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# Bravehearts or tim'rous beasties?

*A decade of research into online election campaigns in Scotland*

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**Abstract:** *Over the last ten years, the authors have conducted a series of investigations into the use of the Internet by political parties and individual candidates during parliamentary election campaigns in Scotland. These are the only such studies which have looked specifically at the Scottish political arena. This paper provides an overview of the results of these studies, and reflects on how new technologies have been adopted by political actors in Scotland in an effort to disseminate information to, and engage with, potential voters.*

**Keywords:** Internet, elections, political parties, candidates, Scotland

**T**he formation of the new Scottish Parliament in 1999<sup>25</sup> 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 information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament, 1998). Indeed, subsequent studies (e.g. Smith & Webster, 2008) have indicated that, in Scotland, “new ICTs have become a cultural norm of contemporary parliamentary life”. In the earliest years of the Parliament’s existence, the current authors hypothesised that those seeking to gain election to this new legislature would seek to take advantage of the opportunities offered by ICTs and, in 2003, conducted the first in an ongoing series of investigations examining the ways in which political parties and individual candidates in Scotland use the Internet during parliamentary election campaigns. To date, studies have been conducted during the 2003 (Marcella, Baxter & Smith, 2004), 2007 (Marcella, Baxter & Cheah, 2008) and 2011 (Baxter *et al.*, 2012) Scottish Parliament elections, as well as during the 2010 UK

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<sup>25</sup> 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.

Parliament campaign (Baxter, Marcella & Varfis, 2011; Baxter & Marcella, 2012), which was predicted by several observers (e.g. Helm, 2010) to be one on which ICTs, particularly new social media tools, would have a significant impact. These studies have coincided with the emergence of a significant body of literature that has discussed the use of the Internet as an electoral tool by political actors worldwide. As Ward and Vedel (2006) observe, the early literature, from the mid- to late-1990s, heralded a general wave of enthusiasm about the potential impact of the Internet, where “mobilisation” or “equalisation” theorists predicted that it would facilitate a more participatory style of politics, drawing more people into the democratic process, and bringing politicians and voters closer together. Shortly afterwards, however, a second wave of more sceptical voices appeared: “reinforcement” or “normalisation” theorists who argued that the Internet simply reflected and reinforced existing patterns of ‘offline’ political behaviour. More recently, renewed optimism has emerged, due largely to developments in the United States, where, for example, Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign successfully used new Web 2.0 technologies to raise campaign funds and create networks of supporters and volunteers (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011).

This paper will outline the methodologies used during the authors’ four campaign studies, and will provide an overview of the results of these investigations. It will discuss how Scottish political actors’ online efforts have evolved over the last ten years, in terms of the ways in which they have provided campaign information to the electorate, as well as any opportunities for interaction, debate and feedback. It will consider whether these results support the mobilisation theorists’ revolutionary claims; or whether Scottish politics online remains, as the normalisation proponents suggest, “politics as usual” (Margolis & Resnick, 2000, p. vii).

## 1. Methodologies

A number of different methodologies have been used by the authors over the ten-year period. However, one consistent element throughout all four studies has been the content analysis of party and candidate<sup>26</sup> websites. In terms of the political parties, the content of the websites of all parties fielding candidates has been examined and analysed, where such websites have existed. These parties have ranged from the four major ones that have traditionally dominated the Scottish political arena (i.e. the Scottish National Party (SNP), the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives), to the minority/fringe parties, some of which have stood during one election only and have campaigned on very specific issues (e.g. the Equal Parenting Alliance and the Save Our NHS Group, both in 2007). Back in 2003, less than 40% of the competing parties had a website. More recently, however, the vast majority of parties have maintained a campaign site of some kind, with just one of the 23 parties in the 2011 election failing to have a web presence. In terms of the individual candidates, during each of the four studies a sample of 11-12 candidate websites has been drawn for analysis, representing a range of parties, as well as a mixture of existing members of parliament seeking re-election and of new candidates. It should be noted here that, throughout the ten years, the parties’ websites have been less than helpful in directing users to their candidates’ personal websites, and that the researchers have had to rely largely on Google searches

