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Click for Democracy

Author(s): Stephen Coleman

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The internet has changed the way people shop, learn, receive news and prepare to travel. It would be surprising if it did not have an impact upon the way we conduct elections. This impact will be overstated, as is so often the case in the hyperbolic world of the dot coms, but there can be little doubt that politics will adapt to online communication, as it once did to print and then broadcasting. So, what changes can we expect?

Professor Stephen Coleman is Director, Hansard e-democracy programme.

THE INTERNET IS ANARCHISTIC; elections are highly regulated. How can the strict rules governing democratic elections be applied on the unregulated net? In most democracies, candidates and parties are required to account for campaign expenditure. But how much does it cost to send an email, run a website or acquire a database? What is the cost of a link from a supporter website to an official campaign site?

What happens if a website is set up which appears to be in the name of a candidate, but actually exists to attack that candidate? There were dozens of these in last year's US election. What protection do candidates have against online defamation – particularly if it comes from outside their national jurisdiction? Net politics will present new problems of regulation which few governments have begun to tackle.

For the past half century most people have received election news via their TV screens, largely from licensed, trusted channels, like the

BBC. The plethora of online sources for election coverage serve a fragmented public which seeks individualised, consumerist information rather than the broader canvass of traditional journalism.

According to the Pew Centre's recent survey on news consumption, one in five Americans receive their news directly from the internet at least once a week – an increase of over three hundred percent since 1996. For example, at the time of the October 1997 stock market crash a fifth of Americans aged between eighteen and fifty followed the unfolding story on the internet. This trend – known as disintermediation – cuts out the editorialising middleman and allows people to go direct the information that they want.

Political parties like this idea: the possibility of communicating directly with citizens, without the interpretive or distorting filter of the media is appealing. But candidate and party websites at the moment tend to look like online versions of leaflets and brochures – dull and unimaginative. Few people would choose to go to these for their basic information rather than a trusted media interpreter.

The web allows parties to run not one website as their shop window, but many, appealing to different target groups: pensioners for Labour, farmers for the Conservatives, teachers for the Liberal Democrats and so on. The ultimate focus of online politics will be personalised messages, either by email or individually targetted ads appearing as users travel the web. In the US election one company purchased tracking data on millions of net users and was able to send them customised messages on behalf of client candidates. Sectional websites, addressing women, ethnic minorities, gays or youth, will also become popular.

Opinion polling will move increasingly onto the net. Online polling is cheaper and allows pollsters to return to participants with further questions. Will voting itself become a net event? Not for quite a while. Many countries have set up commissions to look at the benefits and requirements and have concluded that online voting from home is not yet safe.

The main barriers to overcome are authentication of voters, security of voting software, voter privacy and universal access to the net. Estonia is preparing to be the first country to vote online, in its 2003 election. But, despite the futuristic visions of some e-thinkers, voting online is not likely to replace elected representatives with perpetual one-click plebiscites.

A SPACE TO TALK

The greatest potential value of the net to elections – indeed, to democracy in general – is its capacity for two-way communication. Political communication has tended to be a one-way conversation, with orators propagandising and citizens clapping, booing or taking their votes elsewhere.

Online politics allows the elector to talk back – to candidates, to each other, in local or interest-based communities, and globally. In the Institute for Public Policy Research/Citizens Online report, Realising Democracy Online, written jointly with Jay Blumler, we call for protected public spaces on the net – civic commons – reserved for open democratic discussion. Election campaigners who really use this new medium will not speak at voters, but with them. The Hansard Society's online policy consultations (www.democracyforum.org.uk), run in collaboration with committees in the UK Parliament, have shown how this can be done.

BEYOND THE NET

The impact of new information and communication technologies on the electoral process will not be confined to the net as we know it. At the moment, the internet is text-based. The next generation of broadband internet technology will be multimedia, with voice talk and video becoming as important as text.

Digital television will provide people with links to the net – albeit selectively – and email capacity. In some countries net access via digital television might become more popular than using personal computers. Will the parties seek to offer policy menus on digital television, so that instead of watching tedious party election broadcasts, voters can select the subject areas they want to know about?

Mobile phones are the most ubiquitous of the new technologies, with text messaging a veritable craze with young people. Campaigners will be looking to communicate with first-time voters via text messages and phone polling is to sure to take off.

A NEW KIND OF POLITICS?

In the e-world, always beware of the hype. Dot com rhetoric is rarely sober. Claims are being made that e-politics will fundamentally transform the nature of power. This is to be doubted. But it will transform the ways in which that power is communicated.

Specifically, in the e-world the gap between representatives and the represented will close, with more information directly available online, more opportunities to feed into the policy process, more inventive interactivity in selling candidates and policies and more chances for the public to hear itself speak.

The speed at which such transformation occurs is not technologically determined. A lot depends on the take-up of the new media by citizens and popular readiness for a two-way style of political discussion. In an age where there are global signs of turning away from voting, supporting parties and respecting institutions of democratic governance, there is a huge political impetus to be innovative, inclusive and invigorating. **WT**

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David Hine

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