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The Use of the Internet by Political Parties and Candidates in the 2007 Scottish Parliament Election

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This paper reports the results of a study which investigated the use of the Internet by political parties and individual candidates as part of their campaigns for election to the Scottish Parliament in 2007. This was a comparative, follow-up study to one conducted prior to the previous Scottish Parliamentary election in 2003. Two methodologies were used in gathering data. Firstly, the content of the websites of 27 political parties and 12 individual candidates was analysed to identify the ways in which political participation by the Scottish public was encouraged via the provision of information and of opportunities for interaction, debate and feedback. Secondly, a series of email enquiries, based around key policy issues, was directed at political parties and individual candidates, to measure the speed and extent of response, as well as any efforts made towards the creation of an ongoing relationship with potential voters. The results indicate that the Internet was used mainly for the dissemination of information and ideas rather than for their exchange.

Introduction and Background

Since the influential Clinton/Gore campaign during the 1992 United States Presidential election, the Internet has been adopted as an electoral tool by an increasing range of political actors worldwide. Indeed, as Norris (2003) points out, the mid-1990s witnessed a general wave of enthusiasm about the potential impact of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the political sphere: many commentators believed that the Internet facilitated a new, more participatory style of politics, which would bring politicians and an increasingly disaffected electorate closer together, and would draw more people into the democratic process. However, by the end of the twentieth century, these Utopian claims were being questioned by a second wave of more sceptical voices. Margolis and Resnick (2000), for example, argued that the Internet, far from revolutionising political communication and participation, simply reflected and reinforced patterns of behaviour in the real world; that politics on the Internet is 'politics as usual, conducted mostly by the same familiar candidates, interest groups, and news media'.

Certainly, in terms of electoral campaigning, a succession of studies internationally have established that political parties and candidates tend to use the Internet as a top-down channel for information or party propaganda rather than as an opportunity to encourage two-way discussion and debate with potential voters (see, for example, Gibson and Ward 2002; Gibson et al. 2003; Jankowski et al. 2005). In the United Kingdom, more specifically, a number of studies conducted

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during the 1997, 2001 and 2005 General Election campaigns (e.g. Auty and Nicholas 1998; Auty and Cowen 2001; Bowers-Brown and Gunter 2002; Jackson 2007), the 2000 London Mayoral Election campaign (Auty and Cowen 2000), and the 2004 European Parliament Election campaign (Ward 2005) have discovered that, while parties' and candidates' websites have progressively become more extensive in content and sophisticated in design, their focus has been on information provision and, more recently, on resource generation (i.e. in terms of members, volunteers and financial donations) rather than on participation and interactivity.

The present authors discovered a similar situation when investigating the use of the Internet by political parties and candidates during the campaign for election to the second session of the Scottish Parliament [1] in 2003 (Marcella *et al.* 2003). This study found considerable variation between parties and between individual parliamentary candidates in both their capacity and willingness to seize the potential of the Internet as a campaign tool. While some used technology in quite sophisticated ways, the majority of those parties and candidates studied appeared to be somewhat reluctant to engage in interactive, open, dynamic forms of electronic communication with the electorate. This was somewhat surprising, for the formation of the new Scottish Parliament in 1999 was widely regarded as an ideal opportunity to introduce a new, more transparent style of democracy, and one that would make extensive use of developing ICTs (Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament 1998); therefore it was perhaps fair to hypothesise that those seeking to gain election to this new legislature would also seek to capitalise to a significant extent on the opportunities offered by technology.

As the election for membership of the third session of the Scottish Parliament (2007–2011) was taking place on Thursday, 3 May 2007, it was decided to conduct a comparative, follow-up study to that conducted in 2003, in order to ascertain whether any progress had been made by those in the Scottish political arena in the intervening four years, and whether they were now more positive in providing interactive and participatory opportunities, and more eager to engage with the online electorate in a meaningful and visible debate. This paper will present the main results of the 2007 study, and present some comparisons with the research conducted in 2003.

