Voters' information behaviour when using political actors' websites during the 2011 Scottish Parliament election campaign

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Abstract

Purpose — This paper reports the results of a study of voters' online behaviour conducted during the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary election campaign.

Design/methodology/approach — The study used an interactive, electronically-assisted interview method, where 64 citizens were observed and questioned while they searched for, browsed and used information on the websites and social media sites of political parties and candidates standing for election to the Scottish Parliament.

Findings — While online campaign sites were generally regarded as serving a useful purpose, as being easy to use and understand, relatively interesting and likely to be visited again, there was very little evidence in this study to indicate that they had any significant impact on voting behaviour during the 2011 Scottish campaign. Rather, the participants' comments suggest that more traditional information sources, particularly print and broadcast media, coupled with long-established campaign techniques, such as leaflet deliveries and door knocking, continue to be more influential in determining Scottish voters' democratic choices.

Research limitations/implications — The paper presents results obtained from a sample of 64 citizens of North-east Scotland. As such, the authors would lay no claims to the results of the study being applicable outwith the Scottish setting.

Practical implications — The findings have implications for those candidates successfully elected to the Scottish Parliament, who may have to significantly modify their information practices on entering Parliament. The study also has implications for the broader, international, political and information research communities, as it has added to a rather sparse body of qualitative work on voters' online election information needs. The voter-centred methodological approach used in the study has the potential to be used or adopted more widely, to aid our understanding of the use and impact of online campaign tools.

Originality/value — This study forms part of an ongoing series of investigations by the authors, which has examined the use of the Internet by political parties and candidates during parliamentary election campaigns in Scotland. These are the only such studies which have looked specifically at the Scottish political arena. Internationally, most studies of users of online campaign resources have been largely quantitative in nature. The qualitative research discussed in this paper is, therefore, particularly timely and potentially significant.

Introduction

In May 2011, the Scottish National Party (SNP) swept to power in the Scottish Parliament elections, winning 69 of the 129 available seats with a 45.4% share of the constituency votes and a 44% share of the regional votes, thereby forming the first ever Scottish administration with a working majority. This was, as *The Scotsman* newspaper proclaimed, "an achievement unprecedented in modern Scottish politics" (Anon, 2011). The Scottish electoral system had, after all, been designed specifically to prevent one party winning an outright majority, with its proportional, regional votes approach intended to balance out any gains made from the first-past-the-post constituency seats.

In the immediate aftermath of its victory, the SNP highlighted the crucial role played by its online campaign, including the use of a bespoke voter database, Activate, and a new platform, NationBuilder, which integrated Facebook and Twitter with the party's website. Candidates and party activists were encouraged to use these tools to identify, contact and interact with potential voters online, and combine this with more traditional face-to-face canvassing work on the street or doorstep. As a result, the SNP claimed that the 2011 campaign was the "first European election where online has swayed the vote" (Gordon, 2011) and that their strategy would now be the "model for political parties all over the world" (Wade, 2011).

If the SNP's assertions are to be believed, then these are at odds with the views of those who claim that the internet is unlikely to ever be a truly revolutionary campaigning tool in the UK. Indeed, following the 2010 UK General Election, which had been predicted by many observers to be one on which online technologies would have a significant impact (e.g. Swaine, 2010), Williamson (2010a) concluded that "it is time to put aside the idea of an 'internet election'". He argued that, although digital media play an increasingly important role in UK elections, particularly as management tools with which parties organise their candidates and activists, the party-oriented nature of British politics does not lend itself to web-based campaigns that capture the public's imagination. Williamson (2010b) contrasts this with the campaign culture in the US, where a more personality-led approach provides a powerful means of mobilising public support and raising campaign funds online.

But what did the Scottish electorate think of the online offerings of the SNP and the other parties during the 2011 Scottish Parliament campaign? Were these sites informative, engaging and likely to impact upon their electoral choice? This paper reports the results of a study of voters' online information behaviour, conducted at the height of the campaign in Aberdeen, North-east Scotland, where members of the public were given the opportunity to explore, and provide critical feedback on, the campaign sites of parties and candidates standing for election. More specifically, the study aimed to:

- identify motivations for, and barriers to, the public's use of election campaign sites;

- investigate the types of information, tools and technologies the electorate most values when accessing these sites;

- assess the likelihood of such sites being visited again in the future; and

- explore the extent to which the use of campaign sites might influence voting behaviour.

This study was the latest in an ongoing series of investigations by the authors which have examined the use of the Internet by political actors in Scotland during election campaigns (see Marcella *et al.*, 2003; Marcella *et al.*, 2008; Baxter *et al.*, 2011). To date, these are the only such studies which have looked primarily at the Scottish political arena.

