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Abstract

This piece speculates on the internet's wider influences on the shape of institutional politics in representative 'actually existing democracies'. Findings, based on 100 semi-structured interviews with political actors (politicians, journalists and officials) operating around the UK Parliament, suggest two contrasting trends. On the one hand, more political actors at the immediate edges of the UK institutional political process are being further engaged in a sort of centrifugal movement going outwards from the centre. At the same time, the space between this extended political centre and its public periphery is increasing. This latter, democratic elitist shift in UK politics may be interpreted as 'new' and ICT-driven. It might equally be argued that new media is exacerbating pre-existing political party and media trends in mature democracies which fail to engage ordinary citizens.

Key words

communicative links, democracy, engagement, political participation

Introduction

This article speculates on the internet's wider influences on the shape of institutional politics in representative 'actually existing democracies'. It does so by focusing on the communicative links and patterns of engagement that are emerging between elected politicians and other groups of political actors operating around the political centre. Recent studies are combined with the results of 100 semi-structured interviews with UK-based political actors (politicians, journalists and officials) in an effort to identify developing trends.

Findings suggest that internet-mediated democracy, at least in the UK case, is encouraging two, somewhat contrary political trends. On the one hand, more political actors at the immediate edges of the UK institutional political process are being further engaged

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in a sort of centrifugal movement going outwards from the centre. However, at the same time, the distance between this fatter political centre and its public periphery is increasing. Mass, off-line news media, which is the dominant source of political information for most, is becoming less informative. Those same online spaces and communicative exchanges, developing around the political centre, are relatively insular and exclusionary. In other words, politics, for those already engaged or interested, is becoming denser, wider, and possibly more pluralistic and inclusive. But, at the same time, the mass of unengaged citizens is being subject to greater communicative exclusion and experiencing increasing disengagement.

These paradoxical tendencies lead to what might be described as a thicker, broader form of elite polyarchy. This is akin to a sort of middle-management expansion of UK politics or a fatter democratic elitist model. While such a shift may be interpreted as 'new' and ICT-driven, it might equally be argued that new media is exacerbating pre-existing political and media trends in mature Western democracies. Internet-enhanced politics may be improving democratic engagement and accountability at the centre but, as yet, is unlikely to be offering a solution to wider patterns of public disengagement from institutional politics.

Evaluating new media's contribution to democratic communication: redirecting assessments from direct, deliberative to actually existing democracies

Digital engagements between politicians and citizens: unfulfilled expectations

Early research on the internet's potential for reshaping democracy was clearly influenced by the normative values presented in the works of direct democracy and public sphere advocates (Habermas, 1989; Bohman, 1996; Dryzek, 2002; Putnam, 2000). These argued for more inclusive public participation and deliberative exchange between ordinary citizens and political elites. Accordingly, new ICTs appeared to offer the tools with which to apply the theory. Thus, Negroponce (1995) and Rash (1997) were among the first to argue that the internet offered the potential for a renewal of direct democracy.

At the parliamentary and government levels, a spate of US and UK studies and institutional initiatives (Coleman and Gotze, 2001; Bimber, 2003; Coleman, 2004, 2005; Gulati, 2004; Ward et al., 2005; Chadwick, 2006; Lusoli et al., 2006) explored the potential for online exchanges between citizens and their elected representatives. These attempted to evaluate the possible conditions for the emergence of a 'civic commons in cyberspace' with 'citizen panels', 'e-consultation and deliberation'. A smaller group of studies have asked similar questions at the political party level (Ward and Gibson, 2000; Ward et al., 2002; Lusoli and Ward, 2003; Rommele, 2003; Gillmor, 2004; Trippi, 2004; Davis, 2005). These asked whether new media could be useful in halting the long-term declines in party membership and levels of member activism. New media could potentially reconnect party leaders to ordinary, local members, thus improving accountability as a consequence of better 'intra-party democracy'.

Another series of studies have applied such a research focus to other forums outside national, institutional politics. These have included investigations of several localized,

experimental online forums, including local officials and politicians (e.g., Dahlberg, 2001; Polat, 2005; Wikland, 2005; Jensen, 2006), and within the online sites of interest groups, social movements and professional associations (Atton, 2004; Pickerill, 2004, 2006; Kavada, 2005; Dean et al., 2006; Couldry, forthcoming, 2009). Such studies discussed and evaluated these online spaces in terms of their informational and organizational capacities but, also, public sphere communicative ideals such as ease of access, inclusiveness and deliberative structures.

