
party communication strategy (58%)", "key messages are published simultaneously on all me-

650 BIMBER B. "Toward an Empirical Map of Political Participation on the Internet", Paper for presentation at the 1998 an-
nual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, Sept. 3-6 1998 p. 29
dia available (77%); "the party has created this site to allow people to contact candidates directly (63%); "the biggest part of the interaction with the public happens live, in meetings - the web is used essentially to post the party documents and to give news to the electorate (73%)."

The most interesting results of this question are related to the transactive / mediating role of party communication online. It is beyond any doubt that in the view of these respondents their site has not been created "to invite the opposition to discuss with us (81%)." If there is a politically relevant process that goes on in these sites it's really among like-minded.

The mission statement [our party site is meant] "to gather the wants and needs of the electorate in two (54% of the respondents agrees and 47% and disagrees), but 73% of all respondents also agrees that most of the interactions with the electorate are non mediated, thus limiting the relevance of the political web stricto sensu to a mere information delivery platform.

The central thesis emerging from this first major reality check of the political web is that the structure of most party sites is simply not made to generate the ambitious levels of deliberative democracy.

Not only a large number of party sites are microscopic, but they lack the basic means for human to human interactivity. In 34.7% of the cases scrutinized in the survey the sites lacked even of the mailto command (used to allow end users to write mails to the webmaster). In 51.9% of the cases there is no form at all, to facilitate structured communications between the party and the audience. If we want to cumulate all forms of interactivity techniques (and identify those that have for example a form, and more than 5 email addresses in their web sites) we isolate forty three per cent of the observed universe. Yet, if we group together those that have none or little interactivity (one or two methods) we reach 46.3% of the observed universe. The majority of the early actors of the political web were not structured to engage in deliberative activities. Only a fraction of the universe (between 1 and 2%) shows multiple forms and input methods corresponding to advanced neosites (along the model of the US Green Party Action Centre) or what I call over exposure sites (such as the Argentinian Humanista party). The bottom line is that interactivity levels found - worldwide - on the largest array of political parties sites are simply discouraging, if one tends to believe in the rhetoric of deep eDemocracy, democracy 2.0.

This said, no matter the body of knowledge produced through the analysis of national, regional or worldwide case histories, no one, including me, will succeeded in discouraging experts and scholars from continuing to invest efforts in the "rivalry of hyperbole" about new media technology.651

---

The concept of direct democracy (which often is implicit to many eDemocracy models) continues to be marketed today as an anti-politics remedy.

Sartori – to quote an authoritative and radical voice - has dismissed this simplification by stating that it is simply unrealistic to imagine electronic consultations organized with the systematic involvement of the public at large. These votes would either become empty rituals (if executed in shared competence mode with Members of the Parliament), or would not improve the system (if, for competence issues, they were relegated to decide on issues of minor relevance), or would generate unworkable processes.

Many scholars have already stressed that the discourse developed online in political blogs and social networks lacks of both the essential ‘reason giving requirement’, ‘mutual respect/politeness’, ‘diversity/opinion heterogeneity’ and ‘moderation’ which are indispensable to deliberative forms of democracy. This is probably due to the fact that organising a proper debate online takes energy, resources, and a dose of courage to confront with people that do not share your point of view. As Witschge notes, difference and disagreement make people avoid deliberative politics.

If even more material evidence (than the scrutiny of more than 2000 party sites) was produced to invalidate the likelihood of the emergence of widespread direct democracy, the expectations over a Democracy 2.0 would certainly not decrease.

I argue – in one of my corollaries to the thesis - that the ‘obsessional cycles’ in the cyclothimic eDemocracy debate are not necessarily fed only by the cyclical waves of technological innovation and a community of players in the IT policy debate so large to justify – as Atkinson notes - a specific taxonomy, but rather by a complex/long term trend: generated by the effect of the decline of party politics, summed to the de-ideologization of our societies and the simultaneous collective desire to secure one’s future in the hands of competent politicians and governments.

