

Catching the ‘wired voters’?

Campaigning on the Internet

GÖRAN DJUPSUND & TOM CARLSON

By the end of the 20th century, the political parties in most modern western democracies were faced with a set of common dilemmas. As the floating voter became more of a rule than an exception, the parties – at different points of time in different countries – were forced to develop ‘catch-all’ strategies designed to attract voters from outside their core constituency (e.g. Bowler & Farrell, 1992; Karvonen & Rappe, 1991; Swanson & Mancini, 1996). During the same period, in Western Europe, the party organizations began to lose what strength they had left (e.g. Djupsund & Svåsand, 1990; Katz & Mair, 1994; Mair & van Biezen, 2001). This was clearly indicated by the fact that the number of party members dropped. Another important trait of development was that the parties began to lose control within the media sector (e.g. Humphreys, 1996; McQuail & Siune, 1998; Swanson & Mancini, 1996). First the amount of newspapers owned or controlled by political parties, or organizations closely linked to them, e.g. trade unions, was reduced to close to nothing by the end of the 1990s. The printed part of mass communication came to be dominated by autonomous newspapers that functioned on a clearly commercial basis. From the late 1980s onwards, the broadcasted media also lived through turmoil. The era where the national television networks were owned, or at least highly controlled by the state, and hence indirectly by the parties, came to an end and commercial networks all over Europe were allowed to enter the scene.

Given this development regarding the traditional channels of mass communication, it came as no surprise that the political parties – and their political consultants – looked upon the birth and growth of

the Internet in bright colours (e.g. Faucheaux, 1998; Nixon & Johansson, 1999; Noble, 1996). From the parties’ point of view, this new channel for mass communication provided them – at least theoretically – with new means to reach the voters. Further, it was expected that this could be done at low, or at least reasonable, monetary costs and without the interference of news media. Finally, the web also opened a new, fast and direct channel for a two-way-communication between the parties and the electorate (e.g. Gibson & Ward, 1998; Margolis et al., 1997; Margolis et al., 1999; Norris, 2001b). Because of this many cyber optimists believed, as stated by Norris (2001b: 3): ‘[...] that this rapid proliferation of websites provides the best hope in modern times of reviving political parties, the core structure mediating between citizens and the state’.

However, studies mapping the users of the Internet in general, and the use of the political websites in particular, indicated that a rather restricted segment of the population turned to the political sites. It seemed that this group of net-users consisted in particular of citizens that already were interested in, or connected to politics (e.g. Hill & Hughes, 1998; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Norris, 1999 and 2000). Hence, this would enhance the reinforcing rather than the mobilizing effect of politics on the net. In other words, the Internet will strengthen existing patterns of political participation more than it will encourage those who are currently marginalized from the political system to participate in political discourse. The question whether cyber politics generally has a reinforcing or mobilizing effect on citizen’s behaviour is too large and complex to be fully embarked upon in this context (see e.g. Norris, 2001a). Some short comments might still be appropriate. Thus, we see the conflict between reinforcement versus mobilization-theories as, at least partly, connected to the perspective

Department of Social Sciences, Åbo Akademi University, Vörågatan 9, FIN-65100 Vasa, gdjupsun@abo.fi; tcarlson@abo.fi

from which one chooses to look upon cyber politics. From a purely theoretical point of view, one might stress some of the media-specific trademarks of the web (level of cost, speed, spread, and two-way communication) and end up enchanting the mobilizing potential of cyber politics. On the other hand, the case for stressing the reinforcing character of cyberpolitics seems largely to rest on evidence of another kind. Judging by past experience of new media and their effects on political participation, as well as empirical research on politics on the web today, one might conclude that the reinforcing effects cannot be overlooked. On a general level, we thus maintain that cyberpolitics has a somewhat dual character. On a theoretical level, it potentially owns mobilizing power. Still, it seems obvious that this mobilization has a reinforcing bias. Hence, only the future can tell which one of these directions will finally take the upper hand. Awaiting that future, our most important quest is to enlarge and deepen the knowledge of today's cyberpolitics.

In this article, the general aim is to explore, from a party perspective, the nature of today's cyberpolitics. We go about this task in a twofold way. Our first aim is to try to contextualize cyberpolitics. This is done by scrutinizing both the possibilities and the restrictions that characterize parties' activities on the web, and by comparing these findings with the ways in which politics is conducted in other, more traditional, forms of mass communication. Second, we wish to put some of the postulates that arise from this analysis to an empirical test by taking a closer look at the first round of the 2000 presidential election in Finland. In Finland, the entire election process – starting from the nomination of candidates up to the final election – still places a considerable weight on the party affiliation of the candidates. A second circumstance that makes the Finnish case interesting is that Finland, as well as the other Nordic countries, in global comparisons, has proved to be extremely highly 'wired' (e.g. Norris, 2000: 4–5).