However, to date, early enthusiasm has given way to more sober or pessimistic assessments of the internet's potential for reconnecting political elites to citizens or party members. Politicians, parties and government institutions have been slow to adopt online deliberative tools. Instead, new media is more likely to be viewed as an alternative tool for political organization or service delivery, or be used as an additional one-to-many promotional medium (Jackson, 2003; Gulati, 2004; Jackson and Lilleker, 2004; Chadwick, 2006). Studies of political parties have documented a series of positive developments from improved information dissemination and organization to better linking of ordinary members and fund raising. Each of these have been particularly important for smaller political parties, such as the Liberal Democrats in the UK, and the emergence of lesser known and resourced candidates, such as Howard Dean and Barak Obama in the US (Ward et al., 2002; Lusoli and Ward, 2003; Rommele, 2003; Gillmor, 2004; Trippi, 2004). However, none of these studies has observed more than limited use of online forums for greater external policy inputs or deliberation between ordinary members and party leaders or candidates.

More generally, there appear to be several aspects of the internet which may actually be hindering the very public sphere ideals of public participation and engagement aspired to. Internet use by ordinary citizens is predominantly consumer and leisure, rather than politically, oriented. In the UK, in the year of the last UK election (2005), only 3.3 per cent of the population used the internet as their main source of political information and only 3 per cent looked at political party sites (Lusoli and Ward, 2003). Second, encouraging internet-facilitated exchanges and deliberation, according to public sphere norms, has proved difficult and expensive in many political settings. Such difficulties have been noted in local institutional sites (Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005; Polat, 2005; Wikland, 2005), such as Minnesota E-Democracy, and among established interest groups, such as Amnesty, Oxfam and Friends of the Earth (Pickerill, 2004; Kavada, 2005).

The 'digital divide' is another barrier which threatens to increase political participation (Golding and Murdock, 2000; Norris, 2001; Bonfadelli, 2002; Jensen, 2006; Lusoli et al., 2006). Many have noted that online political participation is correlated along the lines of income, education, age, race and, above all, an existing predisposition to participate in real-world politics. Lastly, according to Sunstein (2001) the internet encourages individuals to pick and choose sites in a way that reduces engagement with alternative viewpoints and undermines shared public forums. The consequences are the development of well-organized 'smart mobs' (Rheingold, 2002) and polarized, fragmented interest group ghettos. All of which suggest that the internet is neither widening nor deepening political participation or engagement between citizens and political leaders.

The best that might be said is that interest groups, 'citizen journalists' and others (Downing, 2001; Gillmor, 2004; Pickerill, 2004; Couldry, forthcoming, 2009) may be better placed to organize opposition to politicians and political institutions. Since such

developments may also enhance the communicative abilities of those same political and corporate actors, at the centres of decision-making, such gains may be negligible (e.g. Schiller, 1996; Herman and McChesney, 1997; Golding and Murdock, 2000). It is thus easy to concur with a long line of cyber-pessimists in concluding that the internet has had a negligible impact on levels of institutional democracy.

Pragmatic conceptions of actually existing democracies: an alternative evaluative schema

At this point, it might be concluded that the internet's ability to alter communication in democracies, according to the normative ideals of public sphere and direct democracy advocates, appears limited. Alternatively, it might be argued that the evaluative research parameters being applied need extending. These are based on measuring qualitative changes in direct and deliberative forms of democracy rather than observing influences on large, complex societies (Calhoun, 1988; Habermas, 1996; Sunstein, 2001) or 'actually existing democracies' (Fraser, 1992). This ICT-oriented approach side-steps the many non-technical (social, economic, organizational) obstacles to such forms of direct, deliberative democracy (see Polat, 2005; Brandenburg, 2006; Dahlberg, 2007; Davis, 2007). Therefore, evaluations of the internet's impact on institutional and party politics need to be broadened beyond investigating such things as the formal mechanisms of public deliberation. Instead, it should be asked: How might representative democracies in large, complex societies be changing with the arrival of the internet? This leads observation of change to be investigated in additional directions.