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<sup>26</sup> The two most recent campaigns studied saw 347 candidates competing for the 59 first-past-the-post Scottish constituency seats in the 2010 UK Parliament election; and 756 candidates contesting the 73 first-past-the-post constituency seats and the 56 proportional representation regional seats in the 2011 Scottish Parliament campaign.

to identify a suitable sample of candidate sites. In all four studies, during the four-week period immediately preceding the respective polling days, the party and candidate websites have been analysed in terms of the ways in which they have: provided campaign, policy and candidate information; attempted to generate interest in the election campaign; kept the electorate up to date with the latest campaign news and developments; tried to engage the support of website users; and provided opportunities for interaction and debate.

Another core element of all four studies has been an enquiry responsiveness test, where a series of email enquiries based around topical campaign and policy issues has been directed at parties and candidates, in order to measure the speed and extent of their response, as well as any efforts they have made to create an ongoing relationship with potential voters. The questions asked have been on topics ranging from street crime to parliamentary expenses and, at times, have been designed to almost provoke a response from the politicians. Here, an element of covert research has been used, where the researchers, although using their real names, have created special email accounts to disguise the fact that they are academics, and have given no indication of their geographic location, to conceal the fact that they may not have been based in the individual candidates' potential parliamentary constituencies. Such an approach was felt essential in order to ensure that the parties' and candidates' behaviour, in terms of responding to enquiries from the electorate, remained normal and consistent. In the 2010 and 2011 studies, the enquiry responsiveness test was expanded, to include the now popular social media applications, Facebook and Twitter. Again, a covert approach was used: new Twitter accounts were created, and existing personal Facebook pages were modified, to conceal the researchers' geographic and professional backgrounds. It should be noted, however, that opportunities to question candidates on Facebook have been limited, as only a minority have allowed direct messaging without first showing allegiance to the candidate and their party by becoming a 'friend' or by 'liking' their site.

Given the increased use of new social media in political campaigning internationally (see, for example, Williamson, Miller & Fallon, 2010), the 2010 and 2011 studies also included an analysis of the content of those Twitter accounts, Facebook pages and blogs belonging to competing parties and candidates in Scotland. Here, all posts made during the respective four-week campaign periods, by the political actors and by members of the public, were captured electronically and subsequently analysed, both in terms of the broad topics being discussed on these sites, and in terms of the nature of the communication taking place (i.e., one-way 'broadcast' by politicians to voters, or two-way interaction with and/or between the electorate). Again, direct links to candidates' social media sites from party sites have been rare. In order to identify such sites, the researchers have had to rely on Google searches, on using the Facebook and Twitter search engines, and on systematically examining the lists of members or followers of party social media sites.

As Gibson and Ward (2009) point out, the literature on online campaigning has been dominated by "supply side" questions, where researchers have quantified the extent of the adoption of online campaign tools by political actors, or where they have conducted content analyses of campaign sites. Meanwhile, Gibson and Römmele (2005) have bemoaned the lack of qualitative user studies and have argued that we need "a better in-depth understanding of individuals' online election experiences". With these points in mind, and to complement their other work, the current authors conducted a study of voters' online information behaviour during the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary election campaign. This study used the researchers' interactive, electronically-assisted interview method, where 64 citizens of Aberdeen, in North-east Scotland, were observed and questioned as

they searched for, browsed and used information on the websites and social media sites of parties and candidates.

