

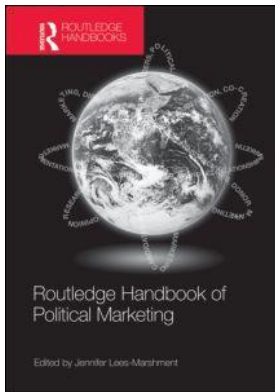
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Political marketing in an online election environment

Short-term sales or long-term relationships?

Nigel A. Jackson, Darren G. Lilleker and Eva Johanna Schweitzer

The topic: online political marketing

The practical application of both political marketing as a concept and the internet as a campaigning tool share a similar time frame, with both gaining attention in the 1990s. However, apart from a few individual authors (Bowers-Brown and Gunter 2002; Jackson 2006), the two have not been generally pulled together conceptually. Indeed, Coleman (2001) was quite dismissive over the use of the internet in the UK 2001 general election, implying that because it only appeared to have been used for marketing purposes, and not to enhance democracy, that this was a less worthy use. Yet the construction of the so-called Web 2.0 era, which is based on a more interactive, bottom-up approach (O'Reilly 2005), opens up new marketing possibilities. This chapter will seek to assess whether the internet is supporting an essentially sales-based political marketing strategy, or one based on longer-term relations that encourages dialogue and public expressions of opinion. We will do this by considering the relevance of the concept of online political marketing, a child whose parentage is conceptually political marketing and at a campaign level the internet. We will first outline the relevant literature on political marketing and the internet, then introduce our methodology for examining how the internet was used in four elections between 2007 and 2010, covering four different countries: France, the US, Germany and the UK. The main findings are summarized in the conclusion, and discussed with regard to their implications for the current state of online political marketing.

We suggest that *online political marketing* describes the sustainable, goal-oriented and strategy-based management of relationships between political actors and their stakeholders, by the means of new information and communication technologies. In essence, political marketing is a curious mixture of the application of marketing practice to politics online and offline, especially electoral behaviour. It has been criticized for being neither true to politics nor marketing, but it can also be viewed as a discipline in its own right (Lees-Marshment 2009). In fact, the link between the two was first made by Kotler and Levy (1969), who famously suggested that candidates used the same principles as marketers selling commercial goods. This principle has been debated for some time; we suggest that of relevance to our debate is an understanding of political marketing practice.

Political marketing practice is not uniform; rather we can identify two different approaches to how political actors use marketing. The first is transactional marketing where the political party

or candidate focuses on the immediate sale, or gaining the vote, which appears to be the dominant approach of politicians (Mauser 1983; O'Shaughnessy 1990; Johansen 2005). Indeed, Wring (1997) noted how easily traditional marketing applied to politics. This form of political marketing would use the internet as a one-way promotional tool. Transactional marketing has been challenged by relationship marketing, where the emphasis is on building longer-term relationships, which inherently requires two-way communication. Bannon (2005) suggests that as a service industry, politics applies a relationship marketing approach. Moreover, Henneberg (2002) argues that political marketing is moving away from a sales orientation, towards one which seeks to build long-term relationships with voters. This form of political marketing would use the internet as a means of facilitating such dialogue (e.g. in blogs, discussion forums or chats). Potentially, the internet provides a simple and cost-effective means of reaching external and internal audiences over a long period of time. This can have positive side-effects on political participation in general (see Hardy and Scheufele 2005; Mossberger *et al.* 2008), which Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy (2010) suggest may encourage citizen re-engagement with politics.

From a conceptual viewpoint, the linkage of the internet to a transactional marketing approach is associated with the static content of websites used within the Web 1.0 era (e.g. information about the candidate, party or election programme, campaign paraphernalia, etc.). However, the inherently more interactive approach implied within the Web 2.0 era suggests that relationship marketing is more achievable. The rationale is that with Web 2.0 the stress is on gaining feedback, and interacting within an 'architecture of participation' (O'Reilly 2005). Web 2.0 makes it easier for parties to encourage interactivity, since they can build on the technical infrastructures and services that are already established, such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace. This is a 'rational choice' for them as they do not have to rely on inventing anything from scratch. Recent literature suggests that in the era of Web 2.0 the internet offers a means of enhancing the relationship between those seeking election and voters (Anderson 2007; Chadwick 2009), though often the reality is that participation is used for the purposes of endorsements, aiding brand management as opposed to relationship management (Jackson and Lilleker 2009). It is through private and targeted communication by email or e-newsletters where attempts are made to build relationships with supporters (Jackson 2006). To assess which forms of participation are currently employed in American and European elections, we will summarize the present state of the discipline and explore ways of measuring different approaches in online political marketing.