Social networks, emerged years after the hype of the Clinton presidency, seem (once again) to bring the decisive empirical evidence to the claims that describe the emergence of a deep democracy. Surveys such as those managed by the Pew Research Centre show that the number of those using social networks to get or share information about elections is indeed raising in developed countries: one in five American adults who use the internet use social networks during elections time.
This said, as I have elaborated in the theoretical section, the discourse developed online in political blogs and social networks however, often equals to mere opinion and not necessarily to public opinion. Habermas himself notes that the internet on one side extends the communication connections in an egalitarian way (towards egalitarismus) while on the other annihilates the achievements of the public space.

With the Web 2.0 the quality and quantity of change is not sufficient to re-engage a discussion on the impact of the internet on democracy. The Web 2.0, as the term implies, develops, in a continuum, the first wave of Web technologies. There is therefore no rupture with the past, but only an improvement which, on one side, creates new combinations with incumbent technologies and, on the other, does not necessarily invalidate the criticisms made against the idea of dis-intermediation. Getting rid of intermediaries with an economically interesting solution does not solve the major issue of developing a faithful online audience, does not increase the overall trust in politics and participation.

I should restate here clearly that my thesis and my conclusions however are based on a narrow definition of the term participation.

Others have used the terms participation and interactivity interchangeably, considering that any “click” on a political party site is a form of political participation. Norris for example qualifies as valuable interactivity (she calls it communication interactivity\footnote{\ldots A wealth of features that could potentially strengthen the relationship between supporters and leaders, providing opportunities for feedback and input into the policy process\ldots} a series of online services which do not necessarily result in more deliberation, negotiation, understanding and persuasive communication (such as money donation; acquisition of goods, search engines, joining volunteer services or joining the party).

These are certainly forms of participation, but in my view, their link with the notion of participatory democracy is weaker than starting a petition or voting for a referendum.

Furthermore many scholars, including Norris, assume that party officials will actually respond in a meaningful way to all the messages posted by their online audience (the so called contact and conversion efficiency). This response would – in principle - be able to trigger a valuable (computer mediated) human to human interaction.

There is however little evidence that this is occurring everywhere in the political web. Only 8% of the parties I scrutinized in my manual observation campaigns integrated political discussion forums: most of them showed no or little activity. It could be counter argued that my data do not really cover the explosion of the social media phenomenon (which essentially follows 2005). To that, I would tend to respond by presenting the recent recent findings of the Inter-
The Internet functioned to further activate and inform those American citizens who were already engaged in politics, thereby mainly preaching to the converted and strengthening existing social inequalities in political participation.

Margolis and Resnick in this respect made a similar case, when they stressed that the Internet replicated politics as usual:

Far from remaking American politics, the development of cyberspace, and particularly the WWW, seems more likely to reinforce the status quo.

A closer look to the political web reveals however that this part of the WWW is developing something more than a mere virtual version of politics as usual.

Huisman notes that not only web forums lack of any deliberative discussion but that they are dominated by atypical partisans and ideologues. This is not specific to the realm of online politics, but is a typical character detected in many other online activities.

Most users don’t participate very much. It’s the so called “90-9-1 rule”, coined by Nielsen. One percent of Internet users accounts for most contributions.

In stark contrast with many romanticized descriptions of eDemocracy, online political contributions are not only unrepresentative (as the online access issues are not yet solved in 2012), but also extremely polarized (as Chadwick himself acknowledges). This is factually confirmed also by the last Pew Survey (2010), which indicated that 55% of the responders think that the internet increases the influence of those with extreme political views.

The same survey in 2008 indicated that 60% of the interviewees thought that the internet is full of misinformation and propaganda that too many voters think is accurate.

The trouble with the political web is that anyone can post anything on the internet.

---


Another of the corollaries of my thesis is that political parties web sites provide relevant evidence to confirm Wolton’s intuition: the internet creates incentives for communitarization, and specifically the political web stricto sensu is more a locus for information overload, fabricated stories, gossips and rumours than participatory democracy.

