

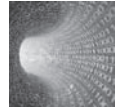
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Politics, elections and online campaigning: Past, present . . . and a peek into the future

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Abstract

This introduction provides a brief overview of developments in research on political campaigning on the Internet. It presents state-of-the-art research in the field of political communication and the Internet, after which summaries of the studies in this special issue are provided. Finally, the article suggests a number of future research concerns.

Keywords

Internet, political communication, politics 2.0, social media, web campaigning

Introduction

Ever since electronic mass media were available to large segments of the population, political leaders, political parties, politicians and candidates have increasingly used mass media to inform, communicate with and connect to citizens. Notable examples are F. D. Roosevelt's fireside chats aired on radio in the 1930s and 1940s, Dutch Queen Wilhelmina's broadcasts on Radio Orange from the UK addressing citizens in the occupied Netherlands during World War II, and the televised debates between Nixon and Kennedy in 1960. Even though these examples are from the distant past, the UK, with its longstanding history of democracy, had to wait until 2010 before the first televised election debate between party leaders took place (Chadwick, 2011). This is not to say that television is old-fashioned, but since the mid-1990s the Internet has become an important additional means of political campaigning, and was first used extensively in the United States. Notable examples of Internet campaigns are those by Roh in South Korea in 2002, and Obama in the United States in 2008.

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Even though e-campaigning took off during the so-called Web 1.0 era, the online mediatization of politics received a significant boost when Web 2.0 was developed. The transformation from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 is basically a transformation from the Web as a mass medium to the Web as a networked community medium. Web 2.0, a wide collection of characteristics of new web applications, facilitates the creation of user-generated content (UGC) and an easier online user experience. Whether stationary on the desktop PC or mobile with today's powerful smartphones, the web has become an empty platform or infrastructure where the key features are sharing content and connecting by social networking (cf. Chadwick, 2009; Cormode and Krishnamurthy, 2008). Through the networking capabilities of Web 2.0 new messages can rapidly disseminate through the net as compared to the 'isolated' consumers of traditional mass media. Also, Web 2.0 campaigns, particularly via social media, allow politicians to develop personalized and individualized campaigns, more or less detached from the party's campaign, in comparison to the early days of web campaigning (Vergeer et al., in press).

Web 2.0 allows political parties and candidates to produce and increase online visibility and interactivity. It also allows parties and politicians to directly inform citizens, bypassing the Fourth Estate – the press who used to be the agency to mediate, critique and interpret on behalf of the public (Weaver et al., 2007).

Still, the online presence of parties, politicians and candidates must not be overestimated. Although many citizens have access to the Internet, many use it for entertainment purposes. Even if they visit online political content, they most likely tend to already have an initial interest in politics, the party or politician (Brundidge and Rice, 2009; Johnson et al., 2011). Furthermore, Kaye and Johnson (2002) show that guidance and information-seeking are strong motivations, followed by entertainment and social utility, whereas for social networking services, studies suggest that social utility is particularly important (Ancu and Cozma, 2009; Parmelee and Bichard, 2011) and is the foremost reason for people to connect to politicians. This leaves us with the question of whether online campaigning, once hailed as the means to counter the steady decline in political participation, and rearrange existing power structures by empowering fringe parties and activists' organization of collective action, has an added value. Findings thus far suggest that this has not changed drastically (Vergeer and Hermans, in press). Apart from the answer to this question, the Pew Research Center (2011) shows that – even in the Internet era – TV is still the most important source of campaign news. The Internet is gaining in popularity, but not at the cost of television's popularity as a news source.