Previous research

Online political marketing can apply to both the 'peacetime' in legislative periods, when it is often associated with the permanent campaign, and the 'wartime' of political competitions. Our focus is on elections due to their societal relevance, higher adoption rate of campaign innovations, and the greater focus by parties and candidates on political marketing as a vote-winner.

Empirical work

The internet has become a standard marketing tool in modern election campaigns. Its rapid diffusion around the world is attributed to the unique technical features of online communication (i.e. capacity, efficiency, hypertextuality, interactivity, multimediality, topicality and ubiquity), which provide political actors with new strategic options to respond to today's electoral challenges (e.g. unparalleled degrees of political cynicism, voter de-alignment and civic apathy in the

Western democracies) (see, for example Dalton and Wattenberg 2002). Social scientists are interested in questions of how these features affect the style and substance of modern political communication. To this end, they conduct quantitative and qualitative content and structural analyses of e-campaigns in different electoral settings and various political cultures (for an overview, see Ward *et al.* 2008).

Their results are astonishingly similar: they prove a standardization, a professionalization and a normalization in online political marketing. Parties and candidates increasingly rely on the same web-based features and successively integrate new formats (like blogs, Twitter and social networking sites) into their overall e-campaigns (*standardization*) (e.g. Kluver *et al.* 2007). The US is said to be a role model in this international standardization process since the sheer number and frequency of their elections, the competitiveness of their political system and the advanced consultant industry foster technical campaign innovations (Chadwick 2009). These developments inspire similar adoptions in other countries (Howard 2006; Schneider and Foot 2006). Moreover, e-campaigns have been found to become more professionalized over time (*professionalization*). In different electoral contests, parties and candidates advance their existing web presences by including more information, offering more multimedia content, and providing more sophisticated means for user involvement and navigation (Druckman *et al.* 2007; Carlson and Strandberg 2008; Schweitzer 2008a). This increases the overall usability, readability and design of the web presences, which in turn has been found to positively affect party and candidate evaluations and voter knowledge (e.g. Hansen and Benoit 2005; Rittenberg and Tewksbury 2007).

These qualitative advancements, however, have not changed the traditional focus of online political marketing. All around the world, party and candidate websites have been found to rely on traditional offline campaign strategies that override any internet-specific style of communication (Rohrschneider 2002; for an overview see Schweitzer 2008b). In particular, political actors refrain from employing extensive interactivity and bottom-up features that could encourage a genuine two-way dialogue with citizens (e.g. Kluver *et al.* 2007). Instead, they continue to focus on information-heavy, centralized and neatly presented top-down web content so as to retain their message control and save human and financial resources (Stromer-Galley 2000). The current use of the internet as a political campaign tool thus resembles a transactional marketing approach that remains locked into styles and modes of communication synonymous with the Web 1.0 philosophy of ‘we will build it and they will come’ (Birdsall 2007).

With the emergence of Web 2.0 and its successful utilization in the 2008 Obama campaign, however, this normalization in e-campaigning might be under threat. The integration of the social web features demands a ‘they will come and build it’ philosophy, which prioritizes interactive co-production and empowers the user as civic producer (‘produser’ or producer-user). To effectively adopt this new means of political communication thus implies that parties and candidates need to move from a transactional to a more relationship approach of online political marketing. To test whether this assumption holds true, we will review past conceptual works on how to measure different paradigms of e-campaigning.

Conceptual work

Historically, the internet has played a set range of key functions within election campaigning. These can be related to either the transactional or the relationship mode of political marketing (Gibson *et al.* 2003). Based on Gibson and Ward’s (2000) established schema, the following tasks can be distinguished:

- Information provision both on civic issues (e.g. on the electoral procedures) and on the campaign (e.g. candidates, programme or the party);
- Promoting persuasive messages to mobilize supporters and undecided voters: this could be a discrete message written for the site, or it could be linking, and so amplifying, a message within other media such as advertisements or policy documents;
- Negative campaigning (see also Schweitzer 2010): that is, the deliberate attacks on opponents so as to cast doubt on their suitability for office;
- Generating resources: usually donations but also encouraging activism so as to increase the logistical power of the organization and its competitiveness;
- Networking, providing spaces for supporters and activists to discuss issues and tactics and for the party to communicate directly to their supporters: historically this has taken place on password-protected intranets or via email to closed lists (Norris 2000); and
- Encouraging participation, traditionally limited to getting out the vote.

