How is Internet use changing the way in which politics is carried out and communicated?

TERESA TURIERA-PUIGBÒ

Journalist and political scientist. Head of webnomics content.

tereturi@hotmail.com

Abstract

The appearance of the Internet and its ever-increasing use worldwide as a tool for communication and relations between people has dramatically changed the way in which politics is communicated and "consumed". This article assesses the evolution of Internet use since its onset in terms of the political and social mobilisation it encourages and the opportunities it provides to change trends in involving civil society in active politics, especially in rising electoral participation at all levels.

Key words

Internet, Politics 2.0, e-citizens, netizens, social networks, virtual communities, political leadership, political parties, electoral participation, generation X, blogosphere, fundraising, e-volunteers

Resum

L'aparició d'Internet i l'ús cada vegada més extens de la xarxa com a eina i via de comunicació i de relació entre els ciutadans han canviat dràsticament els formats de comunicació i de "consum" de la política. Aquest article analitza l'evolució de l'ús de la xarxa des dels seus inicis, en termes de mobilització política i social, i les oportunitats que representa per canviar de tendència en la implicació de la societat civil en la política activa, i especialment en un augment de la participació electoral en tots els àmbits.

Paraules clau

Internet, política 2.0, e-ciutadans, netizens, xarxes socials, comunitats virtuals, lideratge polític, partits, participació electoral, generació X, blocosfera, fund-raising, e-voluntaris

Introduction

Political activity has evolved over the last 150 years basically in terms of three factors: forms of participation (from limited voting to universal suffrage), the quantity and variety of consultations and the progressive sophistication of the media, which has imposed a new pace and language, not only in election campaigns but in all forms of communicating political and social action and in the involvement of citizens to a greater or lesser degree in these actions.

The emergence of television in the sixties was a turning point in political campaigns, placing image at their core, and in the last few years the increasingly more widespread use of the Internet and all the applications deriving from it is starting to cause a shift not only in the form of election campaigns but also in the source of the message and how campaigns are handled and organised.

Internet has revealed new business models for companies, new ways of managing information, new formulas to relate governments and public administration with citizens and particularly new communication formats between transmitter and receiver. But it is yet to be seen whether all the possibilities offered by the Internet to obtain, debate, exchange and compare information, etc. will translate into a change in trend in involving civil society in active politics and especially in a rise in electoral participation in all spheres.

Trends in Internet use for political communication in the United States

What elements of a political campaign are losing validity or regaining importance thanks to Internet use? How is political and social activity being reinvented, as well as the communication of these actions?

The majority of examples shown in this work refer to political campaigns in the United States, the country where the Internet has become most quickly implemented among its citizens, where political marketing techniques are most developed and where the most extensive analysis has been possible of the repercussions of the Internet on the political mobilisation and participation of citizens.

Over all, the ease and speed of transmission of knowledge permitted by the Internet has spread Internet use and applications such as social networks for the political mobilisation of most countries with a minimum of infrastructures, even those where there is no full freedom of expression, as has recently been seen in countries such as China, Burma and Iran, these last mobilisations being to demand transparency in the election process. In all the cases, the key has been citizens' easy access to a large amount of information, the possibility to compare this information with many different sources and the chance to become, themselves, a means of communication and therefore to multiply as senders of the message, no longer

as passive receivers of a message constructed and controlled by established institutions.

