Informing, engaging, mobilizing or interacting: Searching for a European model of web campaigning

Darren G Lilleker
Bournemouth University, UK

Karolina Koc-Michalska
CEVIPOF, Sciences-Po, France

Eva Johanna Schweitzer
University of Mainz, Germany

Michal Jacunski
University of Wroclaw, Poland

Nigel Jackson
University of Plymouth, UK

Thierry Vedel
CEVIPOF, Sciences-Po, France

Abstract

This study presents data from content analyses of the websites of all parties that stood in the 2009 European parliamentary elections in France, Germany, Great Britain and Poland. It cross-nationally examines the main functions of the websites, the adoption of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 features, and the political and cultural factors that determine parties' online communication.

Corresponding author:
Darren G Lilleker, The Media School, Bournemouth University, Fern Barrow, Poole, BH12 5BB, UK.
Email: dlilleker@bournemouth.ac.uk

The findings show that while the main website function varies across countries, Web 1.0 is still the dominant mode of campaigning. Moreover, offline inequalities within and between nations determine differences in parties' individual online strategies: specifically, major parties in states with long histories of democracy and EU membership lead the way and offer more interactive and innovative modes of campaigning. On the other hand, minor parties, particularly in Poland, remain in a more Web 1.0, information-heavy mode of communication. This supports the so-called normalization thesis on both the meso and the macro level.

Introduction

This article is derived from the Comparative European New Media and Elections Project (CENMEP).[1] The overall aim of this project was to understand the role the Internet plays within election contests across the European Union (EU). The article focuses on four nations: Great Britain,[2] France, Germany and Poland. The four nations enjoy a relatively large representation in the European Parliament (EP) (between 50 and 99 seats) and have a wide spectrum of 97 parties involved in the elections. However, in many respects these countries differ from one another in the field of political and party systems, voting customs, attitudes towards the EU and the development of the Internet infrastructure, thus we are able to present a rich analysis of the use of new media across a range of national, political and institutional contexts.

Our data represent the findings of a content analysis of the websites of all parties standing for election in 2009 in all four nations. The analysis focuses upon three dimensions. The first assesses the embeddedness of Web 2.0 features. The integration of sophisticated tools and new applications associated with Web 2.0 reached the main-stream on the World Wide Web in 2007/8 and our aim is to examine cross-nationally whether that also holds for political parties. The second dimension categorizes features according to whether they inform; are engaging; aim at mobilizing supporters; allow interaction; or simply demonstrate technical sophistication. Third, we focus on examining the structural and functional determinants that influence the use of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 elements. We assess the extent to which nation-specific differences, size of parties and their embeddedness within political systems, their ideology and political stance towards the EU have any impact upon their use of Internet technologies.

Conceptual framework

Much discussion regarding the impact of new communication technologies has focused on the potential to change existing power relationships within society and the body politic. Early optimists suggested that the greater use of the Internet by individual citizens would 'level the playing field' (Bimber, 1998; Rheingold, 1993). This equalization hypothesis implied that existing power elites' dominance was upheld by their greater access to the traditional media, but that the Internet allowed other political actors to

bypass the media and speak to voters directly. Initially, the equalization hypothesis suggested that smaller political parties were more likely to have an Internet presence, however research has increasingly focused not just on whether smaller political parties have a website, but more importantly how they use them. In particular, whether smaller political parties were more likely to utilize the interactive elements of Web 2.0 applications (Chen, 2010; Jackson and Lilleker, 2009) as these can compensate for the low attention paid to them by mass media.

The normalization hypothesis, however, suggests that the use of any technology within politics merely reflects existing power relationships (Bellamy and Raab, 1999), and so political power relations online represent 'politics as usual' (Margolis and Resnick, 2000). This thesis suggests that existing electoral inequalities are reinforced, not undermined, by the Internet (D'Alessio, 1997; Davis, 1999). The access larger political parties have to the traditional media offline drive more traffic to their online presences, while their greater resources mean that websites will be more innovative, using Web 2.0, and be more engaging and interactive.