The paper begins by providing a brief overview of the literature in the field of online electioneering campaigning, focusing on those studies that have explored voters' perceptions of the Internet as an electoral campaign tool. It then describes the data collection methodology adopted in the current study, before discussing some of the key themes emerging from the results, in terms of the participants' perceptions of the accessibility, value and impact of online campaign sites. The paper concludes by considering the implications of the research results for those candidates who successfully gained election to the Scottish Parliament, as well as for other political actors and academics internationally.

Literature review

Since the mid-1990s, a significant body of literature has emerged 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 heralded a general wave of enthusiasm about the potential impact of the Internet on the political sphere, where "mobilisation" or "equalisation" theorists predicted that it would facilitate a new, more participatory style of politics, bringing parties and politicians and an increasingly disaffected electorate closer together, and drawing more people into the democratic process. Within a few years, however, these Utopian claims were being questioned by a second wave of more sceptical voices — "reinforcement" or "normalisation" theorists who argued that the Internet, far from revolutionising political communication and participation, simply reflected and reinforced existing patterns of offline behaviour. More recently, a new wave of optimism has begun to emerge, prompted largely by developments in the US, where, for example, Howard Dean's presidential candidacy campaign in 2004 (Hindman, 2005) and, in particular, Barack Obama's 2008 campaign (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011) utilised new, more interactive Web 2.0 technologies to raise campaign funds and create networks of supporters and volunteers.

Gibson and Ward (2009) provide a concise review of the key studies in the field and, in so doing, note that the literature has been dominated by "supply side" questions,

where researchers have quantified the extent to which political actors have adopted online campaigning tools, or where they have conducted content analyses of campaign websites. In reviewing these studies, they identify a number of broad trends, including that:

- parties and candidates have focused on the one-way dissemination of information to the electorate, rather than utilising the interactive features offered by new technologies;

- where political actors have adopted a more participatory approach, they have tended to offer only "controlled interactivity" via the provision of web-based feedback forms or generic email addresses, rather than providing more open, unstructured opportunities for debate, such as chat rooms and message boards;

- parties are increasingly using the Internet as a means of securing resources, in terms of members, volunteers and financial donations.

Gibson and Ward also argue that less attention has been paid to the "demand side" of online electioneering — studies that have explored the extent to which the electorate visit campaign websites or, more significantly, the impact that exposure to these sites has on political participation and voting decisions. Certainly, there have been a number of large-scale, quantitative surveys of the public, generally in western, liberal democracies, which have investigated their use of the Internet to obtain and exchange electoral information during campaigns. In the UK, for example, studies have taken place during, or immediately after, the three most recent general elections, in 2001 (Coleman, 2001), 2005 (Lusoli and Ward, 2005) and 2010 (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, 2010). And on a Europe-wide level, Lusoli (2005) used data from a European Commission survey, conducted before the 2004 European Parliament elections, to explore the use of the Internet as an electoral information source by citizens of 25 countries. The general picture emerging from these studies is that only modest proportions of the electorate visit campaign sites, but that they are used more frequently by young, well-educated males with an existing interest in politics.

In the US, meanwhile, a series of national telephone surveys by the Pew Research Center have charted the incremental growth in the number of Americans going online to obtain electoral information during successive presidential and mid-term contests (e.g. Rainie *et al.*, 2005; Rainie and Horrigan, 2007; Smith, 2009). The most recent Pew study (Smith, 2011) estimated that 54% of American adults used the Internet to connect to the political process during the 2010 mid-term campaign; and while all generations were to some extent "online political users", those most intensely engaged were young adults aged under 30.

There has also been a raft of studies, predominantly conducted in the US and often based on existing survey data, which have used multiple regression techniques to explore relationships between Internet use during elections and citizens' levels of

political efficacy, knowledge, trust or engagement, or of their likelihood of voting. The results of these studies have been mixed: while some have found Internet use to be an important predictor, or at least correlate, of political knowledge and interest (e.g. Drew and Weaver, 2006), others have found more modest associations (e.g. Kenski and Stroud, 2006).

A number of more experimental, laboratory-based investigations have also taken place, again largely in the US and often involving convenience samples of university students. Here, participants have been exposed to candidates' websites and their attitudes towards political issues and the candidates' characters have then been measured using Likert-type scales in a post-test questionnaire (e.g. Hansen and Benoit, 2005; Towner and Dulio, 2011). However, due to the differing approaches and objectives of these studies, no clear patterns have emerged from the results. Some experimental studies have focused on the effects of exposure to interactive features on candidate websites. Again, though, these have produced contradictory findings. For example, Tedesco (2007) established that exposure to highly interactive features resulted in significant increases in political information efficacy; but Sundar *et al.* (2003) found that "too much interactivity" interfered with users' recall of policy issues.

