



# Online Parliamentary Election Campaigns in Scotland

*A Decade of Research*

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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 a longitudinal 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, social media, elections, campaigns, political parties, candidates, Scotland

**T**he formation of the new Scottish Parliament in 1999<sup>1</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). Indeed, the Parliament's Consultative Steering Group identified two main objectives for ICTs, namely:

*"...promoting Parliamentary efficiency through supporting modern ways of working with well-designed information technology; and promoting openness, accountability and democratic participation in Scotland by using technology to make information about the Parliament and its work available to everyone." (Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament, 1998, section 3.6, paragraph 20)*

Research conducted in 2002, during the first Session of the Scottish Parliament, noted that Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) were already "intensive and competent users of ICTs" and that new technologies were "embedded into their parliamentary activities" (Smith & Webster, 2004). With these points in mind, the current authors hypothesised that those seeking to gain election to this new legislature would wish to take advantage of the opportunities offered by new technologies, 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.*, 2013; Baxter & Marcella, 2013) Scottish Parliament elections, as well as during the 2010 UK Parliament campaign (Baxter, Marcella & Varfis, 2011; Baxter & Marcella, 2012), which was predicted by several observers (e.g., Helm, 2010; Swaine, 2010) to be one on which ICTs,

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<sup>1</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 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.

particularly new social media tools, would have a significant impact. These are the only such investigations which have looked specifically at the Scottish political arena.

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) observed, 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 studies and will provide an overview of the results; thus adding to the small number of existing longitudinal accounts of online electioneering research internationally.<sup>2</sup> 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). In this last respect, it will also question the assertion of the victorious party in the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary election – the Scottish National Party (SNP)<sup>3</sup> – that the 2011 contest was the “first European election where online has swayed the vote.” (Gordon, 2011).

## 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 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 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 in 2007, and Ban Bankers’ Bonuses in 2011). 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 new candidates and of existing members of parliament seeking re-election.<sup>4</sup> 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

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the analysis of online campaigns in Germany between 2002 and 2009 (Schweitzer, 2011); and the use of data from four post-election Australian Candidate Studies conducted between 2001 and 2010 (Gibson & McAllister, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> The 2011 Scottish Parliamentary election saw the SNP win 69 of the 129 available seats, thus becoming the first ever Scottish administration with a clear working majority.

<sup>4</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.

websites, and that the researchers have had to rely largely on Google searches to identify a suitable sample of candidate sites.

In all four studies, during the four-week period (sometimes known in the UK as ‘purdah’) 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. As Gibson (2012) points out, much of the existing literature on online campaigning has been based on such website content analyses, with many researchers using quantitative indices that map and measure the presence of particular features, such as policy statements, candidate biographies, chat rooms, and online donation facilities. Indeed, perhaps the most influential coding scheme has been that developed by Gibson and Ward (2000), which has been adopted, or adapted, by various researchers worldwide.<sup>5</sup> While the four studies discussed in this current paper have used a similar approach, in mapping the existence and functionality of campaign website features, the authors have typically presented the results using symbols rather than numerical scores. This is illustrated in Table 1, which shows a section of the party website analysis from the 2010 UK General Election, where the symbol ● represents a website feature which was complete, updated regularly during the campaign, and/or fully online; and where the symbol ⊙ represents a feature which was incomplete, not updated regularly, and/or not fully online.<sup>6</sup>

Table 1: Section of Party Website Content Analysis from 2010 UK General Election

Feature	Political Party			
	Conservative	Labour	Lib Dem	SNP
Information Provision				
Candidate list	●	●	●	●
Election manifesto	●	●	●	●
Other policy statements	●	●	●	●
Campaign calendar		⊙		
Updated campaign news	●	●	●	●
E-newsletter service		●	●	
Real-time feeds from social media sites	●			
Information in alternative formats/languages		⊙	⊙	

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. This is a method that has only rarely been used in other digital campaigning research (e.g., Stromer-Galley, 2002; Bowers-Brown & Gunter, 2002; Vaccari, 2012). The researchers’ questions to the parties have often asked for clarification of rather vague manifesto statements, on policy issues ranging from youth employment to transport infrastructure, or have asked about their election strategies, such as

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Small (2007) in Canada, Strandberg (2009) in Finland, and Koc-Michalska *et al.* (2012) in Poland.

<sup>6</sup> For example, where campaign information in alternative formats or languages was only available on request, rather than being made freely available to read or download online.

the use of celebrity endorsements or negative campaigning techniques. Questions to candidates, meanwhile, have been more targeted and tailored, often relating to events or developments in their prospective constituencies, or to their personal background and qualifications. For example, during the 2010 campaign, candidates in the North East of Scotland were sent questions relating to two high-profile and controversial building developments proposed for the area; while throughout all four studies, the youngest of the candidates have been sent questions about what life experience and gravitas they could bring to the role of a parliamentarian.