Methodology

The 2007 study was designed on similar lines to the one conducted in 2003, in order to facilitate comparison, and consisted of two main elements. Firstly, during the four weeks immediately preceding the election date of 3 May 2007, the content of the websites of all of the political parties who were fielding candidates in the Scottish Parliamentary election was examined and analysed, where such websites existed. Indeed, one immediately noticeable difference from the 2003 campaign was the proportion of political parties who had a Web presence. In 2003, just 11 (39%) of the 28 parties fielding candidates had a website; but, in 2007, 27 (87%) of the 31 parties contesting the election had some form of Web presence. It should also be noted that three parties (the Labour Party, the Scottish Socialist Party and the Scottish Christian Party), in addition to their usual website, were operating separate and dedicated campaign websites. For these three parties, both websites were analysed during the course of this research.

In addition to the party websites, the content of the websites of 12 individual candidates was analysed. It should be emphasised here that it proved rather difficult to find individual candidates' active websites. As will be explained in more detail later, the party websites were not particularly helpful in directing visitors to candidates' personal websites; as a result, the researchers had to rely largely on Google searches to identify candidate websites. An additional factor here was the fact that parliamentary rules prohibit current Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs), i.e. those forming part of the 2003–2007 Parliament, from using existing websites which promote their work *as MSPs* for campaigning purposes. While some MSPs *had* created new, additional campaign websites, the majority had either removed or suspended their existing website.

However, the desired number of 12 candidate websites (belonging to five existing MSPs and seven new candidates) was eventually obtained and, together with the websites of the 27 parties, were analysed in terms of the ways in which they: provided information; tried to generate interest in the election campaign; kept the electorate up to

date with the latest campaign news and developments; promoted the parties and the individual candidates; tried to engage the support of website users; and provided opportunities for interaction and debate.

The second element of the study was a series of email enquiries, on four important and current campaign and policy issues, which were directed at the websites described above, and also at other individual candidates. These enquiries were sent, at a rate of one per week, during the four-week period prior to election day. In making these enquiries, the researchers sought to measure the speed at which the parties and candidates responded, the extent and nature of their response, as well as any efforts made to create some form of ongoing relationship with potential voters. For this stage of the study, an element of covert research was utilised, where the research team, although using their real names, created special Hotmail accounts (to disguise the fact that they were academic researchers) and gave no indication of their geographic location (to conceal the fact that they may not be based in the individual candidates' potential parliamentary constituency). This was felt necessary in order to ensure that the parties' and candidates' behaviour, in terms of responding to potential voters' enquiries, remained normal and consistent.

Content analysis of party and candidate websites

Before outlining the results of the website content analysis, it would perhaps be appropriate to provide some further information about the Scottish Parliamentary election process, and the parties participating in the 2007 election. There are 129 seats in the Scottish Parliament, consisting of 73 constituency seats and 56 regional seats. Each voter has two votes: the first is for their *constituency* member, where the voter chooses an *individual*; the second vote is for *regional* members, where the voter chooses a *political party*, and the subsequent allocation of regional seats is then based on proportional representation, with the successful parties selecting their regional members from a predetermined list of regional candidates. Each party can have a list of constituency candidates and a list of regional candidates, and individual candidates can

appear in both lists. However, the general pattern is that the larger political parties will field both constituency and regional candidates, while the smaller parties will tend to field regional candidates only.

In the 2007 election, 31 parties fielded candidates. These included the four major parties who have traditionally dominated the Scottish political arena: the Labour Party, the Scottish National Party (SNP), the Conservative Party, and the Liberal Democrat Party; they included parties who have had a growing influence in Scottish politics in recent years, such as the Green Party and the Scottish Socialist Party; and they included several minority/fringe parties, many of which were campaigning on very specific issues, such as the Action to Save St. John's Hospital Party, and the Scotland Against Crooked Lawyers Party. Interestingly, they also included the Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party, campaigning on issues affecting older people; and two new parties, the Christian People's Alliance and the Scottish Christian Party, both of which were emphasising Christian values as part of their campaigns. A full list of all 31 parties can be found in the Appendix to this paper. The Appendix itself provides a breakdown of the content analysis of the websites of all parties and the sample of 12 candidates, under the five broad headings of information provision, communication, membership and donations, audiovisual features, and other interactive features. These are all discussed in more detail below.

