**Social media in politics: the ultimate voter engagement tool or simply an echo chamber?**

**Introduction**

Barack Obama’s US presidential campaign created a new political constituency and raised half a billion dollars online – a digital triumph which provided quite a contrast to the ‘hanging chad’ debacle of 8 years earlier. Obama’s success was also the catalyst that propelled social media onto the radar of marketers within commercial organisations keen to inject their own brands with a piece of digital magic. Although the Internet had played a minor role in the 2004 US elections, in 2008 the electorate could see an ‘unedited’ view of the candidate through video clips and interact with the campaign in real time. According to Lutz (2009) the Obama campaign produced 2000 official videos, which were viewed 80 million times on YouTube, and generated 244,000 unofficial video responses.

*“Barack Obama understood that you could use the Web to lower the cost of building a political brand, create a sense of connection and engagement, and dispense with the command and control method of governing to allow people to self-organize to do the work.” (New York Times, 9th November 2008)*

This prompted considerable speculation that the UK General Election in May 2010 would be an “internet election” if lessons could be learned from the US success, although the manual voting process itself (dating from Victorian times) is anything but digital. For example, Shirky (2010) notes how social media offer unprecedented opportunities for the collective leverage of large numbers of people in calls to action.

With the prevalent use of broadband internet by the UK public, and the growth of Web 2.0 applications that have facilitated online collaboration through social networks, video/photo sharing sites and blogs, people now have the ability to spread ideas and recommendations ever more quickly, widely and cheaply (Ferguson 2008; Jackson and Lilleker, 2009a). According to research by Experian Hitwise ([www.hitwise.co.uk](http://www.hitwise.co.uk)), in May 2010 social networks in the UK received more visits (11.88% of traffic) than search engines for the first time (11.33% of traffic). Of these visits to social sites, 55% were to Facebook, 16.5% to YouTube and 2% to Twitter. The Edelman Trust Barometer (2008) based on an international survey of online influencers found that their most trusted source of information was ‘a person like myself’. In , December 2011, the number of active Facebook users exceeded 500 million worldwide, and its recent upgrades allow any website to integrate keyword-specific comments made about it on Facebook and display them on their home page in real time. FourSquare’s location-based recommendation service, which leverages local knowledge and word of mouth, continues to grow. Taken together, these trends indicate that the power of online interaction is now being raised to a whole new level.

However, it is important to bear in mind that Nielsen’s Participation Inequality Law (2006) suggests that 90% of web users are ‘completely silent lurkers’, 9% are active commentators on the posts of others and just 1% generate their own content. This breakdown has held true in a number of more recent surveys (for example Rubicon Consulting 2008; Steffes and Burgee 2009). It serves as a reminder that because only a minority of people are active contributors, social media participation is still some way off being a mainstream online activity, although Forrester’s ongoing “technographics” research (Li and Bernoff 2009) shows increasing numbers of people in the US as active online creators, conversationalists and/or critics.

This brief introduction has highlighted the potential of social media interactions to influence the outcome of key public debates. Our objective is to assess the usage of social media for political purposes and analyse their role in shaping political debate during the UK election campaign of May 2010, with a focus on local application within two constituencies in Hampshire. Thus, our contribution is to explore the use of social media technologies in a political marketing context, something which has not previously been afforded attention in the UK at least. By focusing at a local level this study clearly lacks generalisability , but still lets us draw some tentative conclusions which can be further developed in more comprehensive future work in this field.

We begin by reviewing literature on the topic of political marketing and examine how the role of technology in the political process has changed over time. Recent developments in social technologies and the lessons from the success of Barack Obama offered an opportunity for the UK political parties to build meaningful long term relationships with supporters, and also to help address the cynicism that many segments of the population currently feel about the political process. But our data clearly indicates that the UK general election was far being from an “Internet election” and we conclude with some reflections on why this might have been the case, together with some suggested directions for future research.

**Politics and Marketing**

The link between these two domains has come about because of the need for political parties to satisfy the wants and needs of their target voter markets through the strategic marketing of their values (Baines, Harris, & Lewis, 2002). Whether the concept of political marketing is directly analogous to commercial marketing has raised some theoretical debate (O’Shaughnessy 2001; Butler and Collins 1999; Egan 1999). The term ‘political marketing’ was first coined by authors such as Kelley (1956) and Rothschild (1978), while Fletcher (1997) maintained that it is the most ancient type of marketing in existence. In fact, commentators from political science have long had an interest in marketing tools (Dean and Croft, 2001)

We assume that political marketing is just one domain of the broader marketing discipline (Lees-Marshment 2005; Newman and Sheth 1985; O’Shaughnessy 1990). The notion of a broader discipline was introduced, debated and re-debated in the 1960s and 70s by key authorial influences such as Kotler and Levy (1969), Luck (1969), Kotler (1972) and Hunt (1979, 1983). Thus there is a solid basis for examining non-commercial activities under the auspices of marketing theory (Dean and Croft, 2001). Political marketing may be defined as:

*“The study of the processes of exchanges between political entities and their environment and among themselves, with particular reference to the positioning of those entities and their communications”* (Lock and Harris, 1996, p. 28).

What is apparent from previous research in political marketing is that political parties and politicians do use marketing extensively to achieve their political goals and connect with voters but appear to borrow marketing tools and concepts in an ad hoc and instrumental fashion (Moufahim, Humphreys, Mitussis, & Fitchett, 2007). Likewise, political marketing literature has, for the most part, taken an instrumental approach to marketing phenomena by overly focusing on practical issues, at the expense of methodological or philosophical issues (Moufahim and Lim, 2009). It is the responsibility of marketers, both in practice and in theory, to develop more strategic approaches to marketing for politics (Moufahim et al. 2007; Savigny 2008; Henneberg 2008; Harris and Lock 2010). There is a real need to understand the driving forces behind voter decision-making (Dean and Croft, 2001). The political science literature offers some useful evidence in this regard. Another area to understand, based on the phenomenal success of Obama’s political marketing, is the role of modern technologies such as social media in political marketing (Harris and Lock 2010).

