

The Political Internet: between dogma and reality

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The third wave?

Schemes or subjective definitions are often used to detect the start, the end and the most important phases of complex social dynamics. Schemes and definitions serve the purpose of easing access to knowledge. They may sometimes constraint knowledge development too.

In the futurists' parlance, after *tele-democracy* (in the eighties) and *e-democracy* (in the nineties), *Internet voting* (from the year 2000 onwards) should be considered the 'third wave' of a long and dogmatic debate on the role of IT and the Internet in political communication and participation.

If one observes this debate retrospectively, it's easy to note that the structure of the arguments, the overall rhetoric and many of the proponents, have not changed, notwithstanding the change in technologies, the criticisms raised against their faithful approach and the worsening of political participation levels in the United States and abroad¹.

Christopher Arterton (1985) in *Teledemocracy reconsidered* had already dismissed the arguments of Naisbitt (1982), Toffler (1980), and Becker (1981), three pivotal 'wave' generators (then, and still to date). After examining 13 tele-democracy projects, Arterton had concluded that the key to explain the success of certain political participation experiences was the overall campaign strategy, more than the individual role played by digital media:

"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. 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* (my italics) 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... 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% rate of involvement.”

Arterton has pointed to the detrimental impact of channel/content multiplication on the effectiveness of IT-based political campaigns. Both cable TV, videotex, and computer conferencing systems exhibit “limitations as vehicles of political discourse”. Then, and today, new media are 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.

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.”

E-democracy

Ten years on, the explosion of the World Wide Web, the Clinton-Gore Presidency, and the elevation of ‘Information Society policy’ to the status of planetary priority for both developing and developed countries, all become factors that induced a second, much more powerful wave of (strictly) the same debate.

The novelty of the *E-democracy debate* is without doubt the widespread consciousness that the World Wide Web is indeed to offer – thanks to its flexible service platform – a much larger palette of options for those interested in using the new medium for political communication. The ‘Bias of the Internet’, its specificity, its *signature* as mass medium, is to confer on political communication some new, rather unique, features: hyper-textuality, multimediality, ubiquity.

The second major new fact is indeed the endorsement of an entire political class of a mass communication medium (the Internet) as vehicle for social change. Nothing quite like that occurred since decades. Today, through the various mechanisms of global governance (G7/G8, the ITU, the World Wide Web consortium, ICANN, OECD, Unesco, World Bank, the numerous regional political cooperation fora)

talking about 'Internet and politics' or the 'politics of the Internet' has become mainstream habit of politicians worldwide.

A corollary of this dynamic is the emergence, within a few years, of a Political Internet, a specialised sub-set of the entire network geography, generated and maintained by the formal and informal actors of the political system.

Four meta-sites or Web directories offer an idea of the size (in links)ⁱⁱ of certain *subsections* of the political Internet. These sub-sections correspond to what we can call the formal actors of the political system online (governmental sites, media sites, political parties web sites):

Political Resources on the Net	Managed by former Italian MP and MEP Roberto CiccioMessere in Rome the site was created in the mid-90s as an 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.	5 levels ⁱⁱⁱ 28172 Links 21933 external links (77% of the site) 20% of failed links Traffick ranks Avg. Traffic Rank: 80,443 * Other sites that link to this site: 1,174
Richard Kimber's Political Science Resources	Managed by Dr Richard Kimber at the Keele University the site aims at providing, in addition to numerous political parties' web sites a whole list of political science resources ^{iv}	8 Levels 12643 links 10310 external (81% of the site) 12% of failed links Avg. Traffic Rank: 41,480 * Other sites that link to this site: 971
Governments on the WWW	Managed by Gunnar Anzinger the site is presented as "Comprehensive database of governmental institutions on the World Wide Web: parliaments, ministries, offices, law courts, embassies, city councils, public broadcasting corporations, central banks,	4 levels 22366 links 22101 ext. 98% of the site 16% of the links are broken

	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”.	Avg. Traffic Rank: 40,984 * Other sites that link to this site: 3,042
Election World	<p>“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 practicizes law in the Netherlands. He is the international secretary of the Dutch social-liberal party Democraten 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.</p> <p>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 Schaffer, Gary Selikow, Alejandro Sola, the editors of Klipsan Press and the editor of Rulers”.</p>	6 levels 4209 links 3549 ext. 84% of the site 12% broken Avg. Traffic Rank: 97,118 * Other sites that link to this site: 511

Although the definition of what is a *political web site* remains to be agreed, these directories are among the biggest collections of relevant political material on the Web^v. Regardless how extraordinary and laudable in nature, these directories remain (quite like Yahoo and other Web Directories) man-made, endemically incomplete and outdated. *Panta rei, Everything flows* on the Internet, and moreover, taxonomically, there is much more to be studied than the actors at the core of the political system^{vi}: the *deep political web* of those political actors which are at the periphery or completely outside the formal political system.

Supported by the same Naisbitt, Toffler and Becker the e-democracy wave revealed new specialists. One of them, Mark Bonchek (1997), author at MIT of a significant and timely dissertation, summarised in ten points the theological corpus on the *Internet as a political medium*.

Bonchek's ten points were constructed much like the rhetoric of ten years before: the main emphasis was on highlighting how *the Internet (the Web) bias* was to change the mechanics of traditional politics:

Bonchek's 10 Hypotheses on the effects of the Internet on the flow of political information
1- All channel structure of political communication in which all political agent 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 relationship form more easily around political issues and personal relationships are enhanced in existing issue-oriented networks
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 source for political information, expanding the diversity of opinion which citizens have access and may be exposed to
10- Narrowcasting of customized and targeted messages to specific communities of interest

The overall atmosphere of widespread enthusiasm for the multiplication of new cases of adoption of the Internet by traditional political actors, was not – in the mid-nineties -- conducive to critical thinking.

