Window Dressing 2.0: Constituency-Level Web Campaigns in the 2010 UK General Election

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This article explores the use of Web 2.0 tools in constituency-level campaigns in the UK 2010 general election. Specifically it examines whether Web 2.0 use was undertaken with a goal of promoting interaction with voters or was simply a ‘window-dressing’ exercise. It does so using data from a nationwide survey of election agents, content analysis of a subset of campaign websites, and information collected through interviews with candidates. The results show that while campaigns are keen to adopt Web 2.0 technology, they have largely eschewed the interactive potential of Web 2.0, replicating previous UK web campaigns that have demonstrated limited interactivity.

Keywords: Web 2.0; campaigns; Internet; interactivity; elections

Introduction

Political parties have faced a number of challenges as electorates have de-aligned and the social basis for their organisations has declined. Parties used to electorates with a clear social structure are now faced with a mass made up of complex and contradictory actors which necessitates new approaches to party politics with professional politicians at the centre (Katz, 2001; Katz and Mair, 1995). While the functional role of parties as vehicles for power remains unchallenged, in terms of their role of representation and maintaining links between the rulers and the ruled, political parties are losing out to protest groups, single-issue groups and apathy (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Stoker, 2006). In part, at least, these developments can be seen as the result of the centralisation and professionalisation of parties, particularly in campaigns (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). As parties leave less room for the local party members and supporters, the incentive to participate in, and engage with, campaigns is diminished (Green and Smith, 2003). Given this context, the arrival of a new suite of web campaign tools based on the idea of collaboration and interaction through an ‘architecture of participation’ (Web 2.0) offers a compelling arena for fresh research into web campaigning (O’Reilly, 2005). The question posed by this article is: can Web 2.0 be used to make party campaigns more interactive and address the apparent gap between parties and voters?

The article examines this question specifically at the level of constituency political campaigns, and measures two things: the extent of the adoption of Web 2.0 tools by campaigns, based on self-reported use of tools such as Facebook and Twitter in the 2010 Electoral Agent Survey, and the extent to which specific interactive features within web campaign tools were adopted using content analysis data collected on 204 campaigns in North-West England in the final
The results of these analyses are triangulated through qualitative data collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with candidates and campaigners. The overarching aim is to provide an assessment of the role of Web 2.0 in the 2010 election, not only measuring the extent to which parties used Web 2.0 tools, but also how interactively they did so.

**Campaign modernisation**

Election campaigning is supposedly the nexus of political communication, the one point in every electoral cycle when parties are forced to engage with voters in return for votes. However, trends in national political campaigning have pointed towards less and less engaging campaigns, with campaigns becoming professionalised. Parties are relying on marketing-driven techniques rather than developing local support networks to get their point across and voters to the polls. Elements of locally focused strategies were still evident in UK campaigns well into the 1960s, with campaigns still very much about face-to-face and public interaction on the doorstep and the street corner (Holt and Turner, 1968). With the arrival of television news and the incorporation of techniques developed in the fields of advertising and marketing into political campaigns in the UK, the situation changed dramatically, shifting the locus of campaigning from the constituency towards a unified national campaign. The labels applied to contemporary national-level political campaigns vary: packaged politics (Franklin, 1994), Americanised (Scammell, 1995), Phase III (Farrell and Webb, 2000), post-modern (Norris, 2000) and professionalisation (Gibson and Römmele, 2009). Despite the differing terminology, the authors agree on the increasing importance of the central party in campaigns, and the role of the professional in supplanting that of the amateur campaigner. As one writer put it, campaigns increasingly resembled ‘marketing exercises’ (Farrell, 2006, p. 123).

With the shift in focus from the constituency to the national central campaign, both academic and public attention to local-level electioneering also waned (Denver and Hands, 1997a). Campaigns were still fought and won at the constituency level, but this was now directed from the centre and focused only on strategically relevant battleground seats (Norris, 2000). There have been a number of researchers who have maintained the study of constituency-level campaigns in the UK, but usually with reference to the outcome of campaigns rather than as objects of study in themselves (Denver and Hands, 1992; 1997b; Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2008; Johnston and Pattie, 1995; 1997). Overall, the role of the constituency campaign in the UK general election has been to some extent eclipsed by the growth in both the scale and sophistication of national-level campaigns.