Contextualizing Cyberpolitics

As stated previously, one of the main reasons for the parties to 'get wired' was their ambition to reach voters, both stable and interested as well as uninterested and floating ones. The decision to use the Internet was surely to some extent a result of the fact that the web was there to be used by anyone who so wished. On the other hand, one other reason seems to have been that the parties experienced problems of different kinds in connection to

the more traditional channels of mass communication.

At this stage, one – as well as the parties – might wonder whether getting wired was worth the trouble. In order to be able to address this question, we need to look at web politics against the background of more traditional channels used by parties and their candidates. Hence, on a theoretical level, we pose the following question: what characterizes the prerequisites for political communication on the web compared to more traditional media? Here, these traditional forms of media are classified as:

- 1) *The partisan press*, i.e., printed media owned or controlled by a party;
- 2) *The free press*, i.e., newspapers with no affiliations to political parties or organizations closely linked to the parties;
- 3) *Radio and television*, i.e., communication that is broadcasted.

Needless to say, the differences between these communication channels are too many and too important for all to be accounted for in this context. Therefore, the analysis will be guided by three questions that we deem as crucial from the political parties' point of view. The questions that we, as well as a political party, might ask when monitoring and choosing between the web, the partisan press, the free press and radio and television are the following:

- To what extent is it possible for the party to exert control over the message?
- What are the possibilities for gaining access to the particular channel that one opts for?
- In choosing this channel, what are the possibilities to reach a large segment of the electorate?

As to the first two questions, the four considered types of communication channels form a rather straightforward pattern. When it comes to the partisan press and the web, the questions regarding access and control are fairly unproblematic. Put more bluntly, the party decides when to publish and what to publish. Regarding the two other channels, the free press and radio and television, the situation is quite the opposite. Here, the party lacks possibilities to control either access to the channel or the form and the content of the message. Furthermore, the actors that control both the access and the messages – the journalists and the owners of the media – live by their own book of rules (e.g. Altheide & Snow, 1979; Mazzoleni, 1987; Swanson & Mancini, 1996). This modern media logic creates a situa-

tion where the political parties, more often than not, are denied access to the communication channel. If, and when the parties manage to pass the threshold, they, and their messages, are treated in a journalistic way that every now and then makes them wonder whether it was worth making the news in the first place.

The third question places importance on the capacity to reach as many voters as possible. Obviously, this is by no means only a question about the amount of voters to be reached, potentially. From the parties' point of view, it is also of the utmost importance to reach the right kind of voters; those that take little, or no interest in politics, and who tend to either float or stay at home on Election Day (e.g. Maarek, 1995: 38–40). When exposed to this question, three of the communication channels form rather clear-cut cases. The free press as well as radio and television share a common potential for reaching a large share of the voters. The partisan press on the other hand has great difficulties in reaching people outside the parties' own rank-and-file and its most devoted voters. The web, in its turn, is a rather hard case to judge in the light of this criterion. On the one hand, a message placed on a party's website can potentially reach all the voters that are connected to the Internet. However, it is equally possible that this message reaches only a small group of on-line voters; i.e., those who either take a great interest in politics in general or already favour the particular party. Of course, one might argue that this same line of reasoning is also relevant when considering the free press and radio and television. If you are uninterested in politics or a particular party, there is nothing to prove that you read, listen to or look at messages concerning politics or this political party. Still, we maintain that there exists a major difference between these two situations. As to newspapers, radio and television, the uninterested voter is, more or less directly, often by chance or accident, exposed to messages concerning politics or a particular party. Hence, in a way, the voter has to be active in order to avoid these messages. The situation regarding the Internet,

however, is quite the opposite. The passive, but wired voter does not even have to be aware of the existence of party sites and other political sites. In fact, a voter has to take active measures in order to expose himself to messages conveyed by the parties. Hence, we maintain that the Internet cannot *per se* be deemed as a communication channel that reaches a great proportion of the electorate. Whether or not this is the case is something that will have to be judged on an empirical, not on a theoretical basis.