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. 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 the parties' social media sites. 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. While there are a number of online sites and packages designed to archive and analyse social media traffic (e.g., Tweetdoc at [www.tweetdoc.org](http://www.tweetdoc.org), and Tweet Archivist at [www.tweetarchivist.com](http://www.tweetarchivist.com)), none has yet been found that meets the specific needs of this research. With this in mind, a simple 'copy-and-paste' approach has been used, where all posts (blog entries, tweets, and Facebook wall posts) have been copied and pasted into MS Word documents, read systematically, and then coded based on the main thrust of their content. Following the 2010 campaign, the researchers analysed over 7,000 Facebook wall posts, over 3,000 tweets, and almost 1,600 blog posts from the four-week campaign period. In 2011, the total number of campaign posts analysed was more than double that in 2010 (largely because of the far greater number of individual candidates who participate in Scottish Parliamentary elections than in UK General Elections), comprising over 15,600 tweets, 8,300 Facebook posts, and over 500 blog entries. While a growing number of researchers have devised coding schemes for analysing the content of political blogs (e.g., Trammell, 2007), Twitter accounts (e.g., Jackson & Lilleker, 2011), or Facebook pages (e.g., Klinger, 2013), the current authors have developed their own coding system, which considers social media posts both in terms of the broad topic being discussed (candidates' personal campaign activities, national policy issues, media coverage of the election, etc.) 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).

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. 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 voting decisions. Certainly, there have been a number of large-scale, quantitative surveys of the public, generally in western, liberal democracies (e.g., Lusoli, 2005; Smith, 2011), that have explored their use of the Internet to obtain and exchange electoral information during campaigns. 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 (e.g., Drew & Weaver, 2006; Kenski & 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, where participants have been exposed to candidates' websites and their attitudes towards the candidates' characters and political issues have then been measured using Likert-type scales (e.g., Hansen & Benoit, 2005; Towner & Dulio, 2011). The lack of qualitative user studies has been bemoaned by Gibson and Römmele (2005), who 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, thus allowing more precise causal inferences to be drawn about voters' exposure to campaign sites. With this in mind, and to complement their other work, the current authors conducted a qualitative study of voters' online information behaviour during the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary election campaign. This study used the authors' interactive, electronically-assisted interview method — previously developed during a study of the British public's use of parliamentary websites (Marcella, Baxter & Moore, 2003) — 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 competing parties and candidates.

## **2. Results**

This section of the paper provides an overview of the key results of the four studies conducted over the last decade, beginning with the main themes emerging from the campaign website content analyses.

### **2.1. Content Analysis of 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>7</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.

### 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, with their website content remaining relatively static throughout the campaign. 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 giving a more dynamic, up-to-date feel to these sites. Similarly, a small number of the sample candidate websites (two in 2010, one in 2011) have provided live 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 will 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. During each of the four studies, just one or two 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

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<sup>7</sup> Personal communication with the SNP campaign team, in May 2007.

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**

Throughout the most recent campaigns, the researchers have 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 the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) present a Scottish Gaelic version of its entire party website, the Labour Party and the SNP offer their manifestos in a range of minority languages, including Cantonese and Urdu, and the Green Party provide 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 offered audio versions of their election manifestos; the SSP presented 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 poor accessibility of their websites (Anon, 2011). The SNP came in for particular criticism, and the party did eventually provide an audio version of its 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. Although disappointing, this lack of response to email enquiries on campaign and policy issues is similar to that identified in the other published studies that have sought to measure political actors' online responsiveness to questions (i.e. Stromer-Galley, 2000; Bowers-Brown & Gunter, 2002; and Vaccari, 2012).

