

Despite the availability of social media as a campaign tool, 2010 was business as usual for constituency level campaigners

democraticaudit.com/2013/09/25/despite-the-availability-of-social-media-as-a-campaign-tool-2010-was-business-as-usual-for-constituency-level-campaigners-in-the-uk/

By Democratic Audit UK

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*The arrival of the internet, especially social media, was thought by many to offer a chance at democratic renewal, as it allows for greater interaction between citizens and their representatives. **Benjamin Lee** researched the use of social media by candidates at the 2010 general election. In this post he sets out his findings, showing that even with the availability of Web 2.0 as a campaign tool, constituency campaigning in 2010 was little different to previous elections.*



How is social media such being used in constituency-level election campaigns? Credit: cobalt123 (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

It has never been more important to run engaging political campaigns in the UK. As a parliamentary democracy based on first-past-the-post voting, campaigning at the constituency level plays a major role in connecting voters with would be leaders in the UK. Despite this, parties face competition for the attentions of voters from social movements and single issue pressure groups. Equally, this comes against a backdrop of public apathy, low levels of youth participation, reduced numbers of party activists prepared to campaign on the streets and blurring social distinctions that make it harder for campaigners to craft effective messages. There is a real risk that, if these trends continue unchecked, then political parties will become less legitimate in the eyes of the public.

The arrival of the World Wide Web was thought by many to offer a chance at democratic renewal. There was a palpable optimism in much of the early writings on the Web as scholars such as [Ian Budge](#) set out new visions for

radically participatory democracy. In campaigning too it was thought the web offered a chance to restore the broken links between campaigns and voters, creating what [Kirsten Foot and Steven Schneider](#) termed a 'transactional relationship'. Between 1997 and 2005 the web gradually permeated campaigning in the UK. One study of the 2005 general election estimated that 37 per-cent of candidates had a website.

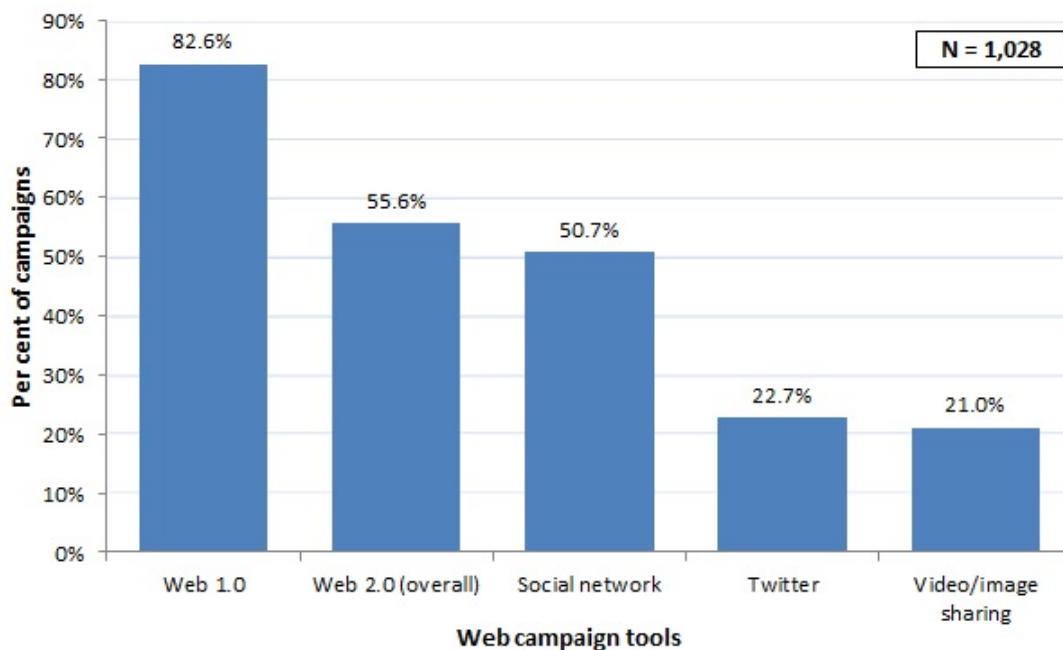
Of course, there is a significant difference between maintaining a website and renewing democracy. For web campaigns to address the problem of legitimacy set out above then it was necessary for them to be more than 'brochure-ware' simply parroting existing party messages. Instead, campaign websites needed to be a space in which, much like on the doorstep, candidates and voters could interact with one another and build relationships. This kind of in-depth relationship has been far more elusive. A study by [Rachel Gibson and Stephen Ward](#) in 2003 concluded that only a tiny portion of campaign websites featured any interaction between candidates and voters.

The lack of interaction is easy to explain theoretically. [Jennifer Stromer-Galley](#) argued that candidates avoided interaction as it took up too much time and made it more likely that they would have to reveal unpopular policy details under questioning. Much better then for candidates to avoid offering voters the opportunity to pose them awkward questions.

This might have remained the case if it had not been for the dot com crash and the subsequent re-branding exercise by publishing firm [O'Reilly](#) that introduced the idea of Web 2.0. Despite its reputation as a 'buzz word' and being decried as jargon by the creator of the Web himself Tim Berners-Lee, the post 2005 period saw the launch of a number of services that made it easier to communicate and share online. The 2010 general election in the UK was the first time that services such as Facebook and Twitter had been in widespread use by the electorate. Moving from an environment in which they controlled the content to one that was populated by content from users may mean that candidates no longer had the option of dodging awkward questions. So, with this in mind, how interactive were constituency campaigns in the 2010 election, and were their efforts likely to lead to better connections between voters and campaigners?

