

# The Internet and the European Parliament elections: Theoretical perspectives, empirical investigations and proposals for research

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**Abstract.** This article reviews the existing literature on the study of on-line aspects of elections along three well-rehearsed theoretical frameworks: equalisation vs. normalisation, information vs. engagement, and mobilisation vs. reinforcement. It then examines the contribution of this volume to the field, first by direct reference to existing literature, then more generally, touching upon the notion of the ‘comparative’ – theoretical, geographical and empirical. I examine the contribution of the articles, considered as a collective effort, in relation to the increasing specialisation in the study of on-line aspects of elections. Then the framing of issues and the evidence presented within and across individual articles are used to assess the import of the internet for election campaigns with respect to increasing pluralism, professionalisation, and audience activity (or the lack thereof). It will be argued that this theme issue represents a first, necessary contribution towards gaining a cross-national understanding of the growing role of the internet for electoral practice. The last section further elaborates on possible future directions of online campaign studies, drawing on the study of the 2004 EP online election.

Keywords: Internet, elections, European Parliament, political communication, comparative research

## 1. Introduction

As the title suggests, this theme issue is concerned with the use of the internet during the elections for the European Parliament (EP), which took place in 25 countries in 2004. Articles in the issue present research findings from a number of European countries – France, Finland, Hungary, UK and Ireland – selected from a larger pool of 11 countries included in the overall study [28]. These countries reflect a wide range of political cultures, party systems, geographical locations, technological development, and attitudes towards the EU. Drawing on comparative feature analysis, interviews, qualitative content analysis and survey data, the articles set the study of on-line elections in ‘comparative’ perspective. Although no claim is made that such countries are representative of Europe at large, they do present a number of characteristics important across the EU that are relevant for on-line campaigns. As an increasing body of evidence has accumulated over the years with respect to the use of new media in electoral campaigns, scholars have been concerned with the import of the internet in the professionalisation, diversification and increased inclusiveness of the electoral sphere. Traditionally, such themes are integral to theories of changing political communications in advanced industrial democracies. The contributions included in this volume directly address and hopefully expand this agenda from a European, comparative perspective.

In this introduction, I will briefly review the literature on the study of online elections, along three well-rehearsed theoretical frameworks: equalisation vs. normalisation, information vs. engagement,

and mobilisation vs. reinforcement. I will examine the contribution of this issue first by reference to previous literature, then by introducing the notion of the 'comparative' – theoretical, geographical and empirical. I will review the contribution of these works collectively, as a response to the increasing specialisation in the study of on-line elections. Then I will review them individually, to shed direct light on the professionalisation of election campaigns, pluralism and audience activity in a range of countries and contexts. For the interested reader, the full argument of each article is readily available in the body of this issue. Finally, I will argue that this theme issue represents a contribution towards gaining a cross-national understanding of the growing role of the internet for electoral practice, in three interrelated ways. Firstly, it provides a critical examination of evidence about use of the internet in European elections; secondly, it makes original empirical evidence available to scholars and policymakers concerned about elections and citizen participation; and thirdly, it generates additional questions for further study.

## **2. The study of on-line aspects of elections**

Issues connected with how election campaigns are fought in cyberspace attract ever increasing scholarly attention. Back in 1999, Richard Davis noted that a range of actors, including national and local parties, interest groups, traditional and online media [39,40,47], pressure groups and educational groups [32] contribute to increasingly sophisticated online campaigns [13]. As new media interact with long-term trends of political communications [4], the innovation brought about by new media is especially evident in election campaigns. In a seminal study of online campaigns, Corrado and Firestone identified four specific functions of the new media [10]. First, new media reconnect the citizenry, as they re-establish the voter-candidate link. Second, they improve voter information, as better quality, diverse and neutral information is provided to the citizen. Third, they increase the candidates' access to the political process. The low cost of campaign-activism affords resource-poor candidates the possibility to run for elections and gain visibility. Fourth, new media expand voter alternatives and increases civic participation. More generally, it was claimed that on-line campaigns reflect the intensified professionalisation, centrifugal diversification and fragmentation of the audience associated with the 'third age of political communication' [4], as it 'has produced an even greater diversity of places to go and things to do' [38, p. 167]. The internet also contributes to an increasingly direct, segmented and interactive electoral repertoire of parties as campaign organizations. 'The third main stage of campaign professionalization can be seen to have coincided with the arrival of new telecommunications technology' [17, p. 105].

Fulfilling Corrado and Firestone's prediction, most research on on-line aspects of elections has focussed on three aspects of 'the new media age'. Firstly, the main thrust of the literature is whether the internet increases resource-poor, female, third party and challenger candidates' chances of electoral success. Early research points at 'equalisation'. Successful challengers at the 2000 US election outmanoeuvred their incumbent opponents online. Three in four 'employed a superior web strategy' and all 'provided internet users with the ability to volunteer with their campaigns on-line' [18, p. 36]. Female candidates also benefit from the total control they can exert on website presentation of their image and contents, as compared to video presentation, which 'provides an equal level on which to present the image of a political leader' [2, pp. 23–24]. However, most evidence suggests that online campaigning increasingly reflects the assets and disparities of off-line campaigning. While challengers may use the Web to subvert mass media dynamics, website adoption is also a function of campaign spending, thus favouring wealthy challengers rather than challengers in general [11]. Stromer-Galley and colleagues found that in 1998 challengers were more likely than incumbents to have campaign websites, while in the 2000 cycle the gap was almost closed, and in the case of the Senate, reversed [47]. In a range of electoral occasions,

candidates from mainstream parties outperformed 'minority' opponents and outsiders in terms of site presence and sophistication [3,13,24,35].

Second, part of the literature is concerned with the possibility of involving rather than informing citizens and voters qua interactivity [30]. New media, it is claimed, complement traditional strategies, as 'the potential added value of political Web sites is their speed and the interactiveness' [5, p. 26