## 2. Results

### 2.1. Information Provision on Campaign Websites

#### 2.1.1. Manifestos and Other Policy Information

Traditionally, the primary source of policy information during UK election campaigns is the party manifesto, and throughout all four studies the manifesto has been prominent on the majority of the parties' websites. Unsurprisingly, given the diversity of the competing parties, these documents have varied greatly in length: the manifestos of some of the smallest fringe parties have consisted of just 200-300 words, while those of the major parties have occasionally been between 100-120 pages long. More recently, some of the larger parties have begun to recognise that lengthy manifestos do not always "connect with the public" (Wade, 2011), and have produced more concise policy documents. For example, during the 2011 campaign, the SNP launched a series of additional two-page 'mini-manifestos' online, each one aimed at a specific sector of the electorate (e.g. carers, small businesses) or dealing with a particular policy area (e.g. the environment, justice and peace). On the individual candidates' websites, meanwhile, policy information has, surprisingly, been less common. Throughout all four studies, only around half of the sample candidate websites have contained copies of, or links to, their party's manifesto, or have contained any personal policy statements or commentary.

#### 2.1.2. Candidate Information

It might be anticipated that a crucial role for parties' websites during election campaigns would be to provide information about their prospective parliamentary candidates. Throughout the four studies, however, the provision of candidate information by the Scottish parties has been erratic and, at times, illogical. For example, in the 2003 campaign, all of the major parties provided biographies of the vast majority of their constituency candidates. In 2007, though, only the Liberal Democrats provided any biographical information, and only for around half of their candidates; the other major parties simply provided a list of their candidates' names. In terms of providing candidates' contact details online (i.e. postal address, telephone number and/or email address), the SNP provided none at all in either the 2007 and 2010 campaigns (arguing, in 2007, that their candidates would receive too much spam<sup>27</sup>); the Labour Party failed to give any email addresses in 2003; while the Conservatives were the only major party to provide email addresses in 2007. Throughout all four campaigns the provision of links to candidates' personal websites and social media sites has also been negligible. At times, then, it has appeared that the Scottish political parties have consciously discouraged voters from making personal contact with their prospective representatives, and have expected the online electorate to make their democratic choice based on minimal personal information.

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<sup>27</sup> Personal communication with the SNP campaign team, in May 2007.

### 2.1.3. Campaign News

During all four studies, the majority of party websites have contained sections labelled 'campaign news', or similar, where they have attempted to keep visitors up to date with the latest events on the campaign trail, from manifesto launches to media appearances, and from key speeches to hustings events. However, it has generally only been the largest parties, with the greater resources, who have updated these sections regularly: the smaller parties have performed less well in this respect. Similarly, only around one-third to one-half of the sample candidate websites have contained regularly updated campaign news items. Throughout all four campaigns, between one-fifth and one-quarter of the parties have indicated that they provide free e-newsletters, and the researchers have attempted to subscribe to all of these in order to explore their regularity and content. The results of these efforts have been mixed: some parties have failed to send any newsletters during the campaign period, while a very small number (most notably the Scottish Green Party) have consistently sent weekly, or sometimes more regular, news bulletins. Overall, though, Scottish parties have paid relatively little attention to the e-newsletter as a dissemination tool during busy campaign periods. During the two most recent studies, the websites of a small number of parties (four in 2010, five in 2011) have incorporated real-time feeds from their UK, Scottish, or local branch party social media sites, thereby providing up-to-date information on campaign events. Similarly, a small number of the sample candidate websites (two in 2010, one in 2011) have provided feeds from their personal social media accounts.

### 2.1.4. Opportunities for Communication and Engagement

In all four campaigns, the vast majority of the party and candidate websites have provided some method of online contact, in the shape of either a general enquiries email address or a web-based enquiry form. However, based on the results of the researchers' enquiry responsiveness tests (of which more is discussed later), the extent to which the political actors have responded to any contact made by the electorate has to be open to question. The provision of other opportunities for online engagement with the electorate has been limited, though. During each of the four studies, just two or three of the smaller parties have provided discussion boards and other online fora; although in some cases (e.g. with the British National Party (BNP) and the Pirate Party) these have been hosted by national, UK-wide party sites and have not focused specifically on Scottish campaign issues.