**Technology in Political Marketing**

According to Stanyer (2005), without information and communication technologies political parties would find it difficult to mobilise their supporters and persuade the undecided voters to support them. Earlier technologies such as radio and television rose to prominence as the broadcast nature of the medium permitted the dissemination of messages to a wide range of people, and UK election campaigns from 1997 onwards have additionally made use of databases, email, websites and text messaging. By 2005 a real awareness of why, if not an understanding of how, the Internet could be used for political marketing purposes began to grow, but telephone and direct mail were still heavily used (Savigny 2005). The Labour Party, for example, spent £501,000 to fund 800,000 pieces of direct mail in the first two months of 2005 (Barnes 2005; Britt 2005). At the beginning of the campaign, three million mail-shots were sent out along with 300,000 telephone calls to voters in targeted seats (The Times, 25 October 2004 and 6 April 2005). Thus, the real advantages of Internet technologies as we now understand them were not fully appreciated in 2005. For example, data mining, automation and personalisation were little used because the political parties still viewed the Internet as a broadcast, mass communication technology (Stanyer 2005; Jackson and Lilleker, 2009a).

Internet technologies now include communication and analytics technologies such as websites, email, social media, blogs, databases, and dashboards. Even by using these technologies at a basic level in 2005, political parties were able to identify, profile and send personalised campaign messages to individual voters (Savigny 2005). The two main parties experimented with complex databases (labour.contact and Voter Vault) to build profiles of voters, based on a wide range of demographic information (Savigny 2005; Seawright 2005). This analysis had huge potential to drive a personalised marketing communications strategy, but a lack of understanding of the interactive nature of social media severely hindered the application of this strategy (Harris and Lock 2005; Lardinois 2008; Jackson and Lilleker, 2009a). It is true that Labour and the Conservative Party did blog but compared to the US campaign by Howard Dean in 2004, the UK lagged well behind (O’Shaughnessy 2005).

In fact, the USA has long been a ‘pace-setter’ in the use of technology for campaign purposes (Mancini and Swanson 1996). In the 2004 US state and presidential elections, at least 400 million dollars were spent on advertising (Moufahim et al. 2007). More significantly, in 2004 Howard Dean led the way for the integration of Internet technologies into political marketing where his ‘Blog for America’ received 40,000 hits per day and allowed people to post whatever message they wanted. This led to there being 500,000 e-mail addresses on the Dean database by November 2003, and $5 million was raised by September 2003 (New York Times, 21st December 2003). This approach was of course taken to a new level by Barack Obama in 2007 and 2008, as we will show in a later section.

**Political Relationship Marketing**

Another definition of political marketing brings it very much in line with relationship marketing theory (Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy 2009). According to Henneberg (1996, p. 777), political marketing seeks to *“establish, maintain and enhance long-term voter relationships at a profit for society and political parties, so that the objectives of the individual political actors and organizations involved are met”*. This relationship marketing approach has shifted marketing’s emphasis away from a focus on product to a focus on relationships and the co-creation of value (Arndt 1979; Grönroos 1994a; Bolton et al. 2004; Vargo and Lusch 2004). The application of this approach to political marketing, at least in theory, has been under explored (Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy 2009; Dean and Croft, 2001). This is despite the fact that political relationship marketing has the potential to stabilise a party’s core support and reduce the number of swing voters (Scammell 1999; Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy 2009). Enacting such an approach would involve consulting voters on an ongoing basis, not just at election time, treating voters as stakeholders, and involving voters in policy and thus ‘value’ creation thereby fostering a sense of political ownership (Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy 2009; Dean and Croft, 2001).

**Technology as an Enabler of Political Relationship Marketing**

The proponents of political relationship marketing have since realised the potential of technology, specifically Internet technologies, to stimulate this strategy (Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy 2009; Stanyer 2005). Previous research has noted that the Internet is effective in developing relationships with core supporters, meaning those who are already committed (Stanyer 2005; Norris 2003; Chadwick 2005; Jackson 2004). This is because of the new forms of direct involvement and participation, intimacy and solidarity with others that Internet technologies permit (Rosenthal 2003) - features that have since been taken to a new level with social technologies such as Facebook and Twitter. However, there remains the challenge of balancing the use of online tools with offline approaches to enhance the creation of special relationships between parties, their members and their broader publics (Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy 2009; O’Malley and Tynan 2000). What is certain is that such technologies have been under-exploited in previous political marketing in the UK (Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy 2009).

Particularly against the backdrop of significant voter disengagement, the role of new technologies in engaging voters must be better understood. In 2005, turnout for the UK General Election was 61.3 per cent (Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd 2005). More than that, the Phillis Review of Government Communication in 2004 (p. 2) found a veritable *‘three-way breakdown in trust between government and politicians, the media and the general public, which has led to increasing disillusionment amongst parts of society, particularly the young and certain ethnic groups. There has been a corresponding disengagement and withdrawal from the political and democratic processes, evidenced by declining participation in local and general elections’.* Issues such as the recent expenses scandal have further disillusioned a mis-trusting public (Hencke, 2009). Another reason for alienation is the lack of coherent local political marketing campaigns (Wintour and White 2005). O’Shaughnessy (2005, p. 908) claimed that the majority of people are alienated by politics, and states; *‘in these facts lives political marketing’s opportunity’*.

According to Jackson and Lilleker (2009a), Web 2.0 demands a fundamental shift in political marketing thinking to consider participation and co-production. The range of social media tools that are encompassed in Web 2.0 are ideal tools for political relationship marketing, to encourage interaction, participation and improve the user experience (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009a). What is important to understand is that these tools are not compatible with the top-down, elite-to-mass style of political communication that is traditional of political parties (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009a).

The best way of exemplifying how Web 2.0 technologies can enable the adoption of a real relationship marketing approach is to provide a brief overview of Barack Obama’s campaign. As Moufahim and Lim (2009, p. 766) proclaim: *‘the powerful campaign that carried Barack Obama to the White House in 2009 will be remembered for its use of technologies such as Twitter, viral blogs, SMS, social networking sites, all of which were mobilised along with more traditional activist programmes such as volunteering, political advertising and so on’*.

The Obama campaign combined the online enthusiasm of Dean in 2004 with the discipline, organisation and hyper-targeting of the Bush 2004 re-election campaign. So, although the Obama campaign was revolutionary in some respects, it ultimately used the same tools that many campaigns had previously employed (Lutz 2009). However, the campaign did everything incrementally better than its competitors, including how it identified, prioritised and tracked prospective voters all the way to the polls using the campaign’s Houdini database. Specifically, Obama’s campaign started early, was built to scale, brought in the right team and channelled energy and enthusiasm into the precise activities that are needed to win a campaign – donations, organisation and getting out the vote in the specific neighbourhoods, districts and states that the campaign needed to win (Lutz 2009).