History of Internet use in North American politics

- **1992** First campaign via email (Jerry Brown, Democrat primaries in California).
- **1993** First institutional website for a senator (Ted Kennedy).
- **1994** First debate between political candidates on an Internet chat (Minnesota).
- **1996** PoliticsOnline[1] is set up, the first political portal that collates information and allows simple comparisons between the proposals and campaigns of all candidates and parties. The Internet is truly beginning to be used in political campaigns: all candidates or parties now have their own website, although aesthetically these are not adapted to be read on screen.
- **1997** First political banner (Ted Mondale, Democrat primaries for Minnesota).
- **1998** First truly interactive website: a political outsider, boxer and candidate for governor of Minnesota, Jesse Ventura, with few economic resources, sends emails to thousands of potential voters, puts the address of his website on the election bus and on the traditional campaign posters, holds a chat to debate his proposals, etc. Jesse Ventura would never have won these elections if he hadn't carried out an Internet campaign. He was starting almost from scratch and managed to build up a list of close to 3,000 emails, garnered the support of 250 volunteers for his campaign and attracted votes from 150,000 people aged between 18 and 29, the age range that most used the Internet at that time.
- Also in 1998, Ed Garvey (candidate for Wisconsin) published the list of financial contributions he received on his website, as an example of transparency,[2] and the Democrat candidate for the Senate for California sold merchandising for his campaign via the Internet for the first time, apply to an election campaign the tools used in e-commerce, which were starting to be successful at that time.
- **1999** First town hall meeting (debate in which a politician answers questions from citizens and it is shown live on television) with the president Bill Clinton via the Internet.
- **1999-2000** Political campaigns make a qualitative leap in format and content. The adult population (possible voters) with access to the Internet in the United States has gone from 26 million in 1996 to 94 million in 2000. Website design is now much more adapted to the "digital eye": highly centred on the candidate, photographs, very short headlines, repetition of the candidate's name and a very specific message on all the website's pages, eye-catching colours, etc.

The Republican candidate John McCain marked a turning point. He started with a campaign outside the establishment and, in fact, took from Jesse Ventura the idea to create a web-

site that would encourage participation. He hired a 28-year-old consultant and started up an experiment that has led to a revolution in the planning and organisation of political campaigns.[3] John McCain broke the record at that time for raising funds through the Internet. He raised half a million dollars through the Internet on a single day and 2 million dollars in one week. Moreover, the so-called webring was organised, supporting McCain, with the role of amplifying the campaign through the Internet. In all, John McCain ended up withdrawing his campaign in the primaries for the Republican Party in favour of George W. Bush. Probably, the shock effect of using the Internet at that time had come too early. Curiously, eight years later in the presidential elections of 2008, McCain lost the electoral race against the Democrat candidate, Barack Obama, who was able to take advantage of the momentum provided by the great expansion of Internet use among the population, especially among younger voters, to make them the basis of his campaign.

Also in the 2000 elections, Bill Bradley, a former professional basketball player and Democrat candidate in the presidential race for New Jersey, turned his website into the driving force of his campaign. He raised a million dollars in small donations through the Internet and introduced elements of political mobilisation, such as downloadable kits to help organise all kinds of events to support his campaign. That same year, Al Gore ran the first viral video campaign.

The elements gradually introduced by political campaigns prioritise these interactive aspects, catching the attention of voters, boosting loyalty and personalisation, attracting voters to a specific cause rather than giving a large amount of information. All the information can be found at the lower surfing levels but the "front cover" or home page, which either "hooks" visitors or makes them leave immediately, is the key page.

At present, access to email lists and user profiles has also become a strategic element. In the 2002 primaries, the secretary of state for California, Bill Jones, who was up against candidates with more economic resources, bought from a company more than a million email addresses of potential voters and sent each one an "unsolicited" email to ask for their vote. This action saved a lot of money and, at the same time, started up a debate about the privacy of email addresses for use in election campaigns, which in the last few years has been subject to stricter regulation under the data protection laws.

Elements of political campaigns that are changing with Internet use

Fundraising

In the US, where almost all the funding of candidates, political parties and organisations comes from direct fundraising, the Internet has multiplied the amount and quality of donations. The option to donate money to a cause via the Internet means that the political impact caused by a specific event on poten-

tial voters can be immediately "translated" into money. For example, a good partial election result (in the primaries), a specific media action (having successfully appeared in an interview or election debate), etc. The record achieved by John McCain on the night of the primaries in New Hampshire (2000) is seen as historic, where he had a strong political drive and, in one week, raised 2.6 million dollars from 40,000 different donations through his website. At the end of the campaign, John McCain had raised 6 million dollars through the Internet alone. The same website asked those making donations to fill in a questionnaire, based on which the following data were extracted: 40% of those donating money through the website had never made a donation to a political campaign before; the profile of donors was workers aged between 30 and 45, of a middle or high buying power, most of whom were related to the Internet industry or new technologies; they donated an average of 100 dollars, while the economic contributions (small) received up to then by traditional parties, via bank cheques, were less than 50 dollars, and the profile of those donating was mostly pensioners.