So far there is no convincing evidence that voter turnout is on the rise due to the use of online (social) media. Similarly, establishing the contribution of these media in online campaigns is difficult due to many problems concerning the forecasting of election outcomes (Jones, 2008). To date attempts to predict election outcomes when social media are involved have failed – cf. the debate between Tumasjan et al. (2011) and Jungherr et al. (2011) – apart from forecasting general election issues (cf. the special issue of *Electoral Studies* on electoral forecasting, Gibson and Lewis-Beck, (2011)). But does this mean that even with these new Internet platforms it is again politics as usual, eliminating benefits from pre-existing power structure differences between parties as suggested by the normalization thesis (Wright, 2012)? By no means. Even though the power structures may not have changed drastically due to the Internet, aside from

some supposed exceptions (e.g. Barack Obama in the US in 2008 and Roh Moo-hyun in South Korea in 2002), other changes have already taken place. One such change is intra-organizational changes of political parties (ITCs) (Chadwick, 2009). ICTs have also changed the way fundraising takes place (Anstead, 2008). Whether it will affect nominations and elections is yet unclear (Christenson and Smidt, 2011).

Scholarly output on Internet, social media and politics

Reviewing the productivity of the field of political communication and the Internet throughout the years, we replicate and adjust Chadwick and Howard's (2009: 2) analysis of scholarly output through time.¹ Figure 1 shows that from 1995 onward there is a steep increase in the number of publications. From 2008 onward we also see scholars increasingly focus on social media. Surprisingly, publications on the web in general, as well as those on social media, show a sharp decline in 2012.²

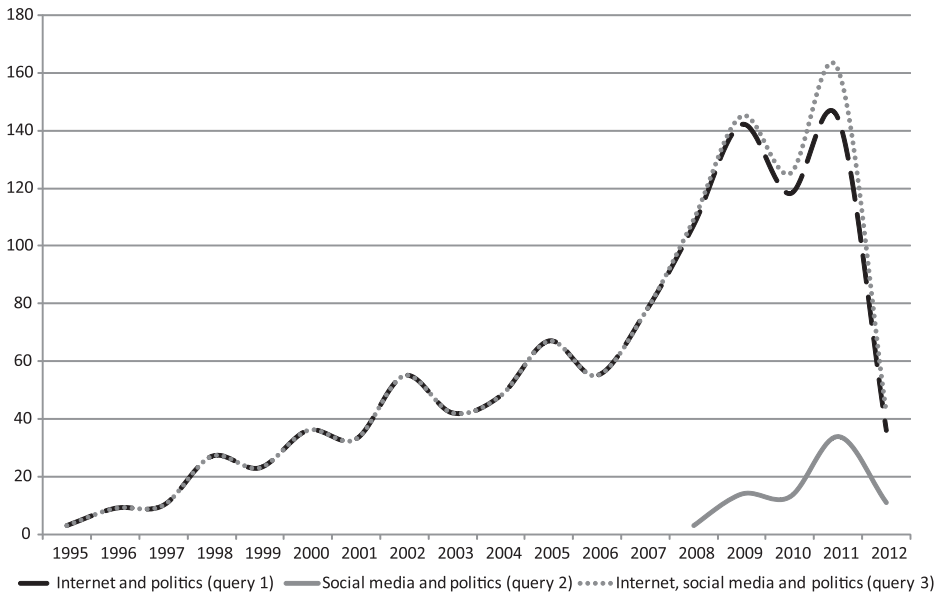


Figure 1. Number of publications on politics, the Internet and social media in ISI-ranked journals. Notes: Queries posed on 23 April 2012 using Thompson Reuter's Web of Science database.

Query 1ts = (Internet or web) and ts = (politic* or govern*) and Web of Science categories (communication or political science)

Query 2ts = (('social media') or (SNS*) or ('social network site') or ('social networking site') or Twitter or Facebook or Friendster or Orkut or Netlog or YouTube or Flickr or Picasa or Cyworld or Bebo or LinkedIn or Tumblr or Twitkr or Plurk or Mixi or Renren) and ts = (politic* or govern*) and Web of Science categories (communication or political science)

Query 3ts = (Internet or web or 'Web 1.0' or "Web 2.0" or 'Web1.0' or 'Web2.0' or (('social media') or (SNS*) or ('social network site') or ('social networking site') or Twitter or Facebook or Friendster or Orkut or Netlog or YouTube or Flickr or Picasa or Cyworld or Bebo or LinkedIn or Tumblr or Twitkr or Plurk or Mixi or Renren) and ts = (politic* or govern*) and Web of Science categories (communication or political science).