The fact that all the political agents were not and still are not directly connected to each other could not counteract the general impression that *Being Digital* was both a right and an obligation.

The idea of disintermediation simultaneously seduced political and business analysts; thus producing in both environments a rhetoric which promoted, once again, the idea of a *revolution* instead of *relative change*.

The endemically disorganised and anarchic nature of political newsgroups was to reveal itself progressively; in the mid-nineties the idea that groups of activists could discuss more than 60,000 topics online conditioned much of the early scholarly works. It was indeed urgent – at that time – to scrutinise the few known cases.

While many academics somehow ceded to these 'research constraints', much of the informed opinion started to mimic the conclusions of the proponents of e-democracy.

A very large corpus of articles on e-democracy developed between 1992 and 2000, blurring the distinction between e-democracy and e-government: In 1992 Clinton and Perot^{vii} dominate much of the coverage for their keen interest in promoting e-democracy: the idea of the electronic town-hall emerges and the first online Presidential debates are organised on GENie first, and then on other online systems. Few years later, with the second and third Presidential elections (1996–2000) electronic democracy becomes 'part of the electioneering bandwagon' (Clenaghan, 1997).

In 1994 Vice President Al Gore states, together with powerful members of the Congress that 'the Infobahn must promote electronic democracy' (Henderson, 1994). Peter Lewis, from the *New York Times*, titles his articles on the 1994 Congressional Campaign 'Internet emerges as a vital link in political arena' (Lewis, 1994).

During the election G. Scott Aikens, a Minnesota graduate student, moderates the cyberspace debate for *the Minnesota Electronic Democracy project*. The project creates two significant spin-offs in the following years: the www.e-democracy.org web site and Democracies Online (www.e-democracy.org/do) an annexed site created by Steven Clift, an e-democracy evangelist bound to become one of the most visible proponents of e-democracy.

The same year another well-known consultant, Esther Dyson, declares to the press "Computers create a community and give power...the electronic democracy is inevitable" (Higgins, 1994). New political debates online, all re-using the Bulletin Board System model, proliferate in the States. The House Speaker, Newt Gingrich, launches *Thomas*^{viii}, the interactive computer program supposed to open the Congress's work to the US population at large.

In 1995 public protest against French nuclear testing at Mururoa Atoll drives New Zealand's first experiments in electronic democracy (McDonald, 1995).

In 1996 the Canadian *Calgary Herald* reports: "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" (Alberts, 1996).

In 1997 the British press notes the country's first steps into the Political Internet (McGoobin, 1997); Altavista pulls up more than 2000 pages related to 'electronic democracy' (Futrelle, 1997).

In 1998 more than two thirds of the 1998 US congressional candidates, had operating web sites. For the Senate, 75%, or 51 candidates, had web sites (Dulio, 1999). The posting of the Starr Report on the Web is described as *historic* (Harmon, 1998), even if as the press covering the event adds "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 edit *Cyberdemocracy* (Routledge 1998). Presented by the press as a *truly international book* (Grossman, 1998), the work describes the experiments in cyberdemocracy in Santa Monica (PEN system), Amsterdam's Digital City, and Manchester's Information City initiative.

In the public discourse, a very thin line separates e-democracy from e-government, electoral-political participation and participative democracy at local government's level. The headlines explicit the new conceptual framework as follows:

"Government makes online connection; Electronic democracy". One of the most quoted features of the Internet becomes its ability "to cut red tape" (Nisperos, 1998). "Electronic democracy" – commentators say – "is inspired by two overlapping dislikes – of bureaucrats and of politicians – and by two ideas for making these groups more likeable" (*The Economist*, 1992).

In 1999 *The Times* (Gould, 1999) suggests : "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 same year other sources (Rust, 1999) propose the next conceptual transition: from e-democracy/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".

The dissenting opinions (Varn, 1993, Bimber, 1998) on e-democracy and its variants, albeit sound and relatively numerous, do not reach adequate visibility. New anecdotal evidence is about to prepare the next 'wave'.

Internet Voting

The third wave, the American debate on Internet Voting, is fuelled in the US by the widespread concern generated by the contested outcome of the 2000 US Presidential elections.

The launch of Internet based voting was, according to the authors of a Harvard PIRP/Booz Allen & Hamilton (PIRP/B.A.H.) recent work (Butcher, 2001) in this field, a response to a paradox: "The most technologically advanced nation, fails to provide its citizens a new president because of an outdated analogue voting technology". In the year 2000 Internet voting represents for many –this is really not new at all -- the 'next logical step' in the saga of 'new uses for the Internet'.

Proponents of Internet-based voting suggest that several factors explain the growing interest shown by a wide range of 'stakeholders' in corporations, research institutions and (local) government. These factors are once again the same ones that were – mutatis mutandis – promoted almost 20 years ago: Internet is cheap, Internet eases access to voting process, Internet provides access to useful information, etc.

If one analyses the size and scope of the cases quoted in the PIRP/B.A.H. paper, it is difficult to agree that they represent 'significant voting initiatives'.

The Arizona experience (during the Democratic Primaries in March 2000) is the sole exception. This said, the lawsuit (which concerns equal access to minority voters) promoted against the proponents of the trial by the *Voting Integrity Project* is – alone – such a serious attack to the entire edifice of the so-called 'Internet voting enthusiasts', that one can expect a difficult future for this kind of projects.