The professionalisation of campaigns is closely linked with observations of party decline, coinciding as it does with the wider phenomena in the UK and elsewhere of declining party memberships and partisan identification (Katz and Mair, 1992; Mair and van Bizen, 2001; Seyd and Whiteley, 2004). For voters, parties’ concentration on specific, target seats may be negatively affecting turnout, with large numbers of voters virtually ignored by campaigns seeking to influence voters in a few key seats (Lilleker and Negrine, 2003; Russell, 2005). As a result, a key question, particularly at the local level, is how can citizens become better connected and more involved with election campaigns?

**Web 2.0 as a tool for more interactive campaigns**

The earliest writers saw the expansion of digital communications as opening up new possibilities for political discourse (Negroponte, 1996; Rheingold, 1993). In time, the web was seen...
as a tool more for the status quo than for radical change, entrenching the power of established actors over new upstarts (Margolis and Resnick, 2000). Empirical study of online campaigning in the UK dates back to 1997, the first UK election at which national-level parties (and a handful of constituency candidates) fielded web presences, with early efforts being described as ‘truly dire’ (Chadwick, 2006, p. 158). By 2001, online campaigning had expanded, with estimates of around a quarter of candidates maintaining a web presence, although the lack of any centralised database of campaign sites made the identification of relevant sites difficult (Coleman, 2001; Ward and Gibson, 2003). By 2005, an estimated 37 per cent of candidates were online, demonstrating the continued evolution of the web as a campaign tool (Ward, Gibson and Lusoli, 2005, p. 16).

Many writers saw the ability to interact online as opening up new channels of communication between campaigns and the most interested and connected citizens (Norris, 2003; Römmele, 2003; Ward and Gibson, 2003). In particular the web created the potential for what Kirsten Foot and Steven Schneider (2006, p. 199) termed a ‘transactional relationship’, creating a clear bond between campaigns and their supporters. Use of the web, and its promise of new levels of connectedness, would seem to have the potential to reverse the apparent decline in linkage provided by contemporary political campaigning and so contribute in part to the wider reinvigoration of party politics. Of course, not all were so optimistic about the potential for interaction in web campaigns. In summing up the 2001 UK election, Stephen Coleman (2001, p. 681) dismissed online interactivity as a campaign tool, arguing that it was not surprising that campaigners avoided ‘chatting with the enemy’. The most incisive explanation of this view comes from Jennifer Stromer-Galley (2000), who argued that campaigns would avoid interactivity because it was burdensome, there was limited control over what could be posted in such a space, and allowing the public to question the campaign directly would challenge the deliberate ambiguity on which campaigns rely. In essence, by making campaigns too accountable, online interactivity would force them to reveal the often unpopular details of plans rather than sell a grander (but vaguer) vision.

At the constituency level in the UK there has been little study of interactivity specifically. Stephen Ward and Rachel Gibson (2003) concluded that only a tiny minority of campaigns were using two-way interactive features on their websites, suggesting that, despite the interactive potential of online campaigning, campaigners were using the web as a way of pushing out campaign messages rather than interacting with voters. This predates the explosion of Web 2.0 tools and the interactivity they provide. There have been similarly limited findings looking at the national-level party sites in the 2001 and 2005 elections (Bartle, 2005; Coleman, 2001). Despite the evidence of a lack of enthusiasm from parties for interacting with voters online, there was a sense that the 2010 election might be different, as from 2005 onwards a new series of services – referred to collectively as Web 2.0 – emerged. The publishers O’Reilly coined the term Web 2.0, defining it as seven specific headings, only some of which are relevant in a political science context, and a number of academic writers have tried to refine the concept (Anderson, 2007; Chadwick, 2012; O’Reilly, 2005). The most interesting concept, however, to emerge from the definition of Web 2.0 has been the ‘architecture of participation’: the idea that where Web 1.0 was constructed mainly of static web pages designed to impart information, Web 2.0 relies on developing frameworks that encourage users to populate them with their own content (Anderson, 2007, p. 19). In the context of this study, Web 2.0 sites can be operationalised as the platforms of Facebook, Twitter and various image- and video-sharing services such as YouTube and Flickr that allow...
users to upload their own content and interact with other users. These Web 2.0 sites are qualitatively different from conventional web pages (Web 1.0) which, in most cases, do not encourage users to upload their own content.