Superficially at least the signs were favourable. The 2010 Electoral Agent Survey, a dataset collected in the aftermath of campaigns since 1992, shows that 82 percent of campaigns that responded to the survey had a website, and over half of respondents used Web 2.0 tools in some form; either as a social network, video or image sharing sites or used Twitter (The singling out of Twitter in the questionnaire reflects the centrality of SMS messages in Twitter's early days, although there was potential for confusion as many would also include Twitter as a social network.)

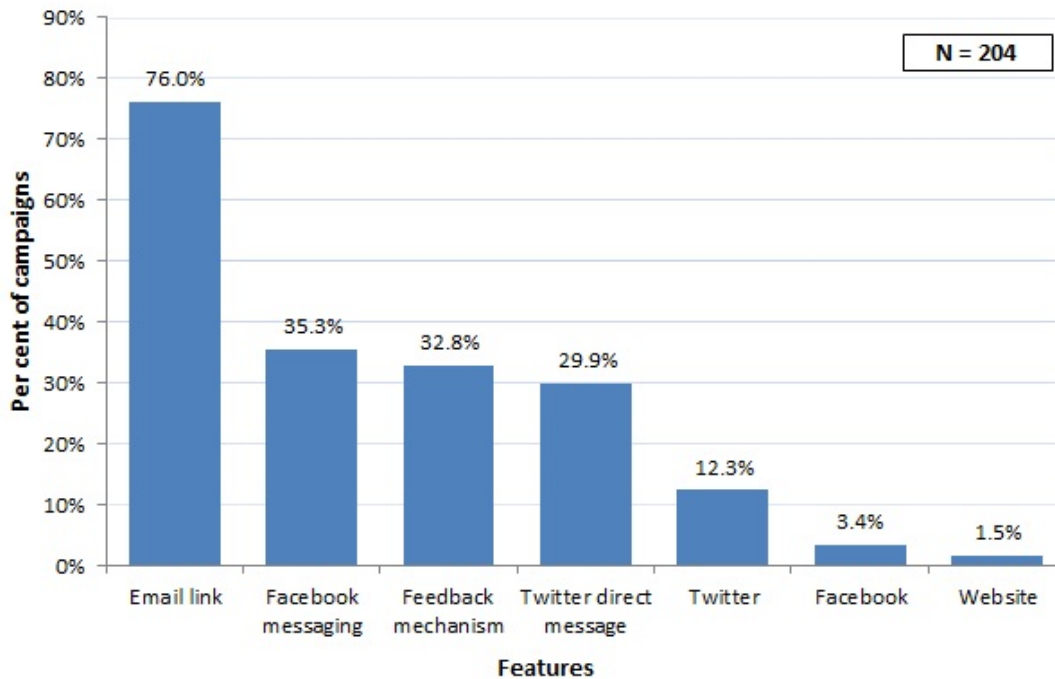
Chart one: Web campaign tools at the 2010 election



Source: Electoral Agent Survey 2010

Deeper analysis was carried out through the use of content or structural analysis of web presences. Given the need to carry out analysis within as small a time-frame as possible and the amount of work involved in manually recording observations, this analysis was restricted to the 75 constituencies that composed the North West England region. From these 204 campaigns were found to have web presences. Of these only two exhibited any form of public interaction on their website. Surprisingly, the figure was hardly any better for those campaigns with a Facebook profile. Where there was a more notable spike was in the use of Twitter in the form of @replies which were recorded from 12 per-cent of the sample, or 40 per-cent of campaigns in the sample with Twitter accounts. However, it's worth noting that the structure of Twitter makes it difficult to know who @replies were directed at – whether it was party workers, journalists, celebrities or party voters.

Chart two: Public and private interactivity at the 2010 election



Source: Content analysis of campaigns in NW England during 2010 election

In public at least, there was little sign of any great debate emerging online. However, the content analysis also captured the widespread availability of email links, feedback forms and in-built messaging systems in social networking tools. Private interaction between candidates and voters could well have been widespread. However, as it took place in an opaque space that is difficult to access both technically and ethically, it remains outside the scope of this study. Subsequent interviews with campaigners, however, showed that email was considered to be a vital tool.

So despite the resurgent optimism that accompanied the interactivity afforded by Web 2.0 tools such as Facebook, the 2010 campaign was not that much different (in e-campaign terms) to its predecessors. This could be down to the supply factors in that candidates may be unwilling to publicly engage with their electors either out of resource limitations or fear. Equally, one suspects that the demand for online interaction may also be lacking. With the public already apathetic, it will take more than opportunity to harass wannabe politicians online to convince them to engage or, if you have rose tinted view of the past, re-engage with political campaigns.

Two further thoughts occur. Firstly, this has considered online campaigns from a fundamentally optimistic view point, i.e. their ability to foster interaction between candidates and voters. There is a more pessimistic interpretation of Web 2.0 more generally, but of its use in campaigns specifically: that it encourages what [Colin Bennett](#) describes as 'political surveillance'. Rather than contributing to traditional forms of discursive campaigns, Web 2.0 could instead fuel a drive towards approaches to campaigns based on political marketing techniques in the UK.

Secondly, this study is also notable for what it cannot access. Although public interaction appears minimal, there is a layer of interaction that this study cannot access. Exchanges by email, through feedback mechanism on website and through the private messaging functions built into social networks, may be common place and represent a hidden interactive campaign.

Note: this posts represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the London School of Economics. Please read our comments policy before commenting.

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