Evidence for normalization derives from a range of studies. Research from Germany in national (Schweitzer, 2008) and EP elections (Schweitzer, 2009), demonstrated the huge gap between parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties. Similar patterns were observed during the 2007 French presidential elections where a visible gap was evidenced between major and minor candidates in their general online performance (Vedel and Koc-Michalska, 2009). While some evidence for equalization has been found in studies of the UK (Gibson and Ward, 1999), largely a middle ground between these two approaches has emerged. The ebb and flow thesis suggests that innovations can be found across the websites of all parties independent of size. For example, in the UK EP contest in 1999 smaller parties used the Internet to bypass the mass media and their websites were as sophisticated as those of larger parties (Gibson and Ward, 2000b); equally in 2005 smaller parties were most likely to use the Internet for mobilizing supporters (Jackson, 2006) and were found to be more likely to explore the potential of Web 2.0 applications (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009).

However, despite the differences, we would expect that parties with larger levels of representation in national parliaments and with experience of competing nationally and in EP contests offer the most innovative web presences. They should be particularly motivated given the opportunities for impact within the context of European parliamentary elections, where turnout is lower and so small numbers of voters can have a significant effect on the result. However, we may find evidence of 'ebb and flow' in terms of the adoption of specific online features, in particular those classified as Web 2.0. This approach requires a more subtle understanding of how political actors use the Internet, taking into account what opportunities it provides compared with other political communication channels. We therefore test the normalization thesis with a framework that assesses the use of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 features in five functional groups, i.e. information, interaction, engagement, mobilization and technical sophistication. The study compares the web performances in these dimensions (1) between major and minor parties *in* each country (meso level) and (2) between major and minor parties *across* the four countries (macro level).

Information

Researchers have consistently considered whether a political actors' online presence is merely content-led, or also seeks to develop longer-term relationships (Gibson and Ward, 2000a; Rainie and Horrigan, 2007). Political websites have been criticized for being one-way communication channels, or 'virtual billboards' (Sadow and James, 1999), designed to inform and persuade visitors to their sites. Informing may be seen as a traditional key function of political websites that is consistent with the Web 1.0 era (de Landtsheer et al., 1999; Coleman and Ward, 2005; Gibson and Ward, 2000b; Jackson, 2008; Lusoli and Ward, 2005). However, parties still need to provide a range of informational items to site visitors which can aid voter choices (Tolbert and McNeal, 2003). Thus we would not expect to find a reduction in the amount of information presented, but that information would be delivered using more engaging formats than the plain text that has been common across political sites. The philosophical perspective which underpins Web 2.0 suggests that information cannot simply be presented in a textual format with read options alone and political communication must adhere to trends in design and user behaviour (Chadwick, 2009).

Engagement

Historically, engagement and interactivity have been conflated (de Landtsheer et al., 1999), but Web 2.0 introduces significant differences in our understanding of the terms. Features which encourage visitors to engage with the site allow a range of interactions including viewing content, following links and also sharing and promoting links and material via Delicious or Facebook. Such features, it is suggested, provide a more involving experience as well as allowing visitors a degree of ownership over the campaign (Harfoush, 2009) and are labelled interactivity-as-product (Stromer-Galley, 2004), allowing interaction with the site through mouse-clicks (Bucy, 2004). Engagement can be linked to the notion of stickiness (Jackson, 2003), and includes features that make a site experientially stimulating, attractive and worth revisiting. Websites have increasingly become technologically advanced to make them more engaging to their visitors (e.g. Schweitzer, 2008). Various audiovisual elements, such as videos, pictures, sounds and music, graphics and animation can be offered to make information more entertaining, though these can also act as a distraction from political content (Sundar et al., 2003).

Mobilization

Political engagement online can develop into offline support and activism (for an overview see Park and Perry, 2008). Parties increasingly attempt to crowdsource online by attempting to mobilize visitors via their website. Mobilization tools allow visitors to donate money, join the party, register as a supporter and volunteer as activists. These centre on the generation of resources (Jackson, 2006) and form a crucial part in the process of parties' 'get out the vote' strategies. In the wake of Obama's success in the

US 2008 presidential contest, it would be expected that mobilization would be a key function of party websites during elections. We expect websites will be used to mobilize supporters into active support online or offline, though this may be mediated by party size, experience and ideology.