Most studies of users of online campaign resources have been largely quantitative in nature; very few researchers have adopted a more qualitative approach. In the US, Stromer-Galley and Foot (2002) and Wells and Dudash (2007) conducted focus groups with citizens and students, respectively, to explore their perceptions of the engagement opportunities presented by campaign websites. Meanwhile, away from the campaign trail, Ferguson and Howell (2004) discussed the deliberations of a "blog jury" who monitored UK political blogs; and Lynch and Hogan (2011) used focus groups to investigate social media use by Irish political parties, from the perspective of young citizens.

This lack of qualitative studies is bemoaned by those observers who point out that "we still know relatively little about the way citizens engage with technology and online information" (Gibson and Ward, 2009). Indeed, Gibson and Römmele (2005) argue that obtaining "a better in-depth understanding of individuals' online election experiences" would assist in better shaping the questions asked in quantitative opinion surveys, allowing more precise causal inferences to be drawn about voters' exposure to campaign sites. The largely qualitative research discussed in this paper is, therefore, particularly timely and potentially significant.

Methodological approach

The research was hosted by the Rosemount Community Centre, an Aberdeen City Council community learning facility located in central Aberdeen. At the time of the study, the Centre offered a varied programme of classes, ranging from flower arranging to computing for beginners. It also hosted regular advice surgeries with two of the local government councillors representing the local electoral ward. It was anticipated, therefore, that in conducting the study in the Centre it would satisfy the

researchers' long-standing philosophy of getting as close as possible to the everyday lives of their research subjects, and in the process would reach a wide cross-section of the local population. The research also took place at a time when there appeared to be a lack of trust in local democracy in Aberdeen, caused largely by the Council's response to a public consultation on controversial plans to redevelop a Victorian park located in the heart of the city centre (Ross, 2010). With this in mind, it was hoped that the nature of the research would appeal to potential participants during a period of heightened political awareness locally, particularly as a number of the city's councillors were standing as candidates for election to the Scottish Parliament.

The study took place during the two-week period beginning 18 April 2011, shortly before the election date of 5 May, and the researchers were located in the Centre's coffee room, where users congregate before or after classes. The research was promoted by means of posters displayed throughout the Centre, as well as articles in the local press. In addition, research team members visited and 'canvassed' the numerous small shops and businesses in the vicinity of the Centre; and one of the researchers occasionally positioned themselves directly outside the Centre's entrance, inviting passing pedestrians to participate. Combined, these approaches were successful in persuading 64 individuals to take part.

The research used the interactive, electronically-assisted interview method — previously developed by the researchers during a study of the British public's use of parliamentary websites (Marcella *et al.*, 2003) — where the participants were observed and questioned as they searched for and used information on the websites and social media sites of parties and candidates standing for election to the Scottish Parliament.

Online access was achieved with the use of a laptop computer and mobile broadband 'dongle' technology. While interviews were occasionally hampered by weak signals and slow data transmission speeds (particularly when respondents wished to view video clips), the access speeds obtained during the study generally proved acceptable to the interviewees. The interviews varied in length from 13 minutes to almost 50 minutes, depending on the information seeking techniques, time availability and personal interest of the research subjects. With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded digitally and subsequently transcribed. In addition, a software package *IE HistoryView* was used to log invisibly all URLs visited during the interviews.

The interview schedule comprised four distinct parts:

1) Demographic questions exploring age, occupation, education, and electoral constituency.

2) Structured questions on voting patterns, political participation, computer use, and past need for campaign information.

3) A free-form period of undirected information seeking on the campaign site(s) of the participant's choice.

4) Post-search, structured questions on the user friendliness of the sites visited, the relevance and comprehensibility of the information found, the likelihood of such sites being revisited, and the extent to which the information obtained may affect electoral choices.

Demographic profile of the study sample

Table I illustrates the key demographic features of the participants. As can be seen, there was a reasonable spread of ages in the sample, although more females than males participated in the research. When compared with recent official statistics (Aberdeen City Council, 2003; Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics, 2010), the sample was, proportionately, better educated and from higher socio-economic classes than the Aberdeen population as a whole. The sample was also slightly over-representative in terms of retired individuals.

Table I: Demographic profile of sample (n = 64)

Number of males	28	Number in higher socio-economic classes	34
Number of females	36	Number in intermediate socio-economic classes	14
Number <30 years old	14	Number in lower socio-economic classes	8
Number 30-64 years old	36	Number who had participated in further education	35
Number >64 years old	14	Number who had participated in higher education	33
Number currently in employment	37	Number living in Aberdeen city	58
Number retired	18	Number registered to vote in North-east Scotland	63

Study results

Respondents' prior political activity

To determine the extent of the participants' political participation, they were asked about their voting activities at the most recent local, regional, national and European elections (see Table II). The proportions of those who stated they had voted were significantly higher than the actual turnouts in Aberdeen for the four elections, which were, respectively: 50.2% for the 2007 council election (Herbert, 2008); 49.0% during the 2007 Scottish Parliamentary election (BBC News, 2007); just 28.2% for the 2009 European Parliament vote (Aberdeen City Council, 2009); and 62.7% at the 2010 UK General Election (BBC News, 2010). While the sample participants may, indeed, have been atypically active in exercising their democratic right, these results may alternatively demonstrate a tendency to over-report voting activity in survey

responses (a situation encountered previously by the authors in research of this kind).