Information provision

In terms of providing information about their candidates to the electorate, somewhat surprisingly only 18 of the 27 parties with a website provided complete lists of all of their candidates. In a pattern similar to that encountered during the 2003 election, details of regional candidates, in particular, were incomplete or, in the SNP's case, non-existent. The reasons for this are not known, but perhaps regional candidate details are not regarded as particularly important, given that the electorate votes for the party rather than the individual in the regional lists. In terms of constituency candidates, where the public's vote should, in theory at least, be based more on the individual rather than the party, details were also incomplete. As Table 1

illustrates, of the four major parties fielding candidates in all 73 constituencies, only the SNP and the Conservative Party provided complete lists of all of their candidates. As a result, the researchers had to rely on the BBC News website to obtain a definitive list of all 2007 election candidates.

Table 1: Details of the 73 constituency candidates on the four major parties' websites.

Candidates' details	Labour	SNP	Lib Dems	Conservative
Name	72	73	67	73
Biographical information	None	None	33	None
Photograph	None	None	66	None
Link to personal website	None	None	20	18

Coverage was even more patchy when it came to providing biographies of their candidates. Only the Liberal Democrats made any effort to provide any biographical information, and only for half of their constituency candidates. This was a significant change from 2003, where the same four parties provided biographies of the vast majority of their constituency candidates. The Liberal Democrats were also the only major party to provide photographs of their candidates; while, of the major parties, only they and the Conservative Party made any effort to provide links to candidates' personal websites. Amongst the smaller parties, candidate biographies and photographs were more common on the websites of the Christian People's Alliance, the Green Party, the Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party, Scottish Voice, the Socialist Equality Party and the UK Independence Party. In general, however, it would appear that the Scottish political parties expected the online electorate to make their democratic choice based on minimal personal information about the candidates. With regard to the 12 individual candidate websites studied, three candidates failed to provide any background, biographical information: a very similar situation to that encountered in 2003.

In terms of policy information, 17 of the 27 parties provided a document which they described as their election manifesto, although, unsurprisingly, these varied widely in length, from the Labour Party's 104 pages to the Equal Parenting Alliance's 250 words. However, all 27 parties provided other forms of policy statements and commentaries, as did six of the 12 candidates' websites.

Of the 27 parties, 18 had news pages on their websites, but only 13 of these were updated during the four-week campaign, rather invalidating the concept of news as a line to attract the electorate to the site. Similarly, exactly half of the 12 candidate websites provided updated news during the campaign period. Seven of the 27 parties and six of the 12 candidates provided free electronic newsletters by subscription. While efforts were made to subscribe to all seven party news services, newsletters were received from only two parties, the Green Party and the UK Independence Party. For the remainder, either the attempt to subscribe failed, or the party did not send out any e-news during the campaign period. Only six of the parties (all smaller parties) and two of the candidates provided some form of campaign calendar or diary, where website visitors could find out about forthcoming events, such as public meetings or door-to-door canvassing in their local area.

In 2003, RSS Feeds were virtually unheard of. However, during the 2007 campaign, six of the party websites and one candidate website featured an RSS Feed, where users can be notified automatically when content has been added to the website. Blogs are also a relatively new phenomenon in the field of election campaigning in the UK, being used for the first time during the 2005 election campaign, albeit rarely, and as one-way communication channels only, offering few opportunities for interactivity (Jackson 2006). During the 2007 Scottish Parliamentary campaign, only one of the major party websites, that of the SNP, contained blogs, on subjects such as small business rates, the party's annual conference, and the party leader's visit to Norway. However, while anyone could read the content of the SNP blogs, it appeared that only party members could add comments. Meanwhile, the websites of five of the smaller parties and five of the candidates also contained blogs; indeed one party site and two candidates' sites were entirely in the blog format. However, these were generally not updated regularly, and only rarely could comments be added. Interestingly, and perhaps unexpectedly, one of the more active and open users of the blog format was the Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party.