To sum up, from the political parties' point of view, the four different kinds of communication channels represent different options for communication. Moreover, these differences touch upon, *inter alia*, the access to the channel, the level of control regarding the message, and the amount of the electorate that can be reached. Table 1 sums up the discussion so far.

Table 1 points at a rather interesting paradox. When looked upon from the political parties' point of view, two channels, the partisan press and the Internet, display surprisingly large similarities. At this stage, we do not wish to stress this remark beyond this point but find, already here, that it is well worth mentioning.

Web Politics in Different Arenas

So far, we have rather strongly emphasized the self-evident fact that the political parties wish to reach as many voters as possible. It goes without saying that the parties also have other important goals. In his Nordic classic, *Party Strategies in a Multiparty System*, Sjöblom (1968) draws up a picture of party activity in general. According to Sjöblom, the goal for the parties in the *electoral arena* is to maximize their number of votes. In the *parliamentary arena*, they opt for a situation where their ability to co-operate with other parties is as good as possible. Finally, in the *internal arena*, the main objective is to create and maintain the highest possible level of party cohesion. Naturally enough, the methods, i.e., channels for communication, for reaching these goals

Table 1. *Prerequisites for Communication in Four Types of Channels From the Political Parties' Point of View*

	Level of access	Level of control	Level of audience being reached
The partisan press	High	High	Low
The free press	Low	Low	High
Radio and television	Low	Low	High
The Internet	High	High	Low/High?

display large variations. Leaving the parliamentary arena aside, we find that Gibson and Ward's line of reasoning concerning party politics on the web (Gibson & Ward, 1998) resembles Sjöblom's categorization. Their concept *interparty competition* stresses the party's ability and capacity to reach voters. Their concept *intraparty democracy*, on the other hand, places weight on internal matters of the party as an organization. In order to be able to function well in the interparty competition, the party has internally to be in line with, amongst other things, at least an acceptable level of party cohesion.

Potentially, it seems to be fruitful to also divide the parties' activities according to orientation when it comes to questions regarding communication. However, we would like to emphasize that this division can be made only on an analytical level. During the last decades, we have witnessed sharply falling numbers of party members indicating that the traditional internal party arena has also gone through radical changes (e.g. Mair & van Biezen, 2001). Hence, this arena cannot anymore be interpreted as a strictly internal one. Instead, we suggest a somewhat broader interpretation. Thus, we view the internal arena as consisting of both the activity of the party's own members and of those persons, groups and organizations that stand close to the party and take a great day-to-day interest in its activities. If we do not account for this new grey-zone, the concept 'internal arena' will soon lose its meaning. Bearing this new interpretation in mind, we now turn to the question concerning how well, or poorly, the prerequisites of the four types of channels suit the parties' communication efforts in the two arenas. Table 2 outlines our general view on this subject.

In Table 2, the majority of the classifications seems rather unproblematic. Still, the Internet again stands out as a somewhat deviant and ambiguous case that is hard to classify on a purely theoretical basis. Concerning the internal arena and the promotion of internal party democracy, we believe that the Internet has the *prerequisites* for efficiency (cf.

Gibson & Ward, 2000; Norris, 2001b). However, regarding the fruitfulness of being wired in the external, electoral arena, we feel that the answer has to be pursued through empirical research.

Before turning to the empirical analysis, we still have to decide on what grounds we will deem the parties' web activity as being a success or a failure. As stated earlier, the Internet offers the parties a good potential for reaching voters and for doing this without any journalistic intervention. What is more, the web also offers different opportunities for two-way communication, even in real-time (see, e.g., Gibson & Ward, 2000). Thus, a campaign that makes use of all of the possibilities offered by the web should display many opportunities for, and extensive use of, two-way communication. The second and the decisive criterion for success or failure, however, must be the amount of voters/citizens that the parties manage to reach on the web. Obviously, the part of the electorate that is reached has to be rather large in order for the endeavour to qualify as being a success.