Table II: Respondents' voting behaviour at most recent elections								
Election	Voted		Did not vote		Was not eligible		Could not remember	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Local Council Election 2007	47	73.4	7	10.9	7	10.9	3	4.7
Scottish Parliament Election 2007	47	73.4	7	10.9	7	10.9	3	4.7
European Parliament Election 2009	33	51.6	15	23.4	7	10.9	9	14.1
UK General Election 2010	48	75.0	10	15.6	5	7.8	1	1.6

Despite these high voting figures, just 13 (20.3%) of the interviewees described themselves as politically participative in other ways. Their activities included: corresponding regularly with elected representatives (four participants); campaigning on behalf of a party (three); discussing politics with friends and colleagues (three); covering local issues via community radio and online citizen journalism (two); and membership of youth parliaments and political fora (one).

Prior seeking of information to aid voting decisions

Only 11 (17.2%) of the 64 respondents had previously looked for information during an election campaign in order to aid their voting decision, with, interestingly, all but one of these individuals having sought the information online. Eight had examined parties' websites in order to establish their stance on various policy issues; one interviewee had looked for parties' channels on YouTube, to find videos on alternative voting systems; while two respondents had written to electoral candidates, one by email, to elicit their policy views. For the majority, however, their main sources of campaign information were print and broadcast media, combined with literature received through their doors:

> I listen to the broadcasts on the television, but basically that's about it for me. And I read the information that comes in through the letterbox.

Respondents' use of computers

The interviewees were asked about their experience of using computers, the Internet, and social media. All 64 participants had previous experience of using a computer, although for nine (largely individuals attending the Centre's computing courses) their use was currently only occasional. The vast majority (58; 90.6%) of the interviewees found computers 'very' or 'quite' easy to use, with four of the six who cited difficulties being aged 65 or over.

Most of the sample (53; 82.8%) described themselves as regular Internet users; with just one (an 80-year-old woman) having no prior experience of the Internet. This was

in marked contrast to the situation nationally, where 27% of Scottish adults never use the Internet (Scottish Government, 2011).

The participants were less familiar with social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, with 29 (45.3%) having never used such applications. Unsurprisingly, the younger participants were more experienced users: just one of the 14 interviewees aged under 30 had never used social media. Several of the older participants, despite having no practical experience of social media, were keenly aware of their existence, and offered their opinions on the societal and security implications of their use.

Free-form period of information seeking

The interviewees were then invited to undertake a period of undirected information seeking, on the party or candidate site(s) of their choice. To assist the participants, the researchers had prepared a list of all parties and candidates standing in the North-east Scotland constituencies, together with desktop shortcuts to their online sites, where these existed. Overall, 71 pages/sections from 32 different sites (14 websites, 12 Facebook pages, one Twitter feed, and five blogs) were explored during these sessions, and Table III lists the ten pages visited by most participants.

Table III: Ten online pages visited by most participants	
Page	**No. of participants**
Candidate A (SNP) Facebook page	16
SNP website home page	12
Scottish Labour website home page	8
Candidate B (Scottish Labour) Facebook page	8
Candidate C (Scottish Liberal Democrats) Facebook page	8
SNP Facebook page	7
Scottish Liberal Democrats website home page	6
SNP website news page	5
Scottish Conservatives website home page	5
Scottish Green Party website home page	5

The participants' reasons for wishing to view specific sites, or look for particular types of information, were many and various. Twenty-six looked for information about candidates. Amongst these, there were those who simply wanted to establish who their local candidates were; those who knew their candidates' names, but desired additional biographical information; those who wanted a general look at "what they've got to say for themselves"; and those who wished to explore the candidates' opinions on specific local policy issues.

Forty-four participants looked for party-related information. Although interviewees were not asked explicitly about their voting intentions, ten freely offered the name of their preferred party and decided to go to that party's site for a general "look around".

A further three declared themselves as floating voters and chose to examine the sites of the parties from which they were likely to choose. The majority, however, were more guarded and gave few clues as to their potential democratic choice. They instead chose to have a general look around the sites of one or more parties, to browse these parties' manifestos, or to investigate their stances on certain policy issues, including education, employment and the environment.

Interestingly, five participants expressed a wish to view the sites of the two far-right parties fielding candidates locally, the British National Party (BNP) and the National Front (NF). These individuals were keen to stress, however, that this was not because of any support for the parties. Rather, their need was borne out of a state of curiosity: they wanted to see "just how horrible they are", but because of perceived security risks did not want to use their own home or work computer in the process.