Only four of the parties and one of the candidates provided their online information in any alternative formats or languages, aimed at website users with a disability or whose first language

was not English. For example, the Scottish Socialist Party provided a Gaelic version of their entire website, while the SNP provided Gaelic, Polish, Urdu and Cantonese versions of their manifesto. The Labour Party, meanwhile, indicated that audio, Braille, Punjabi and Urdu versions of their manifesto were available 'on request'. Perhaps the most interesting alternative provision was offered by the Green Party, whose website contained a video clip of an election address, containing some specific information for the deaf and hard of hearing, using subtitles and British Sign Language interpreting.

Finally, in terms of information provision, eight of the parties and four of the candidates provided information on 'how to vote'. While a number of these sites simply provided information on how to register to vote, or how to apply for a postal vote, six of the parties and one candidate provided illustrations of correctly completed ballot papers, not unexpectedly with the cross adjacent to their party's name. As the date of the 2007 Scottish Parliament election coincided with that of the Scottish local government elections, voters were to be faced with an additional ballot paper. The local government elections were also using the Single Transferable Vote system for the first time, where voters were asked to number the candidates in order of their preference. Given these changes to the voting system, the Electoral Commission in Scotland had felt it necessary to distribute an explanatory leaflet to every household in the country; therefore it was surprising that more of the parties and candidates had not sought to explain the voting system more thoroughly via their websites. Indeed, one of the most significant issues arising from the 2007 election was the eventual number of spoilt ballots – almost 142,000 votes had to be excluded from the total count because of incorrectly completed ballot papers. A report by the University of Strathclyde (Carman and Mitchell 2007) published shortly after the election laid much of the blame on ballot design, and an official, independent review of the elections, ordered by the Electoral Commission, is expected to come to similar conclusions.

Communication and Interactivity

Of the 27 parties with a website, 24 provided some method of online contact, in the form of either a general enquiries email address or a web-based enquiry form. Of the three parties who provided no means of making contact, the most unexpected was the Scottish Socialist Party, who, although not regarded as one of the major players, did have four MSPs in the 2003–2007 Parliament.

Surprisingly, personal email addresses for individual candidates were often lacking on the party websites. Indeed, as can be seen in Table 2, of the four major parties, only the Conservatives provided email addresses for all of their constituency candidates: the other three main parties failed to provide any candidate email details. This appeared to be a complete change of direction from the 2003 campaign, when, of the four major parties, only the Labour Party had appeared reluctant to provide candidates' online contact details. As it was not known if this was a deliberate strategy on the part of these three parties to discourage the public from direct, personal contact with candidates, or if it perhaps reflected an emphasis on centralised communication, the researchers contacted the three parties after the election in an attempt to establish the reasons for this change of position. However, only the SNP provided a response. The SNP's main concern had been the amount of spam that candidates might receive. Instead, the party had decided to use a web-based contact form, which would then 'allow the public to contact candidates without the need to publish their addresses'. This argument is somewhat at odds with the most recently published research on the use of email in the Scottish political arena (Jackson 2003), which indicated that 76% of MSPs were receiving less than 100 emails per week, and that 67% of MSPs were coping 'very' or 'reasonably well' with the volume of email received (although the present authors acknowledge that the volume of email and, in particular, spam received is likely to have increased dramatically in the intervening years). If the SNP's reasoning is typical of that of the other parties who failed to provide candidates' personal email addresses, this suggests a withdrawal from real, personal, one-to-one interaction with the electorate, which is somewhat ironic given that the Internet is allegedly all about 'communication'.

Details of other methods of contacting candidates were also lacking amongst the major parties. None provided a postal contact address, while only the Liberal Democrats made any effort to

provide candidates' telephone numbers (presumably of constituency offices).

Table 2: Contact details for the 73 constituency candidates on the four major parties' websites

Candidates' details	Labour	SNP	Lib Dems	Conservative
Email address	None	None	None	73
Postal address	None	None	None	None
Telephone number	None	None	58	None

Amongst the smaller parties, too, there appeared to be something of a reluctance to provide candidates' contact details. Of those smaller parties who were not, literally, one-man bands, the UK Independence Party and the Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party were the only two who provided candidates' email addresses as a matter of course. The situation was more positive amongst the 12 individual candidates' websites analysed: all 12 provided either a contact email address or a Web-based enquiry form.