Barack Obama marked the turning point in the funding of election campaigns: he refused to use the public funds that he was legally entitled to and opted for a fundraising strategy aimed not only at large fortunes but at small donors, ending up with more than 800 million dollars, and at the same time making donors feel they were participating (involving them) in the candidate's cause, no matter how small their donation.

Transparency

In the 2000 US elections, and especially in the prior process of the primaries, one of the key issues was the reform of political party funding in the US, and this happened partly because one of the candidates, the Republican George W. Bush, published on his website the donations he had received instead of waiting for the four-monthly report by the Federal Election Commission.[4] George W. Bush not only published the contributions he received but also the names and surnames of the donors. This forced the rest of the candidates to offer the same information through their websites and has now become essential if the website in question wishes to overcome the "transparency parameters" imposed.[5]

David Weinberger, US philosopher and co-author of the Cluetrain Manifesto,[6] recently said that "transparency is the new objectivity". This reflection refers to the fact that, in the Internet era, the so widely prized "objectivity" traditionally demanded of the mass media can now be found in lots of sources. The key is for these sources to be transparent. Consequently, this source of information, be it an institutional press office or a political party or the personal blog of a candidate or political commentator, must be transparent if it wishes to be respected in the blogosphere.

Attracting volunteers and e-volunteers

If the Internet beats the rest of the media it is particularly due to its interactivity. And for political actors, this element has become the main means of attracting volunteers: involving visitors to the website in the candidate's cause, using the participation model used for some time now by NGOs. In the initial history we saw how candidates starting from scratch, like Jesse Ventura in Minnesota, managed to recruit the support of 250 volunteers through his website, or how, in 2000, John McCain created a chain of volunteers that sent emails to groups of friends or acquaintances asking for their vote, thereby multiplying his campaign. The local activist group *MoveOn.org*,[7] set up in 1998 to pressurise against Bill Clinton being tried for the Lewinski case, raised 13 million dollars and got 500,000 signatures asking for a simple email from those visiting its website. On the part of the party or candidate, the management of this process is almost automatic and without organisation costs. On the part of the person agreeing to participate, it is much more "acceptable" to send emails or to work from home surfing the Internet looking for information than to stand at an underground exit giving out leaflets with the candidate's photo.

The mobilisation of volunteers and particularly e-volunteers has been a key element in Barack's campaign, both to be appointed candidate in the primaries of the Democrat Party as well as for the long election road to the Whitehouse. Obama managed to take advantage of the emergence of social networks to plan his grassroots campaign based on a veritable "army" of volunteers who were trained, connected and whose work was managed through the Internet. The website *My.BarackObama.com*[8] was the meeting point and also the driving force that encouraged the participation of millions of volunteers from all the states, who in turn passed on Obama's message to their communities (universities, civic centres, local organisations, companies, groups of friends, etc.). The strategists for Obama's campaign not only used the available technology wisely (emails, text messages, messages on thousands of blogs, presence on all online social networks, etc.) but also, and this is the most important point, understood and accepted that these volunteers needed to be important, giving them as much margin and creative freedom as possible. Because, as pointed out by the political consultants J. Segarra and A. Terés,[9] "a 2.0 campaign isn't one that tries to persuade potential voters but one that involves them".

Political propaganda on the Internet and the cost of election campaigns

Television audiences are becoming increasingly atomised by the proliferation of channels, while the younger generations now spend more time in front of the computer connected to the Internet than in front of the TV. Those responsible for political campaigns have gradually switched their propaganda towards the Internet. With the emergence of channels such as YouTube (with a widespread viral effect) and the proliferation of video content on the Internet, political propaganda has thrown itself into the Internet.