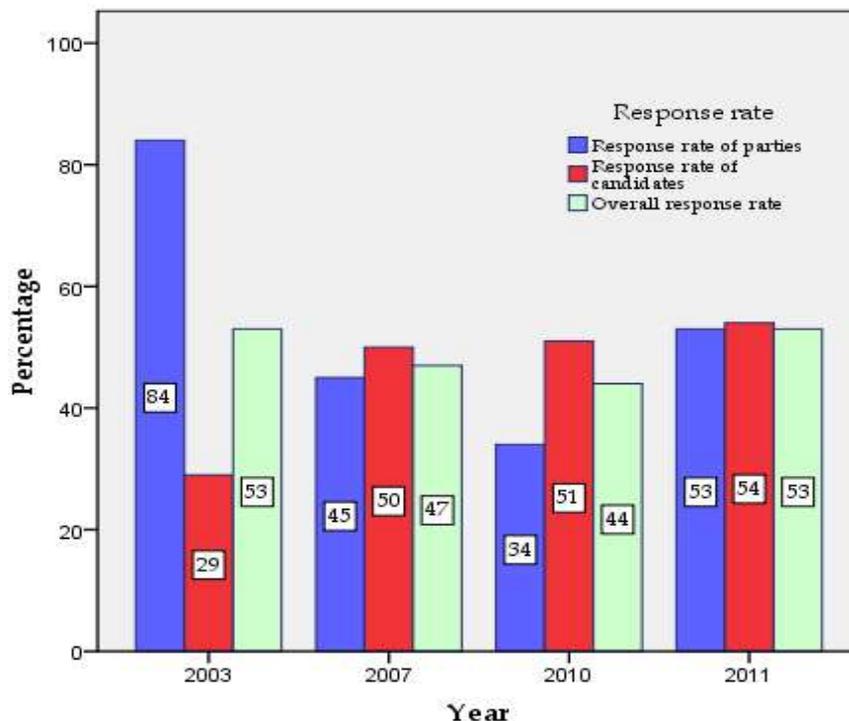


Figure 1: Email Enquiry Response Rates, 2003-2011

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 complete 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 manifestos and 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.

In terms of the individual candidates' responses, the 2003 study saw a very poor response rate of just 29%, which has increased incrementally during subsequent campaigns. Again, though, the

most recent campaign in 2011 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. Perhaps the most interesting reaction came during the 2010 UK Parliament campaign, when the researchers sent questions to those candidates who, as Members of the previous Parliament, had been forced to repay expenses,<sup>8</sup> asking what steps they would take, if re-elected, to ensure correct and proper claims in the future. Few of those candidates who did respond appeared to display any signs of remorse. Instead, they chose either to blame others, emphasise that their own repayments were due to minor administrative oversights, or contrast their own party's misdemeanours with those of their political rivals:

*"The repayment of expenses you refer to were a result of administrative errors by the House of Commons Department of Resources" (Labour candidate)*

*"The money I had to repay was because it was claimed in the wrong financial year rather than not being a valid claim" (Conservative candidate)*

*"Neither myself, or any of my SNP colleagues, have been involved in flipping,<sup>9</sup> or any of the serious calculated abuses that have so angered the public" (SNP candidate)*

Interestingly, it has frequently been the candidates from the fringe parties, with little or no chance of electoral success in Scotland, who have appeared the most willing to initiate further discussion and debate with the enquirer. For example, in 2007, one candidate from the UK Independence Party (UKIP) provided his mobile telephone number in order to discuss policy issues further; while another UKIP contestant sent the researchers a two-minute personal video reply to an enquiry, filmed in his study.

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 2 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 not personally acquainted.

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<sup>8</sup> Some readers may be aware that, in 2009, the UK Parliament was hit by an expenses controversy, resulting in over 300 MPs being asked to repay incorrectly claimed expenses (see, for example, BBC News (2009)).

<sup>9</sup> 'Flipping' is a word which describes the practice by which MPs switched or 'flipped' the designation of their 'principal' and 'second' residences, allowing them to furnish and redecorate different homes at the expense of the taxpayer.

Table 2: Facebook and Twitter Enquiry Response Rates by Candidates, 2010-2011

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

### 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 people. 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 3, meanwhile, indicates the adoption rate of social media by individual candidates during the 2010 and 2011 campaigns. As can be seen, in each campaign, just over one-third of the individual candidates (36.9% in 2010, 34.3% in 2011) were using either Facebook, Twitter or a personal blog at least partly for electioneering purposes (although by 2011 Facebook appeared to have become slightly more popular than Twitter as a campaign medium). There was, however, a significant difference in the extent to which Scottish Parliamentary constituency and regional list candidates had adopted social media in 2011. Almost half (48.9%) of the 321 constituency contestants were using such media, compared with less than a quarter (23.4%) of the 435 candidates (largely from minor parties) who appeared only on the regional lists. This difference was perhaps unsurprising, because, to put it bluntly, most regional list candidates from the smaller parties were effectively making up the numbers and had no chance of electoral success. In both campaigns, existing parliamentarians seeking re-election were significantly more likely ( $p < 0.05$ ) to be using social media than those candidates with little or no parliamentary experience.

In 2010, the Liberal Democrat candidates appeared most willing to adopt social media, with just over half (52.5%) using either Facebook, Twitter or a blog. This was a trend mirrored throughout the rest of the UK, according to Newman (2010). Twelve months later, however, the SNP candidates had the greatest online presence, with 65.8% of the constituency candidates using Facebook, and 41.1% operating a Twitter account. In both campaigns, the most reluctant adopters of social media amongst the major parties were the Conservative candidates. Indeed, following the 2010 election, during which just 27.6% of the Conservative candidates had used social media, an internal commission noted "a widespread acceptance across the Party that the advantages of electronic communications and 'new media' are not being utilised in campaigning, communications and the Party's operations overall." (Scottish Conservatives 2010 Commission, 2010, p.35). Despite this, it would appear that little change occurred within the party in the following twelve months, as the 2011 election again saw the Conservatives with the smallest proportion of candidates (28.8%) using social media.