These functions are not exclusive, but the first three imply a transactional marketing approach, the sixth a relationship marketing approach, and the fourth and fifth could be central to either.

Web 2.0 challenges these functions; the philosophy underpinning the technologies (O'Reilly 2005; Anderson 2007; Chadwick 2009) suggests that the internet presents opportunities for the user as well as those who create websites. Web 2.0 technologies enable the building of participatory architectures, which provide space for individual production and user-generated content. Users are able to easily upload comments, pictures and videos with minimum effort and technological ability, and these can all become part of an online milieu of campaign communication. Parties can harness 'producers', first identified by James (1991), to enhance the campaign as creators of supportive material and endorsers through comments and sharing. Harnessing the power of the crowd enhances activism, creating a win-win situation for both organizations and supportive publics. Thus, theoretically, the internet becomes one huge archive of co-created data which is open and accessible to everyone. While this data can meet campaigning functions, Web 2.0 is bottom-up and non-hierarchical; the opposite is traditionally the case with political communication.

The existence of such data encourages interactivity, a process by which face-to-face communication is replicated through the use of online tools. These can be asynchronous, such as email, discussion forums and the participatory spaces within social networks; alternatively they can be synchronous chat facilities that allow one-to-one or many-to-many conversations to take place. While technologies that facilitate using the online environment are often discussed in terms of being interactive, Stromer-Galley (2004) offers a useful distinction in types of interactivity. *Interactivity-as-product* refers to the ability of the user to click links, play videos and dovetails neatly with McMillan's (2002) definition of user-to-document interactivity, where users have choices over reading only. *Interactivity-as-process* replicates conversation and is contiguous to definitions of user-to-user interactivity. While this dual distinction is useful, Ferber *et al.* (2007) suggested a refinement of definitions of online communication. Supporting notions of user-to-document and product-driven interactivity, they discuss the notion of one-way, top-down communication. Asynchronous and private communication is two-way, but the host retains control over the process of communication. In contrast, three-way participatory communication can involve multiple users in an open forum and conversations can be either synchronous (ideally), or asynchronous with users contributing at numerous points within what some refer to as a global conversation. One-way clearly links to transactional marketing while three-way is clearly relational; two-way communication offers some degree of hybridity

depending on feature usage. Asynchronous communication such as email can be highly relational, yet features such as frequently asked questions or aggregated data from offline or online interaction are essentially one-way, as they are packaged in a persuasive format for consumption. Our intention is to assess the extent to which candidate and political party website use of interactivity encourages a transactional or relationship management approach.

Case study: US, French, German and UK elections 2007–10

Our methodology will apply Ferber *et al.*'s (2007) model (Figure 22.1), as operationalized by Lilleker and Malagon (2010) to test for conversations taking place within the selected four countries, and to consider the outcomes of such interactivity. The first step in the data collection was to archive the websites so that they could be analysed later in the research. For this purpose, the content of the websites was converted through PDF Professional and Web Dumper Software at a key point towards the end of the campaign when the sites were fully mature.

Operationalization

As outlined above, Ferber *et al.* suggest that there are two key dimensions to understanding the use and impact of the internet within politics. First, they assess the direction of communication. One-way is traditional promotion; two-way involves some level of interaction, but it is largely held in private between user and political actor; and in three-way such dialogue is held in public