One advantage is that Internet advertising can be intelligent: ads for certain segments (women, elderly, young people, ethnic minorities, etc.) can be aimed at groups/portals or websites that are specifically interested in such issues. The Internet has also become fertile ground because video is becoming viral and has a massive audience. However, it is much more important in a political campaign to make a video that people talk about a lot on the Internet than to place it on strategic sites so that a lot of people can see it. If the message has impact, it will end up circulating around the Internet without exception. And a prize example of this is the television channel created on Barack Obama's own website,[10] seen by an accumulated audience of 14.5 million hours up to election day. According to the calculations of Segarra and Terés, this figure equals an approximate cost of 50 million dollars in hired advertising.

The monopoly of parties as aggregators of social demands and a sounding box for public opinion

The proliferation of "windows" through which citizens can express their petitions, complaints, claims and mood on a specific issue, as well as these citizens' capacity to get mobilised, mean that parties are no longer the only reference to channel the demands of society.

Blogs of reference, social networks, virtual communities are taking over this role. In these areas, the objectivity of information is validated by the blogosphere itself. For example, if the author of a blog gives relevant, verified information in favour or against a certain political option or initiative, he or she will become influential. If the information by this author is not true or accurate enough, the same readers will make sure they discredit it and will no longer see it as an authority or influential. This same function is being taken over by groups of citizens interested in or concerned by a common cause, such as the state of the environment in a certain area or the wording of a new law on education. Communities in favour or against each of the possible options will provide information that is much more comprehensive and verified (and therefore more believable) to voters than the websites of parties, candidates or political institutions.

Will the Internet also alter the candidate profile from the one committed to the television era?

Without doubt, the physical image and communicative capacity projected by a candidate representing the people is the first element of identification, acceptance or rejection on the part of those who must vote for him or her. But in the 2.0 era (which takes into account the active involvement of all actors in all its phases), this factor will not be as relevant as in the television era. Informed citizens, and especially younger segments, used to being consulted on everything, to co-creating from the bot-

tom up, will want political representatives who, above all, practise transparency, are truly open to citizens' proposals and are efficient in managing public policies.

The North American consultant Dick Morris[11] says that, mechanically, the generation X and the millennium generation (the generations that have grown up with PlayStation and with a permanent Internet connection) no longer look to plug in a television and watch what's happening but to interact with it, be able to choose, have control. Instead of governments that observe their citizens, the process is being turned on its head.

In the 2.0 world, leadership is important but this can no longer be transmitted only with the physical image or with words but above all with actions and facts, which will be scrutinised in real time by those who have placed their trust in them.

The 2.0 reality will rewards those candidates or teams with good reflexes to interact and catalyse public opinion and transform it into political action and will impose practices such as open lists or dynamic election programmes that can be co-generated by the very followers of each political option and that can also be flexible and adapt in real time to new scenarios. And this option of co-generation of policy is the only thing that can turn around the high abstention rates recorded in most countries.

Internet as a means of improving or extending democracy

Kevin A. Hill and John E. Hughes say in *Cyberpolitics*[12] that "with the evolution of the media, we have increasingly more access to political information and politicians but the capacity to interact or influence politics has not grown in the same way". This capacity increases as citizens make use of the instrument of the Internet in their everyday lives, in how they relate socially and progressively also to take part in politics. The people who are taking most advantage of the Internet for political and social mobilisation are the *digital natives* - those generations that have grown and arrived at voting age living together with the Internet - but the ease of transferring knowledge of the tools of social relations on the Internet mean that a part of the previous generations are also turning to the Internet to carry out their participation in political debate.

Two hundred years ago, Thomas Jefferson formulated the concept of direct democracy in the local sphere. Distance and the limits of communication of the time made it necessary to appoint representatives to legislate and decide (vote) on behalf of citizens. The Internet is bringing us closer to direct democracy again but can it eliminate the intermediaries of politics, in the same way that it has eliminated intermediaries in selling plane tickets or stocks? Why resort to politicians as intermediaries when we know they are subject to personal and party interests? Why not have direct control of a lobbying action that specifically interests us? Can the Internet change the rules of the game? Why wait every four years to support or punish our representatives?

