

## **Towards a more participatory style of election campaigning? The impact of Web 2.0 on the UK 2010 General Election**

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### **Participatory politics and Elections**

Traditionally participation in elections has been, for the vast majority, the act of voting itself (Butler and Ranney 1992). While one could assert that there are a variety of participatory actions involved in making choices; accessing news and political communication, discussions with friends and family or attending meetings, these tend to the preserve of a minority (Putnam 2000). The majority of voters, or citizens, are audiences to a largely mediated campaign which many argue reduce information available for choice-making due to a focus on the process of campaigning as opposed to the substantive and policy related issues (Jackson, D., 2009). Wider forms of participation, such as canvassing, putting posters in gardens or windows, are roles taken by activists only. Participation beyond voting during election campaigns is largely a minority activity, with the number of spectators far outweighing the number of players.

The Internet offers a wide range of means to participate in political activities with little cost in terms of either money or time. Any individual with open internet access at home or work, which constitutes 74.6% of the UK population in May 2010 (Internet World Stats 2010), can create a weblog, comment on the election contest via social networking or microblogging sites (Facebook and Twitter being the most used sites), demonstrate their support through profile pictures, avatars or status updates and share or contribute to a variety of spoof campaign images that mock or promote, often in equal measure, parties or leaders. Arguably we have entered the age of the Web 2.0 co-created campaign where a variety of individuals participate. Co-creation would appear anathema to political parties which seek to control their messages and brand image across their campaign communication (Jackson and Lilleker 2009). The increasingly centralised campaign structure reinforces the notion of an election campaign being designed as a repeat-remind exercise to win over a mass market (Negrine & Lilleker, 2003; Lilleker & Negrine, 2004); those seeking election are expected to eschew any communication tactic that may lead to confused signals being

transmitted or greater clarity provided under public interrogation (Stromer-Galley, 2000). Hence, there appear to be divergent trends between an online Web 2.0 community of creators and sharers, and political parties seeking to control communication.

Barack Obama's campaign for the US presidency in 2008 challenged many of the rules of election campaigning. There were many reasons for Obama's victory, the tightness of his campaign organisation compared to his Democrat and Republican rivals being cited as one key aspect (Heilemann & Halperin, 2010). Equally one can point to the importance of the candidate himself, the interest and adulation he received. However, in terms of innovation his use of the Internet suggests a clear shift beyond the much hyped 'Internet election', spoken of within many recent contests, towards the Web 2.0 Election. Obama's use of the Internet reflected an overall branding strategy of him as the head of a movement for change in US politics. As Harfoush notes (2009, pp. 4-5), Obama's core message was that the campaign was about "what we can do together... your time, your energy, and your advice". This message, expressed in his formal candidacy announcement and repeated within a number of speeches and encapsulated in the 'Yes We Can' slogan was reflected through his campaign style, and nowhere more than in his use of the Internet. The key element is not the mobilisation of activists, but that he encouraged participation in the forms of sharing and acting as an advocate online through providing feedback to the campaign. He harnessed the power of the social networks and created his own, [www.mybarackobama.com](http://www.mybarackobama.com) (MyBO), these tools enabled activists to network, organise and build his campaign at the grassroots level and he presented information in a weblog format gaining at times hundreds of comments. MyBO contained over 70,000 personal fundraising pages (Harfoush, 2009, p. 78), he gained over 10 million fans and followers across social networking sites, his 6,170 blog posts by election day had gained an average of 184 comments each with some getting over 2,000; overall 93% of his online presences (the website, YouTube channel and his social networking profiles) allowed some opportunity to participate in the campaign in some way with the majority of opportunities being co-creation of content (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). Obama's was a very different campaign, its success supported by the candidate's image and support gained, the donations received from his online supporters and so resources available and also the promotion he received from the mainstream media

(Heilemann & Halperin, 2010). The innovations were building on two traditions, the long standing tradition of street campaigning in the US which Obama learned in Chicago; and the more recent use of the online environment to leverage support, the campaigns of Jesse Ventura and Howard Dean and ongoing activity by Moveon.org being key examples. Obama drew these together in an unprecedented way; but did this represent a benchmark for future campaigning and in particular did the UK campaign show evidence of Obama-isation?

Analyses of the role of the Internet during election campaigns have found it to be an underused campaign tool outside of the US. Studies consistently find that party and candidate websites are created largely to provide a space for offline material to be posted for viewing in a non-mediated environment (Sadow and James 1999). This has been particularly the case in the UK (Coleman 2001, Ward & Gibson 2003). Despite claims for the UK fitting the Americanisation of campaigning thesis most closely (Lee Kaid et al), the Internet has not been adopted as a campaign hub for raising money, mobilising activists or bypassing the mainstream media. Studies found that shovelware predominated, where websites largely contain materials such as manifestoes, press releases and policy statements and lack any elements that would make them sticky (Jackson 2003); similarly candidate websites tended to lack sophistication and often were seldom updated during the course of a campaign (Ward and Gibson 2003; Coleman and Ward 2005). While it may have been logic for the Internet to play a secondary role; two factors appear to have revolutionised the place of the Internet within political communication and campaigning. Firstly, the evolution and mass adoption of technologies that facilitate social networking have altered the social uses of the Internet and its role within society. The growth in use of Facebook and Twitter, in particular, as well as similar social networking sites as well as online communities such as Mumsnet, is argued to have created a networked society (Castells, 2007, Van Dyck, 2006). Hence the pre-conditions exist in the UK for a Web 2.0 election. Secondly, due to the fact that almost three quarters of the UK population have Internet access, this is now a viable mass media for campaigners and needs to be taken seriously. While many raise cautions regarding the potential impact of the Internet for enhancing democracy (Hindman, 2009), others focus far more on the inclusivity and connectedness potentiated (Coleman & Blumler, 2010). We take a more middle way in exploring the way the Internet was used by UK parties during the

2010 Election, and the way in which usage has developed over recent years. This explores the extent to which participation is potentiated as both a tool for promotion and engagement. Essentially, we recognise the limits imposed by the context of an election campaign, but suggest that any innovations in the area of participation may well also have a positive impact upon democracy. This notion will be revisited within our conclusion, firstly we outline our conceptual framework for studying the Internet as a participatory tool within elections; secondly we operationalise this into a measurement tool; finally we will present our data on the six largest parties which stand nationally in the UK to determine the extent to which the Internet is taken seriously and to what extent a new online, Web 2.0, communication style has emerged.