There is still a divide between social-political science approaches and information science approaches. Whereas the former is predominantly theory-driven and small-scale data analytic, the latter is data-driven and involves large data analysis, sometimes involving so-called 'big data'. The former is more small-scale and the latter focuses on the automated analysis of large-scale data. Where the two distinct fields meet is where scientific innovations will most likely surface. Whether this will be automated content analysis of large quantities of tweets (beyond the obligatory Word Cloud), or semantic or online social network analysis of politicians, media and citizens is yet to be determined.

The articles of the third query were distributed across journals according to Figure 2. It shows that *New Media & Society* with 91 articles is by far the most popular platform for this type of study. It is followed by *Information, Communication & Society* (50 articles), and *Telecommunication Policy* (48 articles). Publications predominantly originate in the Western hemisphere: 58 percent of 1026 articles originate from the US, followed by Europe with 33 percent, Asia 7 percent, Oceania 5 percent and Africa and South America less than 1 percent.

The contents of this special issue

This special issue contains a wide range of theoretical viewpoints and empirical methods to examine the relation between Internet and politics from different regions of the world.

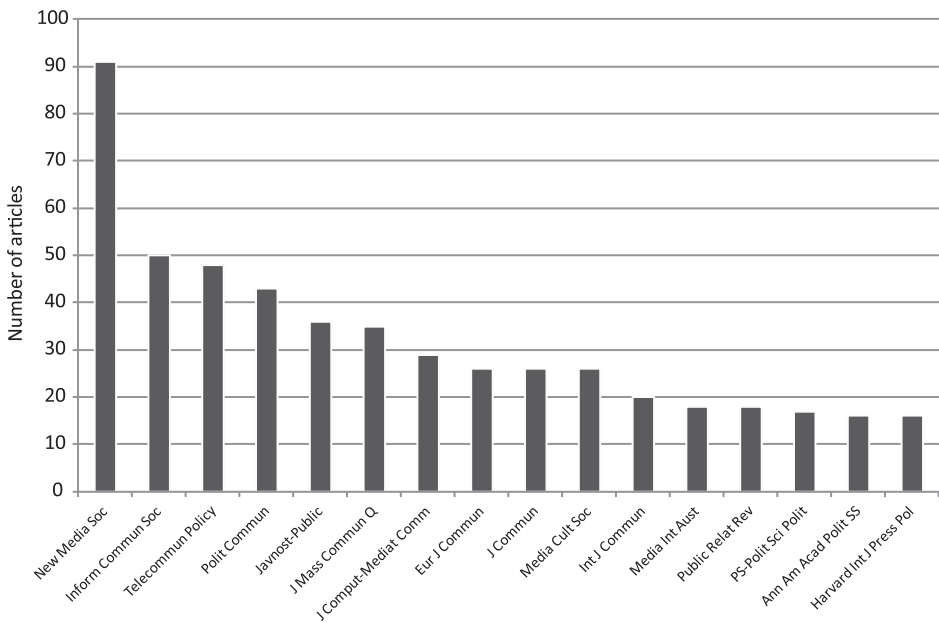


Figure 2. Journals having published most online political communication studies (50 percent of all articles 1995–2011).

Note: Abbreviations are according to those used by the Web of Science. See Appendix 1 for full titles.

The remaining 50 percent of 1026 articles in the period 1995–2011 were published in 147 other journals.

The first article by Greg Elmer reflects on the 'live' and temporal aspects of social media during a televised election debate in Canada and how to deal with public communication from a flow (i.e. 'real time') perspective, not merely regarding tweets as objects to be analyzed distant from the event they originate from. This project also raises questions about the role of researchers: whether they should be active in facilitating the debate or should merely be neutral observing bystanders.