In parallel to constitutional issues, Internet voting is slowed (if not blocked) by very significant security problems: it is virtually impossible to give the highest degree of protection to information that travels on public networks, and is produced (in a distributed way) by a vast number of un-checkable sites. Technically it is possible, like many other things. Practically, it means building thousands of military-quality-Infosec/I-voting sites.

Although the study recognises many of the existing issues, it is hard for the authors to resist to rhetoric of transformation/revolution: "The information age has begun to transform many cherished democratic traditions and practices", "the internet has changed the way citizens interact with one another and with their elected representatives" and "the internet has demonstrated a capacity to inform voters as never before possible" (p. 6).

Why 'has changed' and not 'can' change, 'could' change, 'may' change? And moreover, who really absorbs all this information? And ultimately, is this information really useful to determine the final vote?

New contexts, classic questions

Voting via the Internet (regardless of the type of solution) remains highly conditioned by at least three factors: (a) strong security, (b) the development of a trust mechanism among users, and (c) a strong State intervention to fund the provision of strong security, 'minitel-like' equipment at the level of the end voter. (Large) Internet penetration, per se, is not enough to become a causal factor for Internet voting from home. In other words, the fact that Internet usership is increasing does not mean that I-voting is 'inevitable'.

Even if Internet voting was to become a reality tomorrow, it would only provide voters 'another' opportunity to vote (unless, of course, it was made mandatory to vote by this mean). It would be almost comparable to allowing people to vote on Sunday, or to vote late at night, or to get a day off to go to vote etc. It would be *instrumental*, but not enough to be a structural cause for a (political participation) process.

Between dogma and reality

Again, like decades ago, proponents of internet voting continue to produce aphorisms, while the scientific community at large is aware that *non consumption of media* is a quantifiable phenomenon everywhere, both in developed and in developing countries.

Interestingly, next to financial, cultural or skills gaps, which are the typical causes of the *digital divide* in developing countries, there is also an emerging phenomenon of *media avoidance* in developed countries. In other terms: former media (over) consumers who deliberately decide to 'un-plug' and stop watching the TV or reading newspapers.

Tele-democracy, e-democracy and finally internet voting are three facets of the same intellectual drive, which appears to be the result of two simultaneous pressures:

- One exerted by the political science community at first, then by political analysts at large, to identify a likely *remedy* to the crisis of post-war mass political parties, and the decline of public confidence in the political elite.

- The other by the industry which tends to support the idea that part of its business has become a political priority.

Even before tele-democracy, elements of the same debate started to appear in the late sixties, when numerous political scientists started to note that, with President Kennedy's campaign, techniques had started to modernise through the introduction of a marketing approach, the first campaign databases and geographical information systems. According to some observer this was the birth of the *New Politics* (Penn, 1968), a phenomenon, which was later, re-defined as *image politics* or *personality politics* (Boorstin, 1964).

Strangely enough, this historical context seems to be out of sight for most of the contemporary proponents of the 'new' Internet-based politics. The binomial *Internet and politics* seems to capture the attention of a very specific scientific community. Research associations (or networks) in the field of sociology and political science do not seem to have developed a specific, autonomous research strategy in this field^{ix}.

The majority of those who actually got interested in these phenomena had an IT background or were elected officials at local or national level; most of them got easily conditioned by the rhythm of the 'revelations' concerning the new opportunities provided by the Internet. Many got also engaged in what seems to be a shift from a laudable inductive approach, into a form of dogma, a loss of historic perspective.

Other research questions, the same old questions

This debate could find a new course if the attention of political science or sociology scholars – for example – increased. Political Internet specialists should raise few of the oldest and most relevant questions in political science to understand the reality of this phenomenon.

The first question is, of course, 'why do people vote?'

What explains that in "the country that has both the highest media and technology density per capita", one finds 84 million 'non voters' in 1992 and 100 million 'non voters' (more than the actual number of voters) in 1996? (Doppelt, 1999).

Deepening this question (why people vote) equals digging into the relationships between the 'personal sphere' and the 'public sphere' in the psychological dimension of the potential voter. The point is understanding what makes him/her 'care' enough to do something. What is 'close' and what is 'far away'. What affects him/her and what doesn't.

The Internet could be the tool to increase proximity with things which are in reality much further away. But it is yet to be confirmed whether the political content vehicled by the Internet today, really 'affects' potential voters.

The factors which explain the variance 'vote' are ideological, psychological, *personal*, in a word. Environmental questions (like the possibility of voting from home or from an electronic boot) are only marginally relevant to the end voter.

Many other factors are capable of explaining the same amount of variance. In other words, (from a voter's perspective) being motivated *explains* a lot of votes; being 'supported' by the Internet (in whichever way) explains fewer votes.

The second question is "what people actually do with the Internet" (instead of what they 'could' do).

This intellectual approach is, at least with regard to the e-democracy or I-voting debate, capable of modifying the course of research. Political TV studies have showed that what really matters in this type of political communication is the 'emotional potential' of the medium; to a lesser extent its accuracy, speed or richness in content.

The key point is 'how much and what' comes out from the 'Internet filter' when the Internet is used to motivate people to vote.

If voters have to choose between two charismatic leaders, can they perceive better the 'person behind the personal' through Internet based political communication or do other media outperform political web sites? If compared to the TV or the radio, what is the degree of 'high fidelity' provided by the Internet- based re-production of political reality?

A functional/operational approach to the study of the Political Internet

The Political Internet must be framed in a truly systemic/cybernetic perspective: it's a sub-system of the Internet which responds to a specific function; it does contribute to the homeostasis of the whole system and it does serve the interests of a given community.