One of these is to move away from the single focus on individual citizen-to-state communication. In fact, much debate and research about politics and representative democracy, since the early 20th century, has centred on competing groups, organizations, institutions and networks, and their relationship to the state. The central concern is whether a healthy pluralist balance of groups exists, as 'empirical democratic theorists' argue (Lindblom, 1977; Dahl, 1989), or whether, as a range of critics conclude (Mills, 1956; Poulantzas, 1975), it does not. A related issue is that of intra-group democracy. Within parties, groups and organizations, rigid hierarchies form and come to be dominated by elites at the top (Michels, 1967 [1911]). Representative democracies, more generally, must continue to fend off a tendency to decline into a state of 'competitive elitism' (Schumpeter, 1942) – something all too familiar in many current systems (e.g. Crouch, 2004; Domhoff, 2005; Hay, 2007). If such issues are central to contemporary representative democracies then perhaps the internet's influence on shaping these dynamics needs closer inspection. Thus, as Dahlberg (2007: 829) suggests, in relation to new media research, 'the public sphere [should] be reconceptualised around both intra- and inter-discursive contestation'.

By the same token new media's impact on mass news media and 'soft' forms of deliberation need to be included. This is because the majority of citizens in stable democracies only seek to be minimally informed of, or engage with, institutional politics (Hansard, 2004; Ward et al., 2005; Lusoli et al., 2006). As Brandenburg states (2006: 218): 'public discontent with political elites and representative systems in general does not amount to a widespread demand for inclusion in a deliberative system that affords active participation'.

Thus, for most of the public their only conscious engagement with institutional politics is through general news media. This, in all its forms, becomes the main ‘public forum’ for contemporary representative democracies (Calhoun, 1988; Dahlgren, 1995; Kellner, 2000; Sunstein, 2001; Butsch, 2007). The emotional and non-rational may also be significant influences on both ordinary citizens and actors in and around the political centre. As Pickerill (2006) argues, in respect of new media, perhaps one needs to have a broader interpretation of ‘deliberation’ that includes both its ‘hard’, formal and ‘soft’, informal forms.

The study and methods employed

Accordingly, the work presented here has attempted to incorporate several of these points into its research framework. It involved observing, interviewing and evaluating politically-active individuals, and their communication processes, as they operated in and around the UK Parliament. Research was interested in investigating communicative links and exchanges, both in terms of those taking place between political elites and citizens but, also, within and between groups and factions. It also included a broader interpretation of ‘deliberation’ to include both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ aspects. In all, 100 semi-structured interviews took place with 60 politicians, 20 political journalists and bloggers, and 20 officials in Parliament and the civil service. Politicians were themselves selected in terms of their roles as elected MPs (50) and Peers (10), by party and gender in representative ratios reflecting the current Parliament (2005–), and as a mix of front-bench (30 existing/former ministers or shadow ministers) and back-bench (30) MPs. Each interviewee was thus asked about the role of media and communication in their daily activities before then asking about how new media had changed the way they personally did things. Responses for each category – politicians, journalists and officials – were analysed qualitatively and also aggregated (see Table 1). Answers also directed the selection of more open-ended follow-up questions. A list of those interviewees cited appears in an appendix at the end of this article.

Table 1. Responses of politicians to questions: a) How has the internet changed politics and communication processes around politics? b) How has it changed the way you do things?

New media application for MPs	Party-specific activity?
1. Net as a research tool	Much more Lab/LD, not Con
2. Emails with constituents problematic	More Cons, less Lab, 1 LD
3. Email/net use in political/internal organization	Half LD, third Cons and Lab
4. Prefer letters/trad. comm. forms with constituents	More Lab than Cons or LD
5. Net (e.g. blogs) as tool for MPs/activists	Roughly even
6. E-consultation with public problematic	Marginally more Lab and LD
7. Use of net for customized news collection/gather news online	Marginally more Lab, LD
8. Regular email with constituents	Most LD, then Cons, then Lab
9. Parliament/MPs slow to adopt new media	All parties
10. MPs admit IT illiteracy	More Lab and Cons, no LD
11. Web information problematic (overload, credibility, etc.)	Lab, 2 LD, no Cons
12. 24 hour news/net combination problematic for politics	Just Lab
13. Blogs a waste of resources	Lab, 2 LD, no Cons