Our third and final criterion rests on the notion that it is not sufficient for a party only to reach many voters, not even if this also means an active two-way communication. From the individual party's point of view, the sheer amount of site visitors comes second to reaching the right kind of voters. Previous research has shown that when analyzing the electorate, the parties categorize and segment the voters according to their attitude towards the party (e.g. Farrell & Wortmann, 1987; Kavanagh, 1995). The most interesting voters are those who are surely going to vote but have not yet decided which party they are going to vote for. On the other hand, the voters that are clearly less interesting are, firstly, those who already intend to vote for the party, and, second, those who clearly hoist the banners of other parties (see Sjöblom, 1968: 236–238; Maarek, 1995: 38–40). Consequently, a successful campaign on the Internet should reach as many voters of the right kind as possible. Evidently, it is a very cumbersome task to judge whether or not a campaign fulfils this criterion. One possible way of testing this might be to turn the criterion up side

Table 2. *Prerequisites for the Successful Use of Different Types of Media in Party Arenas*

Channels	Arenas	
	The internal arena	The electoral arena
The partisan press	Good	Poor
The free press	Poor	Good
Radio and television	Poor	Good
The Internet	Good	Poor/Good?

down, instead. Rather than focus on undecided and/or potentially favourable on-line voters, it would be better to focus, instead, on the uninteresting and/or more or less hostile wired voters. Thus, third, if a web campaign attracts a fairly large proportion of more or less hostile voters/surfers, it cannot, according to this criterion, be judged as successful in the electronic electoral arena.

Empirical Analysis

Data and Method

The empirical analysis focuses on Finnish parties' and their candidates' websites during the first round of the 2000 presidential election campaign. In Finland, the election turnout has, in modern time, been higher in presidential elections than in parliamentary ones.¹ Moreover, the rather personalized character of the modern presidential elections has resulted in a high degree of undecided voters (e.g. Gallup Finland/FSD 2000; Moring, 1998). In addition, the media interest and coverage have been exceptionally extensive during presidential campaigns (e.g. Aarnio & Isotalus, 2000; Moring, 1998). This nature of the campaigns makes them a fertile ground for activating public discussion (e.g. Tainio, 2001). Consequently, the chosen empirical case is well suited for examining websites as a tool for campaigning for votes, as well as a means of activating electronic voter and partisan discussion during campaigns.

The study leans on three bodies of empirical data. First, in order to scrutinize the efforts in creating and promoting interactivity and debate on the campaign websites – thus examining the first criterion for successful web campaigning – we report some findings from an analysis of the sites in the final week of the election campaign (9–16 January 2000). Second, in order to shed light on the Finnish voters' view of the websites, we examine results from a national voter survey conducted during the campaign (Gallup Finland/FSD, 2000). Here, the second criterion of successful cyber campaigning, i.e., reaching a large share of voters, is brought to the fore: are there many voters that consider the campaign sites as important information sources? Third, having shown how the campaign sites promote interactivity and how voters deem the sites, we focus on the discussion forums on the web that were provided by the parties and their candidates. Here, we rely on findings from a quantitative content analysis of the discussion in these forums. The empirical data consists of electronic messages that

were posted to the discussion forums on party and candidate websites in the final month of the campaign.² By observing the on-line voters' discussions, we shed additional light on the second criterion: do the forums offered by the parties and their candidates manage to attract a large share of voters discussing electoral topics? Moreover, by studying the content of the voters' discussions, we can examine the third criterion, the need to attract the 'right' kind of on-line voters.

The Interactive Features of The Sites

It can be argued that potential interactivity is the feature that most clearly distinguishes campaign websites from other campaign outlets. On campaign sites, voters can get in contact with the parties and their candidates. Thus, e-mail can be sent to them (i.e., down-top communication). Furthermore, the parties as well as their candidates can reply to voters' e-mail (top-down communication). Moreover, in different types of discussion forums on the sites, voters can discuss political and campaign matters with each other (down-down communication). Finally – and this is the truly interactive feature of the web – the sites can offer opportunities to 'real-time chatting', where voters can converse in real-time with, inter alia, the party elites and the candidates. In all, these interactive features have, theoretically, a potential to activate and mobilize voters. Of course, it is hard to tell whether or not the parties really wish to exploit all these possibilities. The parties might be satisfied communication *to*, rather than *with*, the voters (cf. Stromer-Galley, 2000). Still, we maintain that if a campaign should be deemed as successful as a web campaign it should utilize the interactive nature of the web.

How, then, did the Finnish presidential campaign sites exploit these interactive features? Table 3 sheds light on this question. The examination includes the websites of the five major candidates in the election: Esko Aho (The Centre Party); Tarja Halonen (The Social Democratic Party); Heidi Hautala (The Green League); Elisabeth Rehn (The Swedish People's Party); Riitta Uosukainen (The National Coalition Party).³

Table 3 clearly demonstrates that the websites were only partially interactive. Thus, all sites featured e-mail addresses. Still, there was no guarantee that the candidates would reply to the messages. Merely one candidate, the Green League's Heidi Hautala, provided a discussion forum.⁴ Finally, none of the candidates offered the voters opportunities to real-time chats.