Instead of generating a new political revolution the Web 2.0 is on one side giving the false impression that the entire world is commenting on political events, and creating the conditions for the emergence of a counter trend, a new radicalization of politics – the politics of animosity – the politics of populism, the politics those that are fed up with pundits and savant comments on blogs and prefer instead action, even violent if the conditions require it.

In classic political theory, party web sites would convert/encode needs and wants linearly: the gatekeeper (the political party) should be able to channel all the signal received from its societal interfaces.

My empirical fieldworks indicate that more than 35% of the parties involved in the webmaster survey receives more than 100 mails per week. Against this evidence of potential information overload, 70% of the interviewees denies that this communication input is unmanageable. Fine. We still do not know, however, if this means that all this information is actually used to generate new party policy.

What we know – from one of the manual survey presented in this dissertation - is that the web (by being both a mass and a personal medium) is changing the traditional meaning of gatekeeping:

- everyone can theoretically become an effective gatekeeper, potentially filtering instances from a mass community and to a mass community (an example of this is the mediator/broker role of a blogger) ; and
- established gatekeepers can be easily bypassed online by a cohort of gate-openers

In a situation where everyone is – at least potentially - at reach, the job of gatekeepers becomes much more serious than before and requires tougher tactics to reinforce discrimination, isolation, rebuttal and control of undesirable initiatives, including low value email input from sympathizers.

The result online and offline – as the normalization theory of Margolis and Resnick suggests – is that the political web is becoming a terrain of exclusion and animosity. A battlefield ruled by the same principles that rule the worst electoral TV.

Modern, state of the art party sites tend to convey Hart’s five emotions : feeling intimate with the party, feeling informed, feeling clever, feeling busy, feeling important.
WEAK POWERS, WEAK PROPAGANDA, NO DEMOCRACY

Another corollary of my central thesis is that the reality of the political web generated by parties, forces the analyst to confront with the ethical issues deriving from political marketing and propaganda.

Cunningham’s notion of propaganda as epistemic disservice is a convincing one, but has a limited impact on my empirical fieldworks as it implies a systematic content analysis. I have therefore chosen to focus on all those specific traits of propaganda which could be detectable either visually (as they apply one of the classic propaganda techniques) or from an information architecture (programmatic) point of view (as the structure of the site reveals that nothing has been done intentionally to invite real deliberation, i.e. potential disagreement).

The empirical section of this dissertation brings new evidence to the understanding of the affordances and constraints - as in Schneider and Foot - of online structures for political action. My taxonomy reveals that the most performing political sites represent the worst of the political web in democratic terms. In a political web mostly made of document repositories, the champions are the party nomads, the attack parties that compete through personality politics, that engage in rampant consumer marketing techniques.

‘Commands’, calls for orthopraxy, confrontational communication (observed in the numerous english and french speaking sites) and a growing number of ‘digital tricks’ structure the toolbox of the best party web architects. A form of weak propaganda prospers on the web, something much less offensive than what can be seen during a conflict.

Following intentionalism I have tried to isolate in my empirical work all the evidence that proves that the political web is currently used as an instrument of exclusion, as a call for orthopraxy, as a repository of ‘triggers for anchors’.

As Wolton puts it, more information is really not resulting in more communication. The propaganda that can be found online in political parties does not tolerate discussions.

The review of case histories presented in the first empirical fieldwork offers a wide range of phenotypes and examples of “best practices”. As I have underlines previously my research did not cover, however, the user dimension. Marginal data obtained through the Web Master survey seem indicate that the political web maintains the capacity to swing some marginal seats.

This said, party websites are likely to remain a minority sport, as Lusoli, Ward and Gibson point out and while its audience may have increased in the past 10 years its relevance as a source of political information should be weighted against the role that TV continues to play.
Usability is poor, the audience remains secondary and not necessarily so influential (at least to change the course of elections).

None of the technical constraints (see on these subjects Servaes and Heinderyckx 658) associated to web technology (the difficulties associated to finding parties online, the ‘rhetoric’ of hyperlinks and the issue of ‘non reading’) has changed in more than 10 years. Internet penetration is still a source of concern everywhere (the issue has always existed as one can see in the works I have carried out with Heinderyckx 659), in both developed and developing countries. The (Innisian) bias of the Web (lack of a rhetoric of arrival, tendency of generating cognitive overload and loss of orientation in the end user) still represents a significant hurdle for the development of deliberative forms of political interaction.