Obama’s campaign leveraged social media effectively for both fundraising and organising grass roots support. Political supporters are now active participants due to the disruptive role of technology (Bijmolt et al., 2010; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). In essence, the potential exists for a closer relationship between the candidate and its supporters (Greengard, 2009; Stirland, 2008; Bijmolt et al., 2010). Customers are participating in social networks, creating and sharing content, communicating and building relationships with each other (Gordon 2010; Libai et al. 2010). These customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions are extremely powerful marketing tools, if tapped into in the right way. Obama’s campaign integrated communications by email (13 million registrations) mobile (3 million subscribers) and social networking (5 million ‘friends’). In dealing with such large numbers, it acknowledged that only a certain percentage would be activists, others just casual supporters, and allowed for these differences in its communications. The ‘ladder of engagement’ encouraged supporters to progress from registration, to conversation, contribution and finally advocacy through familiar social channels (joining groups, text or photo posts, blogging, creating groups, video etc). In industry, firms like Blackberry and Apple have forums that proactively encourage customer involvement in every stage of the co-creation process. These customers input into the product and service quality and also become ambassadors for the firm (Hoyer et al., 2010; van Doorn et al., 2010). In Obama’s case, key activists (‘super users’) were identified and given access to tools to increase their effectiveness, for example to supporter phone numbers supplied to the main database so that personal interactions could occur. User generated content was encouraged by providing ‘how to’ guides so that people could respond to posted videos with a creation of their own – over 400,000 of these amateur videos were generated during the campaign. The story of text communication with subscribers linked to key campaign events (“be the first to hear about...”) is worth a whole paper in itself (together with an early example of iPhone application). Finally, key individuals were brought on board at an early stage to guide the implementation of the online campaign. These included such luminaries as Chris Hughes, one of the co-founders of Facebook, and Kevin Malover, a veteran of online travel agency Orbitz. Obama also drew upon the expertise of a distinguished group of advisors, including Google CEO Eric Schmidt and Craigslist founder Craig Newmark.

At a tactical level, Obama had approximately 500 million blog postings mentioning him between August and November 2008, compared to 150 million mentioning John McCain (Lardinois 2008). On My Space, Obama had 844,927 friends compared to 219,404 for McCain (Lardinois 2008). In all, Obama had twice the amount of web site traffic, four times the amount of views of YouTube, five times the amount of Facebook friends and ten times the number of online staff. He also had 13 million people on an email list who received 7,000 variations of more than 1 billion e-mails. He had 3 million online donors, who contributed 6.5 million times, 8.5 million monthly visitors to MyBarackObama.com, 2 million profiles with 400,000 blog posts, 35,000 volunteer groups that held 200,000 offline events, and 70,000 fundraising hubs that raised $30 million. Finally, Obama engaged in mobile communications, where 3 million people signed up for the text messaging program, and each received 5 to 20 messages per month (Lutz 2009).

Obama’s campaign was the first to truly understand and harness the power of sharing and communicating using social media to engage, involve and empower voters, because it enabled trust to be taken to a level rarely seen in politics For example, the campaign used its official website to enlist supporters and to share information, and it used ‘Barack’s blog’ to constantly update members on what was going on and to encourage conversation without the ‘spin’ typically associated with political campaigning. This was complemented by a constant flow of natural photographs from the campaign posted on Flickr, and videos of speeches and engagements on YouTube. On other social media like LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, BlackPlanet and Asian Avenue, the Obama campaigners constantly engaged in two-way discussions with voters (Evans 2008). To sum up, the Obama campaign used social media technology to organise supporters on a scale that would in the past have required an army of volunteers and paid organisers on the ground. Likewise, the official videos on YouTube were watched for a total of 15 million hours. To buy that amount of time on television would cost upwards on $47 million (Cain Miller 2008). For every communication and interaction with a potential voter, data was created. This data was used to drive the campaign’s strategic decision-making down to the finest detail - for every voter, every email, every dollar and every vote that was needed to win (Lutz 2009). While it can certainly be argued that the amount of exposure described above does not necessarily result in an equivalent influence on voter behaviour, the amount of money raised online does give an indication of the effectiveness of the social media interaction. The funds raised did not come from a few wealthy contributors, but were spread over 3 million people donating an average of just $10 each who were inspired to believe that change could really happen

**Challenges of New Technology**

Having examined how Obama’s campaign made use of Internet technology in political marketing, it is important to recognise the challenges inherent in such an approach and thereby provide some explanation for the slower uptake of these technologies in the UK. First of all is the understanding of Internet technologies as a totally new type of communication, rather than just a different medium for transmitting the same type of message (Gordon 2010; Libai et al. 2010). Similarly, early television programs were treated as radio shows with moving pictures; and now many politicians tend to use social media as enhanced TV or radio spots, rather than embracing their interactive nature (Brooks 2009; Hoyer et al., 2010; van Doorn et al., 2010).

There has been progress in the UK since the early uses of Internet technologies where websites resembled basic, online versions of offline campaign material. There were few interactive features and the use of email as a means of reaching voters was also limited (Stromer-Galley 2000; Stanyer 2005). In 2001, Labour sent out 32 e-bulletins during the campaign, and parties were also very slow to respond to web-based or email questions (Coleman 2001). In general, the amount of money devoted to websites was relatively small compared to expenditure on other aspects of the campaign. In 2005 the Internet was still seen as a means of one-way information provision, such as news updates and copies of recent speeches. Websites were designed to encourage visitors to sign-up for email updates and also to volunteer, but nothing like on the scale of their US counterparts (Stanyer 2005). The Labour Party was the first to move onto videos and viral games in 2005, and the Conservatives were sending 200,000 emails per month at this time. There were also 116 political marketing-type blogs active in 2005. However, there was no evidence that these communications were being targeted; that the data and analytics were driving the communication. Nor was there much evidence of the parties using email in a two-way manner to inform and empower supporters (Stanyer 2005). For example, although all three prime party websites encouraged web users to sign up for email newsletters, in the two weeks leading up to the election announcement, only the Liberal Democrats actually issued any (Harris and Lock 2005).

Another important challenge to Internet technologies is change of culture and the relinquishment of control by the political parties, where messages get transmitted virally and are vulnerable to misinterpretation and distortion (Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy 2009; Dean 2005; Freestone and McGoldrick 2007). It is clear that any move towards interactivity represents a clear shift away from a top-down model of political communication (Wright, 2008; Lilleker et al., 2010). The move would be away from PR to marketing, and to placing the customer or voter right at the top of the political party (Dean and Croft, 2001; Ferber et al., 2007). A useful example of the need to engage with voters via social media comes from the 2004 US presidential election, where a group of Republican guerrilla partisans, the “Swift Boat Veterans for Truth” claimed that John Kerry had lied about his military medals. As Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy (2009, p. 25) assert, *‘the well-bred failure of Kerry to respond to this libel left sufficient doubt in the mind of a public deaf to the delicious irony of Bush not having fought at all’*. Ultimately, it may be political parties will always seek to limit the level of interactivity online because inherently they seek to control their messages both offline and online (Tedesco, 2007).