Table 3. *The Use of Interactive Features on the Candidates' Websites*

Features	Websites				
	Aho	Halonen	Hautala	Rehn	Uosukainen
E-mail address?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Reply promised?	No	(Yes)*	(Yes)*	(Yes)*	No
Discussion forum?	No	No	Yes	No	No
Real-time chat?	No	No	No	No	No

*) The candidate may possibly reply, but he/she does not guarantee it.

In sum, the candidates did not exploit the interactive web features that could have activated the voters. Rather, when monitoring the sites, one obtained the impression that the websites resembled traditional campaign brochures that inform the site visitors about the candidates' issue priorities and their personal characteristics (cf. Carlson & Djupsund, 2001; Kamarck, 1999). Hence, the websites predominantly disseminated information downwards; i.e., in the direction top-down (from the candidates to the voters). Thus, the first criterion of successful web campaigning, an extensive use of interactivity, was not fulfilled.

Did the Web Campaign Affect a Large Share of Voters?

Did the 'electronic brochures' of the parties' candidates have any influence on the Finnish voters' decision how to vote? Was there a large share of voters that deemed the campaign sites as important information sources? Some results of a national voter survey (Gallup Finland/FSD, 2000) shed light on these questions (Table 4).

Indeed, the results presented in Table 4 are quite depressing from the Internet optimist's point of view. Very few voters considered the websites important as an information source when deciding how to vote. Thus, in seeking political information, the

voters relied on traditional media, i.e., the press and, especially, the television.

However, as pointed out by Gibson and Ward (1998: 17), in examining web politics, one should pay special attention to, so-to-say, tomorrow's electorate, i.e., today's first time and other young voters. This group is, as Gibson and Ward emphasize, well versed in computer-mediated communication, the Internet in particular. In addition, these young people are, to a large extent, swing voters with weak party alignments. Thus, on the Internet, the parties and their candidates should be keen to attract these young, non-aligned web surfers. Consequently, in Table 5, we pay special attention to the age factor: did the younger voter segments attach greater importance to the website information than older voters?

Again, the results, presented in Table 5, give cause to serious concern for the political Internet optimists. Surprisingly few voters rated the website information highly. What is more, the young voters – the citizens that surf most intensely on the web – did not differ significantly in this respect from the older voter segments. In sum, the findings presented in this section suggest that the Internet does not *per se* have the capacity to mobilize voters, as the earlier discussed mobilization hypothesis suggests. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the second criterion of successful web campaigning is not ful-

Table 4. *The Importance of Different Sources of Information to the Voters in the Finnish 2000 Presidential Election, First Round. Total number of respondents: 1,269*

Relative share of respondents saying they got information from the source for their voting decision (percentage answering 'very much' and 'pretty much' on a four-score scale)	
Type of source	
Newspaper articles	20.4 %
Television news/current affairs	41.8 %
Candidates' websites	1.4 %

Table 5. *The Importance of Different Sources of Information to Different Age Groups of Voters in the Finnish 2000 Presidential Election, First Round. Total number of respondents: 1,269*

Source	Relative share of respondents saying they got information from the source for their voting decision (percentage answering 'very much' and 'pretty much' on a four-score scale)				
	18–24	25–34	35–49	50–59	60–77
Newspaper articles	20.8	14.1	22.2	18.1	28.6
Television news and current affairs	45.5	44.5	42.7	39.6	36.3
Candidates' websites	3.9	1.9	1.2	0.8	1.2
N	77	263	501	260	168

filled: the share of voters that emphasize the role of the sites was not large.

Voters' Discussions in the Web Forums

In the following, we pay attention to the voters that, after all, do utilize electronic discussion forums provided either by parties or candidates on their sites. A 'discussion forum' here denotes a site feature where a visitor can post a message that then appears on the web page in question. Moreover, other visitors can reply to earlier posted messages, or post new messages, that likewise appear on the 'electronic billboard'. The posted messages, original messages and answers, form a series of messages organized in 'threads'. Thus, discussion forums technically resemble Internet news groups (see Bentivegna, 1998; Hill & Hughes, 1998). Ideally, the forums promote and activate political debate among the 'on-line citizens'. Furthermore, monitoring these electronic debates, parties and their candidates can conduit opinions from, so-to-say, the bottom; i.e., in the electoral arena, from voters, and, in the internal arena, from party aligned citizens; party activists, members and supporters.