### 2.1.5. Audiovisual Features

During the researchers' first study, in 2003, just two parties were found to include video clips on their campaign websites. Since then, video clips of election broadcasts and speeches have become standard fare on the websites of the larger parties, either embedded in the website content, or in the form of links to the parties' YouTube channels. The websites of the smallest parties, however, remain largely devoid of any audiovisual features. With regard to the candidate websites, the 2003 study saw just one candidate provide video clips; but by 2010, seven of the 12 sample candidate sites contained videos, of their parliamentary appearances or personal election addresses. Twelve months later, however, just two of 12 candidate sites now contained video clips, perhaps reflecting a new preference for the use of social media as campaign tools. The 2007 campaign saw the emergence of the online TV station, when both the SNP and the BNP broadcast live TV over the Internet each evening. The success of these stations, in terms of viewing figures, is unclear.

However, neither party has repeated the experiment in subsequent campaigns, nor have any other parties followed suit. This perhaps suggests a lack of sufficient content to make nightly broadcasts viable; or perhaps that voters prefer to watch election broadcasts at their own convenience, rather than at times predetermined by the parties.

### **2.1.6. Information in Alternative Languages and Formats**

During the most recent campaigns, the research team has observed a disappointing decline in the provision of campaign information in alternative formats or languages, aimed at website users with a disability or whose first language is not English. The 2007 campaign, for example, had seen a Scottish Gaelic version of an entire party website, minority language versions of manifestos, and a video clip of an election address complete with subtitles and British Sign Language interpreting. By 2011, however, none of the candidate websites and only five of the 22 party websites made any reference to information in alternative forms. The Conservative and Green Parties provided audio versions of their election manifestos; the Scottish Socialist Party provided a one-page anti-cuts leaflet (from 2010) in Polish; and two of the other minority parties provided a Google Translate widget, which theoretically allowed the translation of their website content into around 60 languages. Indeed, during the 2011 campaign, Scotland's political parties were criticised by disability charities for a lack of large print and Braille manifestos, and for the accessibility of their websites (Anon, 2011). The SNP came in for particular criticism, and the party did eventually provide an audio version of their manifesto, which appeared on YouTube just two days before polling day.

### **2.1.7. Membership and Donations**

Following an emerging trend, identified during the 2005 general election (see, for example, Jackson, 2007), of UK political actors using the Internet as a resource generation tool, the current authors have mapped a growth in Scottish parties providing opportunities for members of the public to actively become part of the campaign in some way. By 2011, the majority of party websites (i.e. 16 of 22) now provided an online party membership form, and also allowed users to make online donations to the party. Smaller numbers of parties also provided online volunteering or "pledge of support" forms, or online shops where supporters could purchase party t-shirts, mugs, etc. The same period, however, has seen a noticeable decrease (four parties in 2011, compared with ten parties in 2007) in the number of party sites providing free, downloadable, more traditional campaign materials, such as leaflets and window posters. This suggests a move away from the mutual exchange of support between political actors and supporters, where the parties, although anxious to obtain financial and manual support via their websites, appear less willing to provide anything in return.

### **2.1.8. Other Interactive Features**

The provision of other interactive features has remained relatively rare throughout the ten-year period. In each of the four studies, only a small proportion of party and candidate websites have included such features. These have tended to consist of three types: postcode-based search facilities, to identify the user's parliamentary constituency and/or their prospective candidates; online surveys and polls on, for example, voting intentions; and online petitions on a range of topics, from hospital parking charges to the part-privatisation of the Post Office.

## 2.2. Enquiry responsiveness tests

Figure 1 provides an overview of the response rates to the researchers' email enquiries during the four studies. In terms of the parties' responses, the first study in 2003 saw a particularly good response rate of 84%, which subsequently declined dramatically during the following two election campaigns. The most recent study in 2011 saw an improved response rate from the parties, but still almost half (47%) of the enquiries remained unanswered. This lack of response to email enquiries on campaign and policy issues is similar to that identified by Vaccari (2012) in a cross-country longitudinal study conducted between 2007 and 2010.