Political performance is achieved online both by doing more with less (like fringe parties), both by setting up state of the art web properties that perform like a low cost version of the party daily, integrating more and more online videos as the pinnacle of the communication toolbox. A large part of the political web looks and works like an electronic dazebao.

Weak propaganda (the only sort of ‘naked hand’ propaganda that most political parties can afford to pay) has invaded and captured cyberspace (in addition to commerce). And the user community is becoming increasingly aware of this.

---

Servaes, J. ‘Knowledge is power (revisited): Internet and democracy’, 2005 Online URL http://www.comminit.com/democracy-governance/node/218584

Parties use their web sites also for a whole lot of other things, relevant for both internal and external party functions (such as collecting affiliation fees using secure servers, or sending pre-formatted bulk e-mailing to specific recipients etc.), but nobody seems to be wanting any kind of real discussion between members at all: neither party webmasters I have interviewed, nor the activists that Lusoli has polled in his *Rank-and-File* paper.

Party sites keep diversity out, they push content to the like minded, they spread hacktivist packages to sympathisers, they lend disk space and mail servers to proselytes, they strenuously defend their part against the enemy\(^{660}\).

They do propaganda, digital propaganda: white, grey and sometimes black propaganda.

Jacques Seguela in *Le vertige des urnes* placed great expectations on the future of web based political communication.

The possibility for leaders to react in *real time* to the strikes of the opposition is there, but logic suggests that no meaningful impact can be generated online unless a web campaign create synergies with a television campaign. As my empirical analysis shows, the option of creating trans-media (neo) sites is available to a tiny minority of capital intensive political actors (3.7% of the parties interviewed in the Webmaster survey have managed to outsource their site production to a specialised company): an additional evidence of the lack of pluralism in the management of information flows in the so called information society.

**LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

The combination of technical constraints, the speed of the evolution of the entities to be analysed, and the size of the research perimeter are all factors which significantly affect the cost and effectiveness of this type of research.

The absence of a worldwide official register of political parties, the absence of an official internet taxonomy for political players increase the dependence of the research community on voluntary efforts to list parties online. However albeit the most recent Directories of Parties (such as Alan J. Day’s fifth Edition of the Political Parties of the World - John Harper Publishing 2009) do include references to political parties web sites, no one has yet attempted to cross check off line and online resources (such as Wikipedia which is the only updated source online today) on this subject.

The possibility of scanning web sites through specific web analysers does not necessarily guarantee the possibility of accurately detecting all sorts of embedded participatory mechanisms such as those for example that could be theoretically hidden in Java applets. Another difficulty

\(^{660}\) JOWETT J.S. , O’ DONNELL V. *Propaganda and persuasion* Sage 1986 ; CHEN C. (2000) Id., on the US 2000 elections sites : "...Because site visitors are mostly supporters of the candidates, Web sites such as [www.algore.com](http://www.algore.com) and [georgewbush.com](http://georgewbush.com) are only preaching to the choir".
lies in detecting exactly the amount of content in a web site belonging to a forum versus the amount of content belonging to press or latest news sections. The size and diversity of the research perimeter is an enormous hurdle for the research community to carry out multilingual content analysis on a global perspective. Content analysis remains critical to detect and group according to specific categories the plethora of written propaganda techniques which are deployable on the Political Web stricto sensu.

Therefore the main limitation of this research is the absence of a comprehensive content analysis to complement the observations and findings obtained using three other research methodologies: direct observation, technical analysis and opinion polling.

An additional (and equally deliberate) limitation of this research is related to the issue of the analysis of the impact of political parties web sites on the electoral processes. As Schneider and Foot underline:

> The perspective of site visitors on campaign sites, and the role of Web sites in their experiences of engaging in political action online and offline, should be quired in order to achieve a fuller understanding of the affordances and constraints of online structure for political action

This said, the results of systematic study of the internet effects on political engagement (as in Bimber\(^661\) or Scheufele and Nisbet\(^662\)) tends to be rather pessimistic about its potential as a mobilising force.