As was the case back in 2003, there was an apparent reluctance amongst the Scottish political parties in 2007 to encourage any form of active online public debate. While the websites of a number of parties indicated that online discussion fora were available on the members-only sections of their website, only one party, the Free Scotland Party, had any form of publicly accessible forum. However, this was a Yahoo discussion list, with only 11 members, and no new postings since January 2007.

Following a growing trend, identified during the 2005 UK general election, of UK political actors using the Internet as a resource generation tool (see, for example, Jackson 2007), the Scottish political party websites in 2007 provided far more opportunities than in 2003 for party supporters to actively become part of the campaign in a number of ways. Twelve of the 27 parties provided an online party membership form, four provided an online volunteering form, while 10 parties and one candidate provided downloadable campaign materials, such as leaflets and posters. Twelve party websites allowed users to make online donations to the party, while five sites had online shops, selling, for example, party umbrellas, ties and mugs. Interestingly, the SNP online shop offered an affinity scheme, where if users purchased online from certain high street retailers, those shops would then pay a commission to the party.

Compared with the 2003 campaign, parties and candidates were also making more use of audiovisual features on their websites. Twelve of the parties and three of the individual candidates provided video clips of election broadcasts and speeches, a number of which had also been posted on the YouTube website, presumably in a conscious effort to reach a more youthful audience. Four of the parties provided audio clips of election addresses, while the SNP offered a free downloadable mobile ringtone of their campaign theme.

Two of the parties had their own online TV stations. The British National Party's relatively long-standing BNPTV, launched in 2004 as a channel for showing European Parliament election addresses (some of which had been banned by terrestrial broadcasters), was available through the party's national website, and broadcast live for one hour each evening during the campaign period. While BNPTV did show a Scottish Parliamentary election broadcast, much of the rest of its output focused on the campaigns for the English local government elections and the National Assembly for Wales elections, which were also being held on the 3rd of May 2007. Meanwhile, the SNP surprised a number of observers when they launched their SNPtv station midway through the election campaign, and for the remainder of the campaign broadcast live TV over the Internet for three hours each evening, the output consisting of a daily 'Campaign Roundup', interviews with politicians and celebrity party supporters, and voters' own video clips. None of the other major parties in Scotland followed suit.

There were relatively few other types of interactive features. Three party websites contained petitions that could be signed online: the Conservative Party, against road tolls; the Green Party, against ship to ship oil transfers in the Firth of Forth; and the Action to Save St. John's Hospital Party, against parking charges at the hospital. One party, the Labour Party, offered an online poll, on the biggest achievement of the Scottish Parliament to date; while two candidates' websites were running online surveys on very specific local issues. Two parties also offered postcode-based candidate searches, where users could input their postcode and be presented with details of their local candidates from that party.

Email responsiveness test

As the second main element of the research, four email questions were directed at parties and candidates. These were based around current campaign issues, and were influenced partly by a BBC/ICM poll, on Scottish voters' priorities, conducted at the very beginning of the election campaign (BBC News 2007). At times, the questions were designed to almost provoke a response from the parties and candidates:

1. There has only been a week of the Holyrood campaign so far, and I'm already tired of the bickering and negative campaigning. I often feel that the Scottish Parliament is nothing more than a second-rate version of Westminster, populated by failed MPs and other individuals with little political talent. Why should I vote for anyone at next month's Scottish Parliament election?

2. Hardly a day goes by without reading or hearing about assaults and street robberies throughout Scotland. I certainly wouldn't dream of visiting a town or city centre at night, particularly at weekends. And my elderly parents are becoming increasingly scared to leave the house during daylight hours, or even to visit the local post office and shops. What will your party do to make the streets safer for the people of Scotland?

3. The state of the National Health Service in Scotland continues to frustrate me, with unacceptable waiting list times, dilapidated facilities, the closure of hospitals and other local health services, and extortionate prescription charges. What does your party plan to do to overcome these problems?

