

Chapter 20

Mapping Research Methodology in Online Political Communication

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ABSTRACT

The Web and the Internet in general, initially conceived as research tools, have now become a proper research subject. As has been the case for the press, the radio, and the television, Social Sciences have developed a specific interest in the effects of digital media. These themes are tackled in think tanks' reports and media studies such as consultancy and communication agencies, which are interested in defining how to use the Web as a tool for specific needs. In this context, political communication has a special interest in the Web, as a particular public space in which political actors can convey specific messages and/or act strategically for electoral purposes. As politics has consolidated its recourse to Web-based strategies, the research is aimed at understanding whether and in what direction the Web is able to change electoral choices, influence the electoral process, and contribute to selecting the leadership. However, given their relatively recent development, Internet studies have not yet consolidated shared conceptual and methodological instruments. Moreover—as recently claimed by Helen Margetts (2010)—“Political scientists have devoted rather less attention to online political activity.” This chapter is aimed at mapping the political science production in e-politics during the last ten years—starting from ISI journals—to understand if and how e-politics has been studied, and which approach and/or methodology was used, thus focusing on the empirical results and the centrality reserved to the Web research by Political Science.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last ten years, more and more attention has been focused on *being online*: university courses, theses and research projects abound in various disciplines; research committees and networks have been firmly established at all levels, new journals have been created for publishing the significant amounts of scientific output on the subject, and no conference would be complete without its panel debate on politics and the Web. Despite this flurry of activity, however, the impression is that the area still lacks proper reflection, it is too multipolar and only interests mainly the new generation of Political Science graduates. Only a few research networks exist but these are well-established with good institutional backing. They operate within the spectrum of so-called *e-issues*, from e-democracy to e-governance, from e-participation to e-government.

To see whether this “impression” was a valid observation, we decided to analyze to what extent, how and where *web-issues* featured in the important Political Science literature. In order to do this, we decided to consider ten years of publications in ISI accredited Political Science publications, to ensure we had the most selective basis possible as our starting point and to establish a sound qualitative and quantitative standard. Rather than opting for some kind of sample, which carries an obvious risk of bias, we decided to take the whole list of ISI Political Science journals at June 2010. Then we chose, as the control group, a selection of non ISI accredited international journals, in English, which deal specifically with communication and especially with political communication.

The article is divided into three sections. The first presents an overview of existing research into politics and the Web; the second looks in more detail at the approach we used, the meta-analysis which we applied at a very basic level to limit our analysis, in practice, to the research design; and in the third section we present our results.

ON-LINE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION RESEARCH: PARAMETERS OF CONCERN

The transformational power of the Web is the main focus of the scientific debate (Jones, 1999). The early idea was that the Web - being interactive, simultaneous, accessible, multimedia and decentralized etc. - could change the face of politics because it made access to the whole democratic process easier (Norris, 2000). New technologies seemed to represent the long-awaited springboard for the development of new deliberative procedures because they enabled us to overcome the barriers of time and space and democratize politics by creating a wider and more inclusive public sphere (Grossman, 1996; Poster, 1997; De Sola Pool, 1995). Or rather, multiple public spheres. From the beginning, however, practice did not correspond to theory. Emphasis was soon placed on the *effects* of the Internet rather than its actual *features*, and the deterministic paradigm of the Web as something intrinsically democratic was gradually abandoned (Lusoli, 2006).

Debate then centred on the empirical testing of two main theories. The first was the *normalization theory*, whereby the Internet produces the same *settings* as those seen outside cyberspace and therefore leads to a no-change situation. The other was the *equalization theory* which says that communication resources would be better-distributed on the Web and therefore access to the politico-electoral arena would be much more democratic. Its low cost, pervasive capacity, heavily-decentralized and pluralistic structure - as well as the absence of editorial control - makes the internet a particularly efficient means of communication, enabling even lesser-known groups to gain visibility (Bimber & Davis, 2003).

There are various studies in support of both theories, and a wealth of research literature, which started out with the basic theories then took the analysis a stage further, trying to find out what leads to these effects. Does the Web reinforce or

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