In summary, the use of the Internet in UK politics prior to the 2010 election campaign could hardly be described as effective, despite the lessons in good practice that were already emerging from across the Atlantic. This was principally due to the continued lack of a market-orientation in UK politics (Lees-Marshment 2005).

**The Strategic Approach**

To conclude this review of political marketing literature, it is undeniable that the Internet is here to stay in political marketing and that no serious politician or political party can afford to ignore its increasingly social nature. Despite this, many politicians lack ‘savvy’ in these online marketing approaches, which leads to ineffective use that can be detrimental to the cause (Harris and Lock 2005). Recent research suggests that political marketing must be a continuous, ongoing process as part of the development of a strategic ‘value proposition’ and long-term positioning of a political party (Harris and Lock 2010). In this vein, political marketing is about much more than communications; it also includes data, analytics, insight and value-creation (Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy 2009; Harris and Lock 2010). Once again, politicians in the USA have realised the long-term, strategic nature of political marketing well before their UK counterparts, as evidenced by our discussion of the approach taken in the Obama campaign. Despite the innovations of Howard Dean back in 2004 and the success of Barack Obama in 2008, the UK political parties have to date struggled to use the immense potential of Internet technologies for political marketing purposes. Of course, the Internet is still firmly in a period of adjustment, exploration and innovation, but even back in 2005 the political parties were already well behind the curve. Internet technologies and their marketing applications have developed exponentially since then, and in the next section of the paper we examine the 2010 General Election campaign to assess whether UK politics has caught up or been left further behind since that time.

**The UK General Election of 2010**

It is impossible to do justice here to all the twists and turns of this event, but the biggest single story of the UK Election 2010 was the three leaders' debates, each aired on primetime television. Instant polling after the first event unanimously declared Nick Clegg the winner, transforming what had been widely perceived as a rather dull “two horse race” into the possibility of real change. In the second debate Clegg and Cameron came out best in the instant polls with Brown very closely behind, and Cameron was judged to be the ‘winner’ of the third event in the eyes of the watching public. Despite Clegg’s TV success, and the impressive (if somewhat belated) following that his party consequently developed online, his party ended up receiving LESS votes than it did in the previous election. The big story of election night was the shambles at polling stations as the manual voting process failed to cope with late demand and those locked out of polling stations used their phones to bring the chaotic images to the world in real time. Angry people tweeted their frustration, while others quickly sprang into action on Facebook – providing a good example of the integration of real and virtual worlds. BBC TV coverage on election night highlighted relevant tweets on a laptop screen in between carrying out interviews and more traditional analysis.The voting turned out to be inconclusive and – after much deliberation - the Liberal Democrats bizarrely found themselves as coalition partners with the Conservatives.

Table I summarises the social media channels that were used by the 3 main parties and the extent of the following that they each built up. It is not our intention here to analyse the national picture in detail – these figures provide a basic comparison only and take no account of the degree of interaction or quality of the online commentary generated. The table focuses solely on social media and does not address the bigger marketing picture of email marketing, search strategy and campaign integration.

**INSERT TABLE I HERE**

Only the Liberal Democrats took the personal approach of setting up social media accounts in Nick Clegg’s name, but even then there was limited engagement. Twitter was used only for daily diary announcements, not interaction. The Labour and Conservative contribution through social media platforms was largely confined to impersonal party accounts, missing the opportunity to draw on the leader’s individual voice for clear, personalised messaging and provide the voters with a glimpse of what goes on behind the scenes. All the parties moved very late to establish presences on YouTube and Facebook with little thought apparently given to the ongoing management of responses. For example, a video of Gordon Brown discussing immigration policy still remains prominent on YouTube at the time of writing, together with some highly inflammatory and racist comments that were clearly not screened out by any form of moderation process. The parties still spent sizeable amounts on that traditional election tool, the poster campaign - only to find that posters were swiftly amended in creative and very funny ways, and the best examples were then published in the mainstream press the following day, as well as being widely circulated online (see Figure I).

**INSERT FIGURE I HERE**

Polling of more than half a million UK Facebook users on its “Democracy UK” page the day before the election found that 42% supported the Liberal Democrats, 31% supported the Conservatives and 27% supported Labour. Nick Clegg’s high level of support on Facebook had increased from a mere 19% at the start of the campaign. Obviously, the poll represented the view of a self-selecting group of Facebook's users, and bore no resemblance whatsoever to the actual election outcome. This dichotomy led some commentators to describe online political discussions as taking place solely within a ‘Liberal Democrat echo chamber’ (private conversation, July 2010).

In general, the overall impact of digital and social media in the UK election was limited, which corroborate research by Jackson and Lilleker (2009a). Unofficial social media channels actually had most impact, and these were not under the ‘control’ of any particular party. The official party social media statistics quoted previously are dwarfed by Sarah Brown’s 1.2 million Twitter followers. Her engaging (and always a-political) messages from behind the scenes on the campaign trail were informative and helped to raise the profile of a number of charitable causes.

The “#nickcleggsfault” hashtag was a humorous but pointed response to the bias of the British press after Clegg performed so well in the first televised debate between the party leaders. The mainstream press attacked him in the lead up to the second debate with a series of spurious allegations. Supporters responded on Twitter with the #nickcleggsfault satirical meme which blamed everything on Clegg. Here are some (pre-watershed) examples:

 *Increased interest in otherwise boring election between two hopeless parties is definitely #nickcleggsfault*

*The BP Garage near my house running out of Double Decker bars. #nickcleggsfault*

 *The volcanic eruption? That was #NickCleggsFault too*

 *Third World Debt #nickcleggsfault*

 *Nick Clegg was on the grassy knoll on November 22nd 1963 #nickcleggsfault*

The speed of this response on Twitter meant that it would be nearly 24 hours before the traditional media could retaliate in print – and that was after the second televised debate had taken place. Meanwhile, #nickcleggsfault became the number one trending topic on Twitter.

However, why did social media not infiltrate the mainstream as it had in the US election? The social, economic, and political system of a nation can have a significant impact on how effectively new technology is used. Ward and Gibson (2009) note that presidential, federal systems are likely to be best suited to interactive online technologies, because multilevel government with large numbers of independent actors is likely to result in experimentation and innovation in terms of campaigning. Parliamentary systems such as the UK depend on coordination, integration and control from national headquarters (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009a). The result is that the potential of social media “*for creating loose horizontal networks have fewer affinities with this set of arrangements*” (Anstead and Chadwick, 2009, p. 63).