4. I have to admit to being somewhat confused about the various parties' transport policies, and how this fits with their environmental/'green' policies. As far as I can tell, most of the major parties are advocating the upgrading of existing roads, or building entirely new road links, such as a new Forth crossing and Aberdeen's Western Peripheral Route. Surely this is at odds with any environmental policy statements the parties might make? Could you please clarify your own party's stance on new or upgraded roads, and how this relates to your party's views on environmental issues?

As can be seen in Table 3, the researchers sent a total of 128 enquiries in the 2007 study: 82 enquiries to the political parties (using the general enquiry email addresses or web-based enquiry forms described above) and a total of 46 enquiries to 41 individual candidates (due to an apparent lack of email addresses for candidates in some parties, four candidates were sent two or more different enquiries). This was a significant increase in the number of enquiries sent in the 2003 study,

which consisted of a total of 43 enquiries, 19 to parties and 24 to individual candidates.

Table 3: Responsiveness to email enquiries: comparison between 2003 and 2007 studies

	2003 Study			2007 Study		
	No. sent	No. replies	% replies	No. sent	No. replies	% replies
Enquiries to parties	19	16	84	82	37	45
Enquiries to candidates	24	7	29	46	23	50
Total enquiries	43	23	53	128	60	47

In total, 60 replies of some kind were received, 37 from parties and 23 from candidates, giving an overall response rate of 47%. This was slightly down on the response rate of 53% (23 replies to 43 enquiries) obtained in 2003. When compared with the 2003 study, the parties in 2007 seemed less prepared to reply, the overall response rate decreasing from 84% to 45%. However, the individual candidates seemed more inclined to respond in 2007 than in 2003, the response rate increasing from 29% to 50%.

In terms of the speed of response, 86% of the parties and 78% of the candidates who responded did so within two days. The longest delay from the parties was seven days, whilst one candidate took eight days to respond.

The best party response came from the Green Party and the UK Independence Party, each of whom replied to all of the enquiries sent. In terms of the individual candidates, those from the Labour Party (six replies to seven enquiries), the Green Party (five replies to six enquiries) and the UK Independence Party (four replies to six enquiries) were the most responsive.

Unfortunately, several parties failed to respond to *any* of the enquiries. The researchers received no replies from the Christian People's Alliance, the Communist Party, the 9% Growth Party, the Scottish Christian Party, the Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party, the Socialist Equality Party, and Solidarity. Also worthy of mention here is the Labour Party website's 'Ask Jack' feature, named after the then party leader and Scotland's First Minister, Jack McConnell. This part of the website openly invited users to ask policy questions, guaranteeing a response by the Friday of the week in which an enquiry was made. Despite this guarantee, no

replies were received to the enquiries sent to 'Ask Jack'. Suspecting that these enquiries would be read by the same individuals as were answering the other questions sent via the Labour Party's general enquiry form, the researchers constructed a separate policy question, on overcoming childhood obesity, and directed this only to 'Ask Jack'. However, this enquiry, too, was ignored.

With the individual candidates, meanwhile, the worst response came from Conservative Party candidates: only one reply was received from the six Conservative candidates who were sent a question. Candidates from the Liberal Democrats, the SNP, the Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party, and the Scottish Socialist Party did not perform particularly well here either.

With regard to those parties and candidates who did respond to the enquiries, the extent and the content of the replies varied widely, from those that were constructive, responsive and detailed, to those that were merely standard 'copy and paste' replies taken from campaign manifesto literature, or who effectively ignored the question and simply provided a link to their online manifesto. Generally, it was the major parties who adopted the copy and paste approach, sometimes making no effort to disguise the fact and providing replies containing a variety of different font styles and sizes.

One interesting development during the 2007 campaign, not encountered during the 2003 study, was that seven of the candidates requested details of the enquirer's postal address, presumably to establish if they lived in their prospective parliamentary constituency. Indeed, five of these candidates implied that a fuller response would only be provided on confirmation of the enquirer's address. Four of these candidates had been MSPs in the 2003–2007 Scottish Parliament, and were presumably conscious that, for almost two-thirds of MSPs, more than half of their email correspondence can come from non-constituents (Jackson 2003).