The Political Internet must also be analysed operationally: this means reaching deeper levels of understanding on how the Web works, how its 'voice', its 'signature', its bias --as Innis said-- affects political communication.

A good starting point for this type of research is the enumeration of the material pre-conditions for a successful online political presence.

The following seem to be the most obvious ones:

a) political information must exist online

- b) users must have access
- c) users must have time
- d) users must be politically motivated (civic culture/political socialisation)
- e) users must have motivation to search and retrieve online *and not* in any other way (cross-media competition)
- f) users must find political information online
- g) users must overcome the biases of the Web (lack of *the rhetoric of arrival*) – publishers must use the Web biases (hypertextuality, mutimediality, ubiquity) to increase the effectiveness of their sites
- h) users must be affected, convinced, gratified in some way by what is found on the Web
- i) users must consider that what is found on the Web either integrates previous knowledge or replaces previous knowledge (the Web medium outperforms other media).

Let's try now to scrutinise the relevance of each one of them.

As mentioned above, there is little doubt that something we can call the Political Internet exists today. It is not clear how big this is, since there is no widespread agreement on who participates to this online version of the political system and who doesn't. If we consider the political system as *inclusive of the informal and antagonist (anti-regime) actors*, then the Political Internet is certainly larger than what accounted by the four major political meta-sites mentioned above.

With regard to access online, we know that – in OECD countries – end-user costs (including learning curve), age, sex, do constitute divisive elements within society (Ricci, 1998, 2000). This happens to the Internet and to many other information (or, better, knowledge intensive) technologies.

Both in developed and in developing countries, digital divide can be quantified. Alone, it represents, by far, the most important 'reality test' for e-democracy or I-voting proponents.

With regard to *time management* numerous surveys have already indicated that the Internet clashes with TV. But there is more than this. Time budget conditions not only the mere act of consuming media (I do or do *not* have the time to read, watch TV etc.), but also the type of medium finally chosen. Each media presents a 'ratio' between:

time to consume / Q of embedded information-knowledge / C access costs

As Arterton already noted in his works in the eighties, the proliferation of media channels further increases the comparative edge acquired by certain media and further marginalizes others. From a broadcasters (or campaigner) perspective it

may result more economic to invest in a media mix which excludes the Internet, just because the cost/contact ratio is not interesting enough to mobilise financial resources.

There is also another economic dimension which plays a role for the Political Internet: the attention budget of the addressees of the given online communication.

Why should the potential voter choose for 'political' content when consuming media? What drives the hierarchy of content consumption? Is Politics at the top or bottom of priorities in media consumption?

And even if it was at the top, why choosing the net instead of other more trusted, cheaper, faster, 'compelling' media such as TV, radio, weekly magazines, or newspapers?

Even if recent studies tend show that the time spent on the Internet is greater than the time spent on the television, the Television and the Newspaper have a greater role than the Internet as sources of trusted news^x.

'Attention' – like time – is a scarce resource. The *attention budget* creates (or not) the basic conditions for media consumption. Users/voters may have time, but not enough attention to deal with non-entertainment content online; unless, of course, politics online becomes as entertaining and as compelling as other, competing, knowledge/information objects.

Attention conditions in its own way the choice of media. In this case the $TQ_{i/k}C$ ratio becomes:

Time/Cost/Clarity

In other words, there is a 'confusion factor' which may be higher in certain news media (for example text centric media) and lower in others (multimedia news platforms such as All-News-TV Channels or Rich Content Sites). Information overload^{xi} and boredom increase the importance of the TCC ratio and tend to radicalise (and therefore simplify) the competition between news media.

Aside from media related issues, without a keen interest in politics there is no search for political information online at all, and no any other type of politically relevant action (voting would be the ultimate type of politically relevant action). The question then is: do media (including the internet) participate in political socialization? The answer is clearly yes, even for the Internet, which *could* be considered a likely *co-factor of political socialization* for the generation of those aged 15-18 years old in the mid-nineties.

This said, the question is whether this type of political socialisation online happens once, for a given period of time, or it is a repetitive, on-going, lifelong exercise of reinforcement of one's political convictions.

In case a form of *reinforcement practice* was indeed practised through the Political Internet, a facilitated access to political culture online would be pivotal to the whole process. Let's assume that voters can access the Internet, and are motivated to find political information online: *is it that easy?* Not really.

Either voters have prior and clear knowledge of the existence of a party site online^{xii} or the endeavour could be difficult. This is partly due to the so-called *DNS hijacking*, partly because of the non-unequivocal nature of certain party domains. For example more than 10% of the web sites observed in our empirical research are freely hosted by a third party^{xiii}. In many cases the party address looks like this:

<http://members.aol.com/AlgFis/ribat/a.htm>

Further evidence to this statement comes from the *search patterns* of online users. A WordTracker Top500Report activated between 17.11.2001 and 28.02.2002 shows that none of the following keywords appears to rank anywhere in the 500 most used keywords in the main search engines:

Party, Politics, Republican, Democrat, Elections

Finally, in addition to the so-called 'Linkrot' phenomenon (Nielsen, 1998), current research shows that the effectiveness of search engines is relative: much of the so-called *deep web* remains unavailable to the end user^{xiv}.

If one then tries to see whether the most logical starting point of an internet browsing session (a portal, a search engine) refers somehow to *parties*, one may discover that this happens very rarely. The survey of 82 major portals and directories visited in March 2002, both in the US and in Europe, shows that a minority (23.1%) showed the theme/subject 'politics' on its home page (one only pointed to 'parties', many had as alternative entries 'society', 'government', 'law').