Interactivity

Interactivity is a contested concept, but O'Reilly's (2005) view of an 'architecture of participation' is placed at the core of Web 2.0 applications. As noted by Bimber and Davis (2003), interactivity requires information flowing in multiple directions, hence we seek to assess the extent to which two-way communication is potentiated. Rafaeli (1988) suggests that interaction requires participants to converse in a linear and logical way, and we suggest that this is a means of assessing online interactivity. This reinforces the distinction made by Stromer-Galley (2004) between interactivity-as-product, inter-action with the site and interactivity-as-process which mirrors conversation. We thus define interactive features as those which allow visitors to interact in some way with the host or other visitors.

In an era of Web 1.0 applications there was limited evidence of interactivity during election campaigns (Coleman and Ward, 2005; Gibson and Ward, 2000b; Lusoli and Ward, 2005; Schweitzer, 2008). Theoretically, the architecture of participation at the heart of Web 2.0 encourages a richer experience for the visitor and potentiates conversation between the host and visitor, and between visitors, so that ideas and opinions can be directly discussed through blogs, forums and social networking sites (SNS). We expect that interactivity will be provided with the site as a product of its features as opposed to offering a wide a range of opportunities for user-to-user inter-activity. We also expect party ideology to be a mediating factor governing the adoption of interactive communication strategies, with authoritarian parties pursuing a persuasive and propagandistic style and libertarian parties offering inclusive experiences (Sudulich, 2009).

Technical sophistication

A range of features are hard to classify within any of the above categories. For example, features that aid reading, locating, downloading or aggregating material, or that contribute to the visual appeal of the site. These options can be linked to the employment of technology and resources to create a sophisticated online presence. These items were coded as technically sophisticated, contributing to the overall usability, and demonstrate a level of investment. Such features also provide an air of professionalism, in a similar way to the adoption of any new communication technique (Lilleker and Negrine, 2002), and so can be used as an indication of the importance of the Internet within the overall communication strategy. Since the technical sophistication of websites is dependent on parties' financial and human resources, though, we expect that major parties in all countries will outperform minor organizations in this regard.

Method

Four nations were selected for inclusion in the study: France, Germany, Great Britain and Poland. These represent the largest EU member nations, with the highest number of parties standing for election. These nations also elect MEPs from party lists to represent regions within the nation, thus allowing us to isolate national and party-related causes for variances in online communication strategy.

Content analysis of the main party websites, or specific campaign websites if one was built, was conducted in the last seven days of the campaign. Up to a maximum of 214 features, dependent on the type of site, were identified as present or absent on the website of the party using the standardized survey for all countries. Ninety-seven parties were included in the study (22 in GB, 31 in France, 32 in Germany and 12 in Poland). All researchers passed inter-coder reliability tests, irregularities were checked and training given where necessary. The final Holsti reliability coefficient was .87. This measurement is appropriate for data on a nominal level where coders decide only for absence or presence of features as in our study (cf. Stempel, 2003: 216; Watt and Van den Berg, 1995: 375). The standardized survey was performed for all four countries. Websites were coded online and offline from the archived[3] version of campaign websites.

For the purposes of this article we selected 94 features relevant to party websites. Features were grouped, first, as belonging to Web 1.0 or Web 2.0; and also whether the main function was to provide information, encourage visitor engagement, mobilize support or allow interactivity; a further set of features were classified as demonstrating technical sophistication only. The feature groupings were based upon previous coding schemas developed for the analysis of party websites (de Landtsheer et al., 2005; Gibson and Ward, 2000a; Lilleker and Malagon, 2010) and classifications are presented in the Appendix. Recognizing the extent to which Web 2.0 has been embraced by political parties is one way of identifying the role the Internet plays within their communication strategies, how seriously it is taken as a means of reaching voters and the extent to which political party website design is consistent with broader trends in development across social and commercial organizations' websites.

Following Farmer and Fender (2005: 49) we have created indexes of the average number of features for each grouping: information provision, engagement, mobilization, interactivity and technical sophistication (scores are calculated by dividing the number of indicators present by the total number of features within that grouping). The feature groupings allow us to understand the key functions of parties' websites.

