

## The Internet Election?

Date

12<sup>th</sup> May 2010

---

Much has been said about whether this would be the 'first internet election', driven by massive interest in Obama's innovative online campaign. Labour, the Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats channelled staff and resources into their digital campaigns. Media fascination surrounded this new development in politics and much was written on everything from the impact of Sarah Brown's Twitter presence to the analysis of online sentiment surrounding the television debates. The public affairs industry has watched new online campaigning tactics with interest, recognising the impact they will have, and has already had, on our work. This paper explores some of the ways in which the internet was used and what impact they had on the election result.

---

The 2010 general election was predicted to be the first internet election. In the early days of the campaign attention was focused on what impact the internet, specifically social media, would have on the campaign.

The question of whether it is was an 'internet election' is perhaps the wrong question to ask. The internet was certainly essential to the way the parties carried out their campaigns at a practical level, as important as it is to life generally. That much is undeniable.

Some envisaged the advent of a new order of online politics, which clearly did not happen. It is better to say that digital media added another element to campaigning; it did not revolutionise it. Nor did the internet herald the death of more traditional methods which remained dominant. It could be argued that this was instead - with the dramatic impact of the television debates and rolling news coverage - the 'television election'.

### Social Media:

- The impact of social media on the election result is doubtful. The campaign was clearly present in social media but it was not driven by it.
- Social media was of particular importance to the way the 18-24 age group accessed information about the campaign and there was a surge in voter registration in that age group.

Although we can only speculate, it is likely that this was an offshoot, or indeed expression of, the TV fuelled 'Clegg-effect'. That is, they saw the debate or heard about it offline and then looked online for further information.

It demonstrates well the way in which media channels work in tandem with one another rather than in isolation.

Understanding the user-journey in totality and the role each channel plays within that can significantly increase the success of a communications programme.

- Digital media generally reached those already engaged and highly opinionated and did not change people's minds. The small political class simply found a new forum in which to assert their arguments and opinions, gaining a few new public spokesmen in the form of political bloggers.
- Social media facilitates engagement but it cannot create it. Tools such as Facebook and Twitter are excellent for discussing a common interest; they are not so effective in creating an initial interest. Social media is a very useful tool but we need to understand how best to use it.
- The MPs who had most impact in using social media approached it no differently to their offline engagement. Online was used as a tool to communicate campaign messages in the same way as doorstep canvassing.
- Online engagement, as with traditional offline engagement, has most impact when covering issues that matter to constituents rather than when the MP simply talks about themselves. It must be outward-looking.
- Social media had most impact when used at a local level, bringing people together around shared concerns and issues. Some MPs used Facebook groups to publicly join campaigns on local issues such as hospitals closures.

- It was less successful at a national party-driven level where the tone often made it seem preaching. National politics by its nature has to hold broad appeal and be all encompassing. Generic messaging however does not lend itself to social media.

People naturally congregate around and participate within communities of interest. Local MPs are better placed to tap into this as they can take a more flexible and tailored approach

Local level campaigns could synergise with local issues and were therefore more likely to resonate with constituents. For example, the national message (pre-Clegg effect) focused on Labour vs. Conservative. In many constituencies this was not representative of the battle being fought.

- Social media is likely to have a cumulative effect as both relationships and technologies are developed. Links between MPs and constituents that were built during the campaign must be maintained over the life of this Parliament. If they fail to do so they risk the electorate becoming cynical about their motivation. MPs must avoid the accusation that they used social media to engage with their constituents simply to get elected.

The difficulty comes with putting this into action. On the surface social media may well be a free tool however the amount of time which needs to be invested in order to make this a success will inevitably have a significant cost attached.

### Other examples:

- There was a vast amount of constantly-updated information accessible at any time by the electorate. This meant they were more aware of their options and of their ability to produce unpredictable results. The daily, often instant polls made this election very difficult to ‘spin’ convincingly and took away some of the control from the parties.
- Sophisticated databases were used to personalise their leaflet and email campaigns and the parties used search technology such as Google’s AdSense system intelligently. These more hidden technologies undoubtedly impacted the campaigns but that impact is harder to assess.
- The Conservatives facilitated debate around their draft manifesto inviting people to vote on questions which the shadow minister was then videoed answering. They also used ‘crowdsourcing’ to debate a budget response.
- Online donations were another interesting development with a large number of donors each giving a small amount. This will become increasingly important with restrictions on party funding in the future.

### Conclusion:

What impact did the internet have on the general election? At a practical level it was vital to the running of the campaigns and how people accessed information, but this was no different to the role it plays in business or media generally. It did not revolutionise or overthrow the old order but, when used well, digital media was an effective communication tool and may have made the difference in some marginal seats.

The parties and their digital teams must learn from their experiences in the election and build on the techniques that were successful. Lessons learnt can be applied to public affairs campaigns and good digital media methods must become part of our range of techniques.

---

#### Contact:

For more information, please contact Dominic Church, Managing Director, Westminster Advisers on: 020 7222 9500 or at: [dominic@westminsteradvisers.co.uk](mailto:dominic@westminsteradvisers.co.uk).