### **Interactivity; Participation and the Web 2.0 election**

Interactivity is inherently associated with the Internet. However, there are a range of conceptual discussions surrounding what interactivity means in online environments. Sarah McMillan (2000) discussed distinctions between user-to-site; user-to-document; and user-to-user interactivity. All these are related to the self-shaping of user experiences with the former focusing on the use of click-throughs and links between pages and websites, the user-to-document discussing the choices users have over reading and engaging with materials and the latter where sites allow users to interact with one another in real-time or non-linear conversations. Stromer-Galley (2004) conflated the first two categories into interactivity as product, a form of interaction with the site features or content provided by technology. Drawing on previous definitions of interactivity with technology, this suggests there is an innate sense of interactivity provided by online and digital media (Sundar, 2004). Stromer-Galley argued that interactivity as process was dialogic and conversational between users. This latter type of interactivity links to definitions of asymmetrical and symmetrical conversation (Grunig & Grunig, 1984) and a range of definitions of interactivity that relate to conversations between humans (Rafaeli, 1978; Kioussis, 2002). Building upon these works, Ferber et al (2007) suggest a range of types of communication where the user has varying degrees of control. Most political communication would conform to their notion of one-way and top-down communication where the user would have limited control; though increasingly there are mechanisms for two-way communication through email or online feedback forms. However, their concept of

three-way participatory communication dovetails neatly with concepts of user-to-user interactivity and interactivity as process. Many scholars argue that the Internet is increasingly providing opportunities for this type of interactivity. That as more people migrate online and use Web 2.0 technologies for communication, it will become not only a social norm but an expectation of any organisation that chooses to use the online environment as a space for their communication.

It is suggested that political organisations in particular should be engaging in more interactive modes of communication. Stoker (2006) highlights the democratic deficit that exists between representatives and the represented in many Western democracies and suggests the Internet can bridge the emerging gap through processes of e-democracy. A similar theme emerges in the work of Stephen Coleman, who has advocated various mechanisms for e-democracy (Coleman 2005) and is central to his co-authored thesis (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). Collectively, advocates of e-democracy call for governments and electoral and non-electoral organisations to make greater efforts in facilitating communication using online tools such as forums, e-petitions and collaborative and deliberative consultation exercises in order to bring decision making closer to the public.

Notions of the efficacy of e-democracy are highly contested. Not only are there questions relating to the digital divide, which naturally excludes the more economically deprived social groups, but also that a minority are actually creating content online and so would engage in electoral or social politics. Hindman (2009) argues that despite the fact that anyone can contribute, a hierarchy exists online as much as offline and substantial barriers exist that prevent ordinary people having influence on wider public opinion (pp. 18-19). Hindman notes as an example that the top ten weblogs in the US gain 48% of all traffic and that these are not independent, 'ordinary' voices but five of that ten are established journalists. The evidence of the rise of a new 'opinion aristocracy' is reinforced by evidence supporting the 1/9/90 rule. Hill (1992) found in the early 1990s that only 1% of the online population create the majority of content; 9% are occasional contributors and the other 90% passive lurkers who consume content created by others. While there are fewer inequalities in ability to contribute, it is argued that this rule holds as evidence suggests that 0.7% of Facebook users are creators of causes; the other 99.3% may join but again are not

contributing as activists despite the low barriers; similarly on 0.2% of users of Wikipedia contribute to entries in any way (Nielsen, 2006). Thus, while there are many positive predictions of the growth of a participatory culture online, and that the online environment offers resources for every niche interest, the problem is gaining a critical mass to participate in a meaningful way that would be representative of broader society (Turner, 2009, pp. 133-142).

We argue that such fears may be less serious within the context of electoral politics and draw on lessons drawn from the Obama campaign to indicate why this is the case. Evidence presented by Harfoush (2009) suggests the Obama online campaign did reach new audiences, and encouraged wider participation. While those who actively participated may have been a minority, the opportunities to participate and levels of interaction may have had significant reach and shaped the perceptions of a wide audience. More fundamentally, however, electoral campaigns are not really about hard policy making. A participatory campaign offers a win-win zone for the politically interested and engaged as well as for electoral contestants. Visitors to party and candidate websites can probe contestants about policy if they wish, and their answers can act as an indicator for the wider audience. Participation can also be used to test out messages and ideas on an audience; given the reliance on focus groups at key points during a campaign this could provide a cost-free back-up for qualitative research. Each of these can allow a sense of efficacy among those who choose to participate, particularly if they feel they are being listened to and they are contributing to a larger conversation between the party or candidate and the public (della Porta, 2005). Such 'big conversations' are argued to give joint ownership over the campaign and legitimise the participants as a political movement (Polletta, 2004). Equally, parties or candidates can win by having material shared by contributors promoting material they have contributed to among their own online networks. Participation can thus make a site sticky (Jackson 2003), encouraging return visits as well as greater loyalty among visitors, as well as becoming a key part of the overall branding making the party or candidate appear in-touch, accessible and responsive. Thus interactivity can provide a win-win zone for both represented and would-be representatives in the context of an election contest.