Clearly, the research has a key limitation. Evaluating wider communication links, based mostly on individual interviews (as opposed to non-actor/quantitative analysis of, for example, websites or network relations), is likely to give a subjective picture. The research design tried to compensate for this in two ways. First, interviewees were not told the specific research objectives or asked to evaluate the democratic operation of their work per se. They were instead asked a series of questions about their own daily communicative and cognitive processes. Second, the research attempted to aggregate, cross-reference and triangulate interview material from a range of oppositional and sometimes antagonistic observation points. So, potentially opposed cross-party and senior/junior MP views were sought. Related interview protocols, with similar questions, were also put to journalists/bloggers and officials. Conclusions were thus drawn from aggregating interview findings from a mix of sources. Space restrictions mean that the findings of each occupation are not all presented here separately. Instead, individual sector summaries are presented within themed discussions where similar aggregated findings were supported across professions.

New media and the thickening of communicative links in and around the political centre

findings here evaluate how the internet might be encouraging democratic shifts in communication around the political centre. As such they focus on the internet's utility in ameliorating group or faction inequalities in information/communication resources, the facilitation of intra-group and inter-group exchanges, and the countering of oligarchic tendencies. On each of these points the interview material suggested some positive shifts. Potentially, these may be making formal, institutional and party-based politics a little more pluralist, inclusive and accountable.

The internet as a means for obtaining information equality

Starting with the resource question, clearly any political system that seeks pluralist balance is confronted with the problem of economic inequalities being reproduced in information and communication terms (see Goldenberg, 1975, Gandy, 1982). These exist between and within political parties, interest groups and factions, and also affect the professional efficacy of individual candidates and journalists. As such the internet has been seen as a valuable tool that might enable 'resource-poor' political parties (Ward et al., 2002; Jackson, 2003; Lusoli and Ward, 2003) and individual political candidates (Gillmor, 2004; Trippi, 2004) to compete. Thus, the question is: Is the internet ameliorating existing inter- and intra-group resource inequalities in and around the political centre?

For a majority of interviewees, the use of the internet to both publish and access political information has been very significant. Many parliamentary and government officials stated that new media has quite simply improved public engagement by making politics itself more transparent and accessible. Following several institutional reviews (HoC, 2002, 2004; Hansard, 2005) extensive amounts of parliamentary material has been published on the web. 'Parliament Live', a new video and audio section of the parliamentary website, now carries live and archived coverage (for 28 days) of all public debates and committee meetings in the two Houses. Parliamentary research papers have been made publicly accessible and downloads have rapidly increased. In 2006–7 there were 1.52 million

downloads of parliamentary policy research papers, 289,000 downloads of standard notes (shorter policy briefings), and 386,000 downloads of fact sheets (HoC, 2007).

Journalists and bloggers also argued that the internet had increased the available space and possible choice of subject matter for publishing political news. Established journalists, using online versions of off-line outlets, could now file additional political reports, offer more background detail and opinion on those stories, and produce extra columns and blogs. Bloggers were free to cover more specialist topics, expand interviews and depth coverage and pursue controversial stories (see similar findings in US studies: Gillmor, 2004; Lowrey, 2006; Carlson, 2007). Thus the internet has contributed to an expansion of politically significant information, offering what traditional institutions and news media could not:

the internet capacity on the web, it means that many more of our stories can be made available ... stuff, you know, to do with process and constitutional things, perhaps I may write to the online site not to the paper. So there is a crisis there of [off-line] space but that can be compensated for by the online. (Peter Riddell, political print journalist²)

Conversely, it seemed to be clear that all groups of interviewees (politicians, journalists, officials) were benefiting from these additional information sources. When asked how new media had changed their working practices, the most common answer for all was using the internet as a research tool. Five out of six MPs said they used it to search for information on a regular basis, and more than half of these said 'a lot'. As many also explained, a lack of research resources was a frequent impediment to policy engagement. The internet now enabled them to spend hours, rather than days, in researching topics for political and policy debates.