When, finally, the potential voter has reached the site *the very nature of the Web* can further minimise – notably when the content is not cogent – the impact of the Internet as a tool for political communication: (a) on the Web people spend little time on each site, (b) reading web sites is different from deep reading of traditional printed publication, (c) sites are browsed in parallel using two or more open windows on the screen, (d) web sites structure can influence negatively the

viewing experience: too many levels, or a bad management of the space and colour worsen, like in other traditional media, the quality of the overall reading experience

Let's summarize. In order to identify who votes for a given party, one has to engage in a *reduction process*: from the population at large, to those having the legal right to vote, to those who actually get into the voting lists and actually go to vote; to those that make that given political preference.

If we start to analyse how operationally the Internet affects a given vote, one should *reduce* the population at large to those that have a PC, then those that have access to the Internet, then those that find time and attention to look for political information online, then those who find it, then, and this is the key factor, those whose attitude is changed or reinforced by the content seen online.

The very few studies on the actual usage of political sites during regular elections suggest that only a sub-site of the internet population actually visited those sites during the campaign. The average visit duration is between 5 and 10 minutes long^{xv}. The bulk of the visitors was either 25-34 years old (17.45% of the sample for *alгоре2000.com* and 21.87% for *georgewbush.com*) or 35-49 years old (28.13% of the sample for *alгоре2000.com* and 27.76% for *georgewbush.com*).

Traditional media do remain much more relevant if compared to the Political Internet.

This, however, does not tell us what effects do these sites induce on end users.

A taxonomy of the early actors

The preliminary results of our research^{xvi} for the development of a Taxonomy of the Early actors of Political Communication online indicate that most of party web sites work at least according to two main dimensions: *identity reinforcement and service provision*.

Almost in every site there is a reference to the party's history; the party key leaders, anthems, logos, house organs, flags, merchandising objects are displayed as variants of the same identity definition. The programme or platform, pivotal for the definition of the 'party essence', is often 'declined' in a wide range or 'variants' (single document, list of white papers, FAQ, of lists of sections in the web site which deal with specific policy issues).

Almost every site offers some degree of service to the Internet community: from basic (subscription to a party mailing list) to advanced one, like: paying party fees using a secure server; giving access to political speeches or campaign material using streaming audio and video; providing 'the activists package' to support the campaign (the package often includes banners, animated Gifs, electronic copies of the manifestos, campaign brochures etc.); sending complete affiliation; requests

online; giving access to the party's intranet; or providing a mail account with the party domain.

Party web sites around the world are not developed equally. In our taxonomy we distinguish three macro-genres (*Proto-sites*^{xvii}, *Meso-sites* and *Neo-sites*^{xviii}); one for each major development step. Development is essentially conditioned by external factors: funding and leadership to play a major role, so do few external factors, such as competition at national level. Neosites – creative sites with a sophisticated space and colour management -- are a minority.

Interactivity does exist in several alternative degrees: from the basic mail box, to the provision of the entire directory of addresses of the party organisation, to the implementation of chats and for a for party activists.

Therefore, contrary to the core ideas of the promoters of e-democracy, the largest majority of the observed cases shows very poor interactivity solutions (unless we consider an e-mail address to be the best political party web sites can do to create a virtuous circle with their constituencies).

The partial analysis of our research data finds that:

33,9% of the scanned party sites have only a 'mail to webmaster' feature;

3.4% of them allow user to mail to precise people;

2.6 % of them provide a partial or full directory to the party organisation (phone and e-mail address, for example);

8,2% have implemented some sort of 'forms' to mail generic or specific question to the party;

8,2% of the scanned sites have an online forum *in addition* to one of the options above.

This structural content analysis (of sites in English, French and Spanish) suggests that sites are often conceived to talk with people sharing the same political orientation: newcomers are seldom addressed, the opposition is either not mentioned at all or is attacked. This unilateral mode of communication is one of the indicators which separate persuasion (where two parties enter into a transactional process) from propaganda (Jowett, 1996).

Because of this lack of interactivity, the unilateralist nature of this communication mode, most of the party sites online engage in *Digital Propaganda*: they really do not promote exchange, according to the often quoted model of the Greek *agora*, but essentially work – in a very traditional fashion – using a *digital push mode*.

Known success stories?

Contrary to what happens to trendy expressions such e-politics, I-voting, e-democracy, the activities of *specific parties online* make fewer headlines. Even less appears on public media on current political Web ‘success-stories’.

Who does succeed online, then? The key feature for online performance measurement is the analysis of the so-called ‘server log files’, which record the type of traffic generated by the site. Log files are considered highly sensitive information by all webmasters. Very often, political webmasters refuse to publish their results given that their site statistics can be used by the opposition to prove that ‘that party does not meet the public expectations’.

In our research we have found only a minority of political web sites which do publish their statistics online (7.1% of the observed universe). If we analyse their content we notice that political web sites often have a very modest audience, a significant part of which (ranging between 10-20% of the hits received by the server) of unclear origin: a good percentage of the hits comes from outside the given country or from .com .net .org TLDs. However, if we correlate these findings with the structural analysis of web sites, we could formulate several working hypotheses on the real conditions which favour online effectiveness of political web sites:

- the most technically and aesthetically developed sites have greater chances to succeed. If, according to our hypothesis, the Political Web must win the multi-channel competition, only compelling, multi-media, personalised sites can acquire a comparative advantage vis-a-vis the *same* political content available on TV, radio and press;
- sites with a coherent and simple structure have greater chances to succeed since they match the current, widespread Web usage pattern (very short visits);
- sites which benefit from multiple referrals (such a *constellation of friendly sites*) sending traffic *from* local (the provincial site points to the national one) or thematic sites (the youth organisation pointing to the main party site; an ‘event/conference site’ or an ‘issue/policy’ site pointing to the party site etc.);
- sites with *deep content* (lots of internal links and multiple levels generated out of sheer content or through an active online discussion group) tend to capture and retain strong, engaged Internet activists.