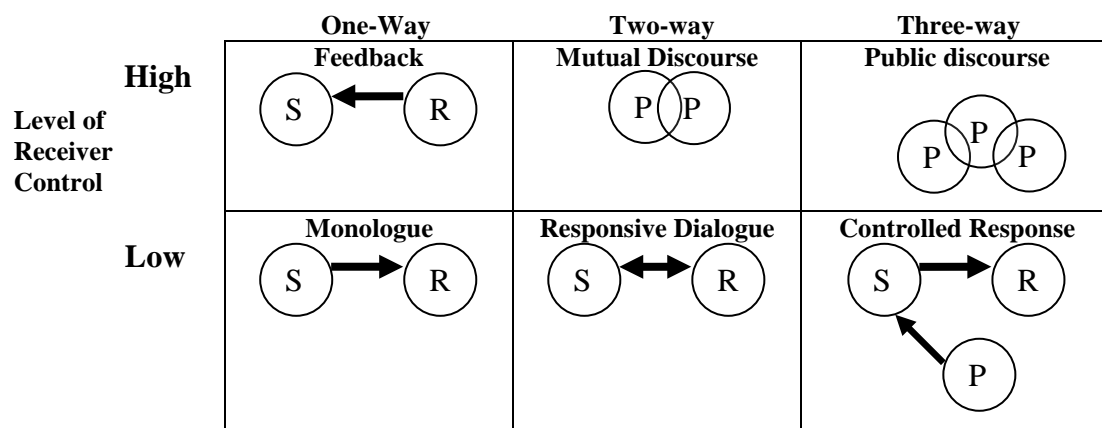
The argument posited in favour of a more interactive election communication strategy is underpinned by what are referred to as the big ideas of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005; Anderson, 2007; Chadwick, 2009). Philosophically these suggest the Internet having a fundamentally different role in society and presenting opportunities for the user; as opposed to those who create sites. These six big ideas create a framework for understanding the potential for a democratisation of political communication as offered by Web 2.0 tools, applications and platforms as well as how parties can harness Web 2.0 to improve the efficacy and reach of an election campaign. Firstly, it is argued that Web 2.0 provides the capacity for individual production and user generated content. Users are able to easily upload comments, pictures and videos with minimum effort and technological ability, and these can all become part of an online milieu of campaign communication. Phil de Vellis, the creator of the Hillary Clinton as Orwellian Big Brother, and Amber-lee Ettinger, aka Obama Girl, are clear examples. Arguably however, parties are also able to harness these producer-users (producers), to enhance the campaign both as creators of supportive material and endorsers through comments and sharing. Linking to this is the notion of harnessing the power of the crowd. With successful campaigns such as catapulting Rage Against the Machine to the UK music chart number one position, it is clear that campaigns can crowd source via social networks. With myriad campaigns using the Internet to leverage power, users can be heard and have power while campaigners can seek supportive crowds to promote campaigns theoretically creating a win-win situation for both organisations and active publics. Thirdly, the Internet provides access to data on an epic scale allowing users to be fully informed about any issue if they wish; this links to the function of information provision though the sources of information change fundamentally. Arguably, in Web 2.0 environments, the community are a key source of information. Overall these first three big ideas link to one of the key concepts of Web 2.0; rather than the 'we will build it and they will come' philosophy of Web 1.0, Web 2.0 enthusiasts argue that 'they will come and build it' (Birdsall 2007). Sites such as Facebook or Twitter provide an architecture of participation, a space for individuals to create content; without users they would be barren landscapes and their success is reliant on usage. Arguably any site can create its own space and earmark it for public participation; the Obama site's architecture was almost totally participatory, though this is unusual. Participation is at the heart of the network effect, whereby the online community members act as conduits of information sharing links,

ideas and, importantly, campaign communication. The final big idea of Web 2.0, one which may appear anathema to political campaigners, is openness. The increased transparency and accessibility implicit through these ideas is a challenge which many see as outweighing the benefits making many apply the brakes when innovating online.

### Methodology

The Barack Obama campaign followed many of the big ideas of Web 2.0 in a candidate-centred electoral system, but will this pattern be repeated in 2010 in a party-centred system? At the heart of his campaign was interactivity. Not the simple definition of interactivity as a product of technology, where Internet users can shape their experience through clicks, but the process of interactivity as conversation. Within analyses of interactivity during the 2007 French Presidential Election (Lilleker & Malagon, 2010) and the 2008 US Presidential campaign (Lilleker & Jackson 2011) we employ an operationalisation of a model of interactivity developed by Ferber et al (2007) based on previous models by McMillan (2000; 2002). This model conceptualises interactivity across two axes (see figure 1).

**Figure 1: Ferber *et al.*, Six-Part Model of Cyber-Interactivity**



Firstly we propose there are three different directions communication can take; one-way, two-way and three-way. The first is clearly information provision with no opportunity of feedback but may be interactive in the sense of offering choices over access. Two-way communication often takes the form of asymmetrical tools such as email or contact forms which may well lead to non-public conversations or



aggregations of frequently asked questions to be presented publicly. Three-way communication replicates as closely as possible symmetrical public conversation between two or many participants. The latter fits most closely to the ideas of open participation, user generated content and the use of the network effect central to Web 2.0.

The second axis is the level of control offered to users by the site. This we rate out of ten based on functionality with limited control, a simple choice over clicking a link, as the lowest and openly encouraged participation within a debate being the highest (see Table 1). This conceptualisation of interactivity allows us to assess the extent to which the ideas of Web 2.0 have filtered into the e-campaigning element of political communication.

**Table 1: Scale for measuring levels of receiver control**

Category	Scale	Definition
Low Receiver Control	1	One-way hyperlink with unclear destination
	2	One-way hyperlink with defined destination
	3	Hyperlinks created with user input, language is dynamic using second person
	4	User has control over read and link options, video play is optional, content can be downloaded
	5	Users have control over interfacing with content (above) and can send information
High Receiver Control	6	Users can send and receive information. i.e. debate forums
	7	Users have multiple options to send and receive information, their input has transformational power – can be seen. i.e. text only chat.
	8	Users can upload content, questions, including videos, and can receive answers from receivers
	9	User can choose time, type and amount of information sent and received, the information sent is transformed by the receiver and the transformation is transparent. Communication is asymmetrical
	10	Sender and receiver have equal levels of control, communication is conversational

This paper assesses the use of interactivity through Lilleker & Malagon's (2010) operationalisation of the conceptual model proposed by Ferber et al (2007). Applying and adapting Gibson & Ward's (2000) methodology, we used a list of 69 discrete

items (tools, applications or functions) to measure the presence and numeric count of items on the websites of six UK parties. We chose the main national parliamentary parties, Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat, and three non-parliamentary national challengers, Green, UK Independence (UKIP) and British National (BNP). This choice is based on the fact that these parties sought to reach a wide national, UK-wide audience, and so would be expected to offer the more sophisticated web presence than parties with a more local reach (the parties standing in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales who may be expected to engage in more local level campaigning). Our data is based on analysis of the sites during the final week of the campaign (May 2<sup>nd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> 2010). However, we also offer findings of a longitudinal nature to assess the extent of changes both post Obama as well as within the context of electoral contests. The first analysis was conducted during June 2008, a period of peacetime with no elections taking place which acts as a control for later studies. The second period was May 1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> 2009 during the week preceding the European Parliamentary and some regional and local elections; while a second order election this provides an opportunity to test features and was the first post-Obama election in the UK. Finally, the sites were analysed again during the first week of May 2010, the week of the UK General Election. Discussion focuses firstly on the presence of features across UK party sites, then how the sites overall fit to the big ideas of Web 2.0 and offered opportunities for interaction among and with site visitors. Finally we compare the findings from 2010 with those of 2008 and 2009 to assess the change in averages for user control, and direction of communication across the websites.