Without doubt, the possibility of exercising democracy more directly may attract more citizen participation. The more information citizens have, the more they wish to control the decisions taken on their behalf.

If dot.coms have shown that they can be more efficient than traditional firms (eliminating intermediaries, costs, time savings, reduction in input/output process), the Internet can also make politics more efficient (social debate, the generation and organisation of demands on the part of civil society, pressurising, managing this debate on the part of politicians, parties, administrations, etc.).

The speed of debates is much greater and dynamic. The Internet has led to a change in power relations between the transmitter (politician) and receiver (potential voter). A political party is always linked to its election programme, to its ideological line, to the agreements taken out with other parties, etc. With the Internet, we go from the unidirectional force of a transmitter to a larger capacity for diversification, for voluntary choice on the part of the receiver.

On the Internet, concerns, interests, hobbies, etc. end up becoming, quite simply, the point of connection or formation of virtual communities as aggregators of interests and very often as aggregators of emotional interests, responding to a media impact or a specific fact and no longer to a certain ideology or principles.

In 2002, Manuel Castells already talked of the *La galàxia Internet*[13] (the Internet galaxy) of a new system of social relations focusing on the individual, constructed around what might be called "tertiary relations" or "personalised communities" that survive while the interests of that community are shared. Castells defined them as "networks of sociability of variable geometry and composition, changing according to the evolution of the interests of social agents and the evolution of the network itself, something that is favoured by the crisis of patriarchy, the disintegration of the nuclear family and the crisis in political legitimacy, so much so that the growing distance between citizens and state undermines the mechanisms of representation and encourages individuals to leave the public sphere. The Internet is becoming the material support for this online individualism".

Moreover, virtual communities no longer obey a physical or geographical reality. With the Internet, borders of country/ nation/region/local causes have been overcome. Virtual communities are helping to organise and structure (might we even say *institutionalise*?) groups that, until now, could not get together as they lacked this tool that brings them closer and facilitates communication and exchange, everything that, until now, was incapable of creating a real community. In a virtual political community, interest is focused and those taking part are valued according to the contributions (intellectual, monetary, etc.) made by the members and not by their training, experience, age, place of origin because this, in a virtual community, might even be unknown.

If the Internet gives voice (at a very low price) to all those segments of society that traditionally were outside political action, this will undoubtedly revitalise citizen action-participation.

Will Internet serve to increase electoral participation?

In the US, two great electoral reforms have been passed during the last three decades: in 1971, the Twenty-Sixth Amendment was used to reduce the minimum voting age to 18; and in 1993, the Motor Voter Law simplified the progress of registering as a voter (mandatory process). Neither of these two reforms has had a great impact on electoral participation.

According to the official data gathered by the United States Elections Project,[14] the electoral documentation centre of George Mason University, participation in presidential elections in 2008 was 64.1%, the highest in the last 100 years, and in some key states, such as Florida, it even reached 72% participation.

In 2008, the highest participation figure was recorded since, in 1960, 63.1% of voters in the elections contested by John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon.

The younger electorate, traditionally the segment with the highest abstention rate in all elections (from local to presidential), picked up in participation terms in 2004 (9% more than in the 2000 elections) and 2006 (24% compared with the parliamentary elections of 2002). In 2008, initiatives such as Rock the Vote,[15] with the leadership of popular personalities from show business, were key to mobilising these younger voters (between 18 and 29 years of age). According to the report *Young Voters By the Numbers*,[16] produced in 2007 by this organisation, whose mission is to engage and build the political power of young people, in 2015 the so-called millennium generation (those who have grown up using the Internet in their everyday lives) will account for one third of the electorate of the United States.

This generation already looks for specific answers, agile and flexible in their concerns; present-day political options seem the same to them and, in any case, they do not contemplate "lifelong" membership of a certain political option. With the Internet, they can find personalised feedback for the issues that most concern them and a very wide range of options to get information and train themselves politically (much larger than that offered so far by the traditional media).

The political scientists Robert Putnam[17] says in his latest book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, that "the Internet is leading a segment of the population towards civic participation and collective commitment, young people, who traditionally didn't take any notice of politics".