Interestingly, interview responses, as well as other studies (Ward et al., 2002; Jackson, 2003), indicated that it was the poorest funded of the three national parties, the Liberal Democrats, who were the quickest to adopt internet technologies. All eight Liberal Democrat MPs interviewed were IT literate and most likely to use the internet as a tool for research, organization and email exchange with constituents. Journalists could also learn more about and engage with party politics and policy (see below). Within parties, lesser-resourced back-bench MPs were more able to challenge policy decisions adopted by their better-resourced party leaders. Typically, as one Labour MP on the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, explained:

For foreign affairs ... [I would go to the] Library, internet, not the party on that ... I'd dip into sort of [the websites of] *The Guardian*, *Times*, *Telegraph*, you know, and see what has been written ... there are serious resource deficiencies here in that the time for research is limited and I do most of it myself. (Andrew MacKinley, Labour Party MP)

Digitally-enhanced intra- and inter-party/organizational exchange and deliberation

Another key issue explored was that of the development of online intra- and inter-group communication, exchange and deliberation across political parties and linked constituencies. Starting with intra-party politics, as several have noted (Norris, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Crouch, 2004; Dalton, 2004; Hay, 2007), there has been a long-term

decline in party memberships and traditional voter-party alignments. Several earlier studies have explored the internet's potential for increasing membership integration and intra-party democracy in the UK (Ward and Gibson, 2000; Ward et al., 2002; Lusoli and Ward, 2003; Rommele, 2003). Despite some positive developments, none recorded any significant success when it came to cross-party or elite-to-member deliberative exchange.

The interview research presented here, and conducted more recently, suggested more significant shifts were now taking place at the party level. In part, this was down to the general take-up and use of ICTs, as more members and MPs used the internet for their daily activities. Within Parliament, internal email traffic has almost quadrupled since 2000 (PICT, 2006) and, by 2006–7, a number of parliamentary procedures (e.g. tabling of questions, circulation of Early Day Motions) were increasingly done via the internet (HoC, 2007). This came through in many of the interviews.

Second, the recent emergence of high-profile political blogging and chatroom sites in the UK, oriented around the major parties but not run by them (significant for some years in the US; see Davis, 2005, in particular), also seemed to be part of an important shift here. During interviews with back-bench MPs especially there was a frequent sense of struggling to keep informed about, or contribute to, the policy process and politics within one's own party. Online sites were one increasingly useful means for getting such information about, or participating in, party-wide processes and discussions. Sites like ConservativeHome or LabourHome were becoming recognized sources of detailed information, analysis and debate on party politics and policy. Others, such as Guido Fawkes or Recess Monkey, with strong political opinions and gossip, influenced 'softer' forms of deliberation and decision-making. Just as back-benchers looked to such sites, so did more senior party figures who were involved in developing party policy or party candidate and leadership selections. Thus, in the view of one former director of the Conservative Party Policy Unit:

there is a huge community of political blogs that are extremely influential now. Conservative Home.com is a very important one ... And blogs like Iain Dale's Diary ... over the last year or so that has been the big political phenomenon, and no serious analyst of politics could now operate without a detailed understanding of the blogs. (Greg Clark, Conservative Party MP)

Similar views were expressed by the political journalists and bloggers interviewed for the research. Each saw the relevance of these sites for party factions engaged in policy and political differences with a large proportion of online information and stories coming from inside the same party. Such sites included a mix of 'kite-flying', damaging gossip, rational argument and positive exchanges. As one, more positive account explained:

It's the Cabinet that is the policy-making machine of the Labour Party ... the Labour Party members increasingly need something back for their membership ... So I wanted to make a space on the internet ... where anyone could come along and write about Labour politics, or politics in general, and not feel that their views are unwelcome ... this engagement across cliques enables people to remind each other of why they're in the same party. (Alex Hilton, left-wing blogger)

Overall, the interview material suggested that new media is playing a growing part in intra-party participation, exchange and deliberation and in ways that are more open to

back-bench MPs and ordinary party members. However, where do such developments leave the issue of inter-group communicative exchange? Increased intra-group exchange might itself be developing at the expense of inter-group exchange. For Sunstein (2001) and Lovink (2007), individuals, are increasingly choosing to avoid public forums, containing mixed viewpoints, leading to cultural balkanization. Some of these trends are undoubtedly true. However, the research observed more instances of inter-group linking than online ghettos.