### **Website features at the 2010 UK General Election**

In assessing the overall structure and content of the site we use the McMillan schematic which differentiates between user to document (downward flows); site (upward flows and asynchronous flows) and user interactivity (interactive flows) as well as assessing the extent to which the party site uses hyperlinks (lateral flows) both internally to site areas, party sites and external links. What is interesting to note, both as a feature of design and increased sophistication is that party websites have little content that is not on demand, content that is placed on the front page with no choice over reading. Party website front pages are simplistic gateways to information containing simple messages with a series of links that invite visitors to access content.

Thus we find little shovelware presented; rather this is placed into discrete areas that can be entered by choice as with site areas which offer more interactive features.

Downward flows (Table 2) are a key feature of all party sites, so fulfilling the information provision typical of party websites. Parties all provide a range of documents, apart from the Liberal Democrats these are the current election manifesto only; also issue documents are presented in easily accessible formats. Newsletters are used far less than previously (Jackson & Lilleker, 2007), however within the asynchronous flows we find offers to sign up for email newsletters which are frequently sent out. Press release archives are a large feature of all sites except for the British National Party, which due to its policies receives little media attention and they are unlikely to be of interest to journalists. Negative messages are a feature of all party campaigns, many of these are presented within video areas (party television areas) as are more positive messages, behind the scenes videos and their election broadcasts.

**Table 2: Downward Information flows across all party sites**

	<b>Lab</b>	<b>Cons</b>	<b>LDems</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>UKIP</b>	<b>BNP</b>
Documents	1	7	114	5	23	2
Policies summed	7	5	6	6	20	11
Issues examined	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Number of issues discussed	14	28	10	16	38	16
Statement of Values/ideology	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Newsletters	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Number of Newsletters archived	0	0	9	0	0	13
Media releases	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
Number of releases	480	11330	2665	2636	711	0
Candidate profile	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Election information	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no
Event calendar	yes	no	no	no	no	no

Frequently asked questions	no	no	no	no	no	no
Number of FAQs	0	0	0	0	0	0
Negative campaigning	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Overall percent of negativity	5	20	15	30	45	50
Videos	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Number of Videos	16	676	126	129	77	286
Targeted pages	4	3	5	2	0	13
Number of groups targeted	2	3	5	2	0	4
Targeted download form	no	no	no	no	no	no
Targeted online inquiry form	no	no	no	no	no	no
Targeted online transaction	no	no	no	no	no	no

The smaller group of features that allow visitors to provide information privately to the party are equally well served with commonalities appearing across the party sites. All, except UKIP, permit visitors to volunteer as activists and donate by all means, most still promoting posting cheques (table 3). Shopping is less consistent, particularly for smaller parties but the largest was that of the BNP which even sold golliwog soft toys as part of its campaign against political correctness. Interestingly only the two largest parties collected information regarding repeat visits by leaving cookies on the computers of visitors.

**Table 3: Upward information flows across party websites**

	<b>Lab</b>	<b>Cons</b>	<b>LDems</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>UKIP</b>	<b>BNP</b>
Volunteering by email	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes
By form	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes
Donations by mail	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Online form	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Merchandise for sale	yes	yes	no	no	no	yes
Cookies	yes	yes	no	no	no	no

Asynchronous information flows (Table 4) combine a range of features which permit users to both shape their experiences in unique ways, as well as sharing information that can be viewed publicly but not in real time. These include some sites that denote a degree of sophistication such as search facilities and navigation aids which are now de rigueur. However the majority of these features are underused across all party sites, with the majority being related to encouraging visitors to become party members. However, Web 2.0 features emerge within this category as parties are increasingly encouraging visitors to download logos for use online and share material with their online networks. We also see links to party social networking fan sites and presences and Twitter becoming widespread practices for parties.

**Table 4: Asynchronous information flows across party websites**

	<b>Lab</b>	<b>Cons</b>	<b>LDems</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>UKIP</b>	<b>BNP</b>
Download logos/posters (Number)	5	50	12	1	4	10
Site search	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Enmeshing	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Navigation Aids	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Online games/gimmicks	no	no	no	no	no	no
E-mail contact	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
E-mail feedback	no	no	yes	no	no	no
Online feed back form	yes	no	yes	no	no	no
Join e-mail list	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Questionnaires	no	no	no	no	no	no
Visitor initiated questionnaires	no	no	no	no	no	no
Polls	no	no	no	no	no	yes
Visitor initiated polls	no	no	no	no	no	yes
Petitions	yes	no	no	no	no	no
Visitor initiated	no	no	no	no	no	no

petitions						
Join online campaign	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Subscribe to e-newsletter	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Membership form to download	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes
Online membership inquiry form	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
Online Membership transaction	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
Bulletin board	no	no	yes	no	no	no
Blog tools	no	yes	no	no	no	yes
Ability to share vids/pics (embed code)	5	50	126	129	0	295
Podcasts	yes	yes	yes	no	no	no
Social networking links	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes
Twitter	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no
RSS	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes

Symmetrical flows (Table 5) are all within the Web 2.0 realm, and feature more widely than perhaps many sceptics might expect. Only the UKIP site remained within Web 1.0, all the other five parties allowed visitors to upload comments or content, share information with other visitors and the party, edit and update information and have public conversations with one another and with the party hierarchy. This suggests that there was a degree of influence from the Obama campaign upon the strategies of five out of the six parties.

**Table 5: Symmetrical information flows across party websites**

	<b>Lab</b>	<b>Cons</b>	<b>LDems</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>UKIP</b>	<b>BNP</b>
Ability to upload content/comments	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes
No of opps to upload content/comments	7	1372	2658	132	0	5342
Ability of visitors to share information	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes
Number of	8	2785	308	158	0	18345

opportunities to share information						
Ability of visitors to update information	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes
Number of opportunities to update information	1	347	308	2	0	4480
Public conversations allowed via comments or wall posting	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes
Number of opportunities for Public conversations	551	1372	2664	132	0	5342
Forum	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes
Chat room	yes	no	yes	no	no	yes
Online debate	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes
Number of opps to debate with leaders	1	1026	2664	1	0	5342

The final information flow category, the lateral flows using hyperlinks (see Table 6) indicates one simple fact that is common to all six UK parties. Party websites maintain consistency of message by building a purely partisan network. The system of hyperlinks mainly directs visitors to branches of the party, for example, local party branches or sub-groups of the party. The Conservatives were alone in providing supportive evidence to their claims on economic policy from non-partisan organisations including major UK companies who supported their spending reduction plans. The other three parties which offered reference links all linked to politically independent but ideologically indistinguishable organisations.