**Table 3: Adoption of Social Media by Candidates, 2010-2011**

Year	Facebook	Twitter	Blog	One or More Types
<b>2010 constituency candidates</b> ( <i>n</i> = 347)	21.0%	21.9%	12.6%	36.9%
<b>2011 constituency candidates only</b> ( <i>n</i> = 321)	37.7%	28.3%	13.7%	48.9%
<b>2011 regional list candidates only</b> ( <i>n</i> = 435)	17.0%	11.7%	5.1%	23.4%
<b>2011 all candidates</b> ( <i>n</i> = 756)	25.8%	18.8%	8.7%	34.3%

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 UKIP candidate, Christopher Monckton, had almost 6,300. The median number of candidate Facebook friends in 2010 was 148, rising slightly to 154 in 2011. 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. Again, the median number of candidate Twitter followers rose slightly between the two campaigns, from 150 in 2010 to 155 in 2011.

During each of the two elections, the numbers of social media posts made by individual political actors have also varied widely. At one end of the extreme, one Conservative candidate sent 1,449 tweets during the 2011 campaign. In sharp contrast, significant numbers of candidates' social media accounts (32 in 2010, 55 in 2011<sup>10</sup>) were completely inactive during the campaigns. Why so many candidates remained silent online during the critical election period is unclear. Perhaps they were like the Conservative candidate who wrote in his blog after the 2010 campaign, "I wasn't able to blog during the campaign, I was so busy talking to voters on the doorstep..." Or perhaps they were, as Gibson, Williamson and Ward (2010, p.2) suggested, reluctant to "step out over the parapet" for fear of writing something that might embarrass their party and harm their electoral prospects. Overall, the average numbers of social media posts made by individual candidates during the two campaigns were relatively modest. In 2010, the average number of Facebook wall posts made by candidates was 20, rising to 27 in 2011; while the average number of candidate tweets increased from 81 in 2010, to 99 in 2011. The average number of blog posts per candidate was virtually the same in both campaigns (seven in 2010, six in 2011).

The content analysis revealed that, during both campaigns, social media were used primarily for the one-way flow of information from the parties and the candidates to the electorate. This general pattern is illustrated in Figure 2, which represents the exchange of information between candidates and voters on Twitter during the 2010 UK General Election. As can be seen, almost half (47.2%) of the traffic on the candidates' Twitter sites consisted of what the current researchers term **Primary Broadcast** posts, where the candidates provided their followers with their personal thoughts and comments on a wide range of issues, from world events to local press coverage of the election campaign. In both elections, and across all three types of social media, the largest proportion of these Primary Broadcast posts related to the candidates' personal campaign activities; where, for example, they discussed their experiences on voters' doorsteps or at public meetings. In both

<sup>10</sup> The number of inactive candidates on Facebook may have been even greater during the 2011 campaign, for a significant proportion (64; 32.8%) of the 195 contestants with a Facebook presence had made their walls private, accessible only to confirmed friends of the candidates.

elections, these posts were almost universally (and unrealistically) positive and optimistic. For the typical Scottish candidate on social media, it would appear, the sun was forever shining and the electorate was always receptive to their campaign message. Even those candidates who were resoundingly defeated on polling day had claimed throughout the campaign that their policy messages were being warmly received by voters:

*“A cracking day in Montrose, good response on the high street” (Conservative candidate, 2010)*

*“Fantastic response on the doorsteps of Larkhall last night” (SNP candidate, 2010)*

*“Out delivering and meeting voters in Lundin Links and Largo with the team – great response on the doorstep” (Liberal Democrat candidate, 2011)*

*“Warm reception for Labour in Paisley town centre today” (Labour candidate, 2011)*