This trend that we can observe in the US can be extrapolated to most countries and not only to western democratic societies. Facts such as the protests of thousands of young people after the results of the last elections in Iran, organised via the

Internet, demonstrate that governments and political parties will have to know how to channel this growing force of civic-political participation that no longer remains closed in and silent when faced with a situation they do not like but actively exchanges opinions and becomes mobilised within and outside the network.

Internet use for political and social action-interaction will undoubtedly lead to greater electoral participation (we are already seeing this in the statistics), although the big leap forward will be when governments authorise widespread e-voting and remote voting. The generation that has grown up with text messages and PlayStation as the main tools for communication and management of their everyday lives will demand, sooner rather than later, a fast, simple voting system. Technology already makes this possible. Biometric control systems, digital signatures and other measures that can guarantee security, confidentiality and reliability of the voting system are already being applied in many consultations and votes. The day these are applied on a large scale we will be talking of a big leap in the data of electoral participation, and once again it will be the younger generation that will have a new incentive to take part in a vote.

Conclusions

New technologies have brought new actors or interactors and concepts, also in political action-interaction. For the more optimistic, the Internet will have, over the next few decades, the power to correct the damage it is said television has done to politics: to recover ideas, content, debate and reduce the importance of 30-second sound bites. The Internet will involve many more citizens in the ongoing debate of social and political issues, in all areas, and not only during the weeks of election campaigning. We will probably be immersed in an ongoing election campaign on the part of candidates and political parties but not in today's sense of the term (events, declarations, gestures aimed at creating a certain image) but as an unavoidable obligation to respond and interact with the more active social groups and networks, who will be the ones who, based on the result of this interaction with the candidate or political party, end up becoming mobilised in favour of one option or another when going to vote and also mobilising broader circles of citizens.

The Internet may be the great "equaliser": reducing the power of money in politics. With television as the dominant mass media, a campaign made with a lot of money could still make all the difference: with the Internet, this no longer happens.

And, most importantly, the Internet allows for a much more direct relationship between voters and their options for political involvement: sources of information, candidates, parties, alternatives, pressure groups, etc. Informed voters become "interested" voters, who look for a precise solution for their interests and join those groups, communities and social networks that are closest to achieving a solution for these specific interests.

According to the study T*he Internet and the 2008 Election*,[18] published in June 2008 by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 46% of North Americans have used the Internet and mobile phone (basically text messages) to get information on the political debate and share their opinions with other citizens during the whole electoral cycle (primary elections and the presidential election). These same citizens have become a powerful weapon to amplify political messages they have received, among their personal, social and professional circles. 35% of North Americans have seen videos on the Internet related to the political campaign and 10% have used social networks to get involved in political activity.

The thing is, as explained by Lourdes Martín in *Marketing político*,[19] "the problem of today's democracies is that the electorate is not a homogeneous mass, not even slightly, and on many occasions political leaders target voters as if they were. In general terms, citizens do not lack an interest in politics; they are simply interested in different specific issues".

The "fifth state", the Internet, will change the world of politics as we know it today. Money will be less important, campaigns will have to be more user-friendly, interactive and also focused on providing specific solutions, in a society where catch-all parties or closed electoral lists will no longer make sense. Electoral or political participation by citizens will increase as they have more opportunities to interact.

The digital development and literacy of the whole population should be seen by political leaders as a fundamental means of recovering and increasing the debate of ideas and offering more opportunities for participation in the public sphere.

As warned by Manuel Castells in *La galàxia Internet*, "cyberspace is becoming a land under dispute, because it is a privileged instrument to act, inform, recruit, organise, dominate and counter-dominate". It is therefore a warning signal for political consultants and representatives of the people: "If you don't take care of the Internet (now with informed and increasingly more proactive citizens), the Internet will take care of you!".

Notes

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3 Election campaign of John McCain (2000):
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4 Federal Election Commission: <http://www.fec.gov>.

5 *Tray.com* (independent portal monitoring private donations to parties and candidates in the US): <http://www.tray.com>.

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