Campaign contexts

In all four countries the EP elections took place between 4 and 7 June 2009. France, Germany and Great Britain have closed list systems. Candidates are not chosen directly (parties decide in advance on their potential delegates in internal selection procedures). In Poland a preferential voting method is employed and it is possible to choose candidates directly. In all countries the final allocation of seats is considered only for parties that have gained more than 5 percent of the valid votes. In addition in

Table 1. Country characteristics

	GB	FR	GER	PL
Years in the EU	36	52	52	5
Number of EP seats allocated 2009	72	72	99	50
Turnout in 2004 (in %)	38.9	42.7	43.0	20.4
Turnout in 2009 (in %)	34.7	40.6	43.3	24.5
Population (in millions)	59.8	62.1	82.0	37.8
Country's GDP[a]	116.2	107.9	115.6	56.4
Internet connections (in % of population)[b]	76.4	69.3	65.9	52.0
Number of parties (or coalitions) in 2009 in EP elections	22	31	32	12
Number of parties in 2004 elections	14	12	24	6
Number of candidates to EP	798	2967	1061	1293

[a]Data are expressed in relation to EU-27 = 100. *Source*: epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu.]
[b]*Source*: www.internetworldstats.com.

EP elections, France, Britain and Poland are divided into constituencies (8, 11 and 13 respectively), while Germany suspends its regular differentiation into constituencies. Other country characteristics, some of which are used in our analysis, are presented in Table 1.

European campaigns in Great Britain, France and Germany were party-oriented and mostly centralized. In Poland the campaign was characterized by intense local individual activities. The hot campaign phase encompassed the last four to two weeks before Election Day when posters are put up on the streets, and free political advertisements are broadcast on public television. Election broadcasts are subject to the regulations of 'graded allocation', i.e. major parties receive more space for advertising than minor or fringe parties based on votes received at previous contests. In Great Britain and France paid television advertising is not permitted. In all countries parties are allowed to buy additional print advertising space, which has no restrictions, however this is mostly accessible to major parties. Thus free channels such as the Internet, which also have no restrictions placed upon them, are seen as attractive campaign tools. Being the first elections of the Web 2.0 era, with platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, or SNS available for campaigning, the Internet gained significant attention; in particular regarding its viability to engage voters.

Funding for parties is reliant on private funds, donations (forbidden from companies in France, limited in Poland) and credits (except for Germany). State reimbursements are available in France, Germany and Poland (according to number of votes gained). The EP election, however, still remains a second-order election, with voter turnout being usually lower than in national elections. Moreover, the campaign remains

Table 2. Average index of features

	GB	FR	GER	PL	Average
Information	.21	.21	.24	.16	.21
Interaction	.22	.19	.16	.15	.18
Engagement	.21	.22	.18	.24	.21
Mobilization	.27	.21	.20	.12	.21
Sophistication	.10	.16	.20	.14	.16
Web 1.0	.21	.24	.23	.20	.22
Web 2.0	.17	.10	.10	.08	.11
Average	.20	.20	.20	.16	.19

primarily focused on more domestic issues (e.g. the British MPs' expenses scandal or the ongoing financial and economic crisis). In Germany and Great Britain the EP election was seen as a strategic test field for national elections that were to follow in autumn 2009 and spring 2010 respectively.

In all countries, the outcome of the election was in line with prior expectations. In Great Britain Labour as incumbent government played down the significance of the result which placed them third (with 13 seats). The Conservatives, ahead in the polls for three years, were the clear winners (25 seats) with the UK Independence Party, a party with no seats in the national parliament coming second on share of vote (13 seats). In France the results confirmed the dominance of the UMP (29 seats). Unexpectedly, the Socialist Party (the main opposition) and Europe Ecologie (a fringe party lead by Daniel Cohn-Bendit) both gained 14 seats.[4] In Germany, the results of the EP election foreshadowed the later outcome of the national races: the Conservatives (CDU/CSU) and the Liberals (FDP) won the election by a wide margin and took 54 of the 99 seats in the European Parliament. The Social Democratic Party came second (23 seats). In Poland the elections saw a triumph for the ruling party Civic Platform (25 seats). Two oppositional forces, composed of a left-wing coalition (SLD-UP) and a conservative party (PiS) received 7 and 15 seats respectively.