Those involved in or around the UK political centre regarded it as essential to both watch and report on their opponents' outputs and all had easy access to any of these sites. MPs who followed or produced blogs also looked at the blogs of friendly and opposition MPs. Journalists and bloggers looked at sites across the political spectrum. The sites of all of the bloggers interviewed had multiple links to opposing political sites and had even combined to set up a joint advertising venture. Other studies have observed similar such exchanges and links (Gillmor, 2004; Jensen, 2006; Quandt et al., 2006; Reese et al., 2007). Journalists and bloggers, when asked about their online respondents, all stated that a third or more consisted of individuals with opposing political views.

Of equal significance, journalists, writing for larger and more varied audiences, made quite extensive use of online information sources. As 'general interest intermediaries' (Sunstein, 2001) they drew on a diverse mix of sites (official and unofficial, left and right) for story ideas and information. For junior reporters official online sites had become invaluable information sources which made up for lack of access to senior political sources. Two-thirds of the journalists also said they frequently looked at the more popular blogging sites and, less often, at politician blogs:

it was physically hard to get hold of all these documents. Now you have no excuse because they're on your screen in front of you. You just have to look for them and find them. And so the Government websites play a huge part in what I do. (Sam Coates, political print journalist)

Blogs are the equivalent of going to the bar ... ConservativeHome is terrific, I mean that really is a professional job, which you get quality information ... on who's standing in constituencies for the selection processes. What used to be a really opaque process has become transparent because of ConservativeHome. (Joe Murphy, political print journalist)

The question of how substantial and positive these internet-facilitated shifts are to representative 'actually existing democracies' remains speculative. However, what can be argued in the UK case is that the communicative ties between political participants are thickening. The proliferation of new blogging sites, chatrooms and online 'citizen journalism', in providing new political spaces that are not party controlled, has encouraged a communicative shift at the party and associated organizations level. There appears to be a sort of centrifugal movement, outward from the political centre, and more horizontally across groups and organizations. The insider political process is a little more accessible and transparent.

New media and the distancing of the popular sovereign periphery

Are there wider consequences of this thickening of the political centre for the majority of less-interested citizens? Where do such shifts leave those whose participation in

institutional politics varies between total apathy and general interest/voting? The research here could only answer these questions from the perspective of those close to the political centre. This suggested that internet-influenced politics may also be contributing to a general weakening of the communicative links between political elites and citizens. First, new media is further hastening the decline of traditional mass-mediated public spheres. Second, it is contributing to the exclusionary political 'elite discourse networks' that exist in traditional, offline politics.

Undermining traditional, offline news production

In terms of the mass-mediated public sphere there is long-term evidence of industry decline in the news media with many non-technological arguments put forward for this in the UK literature (Franklin, 1997; Barnett and Gaber, 2001; Davis, 2007; Davies, 2008). These reveal a continuing downward trend in circulation figures, greater pressure to cut costs, recycling of news content and multi-tasking, and the rise of 'infotainment' at the expense of 'hard' news coverage. According to several US studies (Cohen, 2002; Singer, 2003; Scott, 2005) the internet's arrival has further destabilized the basic business model of journalism which relied on a limited number of news producers and stable advertising. The flourishing of cheap web-based news companies, international competition and news aggregators, such as Yahoo and Google, have all devalued basic news content. Research centres, regulators (Ofcom, 2007) and journalists themselves have begun to draw tentative links between the internet's arrival, increased market pressures and the quality of journalism (see collection in Fenton, 2009). Advertising has been moving from traditional news suppliers to online, predominantly non-news sites (Advertising Association, 2007) but, at the same time, online news is being funded out of traditional news gathering resources.

This came out in interviews. While most of the journalists felt they had gained from the internet, many were also aware of increasing financial constraints, deadline pressures, and an organizational expectation of greater productivity gained via internet use. Reporters were encouraged to spend more time at their desks, constructing news from not always reliable web sources, and less time on traditional news gathering and investigative reporting:

people are under huge pressure, talk to anyone from *The Telegraph* ... At the moment PMQs finishes, George Jones has got to go over and file stuff, and he may even have to do an iPod broadcast as well as something for the blog. And that's all time when you'd normally go straight downstairs and talk to MPs ... and there he is stuck in front of his computer writing something that nobody's going to read. (Gary Gibbon, political broadcast journalist)

if you see a big story breaking on the telly, and you look at the presenter, let's say on a 24-hour news channel, yes you can see the presenters Googling as they're broadcasting ... when you're under those time constraints, the internet is fabulous but it's dangerous as well. (Daisy McAndrew, political broadcast journalist)

Facilitating online elite discourse networks

Arguably, ordinary citizens are also becoming further disconnected as a consequence of what is taking place in the newly forming online networks around the political centre.