 Our interviewees noted that while the UK election was very “digital” in terms of opening up access to politicians and journalists in real time conversations, and in massively speeding up the news cycle, the impact on parliamentary seats won or lost was insignificant. They claimed this was because there was little evidence of attempts by any of the main parties to take a strategic approach as had been adopted in the USA, for example by identifying key supporters and building long term trusted relationships with them, or engaging in debate with sceptics. Similar conclusions were drawn by Croft (2010) in a much broader study of 2010 election results in all constituencies in Wales.

According to those responsible for Obama’s campaign (interviewed by The Guardian, 19th May) success had resulted from targeting and connecting activists online and inspiring them to work harder offline. A study by the Interactive Advertising Bureau (2010), showed that the major UK parties missed a unique opportunity to learn from the Obama campaign and win support through building online engagement and trust. Tamar went so far as to suggest that David Cameron could have achieved his goal of an overall majority had he and the party engaged more personally and comprehensively online. Their ongoing Political Search Index (PSI) series, which began in October 2009, consistently pointed out the shortcomings of the major parties’ online engagement campaigns. In an age of personalised information and influential networks, the decision by Gordon Brown and David Cameron not to engage personally via social media highlighted the lack of understanding about how many people in the UK now are finding information, sharing views and making decisions. As noted earlier, the Liberal Democrats also failed to exploit their late popularity surge after the TV debates. There was no “call to action” right after the first TV debate, no request for donations or activism to build upon the momentum and massive publicity that the debate generated. Neil Jackson, Tamar’s Search Strategy Director, commented:

*“Like the commercial sector, all parties will need to grasp the huge opportunities offered by this engagement, knowing that they have lost control of their ‘brand’ but gained a direct route to open dialogue with the people they represent.”*

The ineffective use of emerging technologies mirrors reviews of prior general elections in 2001 and 2005 (e.g. Harris and Lock 2005; Stanyer 2005; Savigny 2005). The political parties, in 2010, still appeared nervous about engaging with new technologies and fully integrating them as a centrepiece of their marketing effort. This reticence has a number of theoretical and practical implications.

In 2005, the political parties had begun to use database technologies to gather, manage and analyse data on voters (O’Shaughnessy 2005), but the lack of communications media to leverage this knowledge appeared to be a major barrier. In 2010, both the ‘back office’ database technology and ‘front office’ communication tools were available to the political parties. Moreover, they have already been used effectively for marketing purposes in commercial settings and also in a political setting by Barack Obama in 2008. However, in the UK, an intrinsic lack of understanding of the interactive nature of social media persisted, thereby preventing the political parties from leveraging the power of their data and truly engaging with the electorate (Harris and Lock 2005; Lardinois 2008). In this way, the 2010 general election was quite some way off providing an exemplar of political relationship marketing (Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy 2009). This was despite the fact that, seemingly, all the tools and enablers were in place to facilitate the political parties to build an in-depth understanding of their potential voters and to communicate with them in ways that would build loyalty, and ultimately result in votes. As Barack Obama’s campaign of 2008 illustrated, social media can be ideal enabling tools for political relationship marketing. Strategically integrated into a campaign and mixed with the power of data analytics that new technologies permit, parties can potentially build a true customer orientation, the utopia of marketing (Moufahim and Lim 2009; Lutz 2009).

**Our comparison of the approaches taken in the USA and UK election campaigns has established that a key differentiator in the success of the Obama campaign was the way in which technology was used strategically to build relationships with voters based on trust. In the next section we examine two local UK case studies where a similar relationship building approach was taken.**

**The case study method**

To help achieve our objective of assessing the impact of social media in shaping political debate during the UK election campaign, we concentrated our primary research upon two constituencies in Hampshire. Clearly, it would be beyond the scope of one paper to conduct a detailed analysis of social media across the whole country, so we decided to focus upon the activities of candidates who could be described as ‘ahead of the curve’ or ‘thought leaders’ in this field. To do this, we undertook a case study of how the Liberal Democrats used social media to support their general election campaigns in Winchester and Romsey/Southampton North. Thus, this study also draws on a mixed methods research design, where quantitative analysis is used to scope the landscape, and qualitative research is used to understand and explain (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003; Creswell and Plano Clark 2007; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007).The choice of case study drew on a purposive sampling technique (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003), where we sought out those candidates who would have the greatest potential to provide ‘best practice’ examples from their own experience of the use of social media for political marketing purposes, and also to comment from an informed standpoint on the ‘bigger picture’ issue of its comparative effectiveness in the UK and USA. There was certainly an element of convenience to the choice of interview candidates in terms of both their geographic location, willingness to provide access to data, and to be interviewed on the record for this paper, but they were also amongst the most active and enthusiastic early adopters of social media amongst candidates from all the main parties (as catalogued by [www.tweetminster.com](http://www.tweetminster.com)).

*Quantitative methods*

Analysis was undertaken of secondary data pertaining to the use of social media by a Liberal Democrat candidate, Martin Tod, and a Conservative candidate, Steve Brine, in the Winchester constituency. Specifically this comprised analysis of Twitter followers, activity (number of ‘tweets’) on Twitter, and how many expert lists that the candidates were named on. In addition a content analysis was undertaken of ‘tweet’ contents, which was subjected to both quantitative and qualitative analysis. On Facebook, data on number of friends and number of group followers was analysed. Finally, data from YouTube highlighted the number of videos uploaded, the number of channel views, and the number of subscribers. This data was analysed and charted across a 15 month period, between March 2009 and June 2010.

*Qualitative methods*

The qualitative element of this case study incorporated in-depth interviews, which are useful for providing in-depth information through probing and interpretation (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003; Patton 2002). Building on the quantitative data pertaining to the case, in-depth interviews were carried out with the two Liberal Democratic candidates, Martin Tod, the candidate for Winchester, and Sandra Gidley for Romsey and Southampton North. We adopted semi-structured interviewing, where a typical interview included prompts such as ‘what social media do you use?’, ‘how do you think social media helped your campaign?’, and ‘what were the challenges of using social media for your campaign?’ The interviews were carried out by the researchers on a face-to-face basis. This facilitated in-depth interpretation through the observation and recording of verbal and non-verbal communication (Clarke, 2001b; Parameswaran, 2001). The setting was at a venue of the respondent’s choosing, typically their office or a nearby café. The interviews each lasted 90 minutes and took place during July 2010. As a result of information which emerged during the interviews, we also subsequently spoke with two individuals (one from each constituency) who had actively engaged with the two candidates during the election campaign using social media. This provided a valuable alternative perspective on the issues discussed.