General overview of website features

As Table 2 shows, overall we find evidence of a cross-national standardization, though parties within each nation evidence differing prioritization of feature groupings and variances in the frequency with which features denoted by group are used across websites. Apart from GB parties, Web 1.0 predominates but Web 2.0 features are clearly becoming important elements within the design of political websites. On average, engaging features predominated, but only marginally. The exception is Germany, where parties remained in a Web 1.0 informational communication mode, and GB where interactivity and mobilization features were prioritized. In general, party websites acted as multifunctional campaigning platforms encouraging support during the campaign as

Table 3. Website features of parliamentary and fringe parties

Nation	Party size		Web 1.0	Web 2.0	Info.	Inter.	Engag.	Tech. soph.	Mob.
Great Britain	Parliamentary	Major	.31	.21	.27	.28	.33	.22	.38
		Minor	.22	.08	.15	.23	.30	.20	.38
	Fringe	Major	.28	.24	.25	.29	.29	.09	.35
		Minor	.16	.15	.19	.17	.13	.05	.19
France	Parliamentary	Major	.35	.12	.27	.28	.40	.13	.35
		Minor	.30	.16	.15	.23	.38	.33	.31
	Fringe	Major	.24	.16	.25	.21	.26	.18	.18
		Minor	.22	.08	.19	.17	.18	.14	.20
Germany	Parliamentary	Major	.46	.18	.46	.28	.35	.33	.50
		Minor	.40	.20	.37	.31	.34	.35	.37
	Fringe	Major	.25	.12	.26	.17	.23	.18	.21
		Minor	.18	.07	.19	.13	.13	.16	.15
Poland	Parliamentary	Major	.34	.06	.27	.23	.33	.10	.15
		Minor	.17	.08	.19	.15	.20	.03	.12
	Fringe	Major	.17	.09	.12	.13	.23	.12	.11
		Minor	.15	.07	.12	.13	.22	.13	.10
Overall average	Parliamentary	Major	.36	.15	.26	.27	.35	.25	.35
		Minor	.31	.15	.27	.25	.31	.25	.31
	Fringe	Major	.23	.15	.23	.20	.26	.14	.21
		Minor	.19	.09	.18	.15	.15	.13	.17

well as at the voting booth. Interactivity, as expected, lagged slightly behind in most cases. Overall, there is an impression of parity, although Polish sites overall contained a lower number of features.

Table 3 compares the online performance of major and minor parties in parliament as well as the fringe parties (being outside the national parliament during the electoral campaign). Fringe parties are also divided into major and minor, with major fringe parties classified as those without parliamentary representation but receiving more than 1 percent of the national vote within a nation. Minor fringe parties received 1 percent or less of the national vote. In all four countries there is clear evidence of a pattern consistent with the normalization thesis. In all but two cases major parties have the greatest number of features per category, and in most cases there is a clear hierarchy between parliamentary and fringe parties, and major and minor variants within each grouping. There are a small number of anomalies which disrupt the pattern: major fringe parties in Great Britain, for example, outperform minor parliamentary parties and offer the most opportunities for interaction; minor parliamentary parties in Germany also offer sites which are as innovative as their major counterparts. However, on the whole there is an incremental reduction in features by party size, though the Polish parties show a fairly dramatic difference between major parliamentary parties and those within each of the other three categories. Minor fringe parties are universally laggards, reflecting their

Table 4. Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 average feature usage by party ideology

Nation	Ideology	Web 1.0	Web 2.0	Info.	Inter.	Eng.	Soph.	Mob.
Great Britain	Extreme left	.22	.13	.29	.16	.13	.09	.28
	Left	.21	.17	.13	.22	.26	.14	.26
	Centrist	.25	.20	.21	.28	.28	.07	.38
	Right	.19	.13	.21	.17	.18	.09	.21
	Extreme right	.21	.24	.25	.28	.19	.05	.28
France	Extreme left	.21	.06	.23	.14	.19	.13	.11
	Left	.28	.12	.21	.17	.34	.24	.25
	Centrist	.21	.10	.18	.21	.16	.16	.23
	Right	.25	.13	.24	.23	.21	.15	.22
	Extreme right	.22	.09	.20	.16	.21	.10	.23
Germany	Extreme left	.20	.16	.17	.25	.13	.20	.19
	Left	.28	.08	.28	.14	.20	.24	.26
	Centrist	.19	.11	.21	.17	.13	.16	.18
	Right	.27	.12	.26	.20	.24	.23	.21
	Extreme right	.16	.06	.17	.11	.13	.12	.12
Poland	Extreme left	.13	.12	.12	.15	.18	.10	.08
	Left	.20	.12	.17	.15	.25	.16	.15
	Centrist	.25	.04	.17	.18	.28	.20	.12
	Right	.25	.04	.23	.18	.25	.13	.12
	Extreme right	.17	.05	.12	.12	.23	.13	.10

low resources and lack of experience in standing at elections. Thus overall these data evidence that offline inequalities are reinforced online, although in Great Britain there is some evidence to support the ebb and flow thesis.

