Online Campaigning

BY STEPHEN COLEMAN

PORTENTOUSLY heralded as the UK's 'first internet election', the online campaign of 2001 inspired heady expectations and resulted in prevalent disappointment. In fact, even the claim to be first was somewhat hyperbolic: though in 1992 the UK had a general election with no websites, viral email campaigns, or text messages, the 1997 election had been labelled as 'the first internet election', even though only 2% of the UK population then had home access to the internet. In fact, the two great innovations of 1997 were the Labour Party's rapid rebuttal capacity, thanks to its £250,000 Excalibur computer programme, and the emergence of telephone canvassing. The internet had little impact on the 1997 campaign, when it was still thought by many to be an ephemeral fad.

By 2001 the internet had come of age. Most major businesses in the UK were online; over one-third of the public had internet access at home, with millions more online through workplaces, schools or libraries; the government had set an ambitious target of delivering all of its services online by 2005; the e-prefix had become ubiquitous and it was inconceivable that an election could take place without an online dimension.

But what was the online dimension to be? 2001 witnessed a new medium in search of a purpose, not unlike television in the UK election of 1959. This search for a pivotal electoral role for the internet resulted in the emergence of four rather different types of online activity. Firstly, there was e-marketing of party policies and candidates, essentially little more than e-commerce applied to politics. Secondly, there were new online resources available for voters, including websites for vote swapping, poking fun at politicians, and debating the issues. Thirdly, some of the traditional news media moved online to provide a range of accessible, personalised information that had not been available to voters in previous elections. And fourthly—though this approach was mainly conspicuous by its absence—there were those who regarded the interactivity of the internet as a setting for a new, more participatory style of politics. Each of these activities and aspirations need to be evaluated separately if sense is to be made of the impact and potential of the internet in 2001 and beyond.

The internet as a channel for marketing

The value of the internet to political parties lies in its scope for unmediated communication with the electorate. The parties have grown to distrust the opportunities offered to them via the selective and interpretive filter of television, radio and the press. In an age of marketing, broadcasting represents a crude instrument for the targeted dissemination of messages. The capacity of the web and email to address voters directly with personalised messages is attractive.

How well did the parties use the web? All major parties had websites with a range of features, many of which offered voters access to information that could not have been freely or conveniently found in previous elections. For example, the party manifestos were free to download, as were policy statements, speech transcripts and archives of party election broadcasts.

Party websites fulfilled several different functions during the campaign: to organise the efforts of their members; to turn casual supporters into active campaigners or members; and to turn casual browsers into supporters.

Members were targeted via the password-protected extranets that existed within the party sites; these were spaces for virtual organisation and morale boosting. The Labour Party extranet allowed activists to email campaign experiences for others to share; the Conservative extranet provided graphics for candidates to download on to their own sites. The parties also used text messaging and mobile telephony as a means of instant internal organisation.

Inventive efforts were made to pull in casual supporters. The parties still have relatively small email databases (nothing like the million addresses now owned by the US Republicans) and are wary of sending unsolicited emails (known as spams) to hostile recipients. Labour was most ambitious in its emailing, sending out 32 daily e-bulletins, 12 emails to people who signed up on specific policy issues such as health or education, weekly emails to younger voters and an email message from Tony Blair to all of the 35,000 addresses on its records. The parties also sent text messages to mobile phones and PDA bulletins. Labour sent four mass-text messages, including one to an estimated 100,000 young voters, transmitted at 10.45pm on the Friday before polling day, urging them to vote Labour to extend the licensing hours.

The parties appealed to undecided voters via the web, offering a number of creative ways to connect with them. The Liberal Democrats' database of candidates' biographies, linking to each of their individual websites, pointed to the decentralised nature of their campaign, in contradistinction to Labour's bare-boned alphabetical list of candidates with no links to their sites. The Conservatives' *My Manifesto* feature enabled visitors to their website to fill in an online form and then see a personalised version of the Conservative manifesto; although hardly

rocket science in its application, this was a sure sign of things to come in future e-campaigning. Labour's interactive *Mortage Calculator* offered similarly personalised information, though the site was rather hazy about the basis for the calculations. Another Labour web feature, involving the creation of a massive database, enabled visitors to state their constituency to find out about a range of benefits gained thanks to the Labour government. Labour also targeted the youth vote via its *ruup4it* website: a venture that smacked more of condescension than connection.