*Data Analysis*

The quantitative analysis was based on reliable secondary data provided by one of the candidates and thus analysis was quite straightforward, simply presenting the information in comparative line graphs. The qualitative data, based on our primary research, was in transcript form and was analysed using methods such as weighting the evidence, the researchers employed analytical tools such as noting word repetitions, cutting and sorting key words and phrases, searching for metaphors and analogies, and constantly comparing across cases (Becker, 1970; Patton, 2002, Peters and Wester, 2007). The findings came together to both provide an overview of the extent of social media use (quantitative data) and to provide some illumination as to its value in the local campaign (qualitative data).

Validity and reliability were ensured because the secondary data regarding social media use was obtained from a reliable source (e.g. the candidate’s web analytics) and analysed in SPSS v15. With regard to the qualitative element, measures such as prolonged engagement with the interviewees prior and post-interview, gaining feedback from interviews about issues they discussed post-interview (Guba and Lincoln 1989), weighting the evidence in the interview transcripts, and providing rich description when presenting findings, all helped to establish credibility. In addition, peer debriefing was used where both researchers were involved in data collection and analysis (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007).

**Case Study: the Liberal Democrats in Winchester and Romsey/Southampton North**

Both of the Liberal Democrat candidates chosen for their active application of social media actually lost their seats at the election, as shown in Table II. This was a familiar story around the country, although at the local council level the party actually made gains. When interviewed, the candidates each noted the influential role of tactical voting, whereby a vote for the Liberal Democrats could be regarded as ‘wasted’ because it would help the Labour party to stay in power. Given the depth of feeling against Labour, it would have been difficult for any Liberal Democrat candidate (with or without the help of social media) to succeed.

**INSERT TABLE II HERE**

In the candidate interviews, Sandra Gidley explained that the Liberal Democrats are heavily reliant on volunteers to carry out tasks at the local level, and both Winchester and Romsey have just one full time paid member of staff, while the South East region as a whole has two, and the central team based in London has ten. Martin Tod noted that the party had not used technology in any sort of strategic way, although candidates were instructed to concentrate on replying to all incoming ‘email your MP’ messages that were invited from the main party website, an adhoc activity which absorbed a significant amount of time He suggested that outbound email messages could have been generated which included links to the party’s presence on social networks or ‘forward to a friend’ requests in response to key campaign events:

*“There was not much in the way of strategic thinking, or any attempt to consolidate unexpected opportunities such as Nick’s success in the TV debates. For example, unlike the two major parties, we had no online banking infrastructure in place to collect donations over the phone, so we were not well placed to capitalise on the extra interest that the TV debates generated.”*

Whether or not to use social media as part of the campaigning ‘package’ was left to the discretion of individual parliamentary candidates. Consequently there were some individuals who used it extensively, (including our interviewees Martin and Sandra) some who made a few token gestures for promotional purposes, and some who made no effort to engage online with their constituents at all.

 Figures II-IX below compare the social networking activities of Martin Tod with his Conservative opponent in Winchester, Steve Brine. The information was recorded in a spreadsheet by Martin Tod beginning in March 2009 and updated throughout the campaign. The data was then cleaned and coded into SPSS, where descriptive analyses produced the following outputs.

**INSERT FIGURE II HERE**

**INSERT FIGURE III HERE**

**INSERT FIGURE IV HERE**

Martin Tod is ranked 6th in Twittergrader’s list of top tweeters in Winchester, and Steve Brine is ranked 24th (according to [www.twittergrader.com](http://www.twittergrader.com), June 2010). Martin was an early adopter of Twitter as a communications channel, joining in March 2007 when the service was less than a year old. Steve started using Twitter in March 2009, as shown in Figure 2. On each of the measures shown in Figures 1 - 3, Martin is a far more active user. He actively sought out appropriate local people to follow using the Twittergrader rankings. He claims to have had a number of interesting conversations with constituents online, but only a handful of these interactions actually converted sceptics into concrete supporters. Both Martin and Sandra noted that most of their online engagement tended to be with people who were *already supporters*. Martin noted that as tweeting is not yet a mainstream activity – some level of IT skill is necessary to be comfortable engaging in the space, it is currently only suited to a small percentage of voter interactions, even if the candidate himself is a competent user.

An interesting campaign which obtained some traction at the local level featured the hashtag (#) “gomartintod”. If “#gomartintod” is included within a tweet, all such comments can be collated and viewed when people are searching for that hashtag on Twitter. Martin’s supporters took photos of his campaign posters that were displayed around the town, tagged them “#gomartintod” and posted them online together with a humorous or encouraging message. The expression caught on and some people applied it to all their tweets relating to the election, as per the following examples:

*Just voted for @*[*mpntod*](http://twitter.com/mpntod) *- hope he wins it...* [*#gomartinTod*](http://twitter.com/search?q=%23gomartinTod)[*#ukvote*](http://twitter.com/search?q=%23ukvote)[*Thursday 06 May 2010 13:52:30*](http://twitter.com/ricktetstall/status/13485594916)

*Everyone I've spoken to in Winchester today has voted for @*[*mpntod*](http://twitter.com/mpntod)[*#gomartintod*](http://twitter.com/search?q=%23gomartintod)[*Thursday 06 May 2010 13:48:33*](http://twitter.com/fostermarianne/status/13485407862)

*Just voted for @*[*mpntod*](http://twitter.com/mpntod)*, very best of luck to him.* [*#gomartintod*](http://twitter.com/search?q=%23gomartintod)[*Thursday 06 May 2010 10:20:22*](http://twitter.com/RetroWeezer/status/13477655609)

[*#gomartintod*](http://twitter.com/search?q=%23gomartintod) *will be voting for @*[*mpntod*](http://twitter.com/mpntod)*, best guy for the job, a vote well spent!* [*Thursday 06 May 2010 09:59:08*](http://twitter.com/Stevious42/status/13477006774)

*Time to go and give @*[*mpntod*](http://twitter.com/mpntod) *a big kiss on my ballot paper. X marks the Tod!* [*#gomartintod*](http://twitter.com/search?q=%23gomartintod)[*Thursday 06 May 2010 08:52:26*](http://twitter.com/falsepriest/status/13475113023)

*Amused by this letter in the Times. Our poster volunteers have done a great job!* [*#gomartintod*](http://twitter.com/search?q=%23gomartintod)[*http://bit.ly/9aCRt9*](http://bit.ly/9aCRt9)[*Tuesday 04 May 2010 12:48:47*](http://twitter.com/mpntod/status/13360512277)

Once again, although such messages were circulated amongst Martin’s supporters, they would have meant little to anyone who had not been exposed to the original poster/photo campaign, so they received little traction beyond the key supporter boundaries.