Table 4 presents a very mixed picture suggesting little sense of a pattern based upon the ideological positions of the parties. In terms of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 there are few stark differences, though the German left seems most locked into a Web 1.0 communication mode while the centre and right-wing GB parties are most advanced in Web 2.0 usage. The extreme left in GB has the most information-heavy websites, while the centre and right contain the most engaging and interactive features. All British parties offer a range of tools designed to mobilize their supporters, the leftist parties in France, Germany and Poland focus most on these functions; though in reality the difference across German party sites are minimal.

These data tend to contrast with empirically based hypotheses on the nature of communication by parties along the left/right ideological scale. Overall it appears right-wing parties offer the greatest number of opportunities for interaction, not libertarian parties as expected (Sudulich, 2009). However, it is hard to draw wider conclusions from these

data and thus we test the predictions posed earlier in the article with stronger, statistically rigorous tests.

To better explain the data gathered during the 2009 campaign to the European Parliament we have created a model to explain the website features present in political parties' online campaigns. The model is composed of six main components. First, it contains country dummies which allow us to capture the differences between countries (it is a substitute for controlling for many other characteristics rendered impossible given the small variation among countries). Second, we include a variable capturing the party's scale of involvement in elections (ratio of number of party's candidates in 2009 EP elections to general number of seats in parliament per country), allowing us to control for the party size among all parties (especially among the major and minor fringe parties). Next, we use a variable describing the proportional party size (the ratio of its seats in the national parliament to the general number of seats in the national parliament) which indicates the importance of the organization (a proxy for being a parliamentary or a fringe group) and can be considered as an indirect indicator of the party's financial situation (this indicator was not available for each party in the sample). Subsequently, there are party-specific variables such as ideology and its attitudes towards the European Union. The continuous dependent variables are seven functional indexes: Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, information, interactivity, engagement, mobilization and technical sophistication.

Model A from Table 4 indicates that the most informative websites are those of the major parties. This result was expected as they are more active in both national and international politics and thus can provide more information in general. Provision of information also appears to be more important for parties with highest involvement (number of candidates per seat) and those with an extreme left ideology. Model B shows the most interactive parties were those who were more engaged in elections. Parties having a higher number of candidates were more willing to invest in a wider range of advanced communication tools which could attract higher numbers of voters (such as a party's social networking profile or video channel). Interactivity also played an important role in the online strategies of pro-European parties. Engaging features were most important for major parties, used in the most competitive races and by left-wing parties (model C). This is not surprising since elements like videos, podcasting, audio streaming, photo galleries or online games require resources, both financial and in terms of requiring experienced staff, to create and maintain these. It can be provided by parties with solid financial resources that have the appropriate technological infrastructure and a reasonable chance to get elected. Party size was also a significant variable influencing mobilization (model D). Interestingly, the only significant variable explaining technical sophistication (model E) was the experience of participating in previous European elections (2004). Such parties may have appreciated the role of well-prepared and efficiently running websites, providing users with easily downloadable materials, search systems or easily accessible tag clouds. Moreover, they could reuse already existing platforms. The prior investment into the technology necessary for sustaining the websites is similar across different party sizes and their ideologies; it does not change with their engagement in earlier elections. Models F and G show Web 1.0 predominates in French and

German party websites and GB parties are most innovative in Web 2.0 though there is a clear hierarchy with Polish parties being technological laggards. Large parliamentary parties have strongly developed Web 1.0 features which may indicate a well-established but out-of-date online communication strategy. On the contrary, parties experienced in European election campaigning (not necessarily large, e.g. 'Green/ecological') use Web 2.0 features extensively.