The feasibility - in financial terms - of a global survey on users of political parties web sites along the lines of what Lusoli and Ward\(^663\) have undertaken with the UK Labour and LibDem, remains also to be proven.

---

\(^{661}\) BIMBER B. 'Information and Political Engagement in America: the search for effect of information technology at the individual level' Political Research Quarterly, 54 (1): 53-67

\(^{662}\) SCHEUEFELE D. AND NISBET M. 'Being Citizen Online: New Opportunities and Dead Ends' Harvard Journal of Press Politics, 7 (3): 55-75

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

It is unlikely that research on eDemocracy will cease killed by some sort of silver bullet, no matter the amount of time devoted to validate or invalidate the presence of democracy online. I argue – after ten years devoted to chase a chimera – that time and resources should not be devoted to discover democracy in the political web lato sensu, but instead be devoted to further study the political weaponization of the web. The web – particularly in the parapolitical system - continues to deliver opportunities for political escapism, and decent levels of security and privacy to the wrong people\textsuperscript{664}.

Specifically, I advocate that violent populist movements, insurgencies and violent propaganda sites should be the true target of future investigations. These sites are built to serve initiated users, and political motivation there is not an issue, because it is either pre-existing or abundantly produced by the very content of the site. The services provided by these sites are critical to the group's survival: without the Web, the scattered, unlawful community could not probably work in the same way, and probably would not survive for a long time.

There are other interesting research avenues to be analysed in addition to the unlawful political web, all having a relationship with the practice of propaganda. These new research avenues are all related to the study of the kinetic energy (and its main qualities such as inertia, velocity etc.) the web is capable to impress on information. Viral news propagation over the web should be studied more closely, and so should be the lesson of Innis in \textit{Empire and Communications} in the light of the increasing use of the web by terrorist that aim to check the US and western power system.

Rumours and disinformation, coupled with widespread information overload are radically affecting the foundations of the notion of information society and are factually threatening the quality of decision making at every level of the State, at every level of the community. The hesitations of the international academic community to re-launch and further promote propaganda studies increase these threats.

\textsuperscript{664} \textit{Social escapism, transaction based security and privacy, information gathering, non transactional privacy concerns. See KORGAONKAR P., WOLIN L. ‘A multivariate Analysis of Web usage’ in Journal of Advertising Research 1999 Vol . 39 (March, April ) 53-68}
Bibliography


Anderson J. W . ‘Cybernauts of the Arab Diaspora: Electronic Mediation in Transnational Cultural Identities’ online paper URL : http://www.bsos.umd.edu/CSS97/papers/anderson.html ;

Altintas K., Alimoglu F., Batu Altan M., Cagiltay K., Seitveliyev K , , ‘e-TATARS: Virtual Community Of The Crimean Tatar Diaspora’ online paper URL : http://www.iccrimea.org/scholarly/e-tatars.html;


Arrasse D , Le detail - pour une histoire rapprochee de la peinture, Champs-Flammarion, 2002


Atkinson R.D. "Who's who in Internet Politics: A Taxonomy of Information Technology Policy", ITIF The Information Technology & Innovation foundation October 2010 Online URL
Barber, B., Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age, University of California Press; (February 1, 2004)


Bartolini S. “Political parties rise, consolidation and decline (?) in Europe: a developmental perspective”, Paper presented to the Conference on 'New Challenges for Political parties and Representation’ The Univ. of Michigan Ann Arbor May 6-7, 2005

Bartolini S., ‘Political parties rise, consolidation and decline (?) in Europe: a developmental perspective’, Paper presented to the Conference on 'New Challenges for Political parties and Representation’ The Univ. of Michigan Ann Arbor May 6-7, 2005

Becker T.L. ‘TeleDemocracy : Bringing power back to people’ in Futurist 1981 vol.15(6) pp. 6-9


BIMBER B. "Toward an Empirical Map of Political Participation on the Internet", Paper for presentation at the 1998 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, Sept. 3-6;


Bimber B. ‘ Information and Political Engagement in America: the search for effect of information technology at the individual level’ Political Research Quarterly , 54 (1): 53-67

264.