Table III categorises the various ways in which Sandra and Martin used Twitter during the campaign, together with some specific sample messages and commentary from the interviews.

**INSERT TABLE III HERE**

Both Sandra and Martin have continued to actively engage on Twitter since their election defeats, maintaining a dialogue on local issues as well as commenting on significant developments on the national stage, such as the coalition government’s ‘Big Society’ idea. Sandra noted how different the post-election online environment is from the manic activity of the campaigning weeks:

*“Of course the dynamic is now totally transformed – I have more time to contribute and reflect on the events of this spring, and as an ’informed outsider’ I now have a totally different perspective.”*

**INSERT FIGURE V HERE**

**INSERT FIGURE VI HERE**

As with Twitter, Martin’s activity on Facebook has been the most productive. He explained that he found it particularly useful for recruiting student volunteers. The use of a Fan page allowed him to reach beyond his immediate circle of contacts, whilst retaining a focus on local issues. There was, for example, a successful campaign run from Facebook to increase the number of late night buses in the city:

*“After visiting the university and talking directly with the students and then helping to deal with issues such as the buses which directly affected them, I was pleased that a number of students joined the Facebook group and some later committed to help with leaflet drops in the run up to the election”.*

**INSERT FIGURE VII HERE**

**INSERT FIGURE VIII HERE**

**INSERT FIGURE IX HERE**

Video is the one social medium that Steve has been more productive in than Martin has. He has 42 short, professionally produced videos on the [www.stevebrine.tv](http://www.stevebrine.tv) site, which include endorsements from such luminaries as David Cameron and William Hague. Viewing numbers are low, however, and there are very few comments. In the one case where a constituent had requested that a particular traffic blackspot be sorted out, no response has been made. Martin has produced a smaller number of videos , often taken by himself on his BlackBerry, which clearly illustrates the discrepancy in the extent of financial resources available to the two parties. However, more people have subscribed to his channel, and responses have been made to the few comments made by viewers.

Martin noted that one way in which social media were particularly helpful to the local campaigns was in respect of internal party organisation. Google docs and Google calendar were invaluable free administrative resources that allowed data to be quickly and easily updated and shared by the team, and online location-based resources such as [www.flocktogether.org.uk](http://www.flocktogether.org.uk) allowed information about upcoming events to be mapped and shared on a postcode-specific basis:

*“For me personally, social media tools allowed me to manage and track my own campaigning efforts, and to help organise the activities of our group of volunteers with basic but essential tasks such as leaflet drops.”*

**Discussion**

 Based on the range of findings presented, which include excerpts from the candidates’ Twitter accounts, direct interview quotes from the candidates and a descriptive analysis of their general social media use, it is possible to infer some of the opportunities and threats inherent in the use of social media with respect to this particular political marketing case study. What is certain, is that the candidates were very aware of the need to engage in marketing to and with their constituents, even customers (Lock and Harris 1996; Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy 2009). This case study also provides some evidence that technology use in UK politics has evolved since the previous General Election in 2005, where the interactive aspect of the Internet was less well understood (Harris and Lock 2005; Lardinois 2008).

*Effective use of social media*

The case study focused on two candidates who were particularly proactive users of social media in political marketing. Thus, the findings reported a number of benefits of social media use. Both candidates noted that Twitter was the most useful tool and appeared to enable a level of political relationship marketing (Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy 2009; Stanyer 2005). This was achieved through sharing of real-time information and engaging in conversation (Rosenthal 2003). Thus, Twitter facilitated relationship building between the candidates and their constituents (O’Malley and Tynan 2000). Our interviewees emphasised that they were able to provide commentary and analysis on relevant issues and get that information out quickly to constituents, although they also pointed out that it was a time-consuming activity. Twitter also allowed the candidates to engage their constituents and ‘call them to action’ at local events. Obama’s campaign of 2008 was particularly strong in this respect, using a ‘ladder of engagement’ to progress supporters from passive to active (Brooks 2009; Evans 2008). However, Obama’s strategic approach to relationship building was centralised and directed from the top, not unsupported and left to the initiative of individual candidates as our candidates claimed was the case in the UK.

Another strength of Twitter appeared to be its ability to link online and offline. We observed that at a local level activists were good at using photographs and ‘hashtags’ to bring offline events to the attention of a wider online platform. This is an absolutely vital element of any political relationship marketing strategy, and again is something that the Obama campaign effectively took to another level by linking all communication media under one overarching strategy (Lutz 2009).

In many respects social media discussions made the next day’s mainstream press headlines look dated as soon as they were published. Twitter suits fast-breaking news snaps and statistics and we observed how well it worked on results night. At no previous election could the voters have observed their candidate tweeting commentary as the votes were counted, corresponded with them directly in real time, and also received a response back:

*“No telly at my count. Heard about Gedling and edgbaston though. Get in vernon.” (@tom\_watson, 3.20am 7/5)*

*“@*[*jaggeree*](http://twitter.com/jaggeree) *Thanks my friend. Been a grueling 48 hours.” (@tom\_watson, 8.28am 7/5)*

*“Huge thank you to everyone who supported me. Sorry we couldn't pull it off” (@mpntod 6.26am 7/5)*

 Other social media tools appeared to have less significance for our candidates, although both interviewees noted that Facebook was useful for recruiting students and conveying awareness of local successes to a broader audience. However, both candidates confirmed that the vast majority of their online interactions were with people who were already supporters. YouTube also tended to be more useful when ‘brand’ recognition was already high, again permitting extra engagement with people who were already supporters. However, our candidates did show that some interaction was possible in this medium, thus the possibility for relationship marketing does exist (Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy 2009; O’Malley and Tynan 2000). This may be a key finding and one worth further exploration in future research (Stanyer 2005; Chadwick 2005).

 A final positive emanating from the use of social media in this case study was that it enabled more effective *internal* information-sharing and collaboration between local party members. This is an interesting finding, where previous research on political relationship marketing has focused on relationships with the ‘end customer’ rather than among party employees (Harris and Lock 2010; Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy 2009). Another key benefit reported by our interviewees was that social media enabled the local party to better monitor performance and track resources, thus suggesting that social media can improve the efficiency, as well as the effectiveness, of political marketing.