What is known of political campaigns and Web 2.0 tools in the UK is limited to preliminary work conducted on national-level sites. Nigel Jackson and Darren Lilleker (2009) have argued that at the national level Web 2.0 is in practice Web 1.5, with campaigns still shunning interactivity. This approach was still evident to some extent at the national level during the 2010 campaign, but for some parties, at least, there were signs that this was part of a wider move towards a more interactive national campaign web presence (Lilleker and Jackson, 2010). Work comparing the UK and Australia has also begun to take stock of the role of Web 2.0 at the national level from the perspective of both the party and the electorate (Gibson and Cantijoch, 2011). Web 2.0 at the constituency level has yet to be evaluated in the UK at a general election. The rhetoric of Web 2.0 suggests that if campaigns adopt and use tools centred on the architecture of participation, then campaigns will become more interactive. If this is the case then the use of Web 2.0 by campaigns could go some way towards joining the gap between campaigns and their electorates.

Data and methods

To see if this was the case this article looks at three sources of data: secondary survey data, content analysis of websites from the North-West region of England and semi-structured interviews carried out with campaigners. Data to measure the extent of Web 2.0 use come from the 2010 Electoral Agent Survey (EAS) which was sent to election agents of the major parties in England, Scotland and Wales (not Northern Ireland) following the election. Responses were accepted both by post and e-mail. The EAS is a highly credible data set, having been run following every general election since 1992, and forms the backbone of studies of campaigns at the constituency level in the UK (Denver and Hands, 1997a). For the 2010 campaign there were 1,028 responses from the three major UK parties, a response rate of 54 per cent (out of 1,896 possible returns).

Content analysis is used to answer the question of whether campaigns actually made use of the interactive features of Web 2.0 tools. There is a rich history of seeking to understand website adoption through content analysis that consisted of researchers developing schema and ‘coding’ websites based on the presence or absence of features (Carlson and Djupsund, 2001; Gibson, Lusoli and Ward, 2008; Jackson and Lilleker, 2009; Norris, 2003; Ward and Gibson, 2003). The aim of the schema in this instance was to concentrate on thickening the measurement of interactivity online, going to some extent beyond the categorisation of features. This framework embeds the distinction between media and human interactivity identified by Stromer-Galley (2000). In addition it also distinguishes between public dialogue and private dialogue.

Public dialogue: This can take the form of Facebook walls or Twitter @ replies. However, this feature is also possible on Web 1.0 sites through the use of forums and comment sections. They were only included if there was evidence of their use in the form of someone from the campaign actively replying. ‘Empty rooms’, or what Jackson and Lilleker (2009, p. 244) term ‘graffiti’, were not included in this category.

Potential dialogue: The second category considered was potential dialogue features. These are features that allow dialogue in private between campaigns and voters and include tools
such as e-mail, feedback forms, Facebook messaging systems and private messages in Twitter. These features were opaque, unlike public dialogue features, and evidence of use would be concealed from the researcher.

Site-based interactivity: The final category of features is site-based interactivity features that are akin to Stromer-Galley’s (2000) media interaction. These are features that allow engagement between users and systems such as email databases, following a user on a social network or submitting personal information to polls and petitions. Also included in this category are joining the party and downloading campaign material.

The features belonging to each of these categories were identified and recorded across three platforms: conventional sites (Web 1.0), Facebook and Twitter (see Appendix A). Due to the timescales involved and the resources available, the analysis was concentrated on the 75 constituencies in the North-West region of England, as defined by the YouGov polling company.1 The focus of this analysis was on the three largest political parties in the UK: Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. Of the campaigns in the North-West, a web presence could be identified for 204 of them. Data were collected in the final week of the short election campaign (30 April–6 May 2010).2 Where sites had a series of posts over time, only the last seven days of posts were reviewed for the analysis. Websites and profiles were identified using a series of publicly available tools including Google and native search functions in both Twitter and Facebook. Additionally, Tweetminster3 had developed a list of prospective parliamentary candidates’ (PPC) Twitter accounts, which was also consulted. Finally, as well as statistical measures, it is also possible to explore the use of Web 2.0 by campaigns through qualitative data. A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted between September 2011 and March 2012 with representatives from campaigns in the 2010 election. Eight interviews were conducted in total, with six candidates and two campaign managers interviewed, representing six campaigns in total: two Liberal Democrat, two Labour and two Conservative. Interviews were limited to candidates who had made some use of Web 2.0 sites in their campaign and those who were willing to co-operate with the research. Subjects were guaranteed anonymity in the hope of improving their willingness to participate in the study and the openness of their responses.