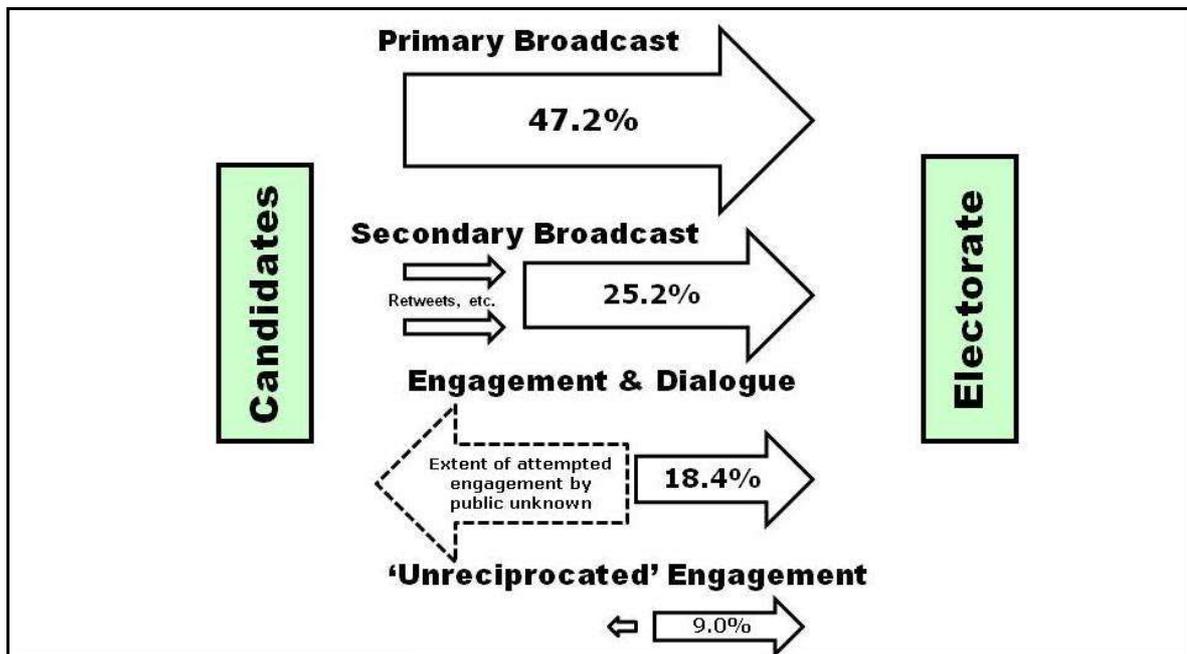


Figure 2: Information Exchange on Candidate Twitter Sites, 2010

Social media were also used extensively by politicians to share photographs of these campaign activities. For example, in 2011, just over 13% of the posts on the candidates' Facebook walls consisted solely of photographs of the candidates and their teams out on the campaign trail, shaking hands, dispensing election literature, or posing in hard hats in factories or on construction sites. One SNP candidate uploaded over 50 photographs of her campaign posters displayed in windows across Glasgow.

Despite a significant proportion of candidates' social media posts being dedicated to their campaign activities, there was a reluctance to disclose what issues were being raised during these encounters with the electorate. In each of the two elections, only a small proportion of posts discussed the issues of prime concern to their potential constituents, from national policy issues such as education and health, to more local concerns such as potholes in local streets or the closure of local recreational facilities. Indeed, in the 2011 campaign, candidates were almost twice as likely to post messages relating to their home life and domestic activities, or to non-political matters such as science fiction television series or the latest sports results, than they were to provide policy-related information.

Perhaps surprisingly, there were relatively few incidences of social media being used to attack political opponents, particularly at the constituency level. Indeed, there appeared to be something

of an unwritten rule amongst candidates that social media should not be used to criticise their direct opponents. Interestingly, although the SNP laid claim to having run the most positive campaign during the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary election (Wade, 2011), our content analysis revealed that its candidates were in fact more likely than those from other parties to attack their political opponents online. These critical comments tended to be aimed at their main opponents, the Labour Party, and on Twitter were accompanied by hashtags such as #labourfail or #labourlies. One notorious campaign episode, in which the Labour leader, Iain Gray, sought refuge in a sandwich shop when confronted by a group protesting against spending cuts, fuelled many of the SNP candidates' more barbed comments.

As Figure 2 also illustrates, a significant proportion of the political actors' social media activity in both elections consisted of what the current authors term **Secondary Broadcast** posts. This is where the parties and candidates simply provided direct links to other online political or news sites, or where, on Twitter, they retweeted others' comments and links. These tended to be links to stories that either praised the poster's party or were critical of their opponents. And while their origins were many and various, they were generally from: local, regional and national news sources; other parties, candidates and activists; journalists and political commentators; opinion pollsters; or think tanks.