Bonchek M.S . 'From Broadcast to Netcast: the internet and the flow of political information', Harvard University, PhD Dissertation Cambridge, Massachusetts April 1997


Brown A. , ' Invasion of the cyber-Members ; Democracy – well, the government and MPs – is slowly getting netted ' The Independent March 20 1995 URLhttp://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/invasion-of-the-cybermembers-1612022.html Accessed 21/09/09

Bryan C., Tambini D., Tsagarousianou R . , Cyberdemocracy: Technology, Cities, and Civic Networks ; Routledge, 1998


Carpentier, M. . Keynote Speech delivered at the Université d’Eté de la Communication (Hourtin - France), 1996


Chadwick, A. & Howard, P. N. [E ds.] The Handbook of Internet Politics (Routledge 2009);


Clenaghan C. , ‘Escape route aplenty with electronic democracy’, Scotland on Sunday , April 20 1997


Jackson D. Z . ' President Shrugs at the Digital Divide’ Published on Wednesday, July 17, 2002 from Commondreams.org URL http://www.commondreams.org/views02/0717-02.htm


Cross M. , ‘ePublic: Cover story: Traditional systems get our vote: The internet may have re-volutionised how we live, but it has yet to transform how we vote - despite strong government support. Michael Cross discovers that there's more to eDemocracy than e-voting’, April 20, 2005, The Guardian (London) - Final Edition


Della Porta D. & Diani M. Social movements: an introduction ; Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1999

Denton R., Woodward Jr. G. Political Communication in America p 11


Deutsch K.W., The Immobility – Emergency Cycle (in Politics and Government Id. p. 4)


Dillon, A. Turnbull D. "Information Architecture", in Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science, Taylor and Francis 2005 p. 3


Doppeelt J.C., Shearer E., Non Voters: America’s no show , Sage 1999


Dulio D. A., Goff D., Thurber J.A.: 'Untangled Web: Internet use during the 1998 election (World Wide Web)' in PS: Political Science & Politics March 1, 1999 No. 1, Vol. 32; Pg. 53

Duverger M. 'Caucus and Branch, cadre parties and mass parties' in Mair P. [Ed.] The West European Party System p . 37-45 Oxford University Press


Easton D., The Political System. An Inquiry into the State of Political Science , New York (1953);

Easton D., 'An Approach to the Analysis of Political Systems', in World Politics 9 (1957);

Easton D., A Framework for Political Analysis , Englewood Cliffs (1965);

Easton D., A Systems Analysis of Political Life , New York (1965)


Ellul J. Propagandes, Paris 1965


Evernden E., Evernden R ., Information First: Integrating Knowledge and Information Architecture for Business Advantage, Butterworth-Heinemann September, 2003

Eysenck, H.J ., ‘Left-Wing Authoritarianism: Myth or Reality?’, in Political Psychology (1981);


Fishkin J. Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform, Yale 1991;


Fishkin J Debating Deliberative Democracy (with Peter Laslett) (Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2003)

Fishkin, J .. When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation , Oxford University Press, USA (October 11, 2009);

Fishkin, J .. The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy , Yale University Press (August 25, 1997),

Fishkin, J .. Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform , Yale University Press (September 10, 1993)


Friess S. . ‘Cyber Activism’; The Advocate, March 2, 1999 ; McCaughey M. Ayers M.D ., Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice , Routledge 2003;


269.


