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Will joke, won’t vote: the internet and political engagement

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For two decades researchers and media pundits have discussed whether the internet is helping political parties and candidates extend their support base and mobilise citizens during election campaigns. On the whole, media pundits have tended to make excited pronouncements about the ‘YouTube election’ or the ‘Twitter election’, while the academic community has spoiled the fun by pouring cold water on the idea that the internet has (as yet) had a decisive effect on the democratic process. A key reason for scepticism has been the discovery that those who use the internet to participate in, or learn about, politics are mostly already political enthusiasts. Internet politics therefore tend to reflect the political inequalities which exist offline: in both spheres rich, white, middle-class, male university graduates are heavily over-represented.

This story of an internet revolution which, despite all the hype, has no impact at the ballot box, rests on a distinction between those who are inside the political process (on and offline) and those who are
excluded. The former are motivated individuals who access information about the election, discuss it with their friends and family and might even help parties by donating money or volunteering. Most of these activities can be conducted either online or offline and engaged individuals will use whichever types are more convenient and accessible to them. In other words, the internet doesn’t change what they do, just how they do it. Outsiders, by contrast, have little interest in politics or the electoral process. They feel no strong attachment to any political party, tend to mistrust politicians and don’t have much confidence in the utility or effectiveness of political engagement. Most citizens in this group don’t vote, and political activity on the internet won’t change this as people have a great deal of control over what they consume on the internet. Those who find politics dull and alienating won’t voluntarily consume political web material.

However, in recent years, a key finding from the latest studies of online campaigns in several democratic contexts, including the United Kingdom, suggests the emergence of a third category of person: the ‘e-expressives’. These people share political opinions and election related material with others online, often commenting on the events of the day or even generating new material themselves. Today, during any election campaign the web sees an outburst of user-generated creativity running parallel to, and independent from, the official campaigns. Informal content produced by users such as pictures, jokes and video clips can easily be accessed and then shared to many others via social media platforms. A political statement posted on Facebook, a tweet (or retweet), a comment to a blog post, all can spur an online discussion among ‘friends’ or ‘followers’. Many of these user-generated forms of political expression end up being more successful than official party-generated output. For example, while the most popular video on the Conservatives’ YouTube channel has been seen under 200,000 times, a satirical clip uploaded during the 2010
general election campaign adapting Pulp’s classic ‘Common People’ and depicting Cameron as an out-of-touch snob trying to relate to ordinary voters has been seen more than a million times.

It could be argued that this is not really a new form of participation but simply another online adaptation of a practice that already existed, just like online petitions are the digital equivalent of hand-signed petitions. After all, discussions and joking about the latest political advert or election debate have always taken place during election campaigns in pubs and around dining tables. But what makes the e-expressive mode original is that the opinions expressed can be heard by far more people, in less time, than the gripes of the local pub bore. The jokes and snark which best catch the national mood can rapidly go viral and be seen by hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of fellow citizens within a matter of hours.

Survey data collected by YouGov during the 2010 general election indicated that about a fifth of the electorate had watched unofficial videos about the election online, posted comments about it on blogs and social media, or shared unofficial online content with their friends. What makes this particularly interesting is that those who engaged most enthusiastically in these e-expressive activities were not the usual suspects who are typically involved in traditional political activity. The systematic political inequalities between political activists and unengaged citizens seem to vanish when it comes to the e-expressives: they are young people who do not feel closer to any party or trust politicians any more than the ordinary citizen. And while they engage with the electoral campaign with great enthusiasm, this does not seem to result in a greater willingness to vote on election day. They are enthusiastic commentators on the campaign fight, but are apparently not interested in influencing the outcome.

How can this be? If someone is making the effort to engage with, and publicly comment on, the campaign, why doesn’t this process
culminate in voting? Probably the best way to understand this is to realise that the distinctions often made between political insiders and outsiders no longer make much sense. Conceptions of what it means to be a good citizen are shifting, particularly among younger generations. The e-expressives are not traditional, dutiful voters. But nor are they simply apathetic and disaffected. They prefer their politics with a small ‘p’. They enjoy expressing and sharing critical views, establishing loose and temporary connections with causes and around issues (even the electoral process if this is the topic of the day) without committing to formal groups like political parties. The digital environment appears to be an ideal platform from which to exercise this novel form of political engagement. And as this type of engagement becomes more popular, the political system faces a significant challenge. Adapting rigid political structures to accommodate this new style of citizenship will not be an easy task, particularly for mainstream political parties.

**FURTHER READING**

The first mention of an e-expressive mode of participation can be found in the studies by Eulalia Puig-i-Abril and Hernando Rojas (see, for example, *International Journal of Internet Science*, 2007, or *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2009). Rachel Gibson and Marta Cantijoch explored how different, or similar, several forms of online and offline participation are, suggesting the novel nature of the e-expressive mode (*The Journal of Politics*, 2013). For more discussion on the changing nature of political participation on the internet among young people, see the special issue of *Information, Communication & Society* entitled ‘The networked young citizen’ (2014).