Overall, the parties failed to exploit the interactivity of the internet: online meeting places they were not. This was understandable: letting potential opponents loose on online bulletin boards is a high-risk activity and political marketing is about winning votes not chatting with the enemy. All the major party websites invited visitors to send in email questions, but not all were answered; questions that were in line with party policy were more likely to receive a response than those that were not.[1]

Turning to the candidates' websites, some had them, few knew what to do with them, and most added little to the campaigns. Candidates and local parties have little time or money to spend on web strategies. The Labour Party provided its candidates with an off-the-shelf web template, the web-in-a-box, which met with much criticism. A study by the Hansard Society's e-democracy programme found that candidates were more likely to state their marital status than their views on the Euro and more likely to state their age than their views on hunting with hounds. Jackie Ballard in Taunton used her site to express her opposition to blood sports and this may have helped to cost her the election — so, perhaps sticking to bland biographical details makes more sense. A few candidate sites were broad and inventive, notably those in marginal constituencies, such as Ed Davey in Kingston and Surbiton (www.eddavey.org.uk) and Howard Dawber in Cheadle (www. cheadlelabour.org.uk). Few candidates' sites made use of interactive features; they were essentially electronic brochures. Some candidates moved from pull to push technology and ran email campaigns; these were effective — localised, personalised, and more economical than delivering leaflets.

There was no single database of candidates' sites, so it is not easy to be sure how many had them; one in five would be a generous estimate. Gibson and Ward's research suggests that the more marginal a constituency, the more likely it was for the incumbent and main challenger to have websites.[2] Smaller parties saw their websites as a way of levelling the campaign playing-field, including the Green Party (www.vote green.org.uk), the UK Independence Party (www.ukip.org), and the Socialist Alliance (www.socialistalliance.net). There is an interesting debate about whether online campaigning offers new opportunities for smaller, less resourced groups to mobilise support or whether the web

will inevitably become normalised as part of the traditional media-party hegemony.[3] Evidence from this election does not suggest that much new mobilisation was taking place — although worrying stories about the use of the internet by the extreme right in Oldham and Burnley should give pause for thought.

Although there were no real signs of smaller parties gaining significantly from their web presence, a number of sectional interest groups used the internet in ways that suggest interesting opportunities for the future. Sites ranging from the Asian zindagee.co.uk to the Muslim votesmart.org.uk, the Christian makethecrosscount.com and the gay-vote.co.uk were attempts to customise the campaign for specific groups of voters. Other sites sought to raise campaign issues up the agenda; these included the National Union of Teachers' education-election.com, vAdvocacy Online's Age Concern site (www.advocacyonline.net. learn_say.jsp) and oneworldnet's *Vote For Me* site, which sought to raise the profile of international development issues in the election.

New resources for voters

The most inventive use of the web during the 2001 campaign were not the party or candidates' sites, but the sites presenting cartoons, lampoons, games and jests. These were irreverent manifestations of voter disenchantment with politicians and their styles. Many of them were genuinely funny; even those that were not were widely distributed and commented upon, particularly by young internet users. As soon as a new one appeared vast numbers of messages circulated via an email bush network. The most frequent theme of the humour sites was the 'Prescott punch': there were sites where one could punch a politician, be punched, make politicians dance, put politicians in a blender and create anagrams of their names. On the face of it, none of this had much to do with electoral politics — or, at least, it might not have done had over 40% of the electorate decided not to vote. As it was, these sites were the best clue to the look and feel of apathy and disaffection, especially among younger voters. They were primarily anti-Tory, but not pro-Labour; unsophisticated but decidedly not gullible; frustrated by party politics but not apolitical. In *post mortems* of the 2001 turnout disaster these websites should not be overlooked.