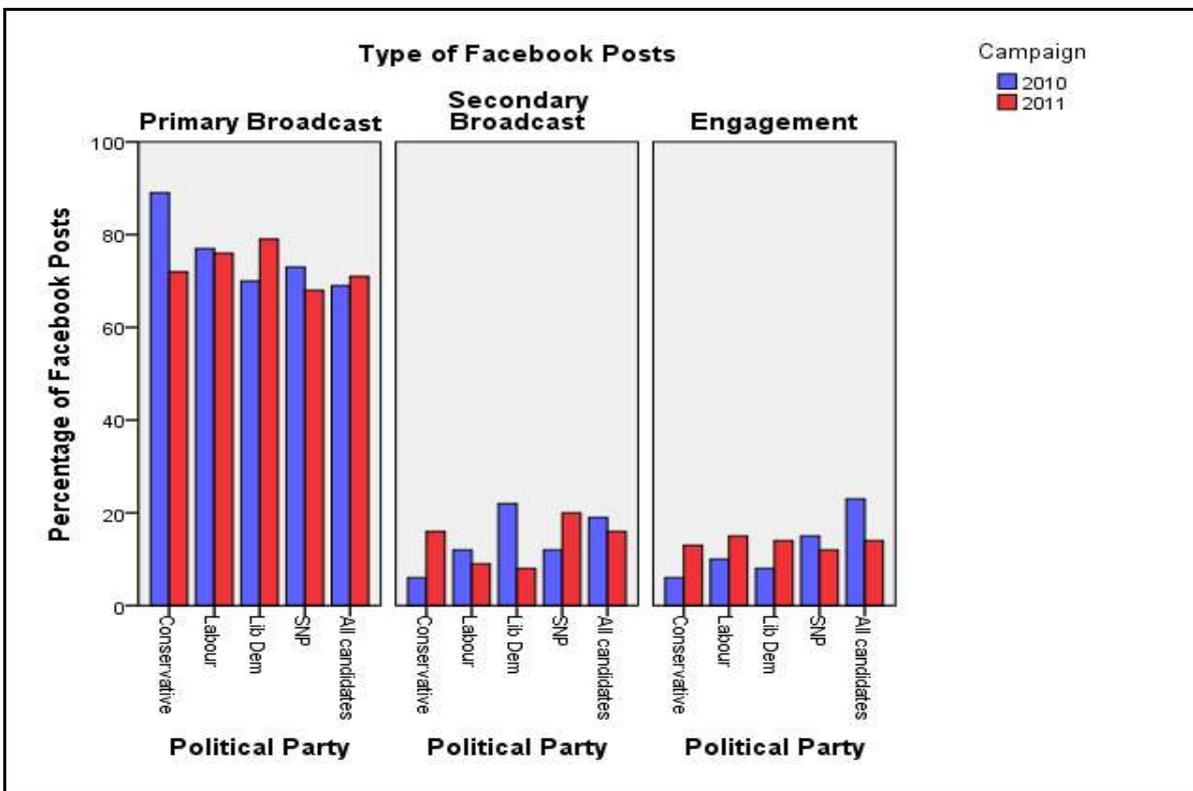


Figure 3: Communicative Nature of Candidates' Facebook Wall Posts: Comparison of 2010 and 2011 Campaigns

Throughout both campaigns there was relatively little direct **Engagement and Dialogue** between politicians and the electorate; and, as with the email communication discussed above, a general reluctance to respond to difficult policy questions or critical comments posted by voters. Perhaps influenced by previous, high-profile, online *faux pas*, by politicians and other public figures, many chose instead to ignore these completely. In fact, most of what interaction took place was based around the political actors replying to supportive comments and pleasantries from friends, family and associates of the individual candidates, and from 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. For example, posters on the SNP's Facebook site during the 2011 campaign frequently adopted a rather exclusivist tone:

*"Why are you on here? You obviously don't agree with the majority of people posting."*

*"I take it you don't like the SNP. Then don't sign up to this forum."*

Indeed, although the SNP had highlighted engagement with the public as being a key element of its 2011 digital strategy (Macdonell, 2011), this content analysis revealed that, proportionately, it was the least interactive of the major parties. This is partly illustrated in Figure 3, which provides an overview of the communicative nature of candidates' Facebook wall posts in both the 2010 and 2011 campaigns.

As Figure 2 indicates, the content analysis of Twitter posts in 2010 also revealed an element of what the current authors term **Unreciprocated Engagement**, particularly in the candidates' accounts. Many of the candidates followed various well-known journalists, political commentators, satirical comedians, sportsmen and women, and other 'celebrities' on Twitter, and would sometimes respond to these individuals' tweets in an effort to begin a dialogue. Perhaps understandably, given the large Twitter followings of many of these public figures, the candidates' efforts were largely ignored. This pattern continued 12 months later; however, the 2011 campaign also saw several candidates, and a small number of parties, attempt to engage more frequently with 'non-celebrity' tweeters, mostly activists and supporters of opposing parties. Their efforts suggested that they were monitoring Twitter traffic (including the use of trending hashtags) for mentions of themselves, or of the Scottish Parliament election in general, and then responding to these in an effort to initiate an online conversation. Again, though, these efforts were largely in vain, as most of the politicians' tweets were not reciprocated.