Gray M., Caul M., ‘Declining Voter Turnout in Advanced Industrial Democracies, 1950 to 1997: The Effects of Declining Group Mobilization’ in Comparative Political Studies, Vol. 33, No. 9, 1091-1122 URL: http://cps.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/33/9/1091


Habermas, J. 'Further Reflections on the Public Sphere', in Calhoun C. [E d.] Habermas and the Public Sphere , Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1992;


Hacker, K. L., Todino M.A. , 'Virtual Democracy at the Clinton White House: An Experiment in Electronic Democratisation'. In: javnost/the public , 3(1), S. 71-86 (1996);
Hagen, M. 'A Typology of Electronic Democracy', Online paper - on the University of Giessen Web Site URL


Hagen, M. 'A Typology of Electronic Democracy', Online paper


Hammer M., 'The Myth Of Disintermediation: Distribution chains are becoming obsolete, replaced by distribution communities that collectively create value for the customer 'Out of the Box' (Section), InformationWeek Web Site URL: http://www.informationweek.com/794/94uw.htm Accessed 08.09.2008;


Haskell J. Direct Democracy or Representative Government?: Dispelling the Populist Myth (Westview Press 2000)


Heeter, C. “Implications of New Interactive Technologies for Conceptualizing Communications”, in SALVAGGIO J.L. and BRYANT J. [EDS.]: Media use in the Information Age: Emerging Patterns of Adoption and Consumer Use , Hilldale, New Jersey 1989


Higgins S., 'Electronic democracy wins votes: corporate PC users take to BBSs to express views; online services'; PC Week, 1997 Vol 9 N.020, Pg 19


Hilton S. ‘Developing Local eDemocracy In Bristol: From Information To Consultation To Participation And Beyond’, September 1, 2006, Aslib Proceedings, Vol. 58, No. 5, Pg. 416-428, September 1, 2007,

Hornsby R., 'It is nigh impossible to think of 'the ethical' or moral consciousness outside of the sphere of language (i.e. Communication). A discussion in relation to the 'Discourse Ethics' of Jurgen Habermas ROY ROGBY SITE URL: http://royby.com/philosophy/pages/ethics.html Accessed 24/09/09

Huffsutter P.J., 'Lawmakers, Internet fail to click', The San Diego Union-Tribune Jan. 1 1996

Huisman M., 'E-democracy, an illusion to be pursued but never attained' 17.03.11 Online Paper URL: http://www.oneplanetoneworld.info/uploads/e-democracy_paper.pdf


Ippolito L., 'La Società Civile Elettronica; che Cresce da Teheran a Pechino' 21 giugno 2009 domenica Corriere della Sera; Pag. 14


Jankowsky N., Leeuwis C., Martin P. Noordhof M., Van Rossum J., "Teledemocracy in the Province: an experiment with public debate and opinion polling Internet based software", Paper Presented to the Conference Media and Politics, Section : Internet and Democracy, Brussels 27.02-01.03 1997


Krug S., Don’t make me think ! A common sense approach to web usability, New Riders 2006

Lambe P. , Organising Knowledge: Taxonomies, Knowledge and Organisational Effectiveness (Chandos Knowledge Management) 2007; Bailey K.D . Typologies and Taxonomies: An Introduction to Classification Techniques (Quantitative Applications in the Social Sciences) Sage, 1994


Levillain P. Ed. Dizionario Storico del Papato , Bompiani Milano 1996 p. 1216

Levy P. L'intelligence collective. Pour une anthropologie du cyberspace , Paris, La Découverte 1994


Mann B., Politics on the net, Indianapolis, IN Que Corp.(1995)


Mc Donald M., 'Tests trigger an e-mail protest wave', The Dominion, Wellington, July 17 1995

Mc Gookin S., 'Internet may give stimulus to democracy’ Financial Times (1995, December 27),


McChesney R. W., Corporate media and the threat to democracy , New York : Seven Stories Press (1997)


McGookin S., 'Somewhere, there may be a parallel political universe', Financial Times April 4, 1997, Friday London Edition


McGrath, D.J., 'Check out the candidates - via computer; Political platforms now reach into cyberspace', Star Tribune (Minneapolis, MN) August 4, Metro Edition News; Pg. 1B (1994)

McNair B., An Introduction to Political Communication, Routledge, 1995 p. 6

McQuail D., Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction, Sage, 1987 p.54


Miley M., 'Good interactive sites take time, hard work'. Mac Week, pp. 32-34 (1996, April 1); Ubois J., 'Ten essential steps for maintaining a web site', Mac Week pp.28,30 (April, 1)

Miller J.M. (University of Minnesota Department of Political Science) : 'Negative Political Advertising', Pedagogical Presentation, College in the Schools, University of Minnesota, 2004


Morville P. Information Architecture for the World Wide Web O'Reilly UK 1998 p. 11- 12


277.