Tactical voting websites sprang up in 2001 as a do-it-yourself version of proportional representation. These sites offered voters a chance to swap their votes (in fact, they could only swap their voting intentions), so that a Labour supporter in a Lib–Con constituency could agree to vote Liberal Democrat, as long as a Liberal Democrat supporter in a Lab–Con constituency agreed to vote Labour. In reality, their aim was to unite the centre-left vote to defeat the Tories. Tactical voting has long existed in British elections, but only via the web has it become convenient for voters in different parts of the country to negotiate vote swaps. The tacticalvoter.net website claimed to receive 200,000 visits

and 8,153 vote-swap pledges during the course of the campaign. In two seats, Cheadle and Dorset South, the number of pledges exceeded the winning majority, suggesting that, if those making pledges voted as they said they would, the site may have had an impact on the results.

New routes to information

Over the past forty years people have come to expect most of their encounters with politicians to be mediated by television and the press. The internet offers a possibility of providing more direct public access to information. In the 1997 election an independent company, Online Magic, set up the GE97 website which became the leading online provider of election news. An independent body, UK Citizens Online Democracy (UKCOD) attempted to generate non-partisan online debate. In 2001, online election information and communication was dominated by media organisations with existing offline reputations. Interestingly, the tabloid press refrained from making much of a splash online. The most impressive efforts were made by BBC News Online, the *Guardian* and Channel Four's 'alternative' election site. The *Daily Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, *The Times* and *Independent* all produced information-rich sites, but provided few interactive opportunities.

BBC News Online put enormous effort into creating a website that was rich in content, easy to navigate and distinctly a BBC product. There were half-a-million total page views per day throughout the campaign for BBC News Online's *Vote 2001* site, with 10.76 million page views on 7 and 8 June, exceeding the previous record set by the 2000 US presidential election. People go to the web for breaking news (such as election results) and personalised information (such as their constituency results). The *Guardian's Election 2001* saw a similar surge in traffic on election night and the day after.

But online information is about more than headline news. The web can also provide depth and a variety of perspectives, making it a richer information source than others. BBC News Online provided detailed accounts of the main policy issues and the parties' perspectives on them; a guide to marginal constituencies; analyses of opinion polls as they were released; an 'online 1000' panel who were surveyed on various issues throughout the campaign; a 'persuade me to vote' feature in which the public tried to urge intended non-voters to participate in the election; a 'virtual vote' feature, allowing users to play with their own online swingometer; an archive of BBC election coverage since 1945; guides to the electoral system and the local elections; a link to the *Newsround* site and an 'If U were Prime Minister' feature in which several thousand pre-voters stated their political policies; regular webcasts with leading politicians; and several online discussion fora. Moreover, all the main news and current affairs programmes from radio and television were available live or recorded via RealAudio. Nothing in the

US election of 2000 came close to BBC News Online's range and depth of information provision.

The *Guardian's Election 2001* site, launched just in time for an expected 3 May election, included a cutting edge 'Aristotle' search engine that could answer a range of questions, such as the names of all candidates who were Oxbridge educated, married, or from Scotland; a daily email newsletter which was sent to 3,000 people; downloadable election posters from past and present; a fictional candidate's campaign diary; and a multi-topic discussion forum. The Channel 4 website targeted the young and disaffected.

As well as the sites run by established offline media, a few wholly online projects made their impact on the 2001 campaign. Yougov.com ran impressive online polls, under the direction of Peter Kellner, and claimed the prize for being more accurate in its prediction of the election result than any other pollster. The size of Yougov's samples and its capacity to conduct serial polls makes it an important player in the polling world. Epolitix.net sent out thrice-daily emails with latest election news, allowing lay political geeks almost the same access to the news wire as professional journalists. Voxpolitics.com was set up by a group of e-enthusiasts who provided a valuable running commentary on the role of the internet in the election. Having learned the lesson of the ignominious failure of the highly capitalised 'political portal' sites in the 2000 US election, there were no signs in the UK election of investors seeking to make fortunes out of online information provision. The lesson for the UK seemed to be that people wanted direct access to information, but not the disintermediation that was much heralded by early internet enthusiasts; the guidance and interpretation of trusted mediators is still needed in the world of online information.