The question on negative campaigning, voter apathy and the quality of politicians within the Scottish Parliament provided the most interesting reaction, with the parties and the candidates generally seeking in their response to encourage good citizenship and participation, by reminding the enquirer of their rights, privileges, and their duty to vote, as part of a democratic society:

'If you choose not to take part in the democratic process you are not really entitled to moan about the quality of our elected representatives.'

'Although democracy is not a perfect system of governance, it is a good deal better than all of the alternatives. I also happen to believe that the right to vote and the right to complain go hand in hand.'

'If you don't vote then you will be faced with an ever increasing amount of government interference in your daily life knowing that apathy has brought it about and that you were in part responsible.'

Overall, however, there was little evidence of personal engagement through the email enquiries. It is perhaps fair to say that the UK Independence Party candidates appeared the most willing to initiate further discussion and debate with the enquirer. One candidate provided the researchers with his mobile telephone number in order to discuss policy issues further; while another sent the researchers a 2-minute personal video reply to an enquiry, filmed in his study.

Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that there has been little progress made by Scottish political actors over the last four years, in their use of the Internet as a campaigning tool. While there is some evidence of party websites now being used more extensively for resource generation purposes, in terms of information provision and engagement the situation appears almost to have regressed, particularly in the provision of information *about* their electoral candidates and in providing contact details *for* their candidates.

Scottish political actors still seem unwilling to enter into any kind of meaningful, visible and swiftly moving online debate with potential voters. As was the case four years ago, party and candidate websites provide very few opportunities for interaction, and debate seems to have been positively avoided. Whether this avoidance stems from reluctance, incapacity, or a lack of vision remains to be seen and requires further exploration. However, as is evidenced by the poor response to the researchers' questions on the lack of candidate information and contact details on their websites, the parties appear reluctant to divulge the reasons for their website design decisions.

Many parties and candidates remain unwilling to respond fully to potential voters' email questions on contentious or 'difficult' policy issues, or they may simply ignore them completely. This pattern of response is unlikely to encourage what is already an apathetic and cynical electorate to participate more fully in the democratic process, despite the aspirations at the outset of the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. The results of this research indicate that political actors have embraced ICTs as a mechanism to disseminate a message or to encourage certain types of behaviour, rather than as an opportunity for the two-way flow of information and communication.

Note

1. For those readers unfamiliar with the legislative situation in the United Kingdom, dramatic constitutional changes in the late 1990s saw the devolution of some legislative powers from central government in London to three new devolved bodies, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly. The devolved matters on which the Scottish Parliament can pass laws include: agriculture, forestry and fishing; education and training; environment; health; housing; law and home affairs; local government; police and fire services; some aspects of transport; sport and the arts; and tourism and economic development.

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Appendix

Feature	Political Party (see key to party acronyms below)															
	LAB[3]	SNP	LD	CON	GRN	SSP[3]	SOL	SSCU	SCHP[9]	BNP[1]	UKIP	CPB	ASJH	ATP[2]	CPA	EPA
Information Provision																
Candidate list	◉	◉	◉	●	◉	◉	◉	●	●	●	●	●	◉		◉	●
Election manifesto	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●			●	●
Other policy statements/info	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●
Campaign agenda/calendar							●	●	●			◉	●			
Updated campaign news	●	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	◉	●	◉		●	
E-news service(s)	●		◉	●	●					●	●		●			●
RSS Feeds	●	●			●	●	●	●							●	
Blogs		●				◉	●			●						
'How to vote' information	●			●	●	●		●	●							
Information in alternative formats/languages	◉	●			●	●		●								
Search facility	●	●	●	◉	●			●		●		●			●	
Communication																
Online contact/questions	●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●	●	◉	●	●	◉
Public discussion fora																
Candidates' contact details			◉	◉				●	◉		●					●
Membership, Donations etc																
Online membership form	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●				◉	●
Online volunteering form	●			●							●		◉			
Online shop	●	●			●					●	●					
Online donations	●	●	●	●	●	●			◉	●	●				◉	●
Download campaign materials	◉	●					●	●		◉	●				●	●
Audiovisual features																
Online TV station		●								●						
Video clips and podcasts	●	●	●	●		◉	●	●	●	●	●	●	●			
Audio clips and podcasts	●					●							●			
Other Interactive features																
Online surveys	◉															
Online petition				●	●									●	◉	
Postcode-based candidate search		●	●													