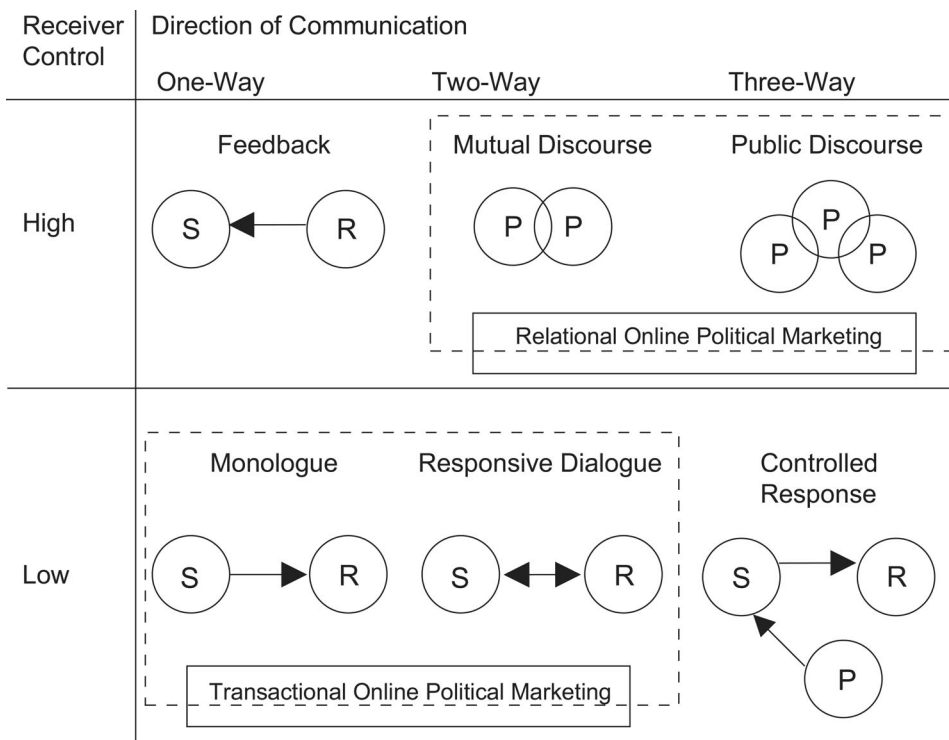


Figure 22.1 Ferber *et al.*, six-part model of cyber-interactivity

Table 22.1 Scale for measuring levels of receiver control

<i>Category</i>	<i>Scale</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Low receiver control	1	One-way hyperlink with unclear destination
	2	One-way hyperlink with defined destination
	3	Hyperlinks created with user input, language is dynamic using second person
	4	User has control over read and link options, video play is optional, content can be downloaded
	5	Users have control over interfacing with content (above) and can send information
	6	Users can send and receive information, i.e. debate forums
	7	Users have multiple options to send and receive information, their input has transformational power – can be seen, i.e. text-only chat
High receiver control	8	Users can upload content, questions, including videos, and can receive answers from receivers
	9	User can choose time, type and amount of information sent and received; the information sent is transformed by the receiver and the transformation is transparent. Communication is asymmetrical
	10	Sender and receiver have equal levels of control; communication is conversational

and open to all. Second, within each direction they suggest that the internet user has different levels of control, from low to high. Table 22.1 identifies a 10-point scale for the measurement of receiver control. This was based on a slightly revised form of Gibson and Ward's (2000) methodology, which sought to code 51 elements present or absent in websites across four functional groups (downward information flows; upward information flows; lateral information flows; interactive information flows). High-level two- and three-way communication indicates evidence of a relationship marketing campaign; low-level one- and two-way implies a purely persuasive transactional sales approach (see indications in Figure 22.1). Both suggest the existence of political marketing, but of different styles.

Through a comparison of feature use, and the user experience potentiated by their inclusion within the architecture of the site, we are able to assess progression in the use of the internet as a campaign tool by our sample, as well as the adoption of new communication technologies. Furthermore, we compare the overall averages for the sites to assess the extent to which website visitors in each of the four countries are encouraged to participate, and the extent they allowed control over the ways in which they participated. This is mapped onto an axis which measures the degree to which the websites offer an open participatory structure, or remain propagandistic tools. The former, by helping to build relationships through interaction, is indicative of a relationship marketing approach. The latter, by stressing one-way, top-down, content-heavy information, indicates a transactional marketing approach.

Sample

We will apply this methodology to four elections: the 2007 French presidential election; the 2008 US presidential election campaign; the 2009 German national election; and the 2010 UK general election. We will specifically assess to what extent these four campaigns provided voters

with space to talk to one another and talk to the campaign, and to what extent a collaborative campaign diegesis was presented to website visitors. The style of this communication will then be used to assess the nature and type of online political marketing, as employed by the primary political actors in these four election campaigns.