The following analysis focuses on two aspects of the discussions in the web forums. The first aspect concerns the liveliness and intensity of the discussions. Here, we use three measures. First, inspired by Bentivegna's analysis (1998) of political newsgroups on the Internet, we examine the liveliness of the discussion by categorizing the messages as either original messages or reply messages. A high frequency of reply messages indicates an intensive debate and a strong participant interest for the topics discussed (Bentivegna, 1998: 5). Second, again following Bentivegna, we check how many different debaters actually participate in the discus-

sion forums. In Bentivegna's words: 'a large number of messages sent by a few subjects points to a certain 'monopoly' of the discussion' (1998: 6). Thus, if the forums are dominated by few participants, then they are unsuccessful in mobilizing and engaging the electorate. Third, we pay special attention to the presence of such participants that post exceptionally many messages to the forums: how many are these subjects and how large a share of the total number of messages do they account for? In all, the analysis of the liveliness and intensity of the discussions shed additional light on the second criterion of successful web campaigning. In order to be successful, the sites' discussion forums should engage many voters.

The second aspect focuses on such messages – original or replies – that focus negatively on the parties' candidates. In particular, we are interested in such messages that attack, ridicule or are otherwise negative toward the presidential candidate of the party providing the discussion forum. As discussed earlier, the presence of negative messages indicates that there are 'hostile' voters surfing on the websites. A large proportion of such messages suggests that the parties and their candidates do not reach the kind of voters they opt for on the web, i.e., the third criterion of successful web campaigning.

Analyzing Different Kinds of Forums

As noted above, merely one presidential candidate, the Green League's Heidi Hautala, provided a discussion forum on the web.⁵ However, during the weeks leading up to the election, the campaign was a central topic also in the unmediated discussion forums on the websites of the major parties. Thus, the data set of the analysis also includes all messages concerning the election and the campaign that were posted to the web forums of the Social Democratic

Party (SDP), The Centre Party (CP) and The National Coalition Party (NCP). The SDP's and CP's forums were free in the sense that the discussants could be totally anonymous. In order to post messages to the NCP forum, on the other hand, the debaters had to register, i.e., state their name and e-mail address to the party, before taking part in the discussion. Nevertheless, the message appearing on the billboard could be signed with a pseudonym. From a methodological point of view, this difference between the party sites is very welcome. We believe that the need to register to the NCP significantly heightens the threshold for entering the party's web discussion for other citizens than the NCP activists, members and sympathizers. Thus, the empirical data set encompasses, on the one hand, forums open for everyone (CP and SDP) and, on the other hand, a forum that, most likely, attracts mainly party aligned voters and, therefore, is more internal to its character (NCP). Hence, in the NCP forum, we expect to find far fewer messages that are negative toward the so-to-say 'own' candidate than in the forums of the other parties and of the Green League's Heidi Hautala.

Examining the Discussion Forums: Findings

The discussion in the four forums was observed during the six final weeks of the campaign (10 December 1999 – 16 January 2000). In all, 1,830 messages were found. Taking into consideration the high amount of Finnish citizens that are 'on-line', this result suggests that the forums did not successfully manage to activate the voters.⁶

In the forum provided by the candidate of the Green League, Heidi Hautala, all messages during this period were recorded. Surprisingly, only a mere 79 messages were posted to her forum. In the forums on the three parties' websites, every message that concerned the presidential election or the campaign was recorded. Here, the SDP forum had received most postings (887 messages) followed by the NCP forum (440 messages) and the CP forum

(424 messages). Thus, in message quantity, the forums on the major parties' sites outshone the forum offered by Heidi Hautala, representing a relatively small party. Noteworthy, in comparison with the other party forums, twice as many messages were posted to the SDP forum. Surprisingly, the NCP forum, that had obligatory participant registration, encompassed roughly the same amount of messages as the CP forum that did not require registration.

Before we turn to the actual number of participants in the discussions, we examine, in Table 6, the liveliness of the discussions by observing the share of reply messages in the forums.⁷

The results presented in Table 6 reveal that the liveliness of the discussions was surprisingly high in the forums of the major parties. In the Green candidate's forum, on the other hand, there was a low rate of response to the original messages.

To sum up, a relatively small amount of messages were posted to the forums during the campaign. However, apart from the forum provided on the site of the Green League's Heidi Hautala, the liveliness of the discussions was rather high. Still, we do not know if the forums gathered many different persons or if the forums were 'monopolized' by a small clique of active discussants. Table 7 sheds light on this question.