Throughout all four studies, no clear patterns have emerged in terms of the most or least responsive parties. For example, in 2010, the Conservative Party failed to answer any of the questions sent by the researchers, but in 2011 responded to all enquiries received. In contrast, the Labour Party had a 100% response rate in 2010, but failed to reply to any queries in 2011. With regard to the nature of the party responses, the major parties have, generally speaking, adopted a 'copy and paste' approach, where they have simply copied paragraphs from party manifestos or other policy literature and pasted these into the body of the email response. Indeed, during the first two studies, the parties sometimes made little or no effort to disguise this fact, providing replies containing a variety of font sizes and styles, reflecting the different sources from which the text had been copied.

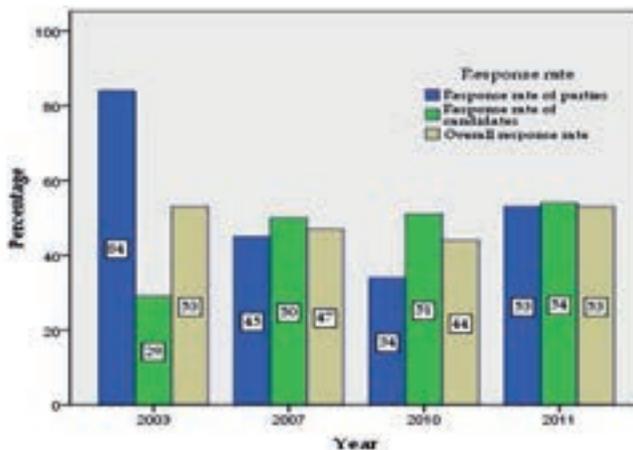


Figure 1: Email Enquiry Response Rates, 2003-2011

In terms of the individual candidates' responses, the 2003 study saw a very disappointing response rate of just 29%, which has increased incrementally during subsequent campaigns. Again, though, the most recent campaign saw almost half (46%) of the researchers' questions being ignored completely. Over the ten-year period, it is perhaps fair to say that the candidates from the Scottish Green Party have consistently been the most likely to respond. The extent and nature of the replies received from candidates have varied widely, from the curt and not particularly informative, to those that have been constructive, responsive and relatively detailed. Indeed, it has frequently

been the candidates from the fringe parties, with little chance of electoral success, who have appeared the most willing to initiate further discussion and debate with the enquirer. One interesting phenomenon, first encountered during the 2007 study, has been that a small but significant number of candidates (generally existing elected members seeking re-election) have requested details of the enquirer's postal address, to establish if they lived in their prospective parliamentary constituency, and have implied that a fuller response would only be provided on confirmation of that address. As Norton (2007) notes, this practice is far from unusual, and presumably relates to Jackson's (2004) finding that over half of elected members' email correspondence comes from non-constituents.

**Table 1: Facebook and Twitter Enquiry Response Rates by Candidates, 2010-2011**

| Year | Facebook | Twitter |
|------|----------|---------|
| 2010 | 50%      | 0%      |
| 2011 | 35%      | 30%     |

Table 1 illustrates the response rates to the researchers' questions sent to candidates by Facebook and Twitter during the 2010 and 2011 studies. With regard to Facebook, the 50% response rate achieved in 2010 was encouraging, being on a par with that of the email enquiries sent to candidates; however, 12 months later the response rate dropped markedly to 35%. In both years the Facebook responses tended to be very brief and offered little evidence of any desire to engage further with the enquirer. With Twitter, meanwhile, whilst acknowledging the difficulties candidates face in providing a meaningful reply within the application's 140-character limit, the current authors were dismayed by the failure to obtain a single response (from 30 enquiries) during the 2010 study. While the Twitter enquiry response rate in 2011 did rise to 30%, these findings suggest that, in general, Scottish political actors are reluctant to use social media as a vehicle for answering policy questions, or at least from those enquirers with whom they are personally unacquainted.