**Table 6: Lateral Information flows across all party websites**

	<b>Lab</b>	<b>Cons</b>	<b>LDems</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>UKIP</b>	<b>BNP</b>
Number of Partisan links	572	6	966	181	7	9
Number of Reference links	0	25	0	1	2	1
Number of Internal links	50	69	54	8	28	92

Cumulatively the counting of features tells an interesting story. We find a consistency across party websites in terms of information provision, and in particular the shift

from shovelware to the creation of areas of interest for visitors, for example, providing a press release archive for journalists. Equally, there has been a shift towards providing information in bitesize formats, and in particular using short videos to convey messages. The second point of convergence is the largely partisan hyperlink network that is designed to draw site visitors closer to the party, and gives an impression of message consistency. Divergence occurs when focusing on the Web 2.0 elements. While they are a feature of all sites except UKIP, use is sporadic. The major parties have areas in which interactivity can take place and many of these mirror, to an extent, the personal social network created by Barack Obama. These are areas for activists designed to mobilise them, their subsequent public activism is then used as a marketing tool. The Green Party rely on Facebook to interact with supporters, therefore in terms of quantity of opportunities is low while the quality is high given the participation of party leader and MEP, now MP, Caroline Lucas. The BNP are an anomaly. Every news page on their site was in weblog format which allowed contributions, every single page could be shared by site visitors online and they offered a range of ways in which site visitors could converse with one another. As most participants are anonymous and use symbolic pseudonyms and avatars (Sheriff of Nottingham being the most frequent contributor) it is impossible to tell whether party leader Nick Griffin is a participant, but clearly the site acted as a hub for an ideological coherent community. These observations will be explored further within the next sections.

### **2010 as a Web 2.0 Election**

Despite many suggesting that the 2010 UK general election was not an 'Internet election' (Dale 2010, Alani 2010), this does not mean that the Internet played no role, and saw little innovation. Party use of the Internet was not as bold as that of Obama and failed to have much impact on the news agenda. However, one can also read accounts of Obama's campaign which plays down the role of the Internet and positioning it as one factor amid many (Heilemann & Halperin, 2010). One can argue that in the UK the three ninety minute televised leader's debates were the game changer in 2010 (Worcester 2010). Moreover, one can also point out that the majority of Obama's spend was on television advertising. Perhaps *plus ça change* is fair comment for both cases. With the UK one can observe parties shifting towards a more participatory mode of communication. They provide environments with a range of



Web 2.0 features, and so adhering to many of those ‘big ideas’ which underpin the ‘they will come and build it’ philosophy (Birdsall, 2007).

The key innovation which allowed visitors to contribute significant amounts of content were the publicly viewable site members’ areas offered by Labour, the Conservatives, Liberal Democrat and British National Party. While each had elements that were unique to each party and website there were clear similarities across these areas in terms of their functionality, and the participation they potentiated. These areas allowed members to create their own profiles or content spaces, within which they could upload commentary and materials that were publicly viewable. Labour’s Membersnet was an extension of their intranet system and geared around their network of constituency party branches but any site member could create their own weblog. The Liberal Democrats LibDemAct area was more about grouping individuals by issue with myriad groups anyone could create or join, and then contribute to message spaces. The British National Party forum had similar functions, though showed greater ideological cohesion and appeared in reality to function as a source of contributions to their anti-immigration, Eurosceptic and homophobic party platforms. The Conservatives members’ area ([www.myconservatives.com](http://www.myconservatives.com)) most closely mirrored Obama’s social network, and was geared around party campaigns at the national level as well as supporting local campaigns in constituencies. Each of these areas were participatory architectures that allowed significant amounts of content creation which were then publicly viewable by all visitors.

A key function of these sites relates well to the notion of the Internet as providing a win-win zone for party and online audience. Each site members’ area was geared towards encouraging activism in support of the party within the election contest. Except for that of the BNP, the parties saw these areas as the first base for supporters; second base existed in taking part in offline activities but then discussing these back within members’ areas or on social networking sites. Key to the success of these mobilisation tactics was connecting people together locally, and building communities of activists at the constituency level. The best and most observably successful party was Labour. They built a community of highly visible online activists who were well connected locally through their Membersnet area, or via the campaigning I-phone application. In order to maintain energy around the campaign, with Twitter tsar Kerry

McCarthy as the guiding force, Labour used the hashtag #labourdoorstep to allow campaigners to relay positive experiences across the network. The feed also appeared directly on the homepage. Site visitors were also encouraged to sign up as fans on Facebook, aided by using pictures of their friends where the information could be gleaned from their ISP. In the final days of the campaign Labour also promoted the 'Word of Mouth' application, supporters would then regularly update Twitter and Facebook with an 'I'm voting Labour message. These underpinned the ongoing initiatives 'Why I am Labour' and 'Change we see', which both solicited supportive comments that also fed directly on to the main website. To an extent these conform to the notion of participatory dialogue (della Porta, 2005), and was clearly harnessing the power of 'a' crowd in terms of the mobilised activists. However, it revolved around encouraging site visitors to buy into the party messages, and repeat these not develop ideas or contribute to wider dialogue concerning the party, its policy or even its campaign conduct.

Five of the six parties, excluding UKIP, also linked into existing participatory architectures; predominantly using Facebook, Twitter and YouTube and encouraged the sharing of files so tapping into a potential network effect. The Greens were the only party to rely on Facebook, rather than a bespoke network as a hub for drawing supporters closer to the party. That said all parties colonised social networking sites with the main party sites gaining varying degrees of success (see Table 7). The winners in terms of fans, followers and video views across all social networks were the Conservatives, who also won the election. Interestingly the BNP videos gained a significant level of views compared with other minor parties; while they did well in gaining Facebook fans this pales into insignificance in comparison to the number who joined anti-BNP groups of which there were twenty with a membership exceeding 50,000. While little can be concluded from the overall data here, it is clear that parties were not only concentrating on building their own networks but used established networks to draw online audiences towards their own sites and embed themselves in the communities already used by a critical mass of the online audience. These activities did, however, achieve some successes. In the final week of the election campaign the top viral video was a negative advertisement produced by the Conservatives. They were not alone however in the top ten, Labour had two videos

that had been shared more than one million times according to the New Media Age chart.