Charismatic leaders sites [the ‘Daily Him’ or ‘Daily Her’, to re-use Negroponte’s concept] have – comparatively – greater success online since they often happen to have many of the characters noted above (depth, ‘personal’/multimedia content). This observation fits with the political science contemporary theories that depict

parties and ideologies as declining entities and the individual leader and issue based politics as emerging phenomena.

Original, unique, hard to find content sites definitely outperform others. In the current Internet economics, this type of content has greater value and suffers less from environmental noise, and channel competition.

There are many reasons why Internet users may badly want to access a certain content online. Some of these reasons, such as reconnecting to one's own country and culture, may be laudable: it's the case of the numerous online diasporas^{xix}.

Other reasons may, on the contrary, be *illegal or antagonistic vis-a-vis* the established order in a given country. Anti-regime, insurgency, violent or militant propagandist sites are the eponyms of this model of political information: they are built to serve other 'initiated' users, their content is unique (un-published stories or photos, films and other evidence of massacres, reports from hard to reach battle zones, statements from insurgents or *terrorist* groups), and hard to find elsewhere. The information 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. In other words, the Internet is pivotal to this communication mode (*illegal – sensitive* content to few, initiated users); the Internet, in this communication mode, responds also to *the uses and gratifications* sought by many Web users^{xx}.

In our hypothesis when *illegal sites* also adopt few or all of the techniques that make traditional, formal political actors succeed, they really achieve something they could hardly replicate using other media.

Conclusions

Some proponents of E-democracy view Internet-based political communication as part of a program to reform the way democracy works in many western societies. For these authors, 'Improved democracy' is the result of a reform of campaign contributions, the modification of electoral rules (more proportional or more majority rule according to the context) and new, more efficient ways to express people's choices.

Others, often starting from the same premises, make a further conceptual step and advocate E-democracy or I-voting as the most concrete, effective way to introduce *deliberative forms of direct democracy* (voters decide all major political issues on a regular basis). This type of proponent of *strong e-democracy* (*Citizens Power* as Ted Becker calls it) tends to get inspiration and legitimacy from both Jefferson

(*The will of the people is the only legitimate foundation of any government and to protect its free expression should be our first object*) and Alvin Toffler (*You don't have to be an expert to know what you want*). For these authors, the *discourse of the waves* is instrumental to prove that changes in politics is indeed happening and progress is inevitable.

Sartori labelled this call for deliberative forms of direct democracy, the *exasperation of activism* (in political participation); 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 (1993) reminds that sheer size of contemporary political issues makes it impossible to follow the model of 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; it's simply incapable of *perceiving* itself; it's therefore 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 sense of *direct relationship* between all the members of the demos would simply vanish. At the same time, with this type of direct e-democracy, 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. As Sartori (1993) puts it, we should pray God to preserve us from this *push-button democracy* (or the ‘triumph of the inexperienced’).

This said, media interest in e-democracy shows no sign of declining. During the recent French and American presidential elections, for example, mainstream media, once again intrigued, covered extensively the online exploits of the candidates and the experiments of vote-swapping between Gore's and Nader's supporters (Eudes, 2000). Recent research papers by Foot and Schneider (2002), contest the *normalization hypothesis* (politics on the Internet resembles closely politics offline) and, once again, favorably reviews the US 2000 Elections online experience (Margolis, 2000).

It is clear that there is interest worldwide in favour of discussing the relationship between Internet and politics; both inside and outside scholarly circles. The subject looks appealing for media and political science scholars, for industry and governments both at local and national level. When one scrutinizes the evidence that supports the idea that e-democracy or I-voting are driving the *new politics*, there are maybe a dozen cases (in the US or across Europe) that are worth studying. The scholars that have engaged in critical reviews have concluded that

only the synergy between traditional and modern political media can increase political participation. It's the overall campaign strategy that matters.

Through our research we have understood that hundreds of political party web sites around the world have only basic e-mail to empower *citizens*. This is probably due to the fact that political webcasters consider the act of setting up a web site as a communication end in itself. E-mail alone, however, is far from being capable of delivering the kind of compelling, motivating political participation, sought by e-democracy proponents.

The *Bias of the Web*, the way it works, hinders furthermore the activities of traditional parties online. By using, the same bias, legions of illegal and potentially dangerous groups are making the best use possible of the Political Internet. One of Innis' greatest conceptual contributions was to demonstrate that communication media have historically had an impact on the character of knowledge (the Web, for example, offers greater command over space than over time).

Innis (1999) also suggested that monopolies or oligopolies of knowledge (and power) are built by media 'up to the point that equilibrium is disturbed'. In today's Political Internet the knowledge oligopoly being created, seems to provide a comparative advantage to the antagonistic actors to the established political system than to traditional mass parties.