Evaluative feedback on campaign sites

These periods of information seeking elicited a wealth of rich, evaluative and thoughtful comment from the participants, and some of the main themes emerging from the data are discussed below.

Candidate information

Amongst the sample, there were a number of interviewees who declared that they had little interest in individual candidates, and that their voting decisions are always based purely on political party lines. However, as noted above, 26 respondents did seek information on their constituency candidates. Some of these participants expressed pleasant surprise that individual candidates had their own web presence. There was an expectation here that only the youngest candidates, or perhaps the "big cheeses" such as the party leaders, would be active online. Equally, though, some interviewees expressed disappointment that not all candidates had a personal site (of those standing in North-east Scotland, 16 of the 29 constituency candidates, and only 11 of the 48 regional list candidates had a site of some kind). As one interviewee remarked, in noting the lack of Facebook pages:

> I mean, it's free. The fact that they're not taking advantage of a free media that's used by millions of people does surprise me.

Opinions were also equally divided about the types of information expected on candidates' sites. There were those who felt that biographical information, particularly a candidate's educational and employment history, was an important factor in determining their potential worth as an elected representative. Although some questions were asked about the detail of the personal information provided:

> That's something I always look at, to see what their education is, and what they've worked at prior to coming into politics.

> But do we need to know their favourite TV programmes to vote for somebody?

In contrast, there were those interviewees to whom the candidates' backgrounds were of little importance. Instead, they preferred to see details of their positions on important policy issues:

> I'm only interested in what he's got to say politically. I'm not interested in any of that other stuff.

Indeed, a number of these participants searched, on either the candidate pages of party websites or on the candidates' own sites, for their personal views on specific local issues, including the aforementioned Victorian gardens redevelopment, and much-delayed plans for an Aberdeen bypass road. These searches, however, were largely in vain, as only one candidate was found to provide explicit personal policy statements. The other pages examined contained little personal opinion:

> It's not saying what they stand for, or what they would like to see happening.

Party manifestos and other policy statements

Thirty-five of the participants examined election manifestos or other policy statements appearing on party sites. The dominant theme emerging from these interviewees' comments was of a need for conciseness in the presentation of policy information. The manifestos of the major parties were relatively lengthy documents (the Labour Party's ran to 98 pages), and respondents displayed little appetite for reading these in any detail. As one said, when faced with the SNP's 44-page manifesto:

> There's just too much here, shouting at you. I'd just like to see something short and snappy, with bullet points of what they're planning to change.

This is something that the SNP itself recognised during the campaign (Wade, 2011), and launched a series of additional two-page 'mini-manifestos' online, each one dealing with a specific policy area (e.g. justice) or aimed at a certain sector of the electorate (e.g. carers). And although none of the sample chose to examine SNP mini-manifestos, examples of concise policy statements were found on other party sites and appeared to resonate with participants. For instance, one interviewee said of the Green Party's 'Vision and Policy' page:

> So this is a sort of a summary of their manifesto. They've got four interconnected principles. I think that's very good…it's succinct and straightforward.

While participants displayed a preference for brief policy statements, it has to be said that many of them also exhibited a degree of scepticism when considering the parties' abilities to deliver their election promises. For example, one reader of Labour's manifesto said:

But the only question I have reading through this, is 'Can they do all this?' I'm a bit suspicious.

There was also disappointment expressed at a perceived lack of local policy commentary on the party sites. It is perhaps fair to say that although sub-national issues were discussed across the sites, in manifestos and in news articles, the user would have to search long and hard to find those relating specifically to North-east Scotland. Much of the more prominent content appeared to refer to proposed developments in other parts of Scotland, such as a new Forth Road Bridge, and a coal-fired power station at Hunterston, Ayrshire. This led one participant to remark:

If there was something in Aberdeen that was directly in my interest, then I would maybe go in and look at it. But I couldn't really give two hoots about what's going on in Orkney.

In this respect, particular criticism was reserved for the 'In Your Area' section of the Liberal Democrats' website, which was entered by a number of participants in the expectation of finding information on "what they're doing in Aberdeen", only to be presented with a list of existing elected representatives for the local area.

Use of social media

Forty participants examined social media sites, with 39 visiting one or more Facebook pages, and just two choosing to look at Twitter. For 17 of these individuals, these sessions provided their first experience of using social media. Only five interviewees described the sites in generally positive terms, largely in relation to the brevity and the currency of the campaign posts being made. The vast majority were decidedly unimpressed with the politicians' offerings, for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it was felt that there was a distinct lack of substance to their posts. Indeed, "trivial", "puerile", "shallow" and "superficial" were among the terms used to describe the content. In line with the current authors' previous research on Scottish politicians' social media use (Baxter and Marcella, 2012), the interviewees felt that there was little meaningful policy comment, and that any pertinent information was lost amidst the many personal, non-political posts made by candidates:

He's saying 'Lots of work still to do, but looks like the voters are liking our positive message'. So what's the message? What does all that mean?