With regard to Twitter, it is also worthwhile noting the effects that televised campaign debates had on the Scottish parties' and candidates' Twitter traffic during the two campaigns. For the first time ever during a UK General Election, the 2010 campaign featured three American-style, live television debates between the leaders of the three main UK-wide parties (i.e. excluding the SNP), which were broadcast at peak time across the UK. A significant proportion of the parties' and candidates' tweets took place during, or immediately after, these three broadcasts. Indeed, 31.9% of the parties' tweets and 12.4% of the candidates' posts (i.e. 14.7% of the overall Twitter traffic) related specifically to the debates, ranging from serious comments about the policy issues under debate, to more frivolous posts poking fun at the party leaders' dress sense. In some respects, then, the more traditional medium of television was the driver behind much of what was taking place on the new medium of Twitter in 2010; a phenomenon also identified by Newman (2010). Less influential in 2010 were an additional three debates broadcast only in Scotland (two at peak time), which featured senior party figures from the four main parties in Scotland (i.e. including the SNP). These were discussed in just 13.1% of the parties' tweets and 0.6% of the candidates' tweets (i.e. 2.2% of the total Twitter traffic). It was a similar story during the 2011 Scottish Parliament campaign, where another three debates involving senior party figures were broadcast only in Scotland (again, with two at peak time), with limited impact on the Scottish political Twittersphere: these debates were the subject of just 3.1% of the overall Twitter traffic (i.e. 7.3% of parties' and 2.6% of candidates' tweets).

#### 2.4. User Information Behaviour Study

Each of the 64 citizens interviewed during the user information behaviour study was invited to undertake a period of undirected information seeking, on the party or candidate site(s) of their choice; and overall 71 pages/sections from 32 different sites (14 websites, 12 Facebook pages, one Twitter account, and five blogs) were explored during these sessions. These periods of information seeking elicited a wealth of rich, evaluative and thoughtful comment from the

participants, and this section of the paper will outline some of the main themes emerging from the data.

#### 2.4.1. Need for Concise and Local Policy Information

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 earlier, 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 one respondent 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.”*

As noted earlier, some of the parties have recognised this preference, and where more concise policy statements were provided (including the SNP’s aforementioned mini-manifestos) 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.

#### 2.4.2. Need for Candidate Information

Of the study participants who sought information on their constituency candidates, some expressed pleasant surprise that individual candidates had their own web presence. There was an expectation here that only the youngest candidates, or the “big cheeses” such as the party leaders, would be active online. Equally, though, some interviewees expressed disappointment that not all local candidates had a personal site,<sup>11</sup> with one remarking on 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 voters who felt that biographical information, particularly a candidate’s educational and employment history, was an important factor in determining their potential worth as a parliamentarian. In contrast, there were those interviewees to whom the candidates’ backgrounds were of little interest, preferring instead 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 participants searched, on either the candidate pages of party websites or on the candidates’ own sites, for candidates’ personal views on specific local issues. However, these searches were largely in vain, as only one candidate was found to provide explicit personal policy statements; the other pages examined contained little personal opinion.

#### 2.4.3. Need for Currency

Participants expressed a need for currency in the information provided on the political actors’ sites. As discussed earlier, the larger parties’ websites tended to have regularly updated campaign news pages, and these were regarded favourably by interviewees. Additional praise was directed towards those sites which featured live feeds from social media sites. In contrast, the user study

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<sup>11</sup> Of those candidates standing in North East Scotland, 16 of the 29 constituency candidates, and only 11 of the 48 regional list candidates, had an online site of some kind.

participants were bemused by those candidate Facebook sites and blogs that had not been updated for several weeks:

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

#### **2.4.4. Need for Accessibility**

A number of participants raised issues concerning the accessibility of the campaign sites, in terms of the language used and the format(s) in which the information was presented. Some respondents, noting that “people have different reading abilities,” were critical of the small size and density of the text on some sites. While 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...”*

#### **2.4.5. Opinions on Negative Campaigning**

In viewing various sites, several 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 by voters. In this respect, 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). Although, as was discussed above, this strategy did not always manifest itself in the social media posts of the party’s candidates.

#### **2.4.6. Opinions on Politicians’ Use of Social Media**

Forty of the 64 user study participants examined party or candidate social media sites, mostly Facebook pages. For 17 of these individuals, these sessions provided their first experience of using social media. While five interviewees described the sites they visited in generally positive terms, largely in relation to the brevity and currency of the campaign posts being made, the vast majority were unimpressed with the politicians’ online offerings, for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it was felt that there was a lack of substance to the posts, with “trivial”, “puerile”, “shallow”, and “superficial” being among the terms used to describe the content. In line with the researchers’ analysis described above, the interviewees felt that there was little meaningful policy comment on these sites, with any pertinent information becoming lost amongst the many personal, non-political posts made by politicians. Secondly, many of the posts consisted almost entirely of photographs, of candidates and party activists engaged in canvassing activities, which were regarded as “rubbish” and “boring” by the interviewees. Thirdly, and also in line with the researchers’ discovery of the largely one-way flow of information from politicians to the electorate, the participants were disappointed to find little dialogue taking place online. As one interviewee commented, on observing an SNP candidate’s reluctance to respond openly to questions and criticisms:

*“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.”*

#### **2.4.7. Democratic Impact of Online Campaigning**

Overall, while the user study 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. One participant indicated that seeing the Green Party's website had persuaded him to give them his second, regional list vote; a 40-year-old female interviewee suggested that exploring campaign sites had kindled an interest in voting for the first time; while two participants who had examined the sites of far-right parties both indicated that this had reinforced their opinion that they would never consider voting for such parties. For the vast majority (60 of the 64 participants), the online, interactive sessions had had no influence on their democratic choice. Some 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, would remain more influential in determining voters' choices. While others 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. "*

### 3. Conclusions and Future Research

This overview of a decade of research into online election campaigning in Scotland has demonstrated that political actors have appeared increasingly 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, 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 therefore 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.

Post-election analyses conducted by the current researchers after both the 2010 and 2011 elections, using the chi-square test and the phi measure of association, revealed that there was an association between candidates' social media use and their electoral success. In both elections, successful constituency candidates were more likely ( $p < 0.05$ ) than unsuccessful contestants to have used Facebook, Twitter or blogs; although in each year this association was relatively weak ( $\phi = 0.149$  in 2010, and  $0.138$  in 2011). Given the modest online followings of the majority of Scottish political actors, the significant number of dormant and private sites, and the largely bland

and superficial ways in which most contestants have used social media, the current authors would certainly not attribute any causal relationship between online campaigning and election success in Scotland. Indeed, we would challenge the assertion of the SNP that the 2011 election was the “first European election where online has swayed the vote” (Gordon, 2011). While 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, we would question the impact of the public face of the SNP’s online campaign, namely the websites and social media sites of the party and its candidates. Although the SNP and its candidates had the greatest online presence and the largest followings, the nature of their information provision and communication was little different from those of the other parties. While the SNP put great stock in the positivity of its online campaign (Wade, 2011), its candidates were, in fact, the most attack minded of those from the main parties, and the party’s Facebook site was peppered with some of the most vitriolic online exchanges of the election. And while the SNP also emphasised how “amazingly powerful” the act of interacting online with voters can be (Macdonell, 2011), its candidates were the least interactive of those from the major parties, and there was only minimal engagement with voters on the party’s sites. We would therefore concur with other commentators (e.g., Barnes, 2011; Taylor, 2011) and argue that other factors were probably far more influential in the SNP’s election success, including: the perceived charisma of the party’s leader, Alex Salmond; the inept campaign of its main rival, the Labour Party; and the collapse of the Liberal Democrat vote in Scotland, due to its coalition with the Conservatives at the UK Government level. The first true ‘Internet election’ in the UK, we believe, has not yet materialised.

So, what does the next decade have in store, in terms of the current authors’ research into the extent and impact of digital campaigning in Scotland? Certainly, the monitoring and content analysis of political actors’ online offerings will continue during future parliamentary elections, as will the more recent focus on qualitative, user behaviour research. Perhaps these studies will witness and map the emergence of an entirely new range of online tools and technologies, eagerly seized upon by parties and candidates for electioneering purposes. In addition, however, we propose to play a part in addressing the empirical gap highlighted by Gibson and Ward (2009), who noted that research has concentrated extensively on election campaigns, but rarely on “peacetime developments or the long campaign.” With this in mind, greater attention will be paid to Scottish politicians’ public use of ICTs outwith the intensive campaign/purdah periods. We will, for example, explore the ways in which Scottish parliamentarians’ use their personal websites and social media sites to not only support their day-to-day constituency work, but also to attempt to shape public opinion on wider political and policy issues.

Of more significance in the immediate future, however, is the Scottish independence referendum to be held on 18 September 2014, where the people of Scotland are to be asked the dichotomous Yes or No question, ‘Should Scotland be an independent country?’. The referendum will provide a rare opportunity to explore politicians’ use of ICTs in a completely different campaign setting; one where traditional political opponents will join forces to either support or oppose the independence argument. Two formal campaign groups have already been established: the SNP-led, pro-independence *Yes Scotland* group, which has support from the Scottish Green Party; and the pro-Union *Better Together* group, with broad support from Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives. Each organisation already has its own website (see [www.yesscotland.net](http://www.yesscotland.net) and [www.bettertogether.net](http://www.bettertogether.net)) and associated social media sites. In addition, each of the major parties will be running its own pro- or anti-independence campaign and will, no doubt, make extensive use of online technologies in the process. With this in mind, we propose to use many of the methodologies described above to investigate the nature and the impact of the use of ICTs by the cross-party campaign groups, the political parties, and prominent individual politicians during what will be a key episode in Scottish constitutional history.

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