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Notes

ⁱ « Overall participation in competitive elections across the globe rose steadily between 1945 and 1990. Between 1945-1950 the number of voters turning out to vote at each election represented 61% of the voting age population (i.e. all citizens old enough to vote). That turnout figure rose to 62% in the 1950s, 65% in the 1960s, 67% in the 1970s, and 68% in the 1980s. But in the 1990s, with the influx of a host of competitive elections in newly democratising states, the average for elections held since 1990 has dipped back to 64%. Interestingly the same turnout figures expressed as a percentage of the number of people registered to vote remained more constant throughout the 1940s to 1980s but then dipped more suddenly in the 1990s. In other words, while the participation rate of all eligible voters has dropped only marginally, the drop in the participation rate of those actually registered to vote has been more pronounced » International IDEA, *Voter*

Turnout : a global survey « Turnout over time: Advances and retreats in electoral participation » URL http://www.idea.int/vt/survey/voter_turnout1.cfm

ⁱⁱ The table shows statistics obtained using WebAnalyzer in March 2002. Alexa server ranks sites according to the usage of the “Alexa Bar”, a search add-on product of the company of the same name. For a technical description of this proprietary ranking method consult:

http://pages.alexa.com/prod_serv/traffic_learn_more.html?p=Det_W_t_40_M2

For a larger list of directories consult the list of specialised WebRings

[http://dir.webring.com/rw?d=Government Politics/Politics](http://dir.webring.com/rw?d=Government_Politics/Politics) or

<http://S.webring.com/hub?sid=&ring=europolitics&id=&list>

Other relevant lists – notably covering (charismatic) political leadership – include:

Zarate’s Political Collections <http://www.terra.es/personal2/monolith/>;

WORLDWIDE GUIDE TO WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

<http://www.guide2womenleaders.com/>; Regents of the world <http://www.info-regenten.de/regent/regent-e/index.htm>;

World Statesmen

<http://www.worldstatesmen.org/index.html>; Rulers <http://www.rulers.org/>; States

and regents of the world

<http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Rotunda/2209/index.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Levels in web sites are defined by the number of mouse clicks which are necessary to reach the information

^{iv} The site is conceived as a support to a political science course: it includes pointers to *Area studies; Local & regional British politics; News and journals Constitutions; Other politics websites; Data archives; Political parties Elections; Political platforms Government websites; Political theory; International Relations; Political thought*

^v Some are arguably the most complete of their kind: for example, with regard to *electorally active political parties*, ElectionWorld is the only site which gathers both official election results and the lists of existing (known) political parties online.

^{vi} Beyond parties, the most obvious agents of e-democracy, research should study the submerged part of the political Internet, the *deep political web*: the web of the movements, of the rebel groups, of the anti-regime sites, of the radical or violent groups, of the political diasporas and persecuted minorities.

This part of the political web, notwithstanding the various successive waves of interest for the political Internet, remains entirely out of reach and mostly unknown both to the scholar community and the public at large.

^{vii} « Nobody has figured out what it means exactly, but the concept of electronic democracy – or an electronic town hall – captured the public imagination this year after Ross Perot announced the concept in this abortive presidential campaign » , J. Ubois, *We the people : electronic bulletin boards and the political process* , Midrange systems Oct 13, 1992 Vol 5 N.° 19 Pg. 49

^{viii} *Electronic democracy : hot wires to Washington* The Herald Sun Aug 28 1995 ; E. Schmitt *Congress caught in Tangled Web* , The Palm Beach Post July 10 1996 « No lawmaker is more responsible for pushing Congress into the on-line realm of the World WideWeb and electronic democracy than House Speaker Newt Gingrich.. »

^{ix} Few of the most relevant events in the field of Internet and Politics have been organised without a specific reference to the major Sociological or Political research organisations (ISA and IPSA). This is the case for recent European events such as: Séminaire sur la démocratie électronique, Sénat Français, Paris 1995; modernizing Democracy through the Electronic Media International Conference of the Academy of the Third Millennium <http://www.akademie3000.de> 1997; Political Change for the Information Society, Rome http://europa.eu.int/comm/consumers/policy/developments/e_comm/e_comm02_en.html 1999; Politics & Internet, <http://www.kolumbus.fi/pi99/> Oulu and Tampere 1999; 1er 2e 3e Forum Mondial de la démocratie électronique Issy les Moulineaux France etc.

^x See Gallup's Media Use and Evaluation : Gallup Poll Topics : A – Z – Media Use and Evaluation on. ref

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/indicators/indmedia.asp#RelatedAnalyses> (data 2000 accessed 22.07.2001) ; Polix (IT) Poll

<http://www.polix.it/home/sondaggi/isongdaggiispo/polix/2027.htm>

^{xi} 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/947d1.asp>

The recent PEOPLE & THE PRESS BIENNIAL MEDIA CONSUMPTION SURVEY has also addressed the issue. QUESTION89: Some people say they feel overloaded with information these days, considering all the television news shows, magazines, newspapers, and computer information services. Others say they like having so much information to choose from. How about you...do you feel overloaded, or do you like having so much information available? Results: Overloaded -†26% Like it -†66 Other (vol.) -††6 Don't know/Refused -††2

The phenomenon of Information Overload is becoming an issue also for marketing research companies although recent studies show that experiences Internet users do not suffer from it: *TechNews.com: Information overload not a serious issue* Jun 08 2001: « Experienced Internet users do not generally suffer from information overload, according to a new study. For the study, which was published in the online journal [The Next Big Thing](#), almost 3,000 mostly experienced Internet users were asked how they cope with the current glut of information and types of communication devices. Eighty percent of the respondents said their ability to cope

with information overload was “better than most” or “excellent”. The study found that those who dealt with the most information were most able to cope, while those receiving the least data were the most overwhelmed. » online reference http://www.nua.com/surveys/index.cgi?f=VS&art_id=905356849&rel=true; *ZDNet: Search engines cause ire among Net users* Jan 03 2001: « According to a new survey, poor search engines and information overload are causing web-rage among Internet users. The survey by Roper Starch Worldwide found that on average, users get angry and frustrated after 12 minutes of fruitless searching. For 7% of respondents, it only takes 3 minutes before web-rage strikes » online reference

http://www.nua.com/surveys/index.cgi?f=VS&art_id=905356304&rel=true;

Newsfactor Network: Net users' patience only lasts 12 minutes

« Information overload on the Internet causes users to feel frustrated and stressed, and can even lead to “Internet rage”, according to a new study.