This is, in part, because online patterns of political communicative exchange are reproducing offline tendencies. Such trends, whereby political elites frequently tend to look and engage almost exclusively with each other, have been noted in several studies (Herbst, 1998; Davis, 2003, 2007; Lewis et al., 2005). Each has observed the tendency of policy elites (politicians, officials and journalists) to form 'closed information systems' or 'elite discourse networks' that are relatively shielded from the wider public. It seemed from the interviews that, in many ways, new media use has encouraged such patterns.

It emerged that, for users at the political centre, email exchanges and online deliberations with the outside world were problematic for practical reasons. For each MP who was a constituency email enthusiast there were two more who voiced strong concerns about it (see Table 1). Less than one in ten had engaged with any regularity in forms of wider online dialogue (blogs, debates, etc.). In fact, for many civil servants and former ministers interviewed, the wider public had neither the expertise nor interest to participate in the majority of policy processes and outcomes (see also studies by Marsh et al., 2001; Smith, 2003). However, at the same time, for interviewees, the internet had been most useful for organization and consultation purposes with those they already engaged with. More than a third noted this. Thus, it is no surprise that institutional ICT adoption has been more 'about managerial control and cost reduction' than widening participation and consultation (Chadwick, 2006: 322). As one official explained:

now everyone can watch it [select committee work] on the website, you know, the web casting, and every public meeting is either in sound or vision ... But I think for the moment, that's principally of value to the media and to interested parties like public affairs lobbyists and so on. I'm not sure that, as it were, the general public engages at that level. (Robert Wilson, senior parliamentary official)

Similar findings became apparent in relation to online journalism and blogging. For both bloggers and blogging journalists there was a strong sense, based on experience of online responses, that their audience was primarily from a privileged, politically-oriented demographic. Paul Staines's (Guido Fawkes) actual market data summarized his audience as being: average age 44, richer and from a higher social class than *Financial Times* readers, and with clear clusters from Oxbridge and other top universities, and Whitehall and Westminster (see similar results in Bonfadelli, 2002; Davis, 2005; Ward et al., 2005; Jenson, 2006; Lusoli et al., 2006; Ofcom, 2007). This is unsurprising as the majority of people do not access the online sites of conventional news organizations and political institutions. According to Ofcom (2007), in 2006, only 6 per cent of the UK public got its news from the internet, as opposed to 65 per cent from television. Ward et al. (2005) found that only 2 per cent of people had visited their local MP's website and 5 per cent the parliamentary website in the last 12 months. As Paul Staines and other bloggers explained, they felt they were producing outputs for a relatively specialist group of insiders and 'political junkies':

Maybe during elections people read political blogs, but mostly it's activists and political junkies ... I'm not aiming to write up a story that appeals to, you know, the same readers as *The Telegraph*. I mean, I'm more writing for political hacks and people obsessed with politics. Now I'm narrow casting ... about 3000 hits a day on some of the politics blogs are from parliament.uk and gov.uk. (Paul Staines, right-wing blogger)

Such insular and cross-referencing networks also seemed to be becoming more entrenched as a result of the internet. When journalists were asked about how new media had changed their practices, the second most common answer was its use in monitoring other news outlets. These practices have increasingly come to include the monitoring of bloggers who, in turn, closely follow online journalists (see similar findings in Allan, 2006; Quandt et al., 2006; Reese et al., 2007). According to Reese et al.'s study (2007) 99 per cent of the content of blogging sites was already published material subject to analysis or comment. The picture emerging was one of a conveyor belt of news, information and opinion that rapidly circulates across a select number of top sites. MPs, journalists and other interested individuals choose to go to the websites of a small number of established news producers or well-known bloggers. All watch, contribute to, and may be the subject of, these sites. As one blogger explained:

I wrote a story on my blog about Cherie Blair signing the Hutton Report ... And a few hours later it started appearing on *BBC Radio London*. Then it was on *Channel 4 News* and then, the next day, it was on the front page of three or four of the national newspapers ... that was really the first time that I understood that most of the Westminster Lobby read my blog ... then I found out that I was on the media monitoring list of the Shadow Cabinet. So when I realised that all of the Lobby and half the Shadow Cabinet and a lot of Tory MPs and other MPs, read my blog, it was a little bit of a shock. (Iain Dale, right-wing blogger)

Thus, in several respects, new media has contributed to a weakening of the already fragile communicative links that existed between political elites at the centre and ordinary citizens at the periphery. Clearly, the same political elite tendencies observed in the pre-internet information environment are also developing, albeit on a wider scale and in alternative formats, in the new media age. The mass of the public at the political periphery are being further distanced from the political centre. In part, this is linked to the decline in mass media coverage of institutional politics which is, itself, contributed to by the transfer of reporting resources and advertising to online platforms. Partly it is also a consequence of the daily new media uses and practices of those engaged within, or close to, the political centre. Thus, the proliferation of new media sites is not as yet useful for re-engaging the mass of citizens who have turned away from party and institutional politics.

Conclusion: Thick competitive elitism

Putting these findings together, the following speculative conclusions might be put forward. There does appear to be a significant increase in the communicative links between those in and around the UK political centre. More specialist political information is available to those activists and interested observers than ever before. There are more means of exchange and deliberation of a 'hard'/formal and 'soft'/informal nature. The ability of ordinary party members, journalists and others to engage in such forums is one means of bypassing the restrictions of traditional news media and party-organized communicative spaces. Such developments may encourage greater responsiveness and engagement by party leaders and political elites. However, at the same time, there is a further distancing of the less party-politically engaged mass of citizens. Mainstream news media will devote fewer resources to political coverage because of the collapse of

its business model and declining consumer interest. Online spaces and forums may fill the gap but only for those already engaged. The online networks now forming are tightly linked, cross-referencing and self-regarding. As engagements increase at this level, those on the outside, whether through active choice or exclusion, become more removed.

So a sort of fatter, middle-management form of representative democracy is being encouraged with new ICTs. To this extent it might be argued that online trends noted here may be reproducing more general offline trends in the focus and appeal of political parties to members and voters. As others have observed (Crouch, 2004; Dalton, 2004; Hay, 2007), political parties in mature democracies have increasingly focused their resources on capturing a core grouping of centre-ground, middle-class voters while retaining core supporters. Such strategies involve engaging more with significant stakeholders but at the cost of alienating multiple groups of others. Online politics may be further encouraging these trends.

These larger research-based conclusions relate specifically to the UK case. Although many individual points are supported by studies of journalism, interest groups and politics elsewhere, the general picture drawn here may not be reproduced elsewhere. Variations in political system, internet penetration and geography, amongst other factors, may all influence the shape of online politics. There is thus scope for further comparative work that applies mixed methods to other systems. As stated earlier (see methods section above), using interview-based research alone has certain limitations. Attempts to triangulate responses from alternative sector perspectives in part alleviates this. So would a collection and comparison of other more quantitative forms of data, such as that on website access/use and online networks.

Notes

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- 2 A list of interviewees and interview details are included in an appendix at the end of this article.

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Appendix: interviewees cited

- Greg Clark, Conservative MP for Tunbridge Wells, advisor and director of Conservative Policy Unit, 25 April 2006
- Sam Coates, Political Correspondent for the *Times*, 29 January 2007
- Iain Dale, Conservative political blogger, author, publisher, television and radio presenter, 22 March 2007
- Garry Gibbon, Political Editor for Channel Four News, 25 January 2007
- Alex Hilton, Labour political blogger, 10 May 2007
- Andrew MacKinley, Labour MP for Thurrock, opposition whip 1993–4, 20 March 2007
- Daisy McAndrew, Political Editor for ITN, 30 January 2007
- Joe Murphy, Political Editor of the *Standard*, 11 April 2007
- Peter Riddell, Chief Political Commentator for the *Times*, 30 August 2006
- Paul Staines (aka Guido Fawkes), Conservative political blogger, 29 March 2007
- Robert Wilson, Principal Clerk of Select Committees, 3 May 2006.

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