Secondly, many of the posts consisted almost entirely of photographs, of candidates and party activists engaged in canvassing activities, which proved of little interest:

That's rubbish. I don't know who any of them are, so there's no point in looking at them, is there?

Thirdly, and also in line with the researchers' previous work which found a largely one-way flow of information from politicians to the electorate (Baxter and Marcella,

2012), the participants were disappointed to find little dialogue taking place online. Interestingly, part of the SNP's digital strategy was to encourage their candidates to converse with potential voters using social media (Macdonell, 2011), but there was little evidence of this occurring amongst their candidates studied here. Indeed, one interviewee, noting an SNP candidate's reluctance to respond openly to questions and criticisms, observed:

> If there's no debate, people just won't bother to make the effort. If you try and get them to respond to you, and they don't, you just give up.

Despite this apparent desire to see more interaction taking place, only six participants indicated that they themselves would be willing to publicly question or criticise a politician using social media, or show public support for a candidate or party by 'liking' them or becoming a 'friend' or 'follower'. Most instead expressed concerns about security, or indicated that they would prefer to communicate privately with politicians, by email or verbally:

> If I wanted to talk to him about something, I wouldn't be putting anything on his wall. I would probably be phoning him, or something.

Other opportunities to interact online

This general reluctance to engage online with political actors was echoed amongst some of the participants viewing party websites. During the course of their information seeking, seven interviewees were faced with online contact forms, or, in one case, an online petition, which usually required the submission of personal contact details. These individuals indicated that they would be unwilling to provide this information, for fear of subsequently being bombarded with campaign and other political communications.

Currency of information

Fifteen participants discussed the currency of the information provided on the sites. The larger parties' websites tended to have regularly updated campaign news pages, and these were regarded favourably by interviewees. Additional praise was directed towards the websites of the Greens and the SNP, which each featured live feeds from the respective party Twitter accounts:

> They've got a bit on their Twitter feed – 'Greens launch their manifesto'. It's like a headline that you can follow up. That's good.

In contrast, some of the candidate Facebook pages and blogs had not been updated for several weeks. While one interviewee was prepared to give these candidates the benefit of the doubt, suggesting that they must instead be busy canvassing on a face-to-face basis, others were less understanding:

> You'd think it would be a bit more topical, wouldn't you? We're within two weeks of the election now.

Accessibility

Twelve interviewees raised issues concerning the accessibility of the sites, in terms of the language used and the format(s) in which information was presented. Six of these respondents, noting that "people have different reading abilities", were critical of the small size and density of the text on some sites. Particular criticism was made of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) website, described by one participant as "an explosion of information everywhere".

Two interviewees acknowledged that they personally had learning difficulties and were struggling to comprehend some of the information presented:

> 'Summary budget' doesn't mean anything to me – I don't know what that means. There's just too much big words…

Another respondent, an adult literacy worker, criticised the general lack of content in alternative formats and felt it would be useful if parties were to provide online audio versions of some of the key textual information presented. (It should be noted that the authors have mapped a disappointing decline in the provision of information in alternative formats by Scottish parties during successive campaigns (see Baxter *et al.*, 2011)).

Three participants specifically discussed the language and grammar used on the BNP sites. While two of these individuals mocked the authors' efforts – "I wouldn't vote for anybody that couldn't write in sentences." – the other hypothesized that the "very simple language" was used in an effort to reach "a certain kind of voter...people who are less educated, or unemployed".

Images and imagery

The imagery adopted by the parties, particularly those at the extreme ends of the political spectrum, was highlighted by six respondents. Three expressed their unease with the Union Jack and 'British Bulldog' motifs prevalent on the sites of the two far-right parties, while another was outraged at finding images of golliwog dolls for sale on the NF's website. Two interviewees commented on the numerous photographs of placard-bearing demonstrators appearing on the left-wing SSP site, suggesting that these were unlikely to appeal to the floating voter:

> This is very much their image, isn't it? I don't know whether it's such a good image.

Negative versus positive campaigning

In viewing various sites, nine participants raised the issue of negative campaigning, where parties and candidates appeared to focus on criticising their opponents rather than positively promoting their own political ideals. These interviewees were unanimous in their disapproval of such an approach:

> Here we go again, bashing other parties. I think that's counter-productive.

In contrast, examples of more positive campaigning techniques were regarded favourably:

> At least they're trying to say 'Vote for SNP because we're trying to do things'. I like that better.

Indeed, the SNP website was generally praised for its more upbeat tone, the result of a strategic decision to promote a positive message based on the party's achievements in government (Wade, 2011). However, this did not always manifest itself in the Facebook posts of one SNP candidate, who was criticised by participants for "slagging other parties".