Web 2.0 adoption

The first, and simplest, measure considered here is the adoption of Web 2.0 campaign tools: the creation of accounts on specific Web 2.0 services. Figure 1 reports the adoption of both Web 1.0 (i.e. conventional html websites) and Web 2.0 tools including social networks – typically Facebook – video- and image-sharing services such as Flickr and YouTube, and finally the use of Twitter by campaigns. A separate question was not asked about the use of blogs. Although blogs are often held up as being an example of Web 2.0, the nature of blogs and blogging has shifted. The development of blog software that allows users to change the appearance of sites, add static pages and hide comment sections has made it difficult to distinguish effectively between a blog and a conventional website, and the inclusion of blogs within conventional campaign sites has further complicated the issue.

Over four-fifths of campaigns reported having a campaign site during the 2010 election (82.6 per cent). Conceivably this was a broad category covering personal campaign sites, repurposed local party websites and local enclaves in national party domains. The use of Web 2.0 by campaigns was also very common. Web 2.0 services such as Twitter and Facebook were not
available to campaigners in 2005 and it is a testament to the rapid rise of social media sites that over half (55.6 per cent) of the sample of 2010 campaigns reported using Web 2.0 in some form. The overwhelming majority of this was down to the use of social networking sites (50.7 per cent); again, based on the researcher’s later experience, this was most likely to mean the use of Facebook rather than then rivals such as Bebo and MySpace. Twitter was also common among campaigns, perhaps more than might be expected given its smaller user base (22.7 per cent), while image- and video-sharing services were less used (21 per cent). Given the complexity of the terminology involved, some caution must be exercised over these results. For example, both Facebook and Twitter have the capacity for sharing video and images, while Twitter, although identified as a separate site, could also be considered to be a social network, leading some subjects to double count their Web 2.0 platforms. Despite this, Web 2.0 does seem to have taken off among campaigners in the UK.

Interactive features

Despite the high level of adoption, there is little corroborating evidence from closer examination of candidates’ use of Web 2.0 tools. The first three bars of Figure 2 report the frequency of public dialogue features, examples of campaigns engaging directly with other users in public, in the sample of campaigns. Public dialogue features were extremely rare on Web 1.0 and on Facebook. Campaigns were simply not attempting to engage voters using these tools, at least in public. The exception was Twitter, where around 12 per cent of online campaigns used public @ replies. As a proportion of campaigns actually on Twitter, rather than online in general, this figure is even higher (40 per cent). Immediately the idea that the apparent adoption of Web 2.0 tools has led to some new kind of interactive, discursive campaign needs to be questioned.

Where campaigns did interact online it was through Twitter. The choice of Twitter over interactive spaces on conventional websites or Facebook was interesting. Campaigns might
have been expected to prefer media where they can exercise control over content, but the Twitter ecosystem is far more open inasmuch as any user can reply to any other user’s message. This may be connected to the short form of Twitter messages (140 characters), which require less time to formulate than other types of message. Twitter might also help campaigns to reach a more influential audience than other tools. The schema could not take into consideration to whom @ replies were addressed. Thus, rather than local constituents, campaigns may instead be trying to interact with party elites, journalists or other national figures rather than rank-and-file voters and supporters.

Private dialogue features are reported in the final four bars of Figure 2. Private features are those that are interactive, but are opaque, so knowing whether or not they were used is difficult for the external observer. As would be expected, inbuilt messaging systems such as Facebook messaging were as common as the use of the sites themselves. Feedback forms on conventional websites were common (32.8 per cent), but the provision of an e-mail address was more so (75 per cent). E-mail was the single biggest (potential) connection between campaigns and users. However, given the lack of access to the content of these e-mails no objective assessment of interactivity was possible.