The nations were selected for comparison on the basis that the elections were a standard distance apart, were national contests and would see a high degree of professionalization (Negrine 2008). The countries – France, the US, Germany and the UK – are all advanced industrial nations with high internet penetration rates¹ and established democratic institutions. The US and France share a presidential system with a separately elected lower chamber. We therefore chose to analyse the main *candidate* websites in these countries (i.e. of Ségolène Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy in France; Barack Obama and John McCain in the US). The UK and Germany, on the other hand, are parliamentary systems where the party or coalition with the most seats builds government. Here we focused on the websites of the main *parties* in the election (i.e. the Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (CDU), the Christlich-Soziale Union (CSU), the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD), the Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP), Gruene (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) and Die Linke in Germany; the Conservative Party, Labour Party, Green Party, Liberal Democrats, British National Party (BNP) and United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in the UK).

In general, the countries have independent traditions of campaigning, with specific national constraints as regards the electoral system, the respective laws for political advertising or the overall political culture (Plasser 2002). However, there has also been a significant amount of cross-fertilization of ideas and practices. For example, the Americanization debate has been related to all four nations within research articles (Swanson and Mancini 1996; Negrine *et al.* 2007). There has also been a crossover of personnel working within nations. One of Sarkozy's online strategists, Loic le Meur, went to work with the US Democratic Party in 2007; Blue State Digital, the creators of Obama's website, were prominent in the UK and worked with both the Conservative and Labour parties in an advisory capacity; similarly, a number of strategists from the US were present in Germany in the years preceding the campaign, with all the major parties showing an interest in what lessons could be learned from the Obama campaign. This cumulatively suggests that looking across these elections is a useful way to understand the evolution of online political marketing in practice.

Results

Table 22.2 shows the percentage of features that fit into the five categories identified by McMillan (2002) and operationalized for the purposes of website analysis (Gibson and Ward 2000; Lilleker and Malagon 2010; Lilleker and Jackson 2011). This data refutes the expectation of a gradual evolution towards a more Web 2.0 style, showing neither an overall progression, nor stasis in terms of online political campaign communication. Instead, this evidences an ebb and flow in adoption of Web 2.0 features, with party and candidate websites showing a range of differences and similarities in the overall design of website architectures. What we suggest is that innovations in the use of website features are adopted in order to fit with a strategy and the campaign context, with resources appearing to have a strong mediating role.

To take a sequential approach we see the lowest level of interactivity, and consequently the most transactional marketing strategy, within the French presidential contest of 2007. This is perhaps consistent with the lower levels of internet penetration in France as well as greater reliance on modern, as opposed to postmodern (Norris 2000), tools of campaign communication. In 2008 Obama, building on innovations from the 2003–04 Howard Dean failed bid for

Table 22.2 Features present across websites 2007–10 by category (in %)

<i>Party/candidate</i>	<i>Downward flows</i>	<i>Upward flows</i>	<i>Lateral flows</i>	<i>Asymmetrical flows</i>	<i>Symmetrical flows</i>
Royal (FR)	94.3	0.1	0.3	5.4	0.6
Sarkozy (FR)	94.7	0.1	0.1	4.1	0.9
McCain (US)	78.3	0.2	1.7	2.8	17.1
Obama (US)	3.6	<0.1	0.2	0.1	96.0
CDU (DE)	4.6	0.2	85.1	0.7	9.3
CSU (DE)	4.2	0.4	93.3	1.1	0.9
FDP (DE)	61.0	0.8	21.8	2.6	13.8
Gruene (DE)	36.9	1.4	54.9	3.8	2.9
Linke (DE)	62.1	1.3	8.5	4.0	24.1
SPD (DE)	12.0	0.5	68.9	1.4	18.2
BNP (UK)	1.1	<0.1	0.3	0.8	97.9
Conservative (UK)	58.9	<0.1	0.5	0.8	39.7
Green (UK)	70.9	0.1	5.3	4.1	11.2
Labour (UK)	29.4	0.3	34.1	5.1	31.1
Liberal Democrat (UK)	18.8	<0.1	6.1	3.1	71.6
UKIP (UK)	94.2	0.3	3.9	1.7	0.0

the Democrat party nomination, made a significant step forward in allowing participation within his website. Key innovations adopted were community-based tools of mobilization within his bespoke network, my.barackobama.com (MyBO), and his leveraging of social networks to promote his campaign – in particular Facebook but also a range of other niche networks popular among ethnic minority, same sex or political interest groups. Obama's delivery of all campaign news in weblog format, presenting literally thousands of participatory opportunities alongside his network, forum and social network presences, clearly offered new dimensions to campaigning and relationship marketing in online environments. That Obama reached out to different communities online probably reflected his background as a community campaigner as well as his more left-wing ideological position and branding as the outsider and people's champion. McCain, though traditional in comparison with Obama, equally made attempts to leverage online networks as well as adopting a range of weblog tools.