**Table 7: Reach via most popular social networking sites**

	Facebook Fans	Twitter followers	YouTube video views
Lab	61,271	8,321	1,704,804
Cons	<b>111,690</b>	<b>37,937</b>	<b>3,008,946</b>
LDems	7,652	23,167	Not available
Green	11,304	11,546	199,533
UKIP	1,069	826	713,949
BNP	26,722	2,339	1,096,920

Cumulatively then, Web 2.0 became a key feature of the party websites. The only tool that seemed underused was the weblog, with the Conservatives Blue Blog and BNP news blog being exceptions. The key observation is that for three of the parties interaction was bracketed into members' areas: LibDemAct, MyConservatives and Labour's Membersnet were discrete hubs for user generated content. Labour did allow online activists to update elements of the front page via Twitter feeds, however, and the Conservative's Blue Blog allowed comments and the most commented on posts also featured on the front page. The Green Party site offered lower levels of sophistication, beyond one opportunity to share a customised video, though the party used Facebook well and party leader Caroline Lucas had a clear participatory presence. UKIP eschewed all Web 2.0 features. The outlier in terms of the levels of participation allowed was the website of the British National Party. The BNP site emerged as the closest in functionality to that of Obama. In total there were 4,680 news items in blog format each receiving comments with the average across them all being 68, but with a maximum of 200. The 286 videos within the BNPTv area similarly gained a significant level of commentary, an average of 48 comments. What was remarkable was that every page of the website allowed an element of online co-creation; most in the form of comments or uploads, the rest through sharing facilities. This was clearly encouraged with pages asking for anecdotes and pictures to support party policy, and the forum that encouraged the discussion of policy. While acting as a hub for extremist and controversial views, this was the most Web 2.0 site offering the greatest amount of participation and appearing as a hub for a type of democracy; if democracy can have such a tight ideological cohesion.

### Comparing communication strategies at the 2010 Election

Overall communication strategies appear to focus on achieving two key objectives. Firstly, providing information about party policy in easily accessible and digestible formats, in particular manifesto as a whole and in sections by political issue prioritised. Secondly, crowdsourcing and harnessing activists to the campaign. Interactive features concentrated on mobilising website visitors, getting them to contribute financially as well as becoming involved in offline campaign activities and providing the scope for involvement in online promotion of the party.

**Figure 2: Revised user-to-user interactivity model**

<b>Level of Receiver Control</b>	<b>10</b>			BNP – 38851 CON – 7886 Green – 399 LAB – 569 LDEM – 11266
	<b>9</b>			BNP – 295 CON – 51 Green – 129 LAB – 5 LDEM – 126
	<b>8</b>			BNP – 1 CON – 1373 Green – 2 LAB – 4 LDEM – 2 UKIP – 1
	<b>7</b>		BNP – 3 CON – 2 Green – 1 LAB – 2 LDEM – 2 UKIP – 1	
	<b>6</b>			
	<b>5</b>	BNP – 105 CON – 104 Green – 194 LAB – 624 LDEM – 1024 UKIP – 40	BNP – 10 CON – 41 Green – 7 LAB – 76 LDEM – 348 UKIP – 7	
	<b>4</b>	BNP – 300 CON – 11688 Green – 2778 LAB – 505 LDEM – 2809 UKIP – 796	CON – 1 Green – 1 LAB – 2 LDEM – 2 UKIP – 1	
	<b>3</b>	BNP – 2 CON – 1 Green – 2 LAB – 1 LDEM – 2 UKIP – 2	BNP – 1 CON – 1 LAB – 1	
	<b>2</b>	BNP – 107 CON – 65 Green – 50 LAB – 31 LDEM – 155 UKIP – 112		
	<b>1</b>			
		<b>Direction of Communication</b>		

Figure 2 presents the number of features that fall within each category for both direction of communication (one, two and three-way) and the amount of user control potentiated. This shows a degree of a pattern, in that many parties have similar amounts of features within each category, but also a high degree of disparity. The amount of features which allow minor levels of control over following links or downloading for example, but that these links go to monologic communication is a common feature. Disparity is mostly seen in the upper quadrant of user control in three-way communication, with the BNP overshadowing all other parties in the extent of features offered that are three-way and offering the highest level of user control – participatory communication. In order to demonstrate the overall disparity between sites simple averages are calculated for each party site by counting the number of features in each category and dividing the number by the total possible. This gives an indication of the overall number of features across the site and what type of user experience is potentiated overall.

**Figure 3: Revised user-to-user interactivity model comparing all parties and candidates**

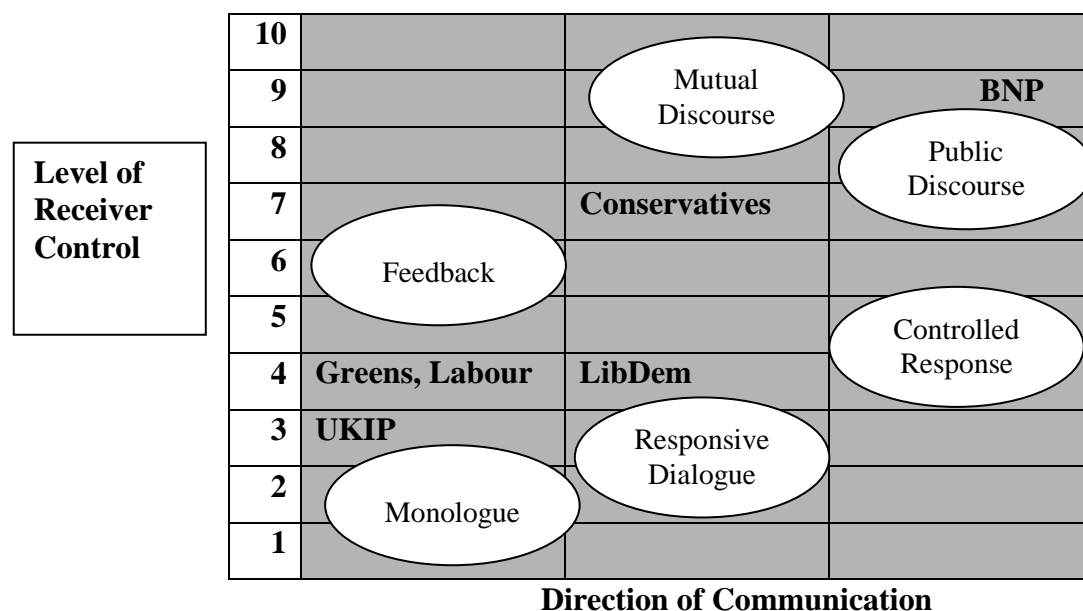


Figure 3 shows where the parties sit in terms of the overall average content on the site. The BNP, perhaps obviously, has an overall average within the three-way