The feedback path inherent to digital media breaks down traditional divisions between information and communication. The election-news websites not only provided information bonuses for those who wanted them, but also opened up new channels for public discussion. Study of more than two thousand messages to online election discussions suggests that far from facilitating an inclusive, deliberative public dialogue, these online discussions were dominated by a small minority of regular participants who were overwhelmingly male, and who rarely contributed fact-based information or experiential testimonies.[4]

The internet as politics

Commentators were remarkably judgmental about the role of the internet in the 2001 election, criticising it both for promising too much and changing too little. It was almost as if the critics really believed that the internet possessed some kind of mysterious power to transform the communication of politics, but had teased them with its understated performance. In fact, there is only so much that can ever be expected of an information-communication medium; after all, even the mighty

medium of television failed to make a dull election lively or to push up ratings. The internet, as a medium, could not reasonably be expected to affect very much, so could not justifiably be blamed for failing.

But there is another way of seeing the internet's relationship to democratic politics. One could argue that the interactivity of the net offers hope for a new kind of politics that is more inclusive, discursive and representative. One could go beyond the idea of the internet as a communicator of old politics to that of the internet as a symbol of a different kind of democratic representation. Given the rhetorical heat that surrounds the internet, it was surprising that no major party addressed the democratic potential of the internet at a policy level — except for the Liberal Democrats, whose manifesto had a passing reference to electronic consultations. Given Labour's stated interest in reconnecting with citizens, and the prevalent fear of voter apathy throughout the campaign, there was surely scope for exploring ways of using e-democracy as an instrument within democratic governance. Instead, the main policy concern about the internet came to the fore in week two of the campaign, when the Home Secretary announced stronger legislation to deal with child pornography on the internet. Policy debates about the internet have tended to emphasise its negative and threatening aspects, which is hardly likely to inspire public confidence in the new medium as a democratising force.

The public reaction

Only a minority of the UK public currently have home access to the internet. This minority is predominantly richer, better educated and younger than the majority who are not yet online.

A MORI poll, conducted for the Hansard Society, conducted between 21–26 June 2001, based on a representative sample of 1,999 British adults, found that one-third of respondents used the internet and email at home; 69% had mobile phones; 32% used text messaging; and 13% used digital TV to access interactive services. Of those respondents with access to the internet and email, 18% used the technology for some purpose connected with the election campaign. This rose to one-quarter among under 35-year-olds.

One in ten of those with access to the internet and/or email visited a media website, such as BBC Online, to read about the election. Men were twice as likely as women to do this. One in twenty sent or received emails about the election, with more women doing this than men. About 4% of respondents with internet access visited websites or exchanged emails to share jokes or play games relating to the election. Interestingly, online humour sites, which one might have expected to attract the wholly disaffected, attracted mainly voters (6%) rather than non-voters (1%.)

What information was the online public seeking? More than one in ten of respondents with internet/email access went online to find out

more about the parties' policies, a figure which rose to one in five (21%) for 18–24-year-olds. For the younger generation, who are the most turned off by politics, the internet is already becoming *the* trusted source for political information. Almost one in ten went online to find out about the candidates in their constituency, suggesting that candidates without a web presence could be negatively affected. Three per cent said that they went online to find out how to vote tactically. Most interestingly, those who went to tactical voting sites were distributed equally across the three main parties, rather than being concentrated among Liberal Democrat and Labour voters.

Did the internet or email influence how people voted? This is a notoriously difficult question to answer, because voters are motivated by many information sources, and do not necessarily know what they are. We await further analysis based on the British Election Study survey and related experimental research. Overall, only 1% of respondents with internet/email access in the MORI survey claimed that it was a 'very' important influence. Nevertheless, 6% said that it was 'very or fairly' important, this proportion rising to 17% among 18–24-year-olds. The remainder of the public (77%) said it was 'not very/not at all' important.