With due caution paid to some difficulties of identifying and separating different discussants⁸, Table 7 shows that relatively few citizens debated presidential election topics in the forums. The SDP forum gathered, by far, the most debaters (562). As expected, the obligatory registration in the NCP forum did heighten the voters' threshold for participation; merely 93 persons posted on average 4.73 messages to this forum. Thus, to a certain extent, the NCP's web discussion was 'monopolized' by party aligned citizens.

Before we turn to the content of the discussion, we shall pay attention to the presence of such discussants that posted numerous messages to the discussion forums. Here, we focus on persons/pseudonyms that posted more than 20 messages. In

Table 6. Original and Reply Messages Posted to the Discussion Forums (percentages)

Message	Discussion forums			
	SDP	CP	NCP	Hautala
Original	38.4	28.5	32.0	88.6
Reply	61.6	71.5	68.0	11.4
N	887	424	440	79

$\chi^2 = 108.952$ (df = 3); $p < .000$

Table 7. *The Number of Messages Posted by Different Discussants in the Forums*

Forum	Number of messages	Number of discussants	Average number of messages per discussant
SDP	887	562	1.58
CP	424	255	1.66
NCP	440	93	4.73
Hautala	79	68	1.16

the data, we tracked ten such persons. Strikingly, they posted 314 messages; i.e., 17 percent of the total data set ($N = 1,830$). Moreover, we found that these debaters posted messages to several forums. For example, one distinct pseudonym sent 18 messages to the SDP forum and 18 to the NCP forum. Thus, these findings ruin the picture of a large number of voters that discuss, on an equal basis, election concerns on the web.

Finally, concerning the content of the discussion, our interest is focused on the presence of such messages that are negative toward the candidate that is associated with the forum-providing website. Here, we found that 39.8 percent of all messages focused on the character and/or the record of the parties' candidates.⁹ In Table 8, the messages that are either negative or positive toward the candidates are categorized as either focused on the candidate associated with the forum-providing website (labelled 'own' candidate) or focused on another candidate.

In Table 8, there are two striking findings. First, the majority of the candidate-focused messages are negative. Second, a rather large share (39.3 percent) of the messages that focus on the 'own' candidate are negative as well. Thus, in the discussion forums, there is a rather large share of voters that are critical or even hostile to the candidate associated with the forum. In sum, as a tool for reaching the strategically important voters, the discussion forums do not seem to do the trick. Are there differences then between the different discussion forums as to the negativity of the candidate-focused messages? Table 9 sheds light on this question.

Disregarding the Hautala forum, where 20 of the 21 candidate-focused messages are positive toward the Green candidate, Table 9 shows that there is a reasonably large share of messages that are critical to the 'own' candidate on the party sites. In particular, the candidate of the Centre Party, Esko Aho, is heavily criticized in the party's own discus-

Table 8. *The Share of Negative and Positive Messages Focusing on Either the 'Own' Candidate or Other Candidates (percentages)*

Focus	Negative messages	Positive messages	Total
'Own' candidate	39.3	53.8	43.9
Other candidate	60.7	46.2	56.1
N	448	208	656

$\chi^2 = 12.228$ (df = 1); $p < .000$

Table 9. *Positive and Negative Candidate-Focused Messages Posted to the Party Forums (percentages)*

Messages	Forums		
	SDP	CP	NCP
Positive toward 'own' candidate	10.9	18.4	19.0
Negative toward 'own' candidate	27.3	37.6	19.0
Positive toward other candidate	16.1	13.5	14.4
Negative toward other candidate	45.7	30.5	42.8
N	341	141	153

$\chi^2 = 23.082$ (df = 6); $p < .001$

sion forum. As could be expected, the candidate-oriented messages in the NCP forum, requiring user registration, are somewhat less critical to the party's own candidate. However, despite the registration, such criticism is not totally absent in the forum; 19 percent of the messages contain negative statements of the NCP candidate.

In sum, rather few voters reach the forums. Furthermore, a noteworthy share of those voters that participate in the discussions voice a negative attitude toward the candidate associated with a forum. Hence, the party forums do not seem to serve particularly well as a tool for reaching the strategically important voters, i.e., the third criterion of successful web campaigning.