quadrant and offer consistently high receiver control. The Conservatives, due to the highly interactive MyConservatives area and Blue Blog, but the equally large areas which offer information and shoverlware, average within the two-way quadrant but offer a high level of receiver control throughout also; the Liberal Democrats match them in terms of direction but user control was calculated as somewhat lower. This latter category is similar to that of the Greens and Labour whose sites, with UKIP, mainly offer one-way communication. This reflects diversity in strategies well. The three parties who offer mainly one-way communication use the website as a promotional tool; the key function is selling their policies, or in Labour's case record in government, to their online audience. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats combine informing and persuading with involving visitors and allowing them opportunities to connect with one another and the party. The BNP created a debate forum that provided those of a similar ideological persuasion an opportunity to air their views and express their support for party policy, as well as producing material that could be used for campaigning at the local level. Thus some parties embraced Web 2.0 well, others eschewed its interactivity in favour of message control and a more traditional form of election communication.

### **Innovation or Caution: Interactivity and website development 2008-10**

While there are a variety of arguments in favour of permitting visitor participation on party websites, there are also arguments that this can be used as a sales gimmick (Lees-Marshment & Lilleker, 2005) or a branding tool (Jackson & Lilleker, 2010). It is thus interesting to compare these developments with previous research into website design over recent years. Comparative studies have found that UK parties are consistently low in interactive elements, even compared to other EU member states where the Internet has been a secondary if not tertiary campaigning communication medium (de Landtsheer et al, 2005). These conclusions may well have been true in the mid campaign period of 2008 also, though there was some indications of a shift towards adoption of Web 2.0. However, at this time architectures of participation were in an embryonic form. They were mainly reliant upon external social networking sites and while visitors did offer occasional comments there was little response from the party. The analysis at this point was that parties had developed a position in between the static information based paradigm of Web 1.0 and the participatory ethos of Web 2.0: Web 1.5 saw participatory spaces being created, but participation not

being encouraged and there was little sense that participation would have any impact (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009).

The European parliamentary election campaign of 2009 saw some developments. Labour had created a more interactive network which allowed visitors to create campaigns to which the party of government would respond. Equally, the Greens and Liberal Democrats had embraced social networking to a much greater extent than previously and due to the use of Facebook, YouTube and Twitter were allowing the public to respond to their communication in a way previously impossible on any official party presence. There was little direct borrowing of techniques from the Obama campaign, though the BNP site had created its news weblog and both UKIP and the Conservative Party had a blog (the latter would continue as a core feature of the site). Overall we found, in terms of overall size of the site and the predominance of features which are classified as one, two or three way an incremental increase in the amount of the party websites that allowed some degree of user participation with averages all falling into the two-way category indicating a wide mixture of feature usage by all parties. The BNP maintained a clear overall lead in terms of potentiating participation.

Figure 4 shows the development in terms of direction of communication over time. The averages within the 2-2.5 range where most parties sat in 2009 mask innovations and adventures in conversational interactivity. By 2010, though, strategies diverged. The BNP built on previous innovations to build a site that was wholly participatory. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats maintained their external social networking, while building spaces for their own communities to interact with one another, as well as with the broader online community. The Conservatives expanded their Blue Blog area and used it to test ideas outside of campaigns, as well as to gain some element of feedback on thinking at the micro if not macro level. In sharp contrast to these three, the Green Party, Labour and UKIP reduced the levels of interactivity and the sites became predominantly one way, persuasive and focusing on providing information rather than soliciting user generated content. While these three parties have all withdrawn from any element of three way communication, there were innovations across all parties except for UKIP. The paring of the site to be lean campaigning tools have led to an information provision strategy with any other

elements kept to a minimum. Despite Labour's Membersnet area, the site content is designed to defend their time in government, the Greens and UKIP as presenting themselves as an alternative to soft environmentalists or pro-integrationists.