Post regression tests were run to check for additional differences between countries (not shown). The models reveal the strongest macro-level differences between the established members of the European Union (Great Britain, Germany, France) on one side, and Poland as a new member on the other. This difference remains significant for all but engagement and technological sophistication. There are also significant differences between Great Britain and France in the provision of interactivity and Web 2.0 (GB higher than FR) and technical sophistication (FR higher than GB), between Germany and France in information delivery and Web 2.0 (G higher than FR) and between Germany and Great Britain in technical sophistication (G higher than GB) and Web 2.0 (GB higher than G).

Discussion

The regression analysis offers evidence for the normalization hypothesis at the meso and macro level. Nations with longer traditions of democratic engagement in elections demonstrate more innovative online strategies; and parties offering the most innovative websites have the greatest resources at their disposal. Therefore, it appears that offline inequalities are reflected online. However, there is also some evidence of an ebb and flow, particularly in the case of minor parliamentary parties in Germany and major fringe parties in Great Britain. The information function is well served by all websites, as expected, however there is an increase in the use of engaging delivery modes, such as video, to make sites appealing and sticky by parties with highest resources. Employing sites for mobilization purposes is also the preserve of the most established parties, though in GB such practices were marginally more widespread. Compared to previous studies, features that allow some form of interactivity are clearly increasing in prevalence with GB leading the way; in all other countries, however, the results correspond to the patterns expected by the normalization thesis. Technological sophistication was high as well, again following patterns of offline inequality. Overall most sites demonstrated adherence to a mixture of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 features, with innovations at the meso and macro level being largely constrained by resources. This was most marked in GB, Germany and France respectively, while Poland lagged behind in almost all respects.

In contrast with previous studies, ideology played only a minor role in explaining the online communication styles of political organizations. There are some differences in the campaign styles between left- and right-wing forces, i.e. parties with extreme left-wing ideologies have a more informational style, possibly due to strict ideological doctrines. Catch-all parties, on the other hand, with more inclusive and communitarian political platforms offer more engaging experiences on their websites. An anomaly is that parties

Table 5. Regression analysis of party website feature usage during 2009 EP elections

	A Information	B Interactivity	C Engagement	D Mobilization	E Technical sophistication	F Web 1.0	G Web 2.0
Country specification (compared to Poland)							
GB	3.358***	2.992***	0.793	2.308***	−0.633	4.290	4.526***
France	2.646***	1.590**	0.750	1.627**	0.483	5.430**	1.643*
Germany	4.451***	2.090**	0.458	1.574*	0.921	6.643**	2.855**
Party characteristics							
Engagement in elections	1.038**	0.758**	0.811*	−0.050	0.094	1.446	1.208**
Proportional size of party	5.626**	3.350	5.504**	4.759***	1.187	20.191***	.289
Political ideology (compared to centre)							
Extreme left	1.898**	0.128	0.078	0.087	−0.061	2.013	.096
Left	0.531	−0.530	1.871**	0.286	0.669	2.745	.073
Right	1.079	0.259	0.752	0.001	0.204	2.195	.037
Extreme right	1.043	0.689	0.625	0.839	−0.260	2.594	.310
Attitudes towards the EU (compared to neutral and single issue party)							
Supporting EU	0.189	0.985*	0.567	0.512	0.352	1.937	.634
Against EU	−0.398	−0.524	0.420	−0.829	−0.062	−1.476	.092
Election history							
Stood in 2004 elections	0.297	0.051	0.193	0.361	0.938**	2.091	−.234
(Constant)	0.328	0.635	1.379	0.661	1.134	5.145	−.990
R^2	.276	.257	.302	.314	.307	.381	.227
Adjusted R^2	.173	.151	.202	.217	.208	.292	.116

*$p < .10$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$.
Dependent variables, continuous: information (0 to 16), interactivity (1 to 11), engagement (0 to 11), mobilization (0 to 7), technical sophistication (0 to 7), Web 1.0 (3 to 38), Web 2.0 (0 to 11).

of the extreme right seem more interactive, though this is not statistically significant. Perhaps this is due to them using websites to build communities around ideas that are marginalized within the media and political debate. For example, the GB British National Party website included a forum which allowed visitors to share ideas and to counter negative media coverage, encouraging members to voice opinions that would be deemed politically incorrect in other spaces.