Celebrity endorsements

Four users of the SNP website commented on the party's use of celebrity endorsements, which has become increasingly prevalent in recent years. While there is some evidence to suggest that celebrity endorsements do little to enhance the appeal of parties to the Scottish electorate (Anon, 2007), images and video clips featuring well-known Scottish actors and musicians were displayed prominently on the SNP site. While one young participant believed that this "tends to give you confidence in the party", the other three interviewees were unimpressed. One felt it "smacks of desperation", while another said he preferred his politicians "to have a little bit of gravitas".

Post-search questions

The periods of information seeking were followed by a series of structured, evaluative questions. Forty-nine (76.6%) of the respondents believed that the types of sites they had just visited were a useful way of providing campaign information, although 15 of these felt that they would be of greater benefit to younger, more computer-literate voters. The Internet was generally regarded as a cost-effective way of disseminating up-to-date campaign information to a wide audience, although many respondents felt that the parties and candidates could be doing more to advertise the existence of such sites:

> People don't know that these sites exist. When they put leaflets through the door they should mention these sites.

Indeed, some envisaged a future where the online site would replace the campaign leaflet drop. Although others hoped that the Internet would not become the main focus of elections, and should instead complement existing campaign methods:

> What we wouldn't want is them withdrawing to a darkened room somewhere just putting messages out on the Internet. You still need to see your candidates.

In terms of ease of use, the vast majority of participants described the campaign sites as 'very' (64.1%) or 'quite' easy (32.8%) to use. The content of the sites was also regarded as comprehensible, with most describing it as 'very' (70.3%) or 'quite' easy (28.1%) to understand. Opinions were more divided, however, on how interesting they had found the content: while 16 (25%) felt it 'very interesting', over half (33; 51.6%) thought it only 'quite interesting' and 15 (23.4%) described it as 'not interesting at all'.

Despite not being overly enthused about the content, around two-thirds (44; 68.8%) indicated that they might look at campaign sites again, either further exploring the site(s) they had just seen, or extending their search to other sites "to see what the other parties have got on there". Of the 20 participants who felt it unlikely that they would ever visit such sites again, most indicated that they would continue to rely solely on more traditional sources of campaign information:

> I'll probably just stick to the TV and newspapers.

Finally, participants were asked if the information they had just seen had helped them in deciding which way they were likely to vote. There was little evidence here of any significant impact on voting behaviour. One respondent indicated that seeing the Greens' website had persuaded him to give them his second, regional list vote; while a 40-year-old female interviewee suggested that exploring the campaign sites had kindled an interest in voting for the very first time. Meanwhile, two participants who had examined the far-right parties' sites both indicated that this had merely reinforced their opinion that they would never consider voting for these parties.

For the vast majority (60 of the 64 participants), the interactive sessions had had no influence on their democratic choice. Some noted that their decision had already been made, based on information obtained via traditional media. While some indicated that they had a long-established allegiance to a specific party, which was unlikely to be affected by receiving campaign information, either online or offline:

> No, I've got my own political views, and I don't think a website's going to change that.

Some others felt that they had neither the time nor the patience to visit a range of campaign sites. Indeed, a small number expressed a desire to see some form of central, politically neutral site, where voters could readily compare and contrast the profiles and policy aims of all local parties and candidates:

> You could do it all within the same website and have the different manifestos. I guess they could all be condensed and put into bullet-point form on Facebook somewhere.

Conclusions and further research

This study, using the interactive, electronically-assisted interview method, was successful in eliciting a rich stream of data from voters about the use and potential impact of online election campaign sites. Above all else, it revealed the dichotomy that appears to exist between the online electoral information needs of the public in North-east Scotland, and the nature and the extent of the information actually provided by parties and candidates.

Perhaps the most dominant theme to emerge was that of a need for brevity and clarity in the presentation of policy information. Very few participants were prepared to spend time perusing lengthy, verbose party manifestos. Instead, many expressed a need for short, sharp, "bite-size" policy statements that can be read and digested with relative ease. While some Scottish parties are already taking steps to present their policy goals in a more concise, user-friendly fashion, there is clearly much to be done in this regard.

The study also highlighted a need for currency in the information provided online. While the party sites were generally regarded favourably for their provision of up-to-date election news, voters were bemused by those candidate sites where the content remained static throughout the crucial campaign period. Indeed, this lack of online activity understandably led participants to question the rationale for these candidates establishing a campaign site. As one asked succinctly, "Why have it?"