The parties in Germany and the UK show rather mixed approaches to online campaigning, and so a more diverse approach was adopted within both nations. While in Germany hyperlinks dominated many sites compared with the number of other features included, one can see a range of both transactional marketing tools alongside Web 2.0 innovations. Communities such as www.meineSPD.de and www.team2009.de were used to draw supporters closer to the SPD and CDU, respectively. CDU leader Angela Merkel, in particular, tried to leverage social networks to increase communication reach and levels of support. Weblog tools also were prominent, with the Linke website being dominated by this feature. Similarly, in the UK parties created a range of communities, though unlike their German counterparts most were public throughout. The largest was the Liberal Democrat Act area (www.act.libdems.org.uk), but both www.myconservatives.org.uk and Labour's www.members.labour.org.uk represented large areas of the party's websites and replicated to varying extents the relational concept behind Obama's

site. Interestingly, the far-right BNP was the most interactive, providing spaces to participate within every aspect of the site from the news weblog to sharing facilities on every page and providing a forum. The site, www.bnp.org.uk, acted as a hub for a minority with marginalized ideas, and so provided the party with an active group who co-created their campaign to a far greater extent than Obama or any other of the party community sites.

Comparing the overall architectures one finds that the websites that predominantly supplied information were those of Sarkozy and Royal, where little else was provided; UKIP, McCain and the British Green Party, then Linke, the FDP and the British Conservative Party. Except for the sites of the Conservatives, Linke and John McCain, all these sites contained few Web 2.0 features and so offered little opportunity for interactivity. Royal apart, these also presented the greatest number of negative arguments, in particular UKIP and the German opposition parties, the FDP, Gruene and SPD. Linke and John McCain both had small weblogs that did allow site visitors to add comments and interact with one another and the host. This provides the sense of being at the centre of a websphere, and the Labour Party in particular used hyperlinks to network with a range of supportive groups from internal associations to trade unions and other non-governmental organizations and pressure groups. These sites tend to adhere to traditions of political communication and serve only campaigning functions, paying only lip service to philosophies of Web 2.0. The websites offering symmetrical information flows has the BNP ranked first, closely followed by Barack Obama; these were true Web 2.0 participatory architectures. British parties the Liberal Democrats, Conservatives and Labour demonstrated a mixed strategy of supplying information balanced by features that offered interactivity. In all three cases the size of the network created within the website determined the number of opportunities to interact, and so the overall percentage of symmetrical communication permitted. The reason that the use of StudiVZ profiles and other German social network communities such as meineSPD and teamDeutschland did not increase the extent to which the sites offered symmetrical communication was due to them being protected by registration procedures and passwords. Obama's MyBO area and all the British party communities were visible to all visitors, although posting and commenting was limited to members only. This positions these communities as fundamental features of an impression management strategy, as well as having a mobilization function and so demonstrating the dual function of Web 2.0 within the context of a campaign. This mixed strategy combines campaigning with co-production and suggests a shift away from a purely transactional marketing strategy.

In Figure 22.2 we compare the political marketing approaches of parties and candidates testing for relational or transactional strategies and the extent to which sites are informational or interactive. As expected, Figure 22.2 shows that Obama's website was both interactive in terms of receiver control and highly participatory in terms of communication direction. Less expected is the fact that the BNP also followed a relationship marketing approach, though this was very controlled and to a very small internal audience. There is, then, a series of parties in the UK and Germany that can be found in a middle ground, Web 1.5 (Jackson and Lilleker 2009), which offer the architecture for a relationship marketing approach, but seek to project sales messages. We then find candidates such as Sarkozy and McCain and parties such as UKIP and Gruene in a purely Web 1.0, transactional marketing space.