As our example constituencies showed, at the local level social media played a role in lots of small ways, through using Facebook to get more young people to register to vote, or Twitter to organise canvassing. Even in the case of our two committed early adopter candidates, social media was never significant enough to dictate the agenda, but both of them clearly demonstrated how it became integrated with everyday business, augmenting and complementing other media and existing practices.

*Areas for improvement*

The first and foremost issue noted by our interviewees was the lack of a broader strategy behind the use of social media in the General Election, which corroborates previous research (e.g. Moufahim et al. 2007; Moufahim and Lim 2009). The overarching policy from the top was that candidates should respond to emails sent to them via the party’s central website; everything else was discretionary. This resulted in very inconsistent social media use within the wider political party which reflect the findings of previous technology use in political marketing (Harris and Lock, 2005). As Jackson and Lilleker (2009a) state, what political parties are looking for in adopting social media is unclear. For our candidates, the consequence of the emphasis on email response was a general lack of time and resources for social media marketing, where volunteers were often charged with this area and thus the power of the technology to enable relationship marketing severely under-exploited (Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy 2009; Moufahim and Lim 2009). Specifically, our interviewees claimed that the party as a whole did not have the resource capability to capitalise on unexpected opportunities, an area in which the Obama campaign proved so successful (Lutz 2009). For example, one of our interviewees noted that online banking was not properly set up to receive donations, something that was absolutely crucial to fundraising in Obama’s campaign (Lardinois 2008). For our candidates who proactively used social media in their campaign, there were also specific weaknesses of the tools. We showed in the previous section how followers on Twitter tended to already be supporters, rendering it more useful as tool to cultivate loyalty rather than attract new ‘customers’ (Stanyer 2005; Chadwick 2005).

Finally, despite the obvious potential of social technologies, it cannot be assumed that people actually want to engage with their MP online (Lilleker et al., 2010). Many people want only selected trusted brands in their social networks, especially given that any interactions they have with those entities will also be visible to their friends:

“*To be honest I don't really trust our current politicians and the last thing I want is for them to be in my online social circles trying to justify their manifestos and ultimately lie to me.” (comment on Twitter, 15/4/10 16.32)*

Even if someone does sign up to a political support group it does not indicate that they will actually vote for that party. In fact, previous research has found limited evidence to suggest that Internet tools encouraged floating voters or disengaged voter segments to become more interested in politics or elections (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009a). As is well known with respect to the organic food debate, often people’s intentions and actions can be very different (see Peattie and Crane, 2005)

The conclusion from this exploratory study is that many challenges still exist in matching new technologies with political marketing, just as they have done in the past. Our study examined best practice in the form of a case study, but wider use of social media in the election did not reach these levels. The reasons for this may be found in the literature, where in business the temptation is to view social media as new forms of an old channel, using them as broadcast, one-way media (Brooks 2009). If political parties adopted this position, using social media has the potential to harm the campaign more than if it had not been used at all. Another challenge linked to this is perhaps that parties continue to fear the lack of control and probing transparency that truly engaging with social media involves (Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy 2007; Freestone and McGoldrick 2007). Finally, it is clear that the parties did not take social media or a relationship marketing strategy as seriously as they might have done. Simply using these tools because they are novel will not reap any benefits (Foot & Schneider, 2002). In this way, they failed to reap much success and may be dissuaded from doing so in the future. The irony of this situation is that until the parties make a conscious and strategic investment in technologies as an enabler of a relationship marketing strategy, any other piecemeal efforts are more likely to detract from rather than facilitate the parties’ campaigns (Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy 2009; Harris and Lock 2010; Jackson and Lilleker, 2009a; O’Reilly, 2005).

As has been frequently observed in the business world, the danger with these weak points of social media use is that they can be more detrimental than no social media use at all (Harris and Lock 2010). Some candidates actually damaged their brands through misuse of social media tools. For example, Stuart Maclennan, the Labour candidate for Moray in Scotland, was sacked in April for a series of inappropriate tweets that were highly critical of both his prospective constituency and his bosses. One message actually read: “*Iain Dale (Tory blogger) reckons the biggest gaffes will likely be made by candidates on Twitter - what are the odds it'll be me?".* Others used the twitterstream simply for a series of PR messages and did not respond to any posted queries.

**Conclusion**

This paper, by focusing on the use of social media in political marketing, has provided useful insights into its positive use and areas for improvement, particularly around political relationship marketing. Indeed, in the wider marketing literature there is much debate on the role of social media in relationship marketing (e.g. Bijmolt et al., 2010; Libai et al., 2010; Schau et al., 2009; Van Bruggen et al., 2010). Thus, the contribution of this study is to open up this new research direction in political marketing, an area which has the potential to grow in importance. Specifically, this paper examined the uses of social media in two local political campaigns for the 2010 UK General Election. Thus, the principal limitation of the study is its lack of generalisability. However, the use of new technologies such as social media for marketing is growing exponentially in the commercial setting, and because Barack Obama successfully used them for his campaign in 2008, the potential of social media for political marketing is clear.

We propose that the UK general election was far being from an “Internet election”. There was little evidence of the methodical and integrated approach to online and offline engagement demonstrated by the Obama campaign. By comparison with previous UK election campaigns, however, it is clear that online communications have progressed some way up the food chain, albeit still with significant room for improvement going forward. Our case study suggests that, as in the business world, social media communications can add significant value internally and at the local level when implemented as part of a systematic and long term online and offline relationship building strategy, but are not well suited to short term applications intended to influence the outcome of particular campaigns.

Future research should examine politicians’ use of social media across a broader range of constituencies, and track its ongoing use post-election, as the field is developing so quickly. For example, we are currently at a point where we have lots of content and data-driven services on the web, but we don't yet have a reliableway of linking that data. By the next election there could be a public-facing ‘one stop shop’ for politics, which aggregates content around candidates, constituencies and parties, and posing new marketing challenges. Also, it is ironic to observe that social media is now being used against Obama in the USA, as his opponents learn the lessons from his success and apply them to diminish his accumulated social capital. Finally, as Charles Leadbeater notes, the possible implications of technological developments extend way beyond the marketing arena:

*“As more mainstream politicians take to the web, with their carefully calculated YouTube channels and social-network profiles, so they could diminish its radical potential. The web could become a tool for politics as usual. And even if the web does not benefit the old elite it could well create a new elite to take its place, the technorati who are adept at using the web for political purposes”* (Leadbeater, 2009).

**References – note to self - cross check as osme refs have been deleted from main body**

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