The main message from the MORI poll is that the internet's role was probably peripheral, but much more significant within the youngest generation; these, of course, are the trendsetters for the future. It would have been useful to compare these poll findings with actual weblogs for the main party and candidates' sites, but the party webmasters have been insistent about the confidentiality of their user statistics, partly to keep them from their political rivals and partly because they are worried that too few people went to their sites. Tim Collins, the Conservative Party vice-chairman, said after the election that he considered his party's web campaign to have been too costly and not worth the money in comparison with other campaign activities.

Where to next?

2001 was for the internet what 1959 had been for television: both were elections in which a new medium found its way on to the political stage and was tested. Just as in 1959 television producers were not sure what would work, and by 1964 both the parties and the broadcasters began to understand the potential of televised politics, so the 2001 online campaign can be seen as something of a dress rehearsal for bigger things to come. Three kinds of development will shape the future role of the internet in UK politics: technological, political and cultural.

As internet and broadband connections increase, online activity will become less rooted in personal computers and will move to other digital platforms. Digital TV has the potential to bring internet access into poorer households and into the traditional domestic setting for informa-

tion consumption. If, as the government has stated, the next general election is going to be the last one before analogue switch-off, the election after that (2009/10) will be the first election in which digital interactivity is virtually universal. This leaves less than a decade for the parties and information-providers to work out how political communication will look in a post-analogue, post-broadcast age.

The internet will be tested politically before it develops as a technology. If there is a referendum about the Euro within the next two or three years the information battle will be fought out partly online, especially for the younger generation who look to the web for trusted information. The 2001 election was not a tight race; a referendum on the Euro could be the vigorous test of online information provision and discussion facilitation that could make the internet's political reputation.

But perhaps the most important factor to shape the future of online politics will be political culture. Traditionally amorphous and slow-changing, political culture in the UK is ripe for radical change. The gap between citizens' interest in political issues and their distaste for party politics calls for sophisticated analysis. At least part of the explanation will be found to lie in the anachronistic nature of political communication. Channel 4 has succeeded, against all odds, in rebranding cricket as an exciting sport, but still viewers find the broadcasting of Parliament dull, impenetrable and formulaic; millions of young people vote on who should be in the *Big Brother* house, but not on who should be in the House of Commons. Citizens increasingly shop, bank, learn and chat by email and the web, but still less than a fifth of MPs in the 1997–2001 Parliament had a website, and only half had publicly available email addresses.[5] The project of adapting British democracy so that it relates to the public in the information age could mark the real political coming of age for the internet.

As a simple tool for political marketing, the internet is unlikely to have a significant influence on British politics, although it will continue to be a resource for parties to make unmediated appeals to target voters. As an integral part of the reinvention of democratic representation, linked to agendas for e-government, online parliamentary committee hearings, and trusted spaces for public deliberation (a civic commons in cyberspace),[6] the internet might be the instrument of reconnection and engagement that could bring new vigour to the atrophying British democratic process.

1   See S. Coleman (ed.), *2001: A Cyberspace Odyssey*, Hansard Society, London, 2001, p. 18.

2   R.K. Gibson and S.J. Ward, 'Open All Hours? Political Parties and Online Technologies', unpublished paper for IPPR conference, 20 June 2001, pp. 39–45.

3   For an introduction to this debate, see R.K. Gibson and S.J. Ward, 'UK Political Parties and the Internet: Politics as Usual in the New Media', 3 *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 3, 14–38 and J. Roper, 'New Zealand Political Parties On Line: The World Wide Web as a Tool for Democracy or for Political Marketing?' in C. Toulouse and C. Luke, *The Politics of Cyberspace*, Routledge, 1999.

4 S. Coleman, 'Was There an Online Public Dialogue?', *2001: A Cyberspace Odyssey*, Hansard Society, London, 2001, pp. 39–45.
5 D. Walker, 'Why the General Election of 2001 is Not Going to be Held Online', *Business*, May 2001, pp. 24–9.
6 J.G. Blumler and S. Coleman, *Realising Democracy Online: A Civic Commons in Cyberspace*, IPPR/Citizens Online, 2001.