As a corollary, left libertarian parties are more engaging, and a striking finding is that there are clear differences in the communication styles of parties with a pro- or anti-stance on the European Union. Anti-EU parties tend to be more informational (.22) and least likely to offer features that encourage interaction (.16); pro-EU parties, in contrast, are most likely to be interactive (.22). Perhaps the reasons for this are first to gain some public input from those supportive of the EU, particularly in strongly Euro-sceptic nations like GB. Here, these parties employed a strategy around interactive features in order to start debates on EU membership. Anti-EU parties, on the other hand, largely offer negative messages regarding various aspects of the EU. This corresponds to a more propagandistic mode of communication.

Conclusions

Political parties within Great Britain, France, Germany and Poland may not have embraced all the features introduced within the era of Web 2.0, but this study provides evidence of a step in that direction. While parties still supply a lot of information, this is necessary: it would be very strange for any party not to display its policies and arguments on its website. However, the traditional monologue approach to transmitting data is being balanced out in modern e-campaigns. Features are common that allow information to be delivered in more engaging ways, for example through the use of videos showing a range of contexts. Equally parties used a range of options that encourage involvement in the campaign. Interactivity is no longer rare and while this may cover a range of different types of participation, not all of which conform to the classical definition of a conversation, opportunities for horizontal dialogue are clearly a feature of today's party websites.

Party websites can no longer be described as static or boring. The features that seem to have most revolutionized the development towards interactivity are the growth of social networking and file-sharing sites. They provide means for free dissemination of information while also giving online users the opportunity to have a conversation either between themselves or with the party leaders and their staff. While these are currently a fashionable add-on to campaigning, one possibly influenced by Obama, it may signal a new style of political communication. In particular, we find a range of party web presences offering a rich experience that combines engaging features with the delivery of information. However, this style of e-campaigning is clearly restricted by two factors: the political status of the organization as measured by the proxies of party size and electoral experience, and by the country's democratic history. Thus while we find Web 2.0 features to be taken up by all parties across our four nations at the 2009 EP elections, the degree to which this has happened is still a function of traditional patterns in offline politics.

Appendix: Grouping of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 features

Web 1.0 information	Engagement	Mobilization	Interactivity	Technical sophistication
news	video TV spots	register as volunteer	contact facility	animations
press clippings/press releases	videos of conferences	guest book	questions invited	download podcasts
newsletter archive	videos of appearances	register for events	short poll	download speeches
speech section	videos of home/private	subscribe to events	large poll	language switch
list of upcoming events	photo gallery	join party	poll results published	translate function
text/video/audio/photo/	public photos	promotional material		font resizing
newsletter archive	personal photos	donation function		read out loud function
other information archive	share by email	shop		change bandwidth
party standpoints	audio features	site registration function		download PDFs
documents available to all	streaming audio	site members area		search
documents for registered	register to email	party members area		embedded search
visitors only	newsletter	register as voter		press release via email
documents for party only	chat archive			press release via RSS
party history/achievements				
code of conduct				
FAQs				
national/EU political info				
voting procedure info				
regional sites				
register for mail				

(Continued)

Appendix: (Continued)

Web 2.0 information	Engagement	Mobilization	Interactivity	Technical sophistication
weblog	news rating facility video rating facility webcam feed photo rating facility political games apolitical games prioritize/rank function	personal events calendar	blog comment facility wiki collaborative programme collaborative party history collaborative features links to SNS promote via SNS social bookmarking chat facility with party chat facility with others forum video comment facility video sharing channel photo comment facility news comment facility	online speech archive tag cloud

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Notes

1. CENMEP: a study of the use of the Internet during the 2009 European parliamentary (EP) elections that encompassed 23 EU member nations. Directed by Maurice Vergeer (University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands), Gerrit Voerman (University of Groningen, the Netherlands) and Carlos Cunha (Dowling College, New York, USA). CENMEP was the successor to the 2004 Internet and Elections Project (Jankowski et al., 2005).
2. The study was performed for England, Scotland and Wales but not Northern Ireland as none of the major parties stand in that country.
3. The data archives were downloaded to local computers and to a computer at Radboud University using TelePort Pro provided by Tennyson Maxwell Information Systems, Inc.
4. At: www.france-politique.fr/elections-europeennes-2009.htm.

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