Parsons, T ., The social system, Glencoe, Ill. Free Press (1951)


Pfau M. Kenski C. Attack Politics Praeger Series in Political Communication N.Y. 1990


Raney, R. F., ‘A Second Chance: The Potential Of Politics Online’. Inter@citive Week , 07/03/2000, Vol. 7 Issue 26, p22; Browning G. Electronic Democracy: Using the Internet to Transform American Politics, Cyberage Books; Ed. : 2 Sub (1 juin 2001)


Reiss E. Practical Information Architecture: A Hands-on Approach to Structuring Successful Websites, Addison Wesley November, 2000


Rosenfeld L., Morville P. Information Architecture for the World Wide Web O'Reilly UK December, 2006; the first 1998 ed. was authored by Morville alone.


Rousseau D.M., Rivero A. (Carnegie Mellon University), 'Democracy, a way of organizing in a knowledge economy' in Journal of Management Inquiry June, 2003 SECTION: Vol. 12, No. 2; Pg. 115

Rust M., 'Cyberspace trendy tool for political campaigns', Minnesota Daily via U-Wire December 2, 1999


Salkever A. 'Bridging the digital divide, cheaply', Nov. 26, 2003, MSNBC Website ULR http://msnbc.msn.com/id/3606441/;


Sartori G., Democrazia : cos'è, Rizzoli 1993 pg 83-87


Sartori G., Teoria dei Partiti e Caso Italiano, Sugarco Edizioni 1982 Chapter 1 p. 7-44

Sawyer K., 'Debates Emphasize The Human Element', Washington Post (1984): "...In less than a quarter-century, televised presidential debates have taken root as a staple of modern politics -- short on rules and tradition, long on stress for the candidates -- a quadrennial High Noon for the Electronic Democracy."


Scheuer M. Imperial Hubris Why the West is Losing the War on Terror 2004 Brassey's


Schwartz E., Net activism:how citizens use the Internet, Sebastopol, CA Songline Studios (1996)


Seguela J., Le vertige des urnes Paris Flammarion 2000 p.35


Servaes, J. (ed.) The European Information Society: a reality check, Intellect, Bristol 2003

Servaes, J. ‘Knowledge is power (revisited): Internet and democracy’, 2005 Online URL http://www.comminit.com/democracy-governance/node/218584

Servaes, J.; Heinderyckx, F.; , The 'new' ICTs environment in Europe: closing or widening the gaps?,Telematics and Informatics,19,2,91-115,2002,Pergamon

Shane, P.M. , Democracy Online: The Prospects for Political Renewal Through the Internet , Routledge; 1 edition (August 3, 2004)

Shapiro A.L ,‘The Control Revolution: How the Internet is Putting Individuals in Charge and Changing the World We Know’, PublicAffairs (May 15, 2000)


Snow N. Propaganda, Inc.: Selling America’s Culture to the World (Open Media Series) (Seven Stories’ Open Media 2002)


Statera G., La Politica Spettacolo Politici e Mass Media Nell’era Dell’immagine Cles (Tn) Arnoldo Mondadori Editore 1986


Toffler A., The Third Wave , Bantam (May 1, 1984)


Ware A, ‘Political Parties and Party Systems’, *Oxford University Press* 1996


Wedig T., ‘The Internet and Political Organisations: Force Tool or Wildcard’, PhD Dissertation, Graduate School of University of Maryland, College Park (2007) Downloaded from UMI


Withschge T. "Online Deliberation: Possibilities of the Internet for deliberative Democracy" Paper submitted to Euricom Colloquium 'Electronic Networks & Democratic Engagement' October 2002