A clear need was also demonstrated for policy statements and commentary relating specifically to local constituency issues. In this respect, the parties' sites were perceived as being wanting: although some sub-national policy information was present, it tended to become 'lost' amongst other site content. As national party sites appear to face challenges in being 'all things to all people', the current authors would argue that it is even more incumbent upon the individual candidates and their campaign teams to provide online information on specific local questions, or on how national agendas might affect their potential constituents. Yet, several of the candidate sites explored in this study were lacking any significant policy commentary: the contestants in North-east Scotland often appeared more interested in discussing the weather rather than the issues being raised by voters. Indeed, in a complementary study of the content of all Scottish candidates' social media sites during the 2011 campaign (Baxter and Marcella, 2013), the current authors established that this pattern was replicated across the country. In terms of local policy information provision, we would also suggest that a more prominent role be afforded to the online sites of local branches of political parties. The larger parties in Scotland have a number of regional associations, many of which have their own sites containing political information and news with a more local slant. However, their existence is barely acknowledged on national party websites, with only the

Conservatives and the Greens currently providing relatively prominent links to their regional sites.

A desire to see more online engagement between politicians and voters was also evident in the study. Here, however, the participants' comments were somewhat contradictory, in that they expressed disappointment with the current levels of debate on the social media sites of parties and candidates, yet were themselves reluctant to enter into any form of public dialogue with political actors or other voters. The findings of the authors' complementary study (Baxter and Marcella, 2013) would suggest that this reticence, on the part of both politicians and voters, was a national rather than just a North-east Scotland phenomenon.

Overall, then, while online campaign sites were generally regarded as serving a useful purpose, as being easy to use and understand, relatively interesting and likely to be visited again, there was very little evidence in this study to indicate that they had any significant impact on voting behaviour during the 2011 Scottish campaign. Rather, it would suggest that more traditional information sources, particularly print and broadcast media, coupled with long-established campaign techniques, such as leaflet deliveries and door knocking, continue to be more influential in determining voters' democratic choices. The current authors would therefore challenge the SNP's assertion that its online campaign had "swayed the vote". While it is acknowledged that elements of the SNP's internal strategy, particularly its voter database, will have played a vital role in informing and organising the party's activists, we would question the effects of the public face of the SNP's online campaign, namely the websites and social media sites of the party and its candidates. In line with other commentators (e.g. Barnes, 2011; Taylor, 2011) we would argue that a range of other factors were far more influential in the party's electoral success, including: the perceived charisma of its leader, Alex Salmond; the inept campaign of its main rival, the Labour Party; and the collapse of the Liberal Democrat vote, due to its coalition partnership with the Conservative Party at the UK Government level. With these points in mind, we believe that the first true 'Internet election' in the UK has yet to materialise.

The implications of the results of this study might be considered in two different ways; firstly, for those candidates who were successfully elected to the Scottish Parliament in 2011. When the Parliament was being established in the late 1990s, an Expert Panel on Information and Communications Technologies (1998) recommended that it should focus upon the contribution that new technologies might make in enabling greater openness and transparency and in assisting the democratic process. The Panel believed that the Parliament should "aspire to be an example of best practice in parliamentary information systems". Since then, studies by Smith and Webster (2004 and 2008) have established that Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) are "intensive and competent users" of new information and communications technologies (ICTs), and that ICTs "have become a cultural norm of contemporary parliamentary life". Smith and Webster's studies took place before the emergence of Facebook and Twitter; but the potential value of these social media as information provision and communication tools has since become recognised within the Scottish Parliament, where it is acknowledged that they "can increase the accessibility of MSPs and offer new ways in which to engage constituents, stakeholders and the

wider public" (Scottish Parliament Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, 2012). However, as this study revealed, those individuals seeking election to the Scottish Parliament frequently failed to provide up-to-date, local policy information on their campaign sites, or enter into any meaningful online engagement with potential constituents. We would suggest, therefore, that many of the successful candidates will have to significantly alter their information practices on entering the Parliament if they are to become fully integrated into its community of modern, online parliamentarians.

The present authors' research on online electioneering, conducted over the last decade, has concentrated on the state of affairs in Scotland, and will continue to do so. Indeed, the forthcoming referendum on Scottish independence, to be held in September 2014, will offer a unique opportunity to explore the extent and impact of online campaigning in an entirely different, and less party-focused, polling situation. For example, it is anticipated that the electronically-assisted interview method will be used to investigate Scottish citizens' perceptions and use of any online sites created by the respective 'Yes' and 'No' campaign groups.

Despite this regional focus on the Scottish scene, the current authors feel that the implications of their work might also be considered in the context of the wider, international political arena. The study discussed in this paper has added to what is a rather sparse body of qualitative work on voters' online election information needs, and the ways in which citizens engage with campaign websites. And while we would lay no claims to the results of the study being applicable outwith the Scottish setting, we firmly believe that the voter-centred methodological approach described here might be used or adapted by colleagues in the political and information research communities worldwide, in order to further shape our understanding of the use and the true democratic impact of online campaign tools.

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