Summary and Conclusions

The empirical findings can now be summed up. In the analysis, we empirically examined three aspects of successful web campaigning: the use of interactivity; the amount of voters reached who deem the sites as important; the need to reach as many voters of the right kind as possible. The first major observation worth pointing out now is that only a very small percentage of the Finnish voters attached great importance to the campaign sites as information sources when deciding how to vote. Even among the youngest voters – ‘the wired generation’ – only few (3.9 percent) considered the websites important. Second, amongst the tiny share of the electorate that visited the campaign sites, the level of activity must be considered low. Here we would like to emphasize the fact that a very small group of on-line voters (ten persons, pseudonyms) actually accounted for a considerable part (17 percent) of the messages posted to the forums. Third, and finally, regarding the character of the messages, the most striking observation is the negative, sometimes even hostile tone shown from time to time. Naturally enough, the web forums of the parties contained messages where the candidates of opposing parties are mocked. Still, the most surprising thing is that the forums also contained a substantial share of, more or less hostile messages that zoom in on the, so-to-say, own candidate, i.e. the candidate of the party providing the forum in question.

When looking at these empirical findings in a theoretical perspective, the following conclusions seem to be essential. First, the results prove – beyond reasonable doubt – that the parties' ambition

to get wired in order to reach the strategically important voters has been a failure, at least to date. The major explanation to this might be the following: whereas voters, more or less actively, have to avoid political messages in the press, and on radio and television, the voter surfing on the net has to take active measures in order to even find the messages of the political parties and their candidates. On a theoretical level, this statement underpins one general conclusion: the Internet does not actually constitute a form of mass communication; i.e., a channel of communication where a message, per definition, reaches a vast number of citizens.

Earlier we noted that, from the party's perspective, the partisan press and the Internet displayed, on a theoretical level, rather large similarities. At least when it comes to reaching new voters, our empirical findings indicate that these similarities exist also on the empirical level. Hence, in many ways, the Internet seems to display the same positive and negative qualities as the partisan press. Accordingly, one might argue, by turning the coin, that cyber campaigning has not managed to replace the parties need to reach voters through the free press and the television, i.e., channels to which the party's access is as low as their possibilities to exert control over the messages. Hence, regarding the electoral arena, the Internet today seems rather much to function in the same way as the partisan press of yesterday.

In order to be judged as at least partly successful the cyber campaigns should function well in the internal party arena by promoting internal party activity and party cohesion. However, the analysis of the discussion forum of the most internally oriented on-line party, the National Coalition Party, indicated that this might not be the case. Merely 93 discussants participated in the internally oriented discussion forum of the NCP. Also the surprisingly high amount of negative messages found in the forums point in a somewhat different direction. In all, these findings point to the shortcomings of cyber campaigns in promoting party cohesion.

The general conclusion of this study is that the parties – at least for now – have gained rather little from ‘getting wired’. They have not really managed to reach new voters, nor has the internal party activity or the party cohesion been promoted. In many ways the sites seem to have functioned as modern versions of the partisan press of days gone by.

Notes

1. See http://www.idea.int/voter_turnout/westeurope/finland.html>.
2. We wish to thank Mr Kim Strandberg for collecting and coding the data of the discussion forum analysis.
3. The two remaining presidential candidates, Ilkka Hakalehto and Risto Kuisma – both representing marginal parties (*The True Finns* and *The Reform Group* respectively) and scoring very low in the polls – were not included in this study. Their web campaigning efforts were very modest and their sites were rudimentary.
4. It may be worth mentioning that a worldwide survey of parties' websites, conducted by Norris (2001b), showed that Green parties in particular have utilized the new medium.
5. A special feature of Heidi Hautala's discussion forum was that she to some extent took part in the debate.
6. For the sake of comparison, we can report some figures concerning the amount of messages posted to the discussion forums provided by a major Finnish web portal offering forums, <http://www.suomi24.fi/>. During September 2001, 68,924 messages were posted to the different forums, covering a range of topics, mostly life-style oriented ones. Here, the forum for discussion on political and societal matters received merely 1,196 messages. (Figures provided by Mr Nicklas Koski, Product Manager, Scandinavia Online).
7. In such cases where an original message resulted in multiple levels of replies (i.e., the first reply is replied by another reply, that, in turn, is replied by a third reply, etc.), we decided to record only the first level of reply messages. Of course, on this first level, there may be several replies to the original message.
8. Whereas the people posting messages revealed their e-mail address and/or their full name, the separation of discussants was easy. However, when they used pseudonyms, the coder had to observe distinct pseudonyms that returned in the discussions.
9. Furthermore, 20.4 percent of the messages emphasized issues, 28.5 percent stressed campaigning matters (e.g., 'horse-race' themes) while the remaining 11.4 percent of the messages formed a residual category ($N = 1,830$).

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