Rachel Gibson, Kevin Gillan, Fabienne Greffet, Benjamin J. Lee, and Stephen Ward apply a wide range of analytical techniques and research designs – such as survey, content analysis, website traffic data and hyperlink network analysis – to understand how ICT changed British political party organization prior to and after the 2010 elections. They focus, amongst other issues, on how grassroots online spaces, such as blogs, criticize official party standpoints, and the cohesiveness of online hyperlinked networks. One key finding is that these new online grassroots platforms foster internal debate about parties and their leaders. Yet they are not considered rivals of official party platforms, because they are particularly popular in non-election periods.

Jeff Gulati and Christina Williams focus on candidates' adoption and use of Facebook in the 2006 and 2008 congressional elections in the United States. They track the rapid adoption of Facebook and offer explanations based on candidate characteristics (e.g. available campaign funding, overall state adoption) and state characteristics (e.g. population composition and adoption at state level). Their findings, among others, suggest that candidates who adopted Web 1.0 were also early adopters of Web 2.0 technology, and adopting web technology leads to imitation by other candidates (known as contagion).

The study by Liesbeth Hermans and Maurice Vergeer takes a cross-national comparative perspective on personalization in political campaigning: how do candidates present themselves online and how is this related to cross-national differences – for instance in terms of Hallin and Mancini's media systems classification (2004) and citizens' trust in politics? Their findings show that politicians present themselves at three different levels: as the professional, as the home and family person, and showing personal interests. Furthermore, the politicians from countries that have recently joined the EU and those from low-trust, post-communist countries specifically use personalization strategies. As for the use of social networking sites, the rate of adoption of these sites by central European politicians lags well behind that of West European politicians.

Focusing on the South Korean political websphere, Yon Soo Lim and Han Woo Park, after scraping numerous websites for data, perform a network analysis on the Members of Parliament mentioned on them. They relate the existing political network to the differences in financial support these candidates received in the election campaign and try to assess to how much political normalization or innovation prevailing in South Korea is attributable to taking politics online. An important finding of their research is that politicians that have a more central position in the web visibility network are more likely to receive financial donations.

Cristian Vaccari aims to develop insights on the question whether – according to campaign managers – online campaigning has the potential to change or reinforce existing attitudes. Based on in-depth qualitative interviews with campaigners in the 2008 US presidential campaign, Vaccari explores whether and to what extent campaigning on the Internet helps to persuade people to vote for a specific candidate and under what

conditions. His qualitative study concludes with a set of hypotheses that predicts when and how online campaigning is thought to be persuasive.

In their study of political actors' web campaigning prior to the 2009 European Parliamentary elections in 17 EU countries Maurice Vergeer, Liesbeth Hermans and Carlos Cunha re-apply theoretical notions, as well as refined measurements and statistical analyses (i.e. multilevel analysis), to see how the web is utilized by candidates and political parties. Building on previous cross-national comparative web-feature studies, they not only look at the systemic variables of countries but also at the individual characteristics of candidates. Based on these analyses they conclude that web-feature utilization is poorly explained by characteristics at the systemic level – dismissing findings of prior studies – but is predominantly explained by the individual actors' characteristics.

What the future will bring . . .

Because the Internet is both an electronic network and a social network in terms of how it is used (cf. Wellman, 2001), network analysis as a mathematical method has undergone a revival (Easley and Kleinberg, 2010; Monge and Contractor, 2003). Nowadays, the immensely popular social networking sites, Internet research in general, and political communication in particular, provide numerous new options to study political behavior and online public opinion. It is challenging both from a theoretical point of view and from a methodological standpoint. Advances in ways to collect and analyze online data, whether by application programming interfaces (APIs) provided by the online platforms or scraping software (cf. Sams et al., 2011), these developments allow for unobtrusive analysis of political behavior and public opinion. Specialized software such as Thelwall's Socscibot software, Ackland's Uberlink software or Connected Action's NodeXL as well as package implementations in R statistical software, supports these new ways of data collection.³

These developments have made politics interesting again, not only for citizens but also from a scientist's perspective. However, one type of study this special issue lacks is on predicting election outcomes. Forecasting is a challenge across the sciences. The quality of predictions serves as an indication of the extent to which we understand our world, particularly when the studies are theory-driven. Unfortunately, the laws governing the social world are more sketchy than those of the natural world. Whether social media will add to the explanations beyond already existing ones, or serve as a bellwether in future elections, has yet to be determined.