The unexpected level of adoption of Web 2.0 by Barack Obama represents an outlier in terms of all other parties and candidates within this study except for the BNP; though Obama sought to build relationships with a mass network, the BNP maintained a conversation among their minority of like-minded supporters. Mainstream German and UK parties created communities based around their existing members and supporters, and the latter, in particular, appear to have drawn ideas from MyBO. They also built on their existing uses of databases and

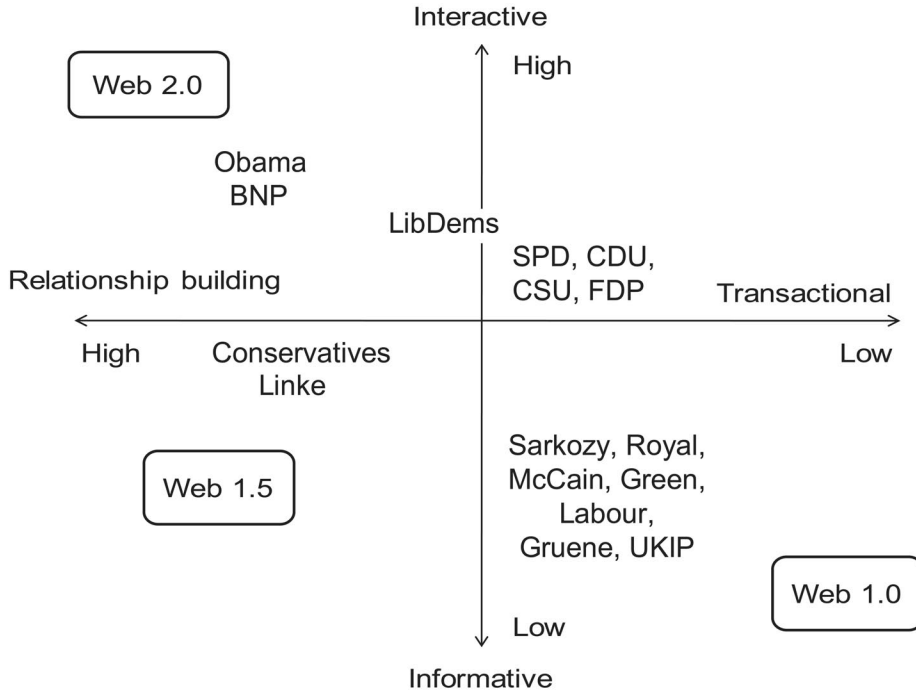


Figure 22.2 Use of transactional or relationship marketing 2007–10

email lists, and whilst this implied some level of relationship marketing, it was targeted at internal audiences. The outreach to the general public was closer to a transactional approach. This implies that the two basic modes of online political marketing (transactional versus relationship) can in fact co-exist, depending on the type of stakeholders that will be addressed on the internet. Obama, in contrast, used the internet to gain new supporters. His relational style of online political marketing thus encompassed both internal and external audiences. However, he did not start with a blank canvas. After his 2004 speech to the Democrat Party Convention a Facebook group was created independently called Obama for President. Its membership increased to almost a million over the three years prior to Obama declaring his intention to stand for the presidency. This was a clear indicator that there was a supportive, online crowd whose power the campaign could harness. This was not the case elsewhere; Royal built a network slowly around her Notebooks of Hope which were co-created in the two years prior to the contest but also had a party network in place. German and UK parties have similar traditions of mass membership and, though in decline, these remain the lifeblood of the organizations. Thus networks were created to draw these members closer as opposed to focusing on reaching out to the masses.

Moreover, the French election was at a time when the ideas of Web 2.0 were nascent and so Sarkozy's and Royal's approach reflects both this fact and the political outlook. In fact, of our sample, Sarkozy is the only one whose approach is essentially transactional to both internal and external audiences. In the wake of the Obama success, though, there seemed to be a shift in European elections towards relational modes of online campaigning. While Web 2.0 features may not have been embedded, as for Obama, parties in Germany and the UK clearly sought to embrace social networking. In Germany, this happened in a rather restrictive manner so as to

retain the party's overall message control. As a consequence, the public response was rather meagre. Whilst we cannot fully compare the number of fans on candidate and party sites, they provide an interesting snapshot. Chancellor Angela Merkel could only gain 14,000 fans to her Facebook site during the campaign, suggesting that there was limited interest. In the UK the Conservative Party's Facebook profile gained 70,732 fans, suggesting that there was a stronger response to the more open-minded Web 2.0 approach of British parties. However, Obama had an online audience in place, and his number of fans was millions strong, topping 8 million globally by election day. Such levels of support enhance an external relationship marketing approach.