The study from UK firm [WebTop](#) found that 71 percent of British Internet users have suffered from Internet rage at least once. »

Online reference

http://www.nua.com/surveys/index.cgi?f=VS&art_id=905356650&rel=true

^{xii} Notably if the campaign strategy implies that the party or the candidates engages in a process of mutual reinforcement of the messages channelled by each medium (for example the radio ads point to the web site, the press ads point to the web site, the site reproduces the radio and press campaign).

^{xiii} A great number of pages are made available by the internet service provider www.angelfire.com or www.geocities.com later acquired by Yahoo see on.ref., http://pages.yahoo.com/nhp/government__politics/politics/parties_and_groups

^{xiv} *The Deep Web : Surfacing Hidden Value* Bright planet White Paper on.ref.

<http://beta.brightplanet.com/deepcontent/tutorials/DeepWeb/index.asp>; P. Bailey,

N. Craswell, D. Hawking *Dark Matter on the Web* Proceeding of the W3

Conference on.ref. <http://www9.org/final-posters/poster30.html>;

J. Bar-Ilan *Ten days in the life of HotBot and Snap – a case study* . <http://www9.org/final-posters/5/poster5.html>;

The GVU' Tenth WWW User survey (1998) also provides interesting and, albeit not new, still relevant data about the « Problems Using the Web » : 9% of the responses (57,1% of the cases) indicate that « Broken Links » are a major issue, together with « finding new info » (7,1% and 45,4% of the cases) and « find known info » (4,7% and 30% of the cases). On. Ref.

http://www.gvu.gatech.edu/user_surveys/survey-1998-10/graphs/use/q11.htm

^{xv} Only Gore in the week ending October 8 had an audience on n179.000 with n average time spent of 15 minutes ad 27 seconds. Ibidem

http://209.249.142.22/press_releases/pr_001031.htm

^{xvi} The research aim is to describe the nature, the methods and the identifiable achievements of the early actors of web-based political communication . The bulk of the analysis is carried out by scanning the « visible » part of the political Internet (more than 600 party web sites listed by two of the four inventories quoted in this paper). Ethnographic notes have been collected on those sites, and the research results have been collected in a database. The structural elements for a first taxonomy have been defined and applied to what observed so far. The data reported here are relative to two successive explorations of this vast amount of data online. The research will be completed with the structural (software based) analysis of the observed universe.

^{xvii} Proto-sites have poor control over Form and Function – they also provide minimal Interactivity

^{xviii} To an even greater extend than Meso-sites Neo-Sites have a very sophisticated space management , same applief for Color Management ; they often use sound and movement (through animated Gifs, Java ; Shockwave/Flash, QuickTime and other multimedia solutions). It's in Neo-Sites that one can find the greatest amount of Innovation and creativity : Neo-Sites are often conceived with Trans-media approach : they try to merge in a single platform the best that press, radio and TV can offer in terms of content management.

^{xix} Several sites have played or still play the role of hub for numerous virtual communities online: <http://www.ethioworld.com> (Ethiopian diaspora) <http://www.armeniadiaspora.com/> (Armenian Diaspora) <http://diaspora-net.org/> (American-Greek, Canadian-Greek communities diaspora) <http://news.asmarino.com/> (Eritrean diaspora) <http://www.kurdistan.org/> (Kurdish Diaspora) <http://www.afghanradio.com/> (Afghan Diaspora). See also J. W. Anderson *Cybernauts of the Arab Diaspora: Electronic Mediation in Transnational Cultural Identities* <http://www.bsos.umd.edu/CSS97/papers/anderson.html>; K. Altintas, F. Alimoglu, M. Batu Altan, K. Cagiltay, K. Seitvelyev, *e-TATARS: Virtual Community Of The Crimean Tatar Diaspora* <http://www.iccrimea.org/scholarly/e-tatars.html>; D. Mezzana *Internet/The strength of the online bonds: Networking, themes, services, politics and culture* http://www.africansocieties.org/eng_giugno2002/eng_rubricadiasporaonline.htm; (Map) Virtual Jerusalem – Jewish Communities of the World <http://www.wjc.org.il/wjcbook/chartmap.htm>; I. Williams *Downloading Heritage: Vietnamese Diaspora Online* <http://cms.mit.edu/conf/mit2/Abstracts/IWilliams.pdf>; M. Georgiou *Diasporic Communities On-Line: A Bottom Up Experience of Transnationalism* – Paper to be Published in the journal *Hommes et Migrations*, Oct. 2002 London School of Economics www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/Media/EMTEL/Minorities/papers/hommesmigrations.doc; A. K. Sahoo, *From Diaspora to Transnational Networks: A Comparative Study of*

Gujarati, Punjabi and Telugu Diaspora

<http://www.geocities.com/husociology/trans.htm>

^{xx} Social escapism, transaction-based security and privacy, information gathering, non-transactional privacy concerns. See P. Korgaonkar, L. Wolin *A multivariate Analysis of Web usage* in *Journal of Advertising Research* 1999 Vol . 39 (March, April) 53-68