### 2.3. Content analysis of party and candidate social media sites

In 2010, during the UK Parliamentary election, seven of the 20 competing parties in Scotland used Facebook and/or Twitter as campaign tools. One year later, just over half (12 of 23) of the parties in the Scottish Parliamentary contest had adopted one or both of these social media. Whilst the Labour Party had the most Twitter followers (1,224) in 2010, by the 2011 polling day the SNP's Twitter site had the largest following, of 3,833. During both studies, the SNP also had the largest number of Facebook 'friends', which rose dramatically from 3,305 in 2010 to 10,433 in 2011. Table 2, meanwhile, indicates the adoption rate of social media (more specifically, Facebook, Twitter and blogs) by individual candidates during the 2010 and 2011 campaigns. As can be seen, in each campaign, just over one-third of the individual candidates were using either Facebook, Twitter or a personal blog at least partly for electioneering purposes. In 2010 the proportions using Facebook and Twitter were almost identical, but by 2011 Facebook had become a slightly more popular campaign medium. The number of Facebook 'friends' each candidate has had has varied widely: in 2010, one Conservative hopeful only had two 'friends' by polling day; while, in 2011, the prominent UK Independence Party candidate, Christopher Monckton, had almost 6,300. Similarly,

the number of Twitter followers has ranged from the two people who followed one Scottish Green Party candidate in 2011, to the near 27,000 following the controversial Respect Party politician, George Galloway, during the same campaign.

**Table 2: Adoption of Social Media by Candidates, 2010-2011**

| Year                              | Facebook | Twitter | Blog  | One or more types of social media |
|-----------------------------------|----------|---------|-------|-----------------------------------|
| 2010 ( <i>n</i> = 347 candidates) | 21.0%    | 21.9%   | 12.6% | 36.9%                             |
| 2011 ( <i>n</i> = 756 candidates) | 25.8%    | 18.8%   | 8.7%  | 34.3%                             |

Following the 2010 campaign, the researchers analysed almost 1,600 blog posts, over 3,000 tweets, and over 7,000 Facebook wall posts made during the four-week campaign period. This analysis established that social media were primarily being used for the one-way flow of information from the parties and candidates to the electorate. There was little direct, two-way engagement with potential voters and, as with the email communication discussed above, a general reluctance to respond to 'difficult' policy questions or critical comments posted by the electorate. The information provided tended to be rather bland and lacking in any meaningful policy comment. Indeed, many of the 2010 candidates appeared more interested in discussing the climatic conditions when out on the campaign trail, rather than any important national or local issues being raised by their potential constituents. The 2010 candidates' posts were also almost universally (and unrealistically) positive and optimistic: even those candidates who were resoundingly defeated on polling day had claimed throughout the campaign that the electorate was warmly responsive to their political message. With the exception of the more prominent individuals (largely existing parliamentarians seeking re-election), the candidates' Facebook 'friends' and followers tended to be relatively modest in number, and appeared to be largely family, friends and associates of the contestants, or party supporters, members and activists. This gave something of an exclusive feel to many of the sites, where 'outsiders' with opposing political views were unwelcome and where opportunities for objective debate with the wider electorate were limited.

Analysis of the parties' and candidates' social media activity during the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary campaign is still ongoing. However, the researchers' initial impressions are that little had changed in the intervening 12 months. The political actors were still largely in one-way, broadcast mode, and two-way interaction with the general public was relatively rare. Despite the victorious SNP's suggestion that their candidates, including their existing Scottish Government Cabinet Secretaries, had been actively encouraged to converse with potential voters via social media (Macdonell, 2011), there is little evidence to suggest that the SNP candidates were any more interactive and engaging online than their opponents. And while the SNP have also highlighted the positivity of their digital campaign (Wade, 2011), there is little evidence to indicate that their candidates and activists were any less likely than those of other parties to attack their political opponents online. Indeed, the most vitriolic exchanges identified by the current authors were amongst those to be found on the SNP's Facebook site.