The least interactive features were those where the user interacts with a system rather than another human: site-based interactivity. These are reported in Figure 3. Examples of these features include downloading materials, participating in polls, following options on social networks and signing up to e-mail newsletters. As with potential dialogue features, some of these behaviours were also built into Web 2.0 sites in the form of ‘following’ or ‘friending’ mechanisms. There is a good deal more variation in the distribution of these features over conventional websites, with donating and joining the party being the most popular features to include in a Web 1.0 campaign site. Web 2.0 sites were not generally used to host these features (with the exception of inbuilt following mechanisms) and largely seem to be focused on information provision rather than encouraging site-based interactivity.
In their own words ...

The low levels of public dialogue suggested by the quantitative data are confirmed by interview data. Many subjects were less than sanguine about their online campaigns, in particular the extent to which Web 2.0 tools were useful for communicating with voters. Subjects seemed to view the web as more of a requirement than an opportunity, and even the candidates with higher aspirations for their web campaigns found it difficult to develop an audience.

It was very much a shop window as far as I was concerned. I didn’t update all the time. I would put photographs up there; if anybody looked at it they would think [candidate name] looks like a normal [person], which I am (Conservative Candidate 1).

[When asked how much interactivity they saw?] Not much. I think there are a couple of things to be aware of. One is that there is a sense in which you’ve got to be either a celebrity or a notoriety to get a lot of people to decide to follow you (Labour Candidate 1).

Despite this, Twitter in particular did seem to emerge as the candidates’ favourite. In some instances campaigns saw Twitter as a way to engage in wider debate. One candidate thought they got good results from following up on public meetings through Twitter, developing an ongoing conversation with voters. Others found Twitter useful, but not necessarily for contacting voters. Instead candidates seemed keener on the idea of Twitter allowing them to engage with key elites such as local journalists.

[I] would talk at a public meeting and we would get involved in a conversation over Twitter afterwards (Lib Dem Candidate 1).

Whilst lots of your constituents might not be on Twitter, a lot of – to use a local government speak – key stakeholders ... I mean a horrible phrase I know but I have no better one.
Terrible. But certainly you look no you will find pretty much every [local newspaper title] journalist is now on Twitter. All the ones who are involved in my area are following me and I’m following them (Conservative Candidate 2).

The surprise that emerged from the interview data was the importance of e-mail to candidates, not only as a tool of internal organisation and co-ordination between national and local campaigns, but as a tool for responding to and engaging with voters. Many found the workload onerous; however, others maintained that they replied to every e-mail they received.

But email was the key one, so I found a lot of it ... Yeah, email and dialogue with people. And it was a much bigger amount of traffic and conversation via email than the previous general election (Lib Dem Candidate 1).

They are the people who want to know what my views as a candidate are so I took a bit of time responding to individuals (Lib Dem Candidate 2).

Although this is anecdotal evidence, it suggests that the potential dialogue features described above account for a significant amount of interaction between campaigns and voters and may well be worth further study. The wider picture, however, is one of scepticism from campaigns at the value of interactive campaigning. This does not seem to be an outright rejection on the grounds of cost or loss of control as Stromer-Galley (2000) suggests, but more practically with a lack of critical mass of voters paying attention to campaign web presences. If they could have attracted a significant following then at least some campaigners interviewed suggested they might have sought to do more.

Conclusions

The central focus of this article has been to explore the potential of Web 2.0 as a tool to enable greater interaction between campaigns and voters during the 2010 constituency election campaigns. This is an important avenue to explore given the apparent decline in the representative functions evidenced by declining party memberships and partisanship, and with the emergence of Web 2.0 tools since 2005. Based on the greater interactivity afforded by the design of Web 2.0 tools and the excitement over the Obama campaign’s apparent success at exploiting them, it was thought that there might be some development beyond previous patterns of web campaigning in the UK. The evidence suggests, however, that while the tools may be new and different, the Web 2.0 area does not seem to have been accompanied by any obvious explosion in online interactivity at the sub-national level.