Feature	Political Party (see key to party acronyms below)														
	FSP	HEP[2]	IGV	NPG[4]	PEAP[1]	PUB[2]	SACL	SENT	SEP	SJP	SLP[1]	SNHS	SUP	SV	WIT[2]
Information Provision															
Candidate list	●		●	●	●			●	●	●	●	◉	●	●	
Election manifesto			●					●			●				
Other policy statements/info	●		●	●	●		●	●	◉	●	●	●	●	●	
Campaign agenda/calendar									●						
Updated campaign news	●								◉		◉			◉	
E-news service(s)															
RSS Feeds															
Blogs				●						●					
'How to vote' information			●										●		
Information in alternative formats/languages															
Search facility				●	●								●		
Communication															
Online contact/questions	●		●		●		●	●	●		●	●	●	●	
Public discussion fora	◉														
Candidates' contact details	●							●		●					
Membership, Donations etc															
Online membership form	◉							●					◉	◉	
Online volunteering form													◉		
Online shop															
Online donations	◉						◉	●					◉	●	
Download campaign materials	●		●		●		◉							●	
Audiovisual features															
Online TV station															
Video clips and podcasts															
Audio clips and podcasts														●	
Other Interactive features															
Online surveys															
Online petition															
Postcode-based candidate search															

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Notes

[1] – National site only.

[2] – No website found.

[3] – Two websites analysed: usual party site and special election campaign site.

[4] – Blog site.

Key to symbols

● Represents a feature which appeared to be complete, updated regularly, and/or fully 'online'.

◉ Represents a feature which was incomplete, not updated regularly, and/or not fully 'online'.

Feature	Candidate and Political Party (see key to party acronyms below)											
	A LAB	B LAB	C SNP	D SNP	E LD	F LD	G CON	H CON	I² GRN	J² GRN	K¹ SCHP	L IND
Information Provision												
Biographical details	●		●	●		●		●	●	●	●	●
Personal Policy statements/info	●	●	◉			●	●				◉	●
Personal Campaign agenda/calendar						●					●	
Updated personal campaign news		●	◉	●	●	●		●				●
Blogs	◉		◉					●	◉	◉		
'How to vote' information	●	●				●					●	
Information in alternative formats/languages		◉										
Link to party/constituency website	●	●	●	◉	●	●	●	◉	●		●	N/A
Search facility		◉	●		●				●	●		
Page change alert		●										
Download campaign materials								●				
Communication												
Online contact/questions	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Mailing list/e-news update		●	●		●	●	●	●				
Audiovisual features												
Personal Video clips and podcasts			●	●							●	
Personal Audio clips and podcasts												
Other Interactive features												
Online surveys	●		●			◉						

Notes

[1] - Hosted by party or constituency

[2] - Blog site

Key to symbols

● Represents a feature which appeared to be complete, updated regularly, and/or fully 'online'.

◉ Represents a feature which was incomplete, not updated regularly, and/or not fully 'online'.

Key to Party Acronyms

LAB	Labour Party	FSP	Free Scotland Party
SNP	Scottish National Party	HEP	Had Enough Party
LD	Liberal Democrats	IGV	Independent Green Voice
CON	Conservative Party	NPG	Nine Percent Growth Party
GRN	Green Party	PEAP	Peace Party
SSP	Scottish Socialist Party	PUB	Publican Party
SOL	Solidarity	SACL	Scotland Against Crooked Lawyers
SSCU	Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party	SENT	Scottish Enterprise Party
SCHP	Scottish Christian Party	SEP	Socialist Equality Party
BNP	British National Party	SJP	Scottish Jacobite Party
UKIP	UK Independence Party	SLP	Socialist Labour Party
CPB	Communist Party of Britain	SNHS	Save Our NHS Group
ASJH	Action to Save St John's Hospital	SUP	Scottish Unionist Party
ATP	Anti-Trident Party	SV	Scottish Voice
CPA	Christian People's Alliance	WIT	Adam Lyal's Witchery Tour Party
EPA	Equal Parenting Alliance	IND	Independent candidate