Advice for practitioners

The data across our four countries suggests that there is not a single answer as to what works, and hence no simple universal lesson as to how politicians and campaigners should direct their online activities. This absence of one size fits all reflects in part differences between these countries in terms of their electoral procedures, political systems and cultures. The lack of uniformity in our data also reflects factors individual to the key players in each country, such as resources and skills available to make use of marketing knowledge and internet technology. However, we suggest that there are certain lessons which may have a practical impact upon political marketing strategies and tactics. First, practitioners need to take into account national approaches to politics and the internet. There is some evidence that political campaigners in Germany and the UK tried to adopt Obama's campaign, but we suggest that campaigners need to cherry-pick from how the internet is used and not import it wholesale. Start with an understanding of the national political scene and apply the technology to this, not the other way around. Second, we would suggest that there is some evidence that political campaigners would extend their understanding and use of political marketing principles to include a discrete online approach. This would not mean different aims and objectives, but would recognize the potential unique benefits that the internet as a communication channel offers them. In particular, we would suggest that as a marketing communication channel the internet provides political campaigners with flexibility, so that it can be used as both a broadcast and narrowcast tool at the same time. Third, we suggest that political campaigners would be best advised to use different marketing styles at the same time as they meet different audience needs. The discussion has been primarily whether the internet is being used as part of a transactional marketing strategy or a relationship marketing approach. Normatively, we might suggest a relationship marketing approach, but the evidence suggests that both are perfectly acceptable. The persuasive and information-based transactional approach is probably most appropriate for reaching external audiences who know little about the party or candidate. In contrast, relationship marketing is probably more effective for internal audiences, such as members or stakeholders with strong party identification and high levels of knowledge and political interest. We suggest, therefore, that the ebb and flow data we identified indicates that political actors should be marketing agents using a range of approaches, depending on the circumstances.

Impact on politics

The impact of online political marketing can be described in three ways: in a communicational dimension; in a logistical dimension; and in a civic dimension. As a communication channel the internet has helped political actors to deliver persuasive and alternative messages to the public without journalistic interventions or presentational constraints. This increases their message

control and provides a compensation for the lack of attention in the traditional mass media. Another impact on politics is found in the options to generate new funds and to mobilize and coordinate activists. This applies not only to candidate-centred systems where there is more scope/need, but also to party-centred systems. In this way, the internet has become a vital logistical backbone in modern political marketing that increases the competitiveness even of smaller organizations. Finally, the interactivity we identified within Web 2.0 has the potential to transform the relationship between political actors and citizens. In particular, parties and candidates are able to rely on direct voter input as regards their policy standpoints or their campaign strategies. In turn, they can provide opportunities for lasting civic participation so as to enhance the responsiveness and legitimacy of the democratic system. This is especially so if a long-term relationship marketing approach is applied between elections which encourages an ongoing two-way dialogue. At present, however, the external impacts on democratic discourse between governed and governing is more a theoretical construct than a reality. For now, the evidence suggests that the internet is primarily affecting the communicational and logistical dimensions of political communication, and less so the civic foundation.

The way forward

This project used the same methodology to assess four different elections at the very beginning of the Web 2.0 era. For finesse, the analysis requires a wider sample as regards the number and type of political actors and the countries that are included. Moreover, research should strive to cover both election and routine periods to learn more about the conditional factors that influence the adoption of different marketing styles. Finally, longitudinal comparisons are warranted that allow for conclusions about the development of online political communication in relation to their offline environment. Apart from these scientific desiderata, there are also future considerations for the practice of e-campaigning. At present, political consultants are actively looking at the technology, but are primarily interested in its vote-winning potential within a transactional marketing approach. We suggest that not enough practitioners are considering the wider conceptual issues of how they can use the internet to enhance democratic participation within a relationship marketing approach. We suspect that most believe that elections, in particular, are not the time to consider wider participation. However, we suggest that the embeddedness of the internet within political marketing communication strategies, both before and during elections, may actually bring powerful electoral benefits to parties and candidates.

Note

- 1 According to the database www.internetworldstats.com, France had an internet penetration of 51.8 percent in 2007. In the US 74.7 percent of all citizens were online in 2008, while in Germany 75.3 percent used the web in 2009. In the UK internet penetration was 76.4 percent in 2010.

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