**Figure 4: Mean Direction of Communication and Change 08-10**

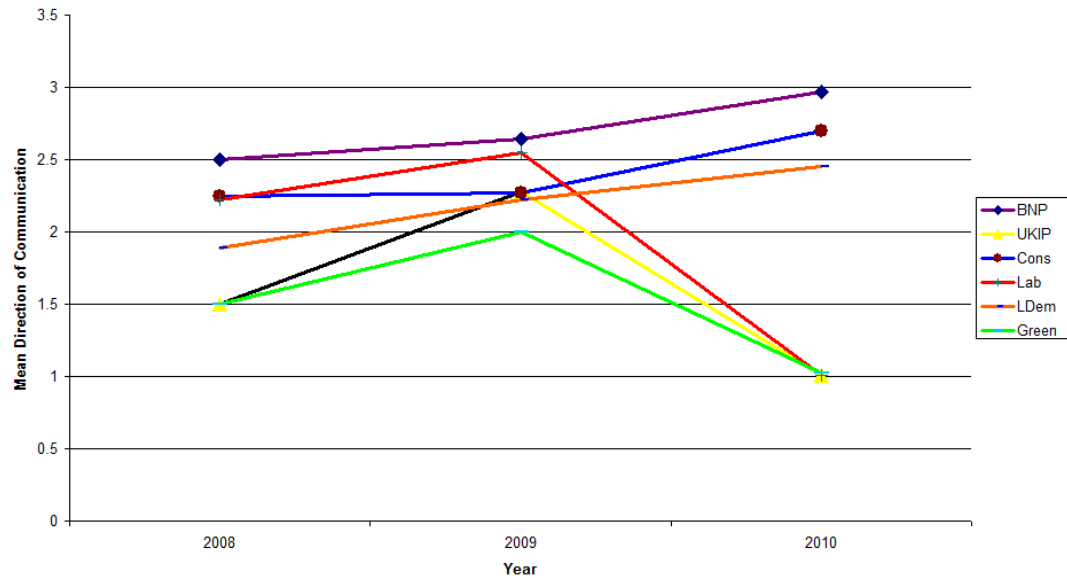
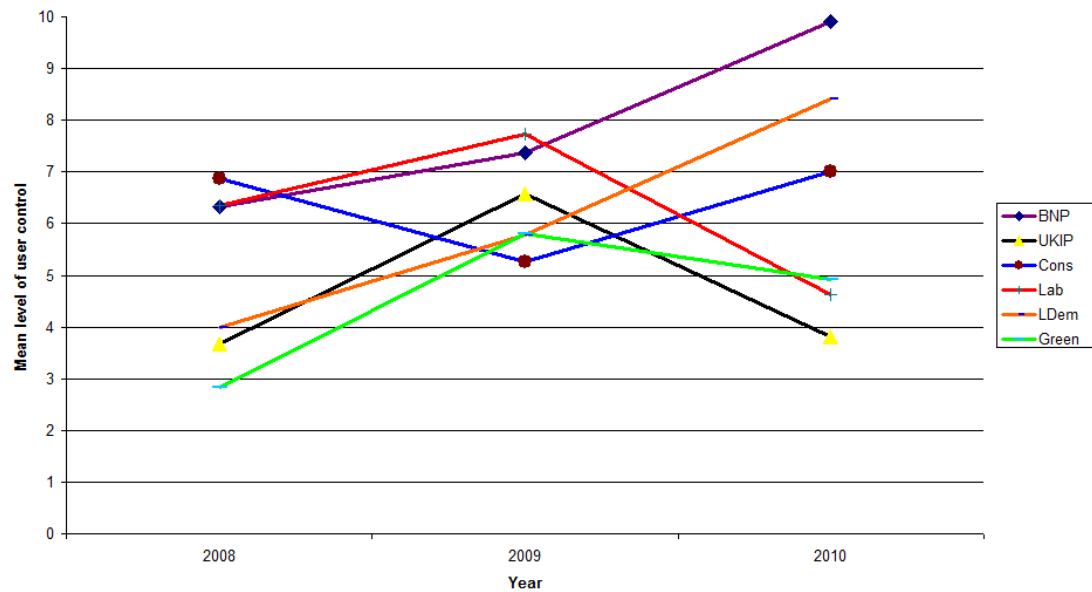


Figure 5 shows that user control follows the exact same pattern as one would expect. Moderation as an issue aside, the BNP site allows comments across almost every page; the rest permit sharing. The Liberal Democrat 'Act' mini-site, the Conservatives MyCons network and the Blue Blog contains so much user generated material that it overshadows the levels of information they also provide. Similarly, but having the opposite effect on the overall average, user generated material within Labour's Membersnet and the feeds from Twitter are overshadowed by the sheer amount of information, in the form of news features and press releases, which dominates the site. For three parties (BNP, Cons and Lib Dem), 2010 represented a continuing progression in their use of interactivity, but for the others 2009 appeared to represent their highpoint, thus far.



**Figure 5: Mean User Control and Change 08-10**

## Conclusions

On the whole the Internet had two main functions during the 2010 UK Election contest, firstly selling the party and its personnel to website visitors; secondly converting latent and loyal supporters into activists, activism ranging donating through publicly endorsing to campaigning offline. In terms of functionality there is an equalisation across the parties, though sophistication of design remains imbalanced towards the major players. Thus websites and social media have become key tools of campaigns, but have not fundamentally changed the nature of campaigning. This is not to say that Web 2.0 has no impact on electioneering. The network effect is difficult to manufacture and relies on the activities of members of the online community. While many members of the public may have engaged in political talk at election times, in bars and cafes for example, this talk can now be carried out in public places that are globally accessible. However, the nature of the talk that filtered through to political party websites was solidly 'on message' and enhanced the campaign, thus within these spaces the public voice was channelled. Thus we find a normalisation of political communication within party-built spaces.

Party websites have not yet challenged Butler and Ranney's (1992) view that the main form of participation during elections is voting. Yet, there is evidence of some 'green shoots' of electoral participation. For example, The BNP forum and Conservative's Blue Blog offer some tentative signs of progress, and the election campaign did see a large amount of public (non-elite) use of the web to comment on the campaign and key events, particularly the televised debates, as well as on the outcome and what how the parties should respond. The LibDem Voice independent forum in particular came alive as party leader Nick Clegg was given the role of 'kingmaker'. Equally contributions on news sites, via Twitter and Facebook forums as well as the Vote for Change and Vote for Democracy campaigns which crowdsourced support for voting reform suggest public involvement in debates being facilitated by the Internet and supporting to an extent arguments that it can play a role in enhancing the workings of democracy (Coleman & Blumler 2010). This suggests that the Internet reflects and amplifies other events, activities and debates, rather than starting them.

Compared with previous UK elections there has been a greater use of the Internet. The Internet does provide a space for interaction between parties and voters, but it would be erroneous to conclude too much for this. The 2010 UK General Election does not support evidence of a clear win-win zone where politically interested people can engage with parties. Rather, what exists at present is a share-share zone, where the process of communication exists, but the results do not yet justify any significant changes. Our longitudinal data suggests that the parties had two different approaches to Web 2.0. For three of our parties (BNP, Cons, Lib Dem), 2010 represents a stage in a gradual progression, which presumably will be evident at subsequent elections, but for the other three parties 2010 is not the height of their use of Web 2.0 applications. This suggests that for some parties Web 2.0 is a steady upward progressive journey, but for others there is more of an ebb and flow in innovation.

The external, public interventions, be they satires of party posters, Twitter users comments on the leader debates, and Facebook groups campaigning for or against parties as well as broader reforms all contribute to a complex communicative ecosystem which parties have to deal with if not facilitate. Some party sites did add to this ecosystem; however the combination of control and loyally supportive ethos meant these represented attempts to colonise the ecosystem and make it work for the

campaigns. The marketing imperatives of election campaigns override public demands for participation. However, the divergent strategies demonstrate that for three parties they increased the levels of participation, in order to embed themselves within the online network and fulfil electoral goals. This suggests that, if resources are sufficient to monitor and orchestrate participation within the online campaigning elements, elections may well become more participatory in the future and the next contest will draw lessons from 2010. If advantages were found from encouraging online participation there may well be a further increase in three way communication in user controlled environments within party sites; however parties may equally feel there is little to be gained from interacting with website visitors and return to the brochureware approach consistent with the Web 1.0 era of internet technologies.

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