A decade of research into online election campaigns in Scotland

Graeme Baxter and Rita Marcella
Department of Information Management, Aberdeen Business School, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, UK
Scottish Parliament formed in 1999

“A new sort of democracy... an open, accessible Parliament”

“It should aspire to be an example of best practice in Parliamentary information systems”
(Expert Panel on ICTs, 1998)

“MSPs are intensive and competent users of ICTs... ICTs are embedded into their parliamentary activities...”
(Smith & Webster, 2004)

Would those seeking to gain election to the Parliament also take advantage of the opportunities offered by ICTs?
Four studies conducted, 2003 to date

- UK Parliament election 2010 (Scottish constituencies only)
- Content analysis of all party websites
- Sample of 11-12 candidate websites
- Analysis during four weeks preceding polling day
- Content analysed in terms of the ways in which the websites:
  - provided policy and candidate information;
  - provided up-to-date campaign news;
  - tried to engage the support of users; and
  - provided opportunities for interaction and debate.
Methodologies (2)

- Online enquiry responsiveness test, measuring speed and extent of response
- Covert research, where researchers posed as potential voters
- Created special email accounts and (in 2010 and 2011) social media accounts
Methodologies (3)

- In 2010 and 2011, content analysis of parties’ and candidates’ Twitter accounts, Facebook pages, and blogs
- Analysis of all posts made during four-week campaign period
- Posts analysed in terms of the topic(s) being discussed, and the nature of the communication taking place
Methodologies (4)

- 2011 research included a study of voters’ online information behaviour

- Hosted by Rosemount Community Centre, Aberdeen

- Recruited 64 participants, from a range of age groups and socio-economic classes

- Used laptop and mobile broadband ‘dongle’

- Used the ‘interactive, electronically-assisted interview’ method
- Manifestos prominent on party websites

- Recent move towards providing additional, more concise policy documents

- Policy commentary less common on candidates’ websites
Candidate Information

- Provision of candidate information on party websites inconsistent and illogical

- Lack of candidate contact details

- Lack of links to candidates’ personal sites
Larger parties better at providing regular, up-to-date news

Slight move towards providing real-time feeds from social media sites
- Vast majority of parties and candidates have provided some method of online contact

- But other opportunities for online engagement have been limited
Audiovisual Features

- Video clips have become standard on websites of larger parties
- In 2007, some experiments with live online TV broadcasts, but never repeated
Since 2007, a decline in the provision of information in alternative formats or languages.

During 2011 campaign, criticism from disability charities.
Since 2003 campaign, a dramatic increase in the use of the Internet for resource generation.
E-mail Enquiry Response Rates

Response rate
- Response rate of parties
- Response rate of candidates
- Overall response rate

Year
- 2003
- 2007
- 2010
- 2011

Percentage
- 2003: 84%
- 2007: 45%
- 2010: 51%
- 2011: 53%

Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Facebook</th>
<th>Twitter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Scottish Politicians’ Social Media Use, 2010 and 2011

- Keen to be seen embracing new social media tools
- But lack of meaningful policy comment
- Most followers and ‘likers’ appeared to be personal friends or party activists
- Reluctance to interact with wider electorate
- Primarily the one-way ‘broadcast’ of information
2010 UK Election: Scottish Party Twitter Sites

(n = 857 posts)

Parties

Primary Broadcast

81.3%

Secondary Broadcast

14.6%

Engagement & Dialogue

? 1.4%

‘Unreciprocated’ Engagement

← 2.6%

Electorate
User Study 2011

- Need for concise policy documents
- Need for *local* policy commentary
- Wish to see more online dialogue
- Unimpressed with social media efforts: "trivial", "shallow", "superficial"
- Majority felt campaign sites served a useful purpose
- But, for 94%, they had no influence on their voting intentions
Online Elections in Scotland, 2003-2013

Conclusions

- Incremental growth in use of Internet
- Technologies have changed, but nature of their use remains the same
- Primarily one-way broadcast
- Politicians unwilling to answer ‘difficult’ questions and engage with voters
- Dichotomy between provision and voters’ information needs
- SNP’s claim that “online swayed the vote” in 2011 is questionable

Photo: Wolverhampton Express & Star

Image: No Tosh