More problematic and challenging is the fact that political campaigners increasingly use the same tools that scientists use. Software such as social media dashboards bring the websphere to the fingertips of campaign managers and enables them to scrutinize the sentiments concerning their parties, candidates and issues. These aspects provide them with ample opportunities to fine-tune campaigning and perform damage control when necessary, almost in real time. Whether this will lead to an erratic or volatile campaign because of 'on the fly' decision-making is yet to be seen. A more ominous future is painted by Neal Stephenson and George Jewsbury in the novel *Interface* (Stephenson and Jewsbury, 2005), which portrays a governor running for office having been implanted

with a direct interface to the polling stats. Although this is a fictional account, real-time tracking of the public's behavior is common practice in television audience research. Real-time sentiment analysis and opinion-mining are still in their infancy, but most likely will be developed further in the coming decades. Whether this is beneficial to politics is still debated. For instance, the National Election Commission in South Korea banned the use of Twitter (and other methods of promotion) 180 days prior to election day in 2010. However, prior to the most recent elections of 11 April 2012, the Constitutional Court ordered the ban to be lifted. Two dissenting judges feared that lifting the ban could result in the campaigns become overheated (*The Chosun Ilbo (English Edition): Daily News from Korea*, 2011).

What is certain is that the technology is here to stay, and its implementation will only increase. Whether citizens will be reading tweets from politicians as devotedly as they listened to Roosevelt's fireside chats is questionable, due to the increased number of media channels from which people can choose. Where mass media tend to create cohesion through shared experiences, social media might result in 'cyber-balkanization' (Williams, 2007). For politics and social media in a two-party system this is not a problem. Obama's Twitter account (BarackObama) reports over 14 million followers. Mitt Romney's account (MittRomney) reports over 400,000 followers (as of 23 April 2012). However, in a country such as the Netherlands with at least 15 political parties taking part in the elections, social media, if increasingly important for election news, could seriously fragment the political community.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. These queries are more specific than those by Chadwick and Howard (2009) by limiting the search to publications in the Web of Science categories Communication or Political Science. The main reason for narrowing the search to these subject fields is to avoid false positives, particularly for 'social media' (e.g. publications on physics and metallurgy and publications prior to 2000 when social media as Web 2.0 applications did not yet exist).
2. Three factors are most likely to affect the yearly output in academic journals. First the academic interest in the topic itself. Second, the availability of relevant cases to focus research on (e.g. elections), and, third, lag produced by the research workflow and the academic journal workflow. Whether the sharp decline for 2011 is due to relevant articles not being included in the Web of Science database is not clear.
3. See <http://socscibot.wlv.ac.uk/>, <http://www.uberlink.com/> and <http://www.connectedaction.net/nodexl/>

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Appendix I

Web of Science abbreviations of journal titles

New Media Soc	<i>New Media & Society</i>
Inform Commun Soc	<i>Information Communication & Society</i>
Telecommun Policy	<i>Telecommunications Policy</i>
Polit Commun	<i>Political Communication</i>
Javnost-Public	<i>Javnost/The Public</i>
J Mass Commun Q	<i>Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly</i>
J Comput-Mediat Comm	<i>Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication</i>
Eur J Commun	<i>European Journal of Communication</i>
J Commun	<i>Journal of Communication</i>
Media Cult Soc	<i>Media Culture & Society</i>
Int J Commun	<i>International Journal of Communication</i>
Media Int Aust	<i>Media International Australia</i>
Public Relat Rev	<i>Public Relations Review</i>
PS-Polit Sci Polit	<i>PS: Political Science & Politics</i>
Ann Am Acad Polit SS	<i>Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science</i>
Harvard Int J Press Pol	Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics

Maurice Vergeer works at the Department of Communication Science, Radboud University, Nijmegen. His research interest focuses on online political campaigning and people's use of social media in general.