## 2.4. User information behaviour study

In the 2011 user study, the most dominant theme to emerge was that of a need for brevity and clarity in the presentation of policy information by political actors. As indicated above, a mainstay of the party campaign website has been the election manifesto, which is frequently a lengthy and verbose document. Very few of the participants were prepared to spend time perusing these, and instead expressed a need for short, sharp, "bite-size" policy statements that might be easily read and digested. As noted earlier, some of the parties have recognised this preference, and where more concise policy statements were provided these appeared to resonate strongly with the study participants. A clear need was also demonstrated by participants for policy statements and commentary relating specifically to local constituency issues. However, these were perceived as lacking, or becoming 'lost' amongst the other content on party websites. Interviewees were also surprised and disappointed by the lack of local policy commentary on their local candidates' sites. The participants were also far from impressed with the political actors' use of social media, citing the preponderance of "boring" campaign photographs, but also a lack of meaningful policy comment, and a reluctance to engage in dialogue with potential voters. Indeed, "trivial", "puerile" and "shallow" were among the terms used to describe the politicians' efforts. Overall, while the interviewees regarded online campaign sites as serving a useful purpose, being easy to use and understand, relatively interesting, and likely to be visited again, there was very little evidence to indicate that they had any significant impact on voting behaviour. For the vast majority (60 of the 64 participants), the online, interactive sessions had had no influence on their democratic choice. Rather, the interviewees' responses suggested that more traditional information sources, particularly broadcast and print media, together with long-established campaign techniques, such as leaflet deliveries and door-to-door canvassing, remain more influential in determining voters' choices.

## 3. Conclusions

This overview of research into online election campaigning in Scotland has demonstrated that political actors have appeared relatively keen to be seen embracing new and emerging technologies for electioneering purposes. The vast majority of political parties, and a significant proportion of individual candidates, now maintain an online presence during campaigns, be it a 'traditional' website, or newer social media applications such as a Facebook page or a Twitter account.

It might be argued that, in certain respects, some progress has been made by Scottish political actors over the last ten years. Certainly, online sources are being used more extensively for the generation of campaign funds and for the recruitment of members and volunteers; and the inclusion of audiovisual features has become more prevalent, particularly on party sites. Equally, however, the provision of information in alternative languages and formats has regressed. And, despite the incorporation of real-time social media feeds on some sites, many parties and candidates fail to regularly update their online content during the busy campaign period, resulting in rather stagnant sites unlikely to attract repeat visits from voters. While the technologies adopted by political actors may have changed over the last decade, the nature of their use has remained relatively constant. Parties and candidates still use the Internet primarily for the one-way broadcast of information to the electorate, and they remain reluctant to encourage online contact or to enter into any kind of visible online debate. They also remain unwilling to respond

fully to any critical comments or questions on contentious policy questions. The current authors would argue that these patterns of information exchange are unlikely to have encouraged an already apathetic and cynical electorate to participate more fully in the democratic process.

Indeed the research, particularly the 2011 user study, has revealed the dichotomy that appears to exist between the views of the parties and candidates and those of the voters. While the public wishes to see concise and easily-read policy statements, the majority of parties continue to produce lengthy, wordy manifestos. And while the electorate desires more information relating to local constituency issues, local policy comment is lacking, or difficult to find, on campaign sites. Voters also desire more online engagement with their prospective representatives, yet most Scottish political actors continue to avoid such interaction. With this apparent dichotomy in mind, the assertion of the SNP that the 2011 election was the “first European election where online has swayed the vote” (Gordon, 2011) might be questioned. It is acknowledged that certain elements of the SNP’s digital strategy, such as its bespoke, internal, voter database, Activate (Gordon, 2011), will have played a crucial role in informing and organising the party’s activists during what was an unprecedented election victory. However, in terms of publicly accessible campaign information, given the generally modest followings of most of the political actors, from across all parties, and the bland and superficial ways in which they used the Internet during the 2011 campaign, the current authors would hesitate to make any direct associations between these politicians’ online efforts and their electoral success or failure.

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