Looking only at the adoption of Web 2.0 tools as reported by campaigns themselves, it is clear that the use of Web 2.0 tools has proliferated quickly, with over half of the sample engaging with Web 2.0 on some level. However, based on the content analysis of campaigns in the North-West, the use of public dialogue features is widely avoided. What public dialogue did occur was concentrated on Twitter. This may represent a genuine attempt to reach out to voters but, given the smaller user base of Twitter, it more likely represents attempts by local campaigns to reach out to a vanguard of opinion formers such as journalists. What is less clear is the extent to which interaction is being carried out in private. The provision of an e-mail address was almost a reflex behaviour for campaigns, but anecdotal evidence suggests that e-mail supports a lot of interaction between voters and campaigns, although more systematic study is difficult without some kind of privileged access.
In terms of the wider debate about interactivity in sub-national campaigns online in the UK, this article offers a number of further conclusions. The adoption of tools with little evidence of interactivity supports Jackson and Lilleker’s (2009) thesis that political parties were willing to put a toe in Web 2.0, but were reluctant to commit fully, engaging instead in what they called Web 1.5. As a way to explain this, Stromer-Galley’s (2000) argument that interactivity is simply a poor fit for political campaigns that are unwilling to relinquish control could also apply. Equally, however, as interview data have indicated, the success of online campaigns also requires an audience, something that even those well disposed towards the idea of a web campaign struggled with. Finally, the importance of e-mail underlines Kleis Nielson’s (2011) arguments about the centrality of ‘mundane’ tools in online campaign mobilisation practices.

As for future study, there is room to improve the data available about sub-national web campaigns both through secondary surveys and through content analysis. The increasing complexity of campaign web presences has been accompanied by an increase in the resources required to analyse them. A further complication may be the increased use of Web 2.0 tools as platforms for gathering data. Web 2.0 has been criticised previously as a platform for surveillance (Gehl, 2011). Initial reports from the 2012 Obama campaign also indicate that ‘Big Data’ is an area of interest (Bimber, 2012). It is not clear that the UK will follow the same model given the different electoral and regulatory factors involved, but certainly moves to centralise web campaigns at the sub-national level could in future lead to less autonomy for local candidates and a correspondingly diminished level of variation to analyse.

Currently, in the UK context, the availability of Web 2.0 does not seem to have dramatically altered the behaviour of UK candidates online from earlier elections. They use the tools on a superficial level and in the sample analysed there was little evidence that adoption had led to more interactivity. Although this analysis was limited by the availability of data and, in particular, data of private communications between candidates and voters, publicly at least, Web 2.0 is not serving to encourage interaction between candidates and voters.

About the Author

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Notes

1 See: http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/.

2 In order to draw a meaningful comparison between web presences it is necessary to collect content analysis data as contemporaneously as possible. This is so that all campaign web presences are collected at the same stage of the election.

3 http://www.tweetminster.co.uk is a clearing-house for political Twitter accounts in the UK.
Appendix A

This schema lists the features recorded for each of the three categories of interactivity: public, private and site-based, across the three platforms considered: conventional sites (Web 1.0), Facebook and Twitter.

Public dialogue is defined as public interaction between the campaign and user in which the campaign is seen to reply to the user. This included campaign responses on forums, comment sections, Facebook and ‘mentions’ on Twitter. Examples of users posting but campaigns not responding were not recorded as demonstrating public dialogue.

| Table A1: Content analysis schema for measuring interactive features in local campaign web presences |
|-------------------------------------------------|
| **Web 1.0**                                      | **Facebook**              | **Twitter**                      |
| Public dialogue                                 | Public dialogue           | Public dialogue                  |
| Private dialogue                                | E-mail                    | Private message                  |
| Site-based                                      | Contact form              | Site-based                       |
| Poster                                         | Leaflet                   | Poster                           |
| Leaflet                                         | Poll                      | Leaflet                          |
| Poll                                           | Petition                  | Poll                             |
| Petition                                        | Org. request              | Petition                         |
| Org. request                                    | Donate                    | Org. request                     |
| Donate                                         | Join                      | Donate                           |
| Join                                            | E-mail subscription       | Join                             |
|                                                 | ‘Friend’                  | ‘Follow’                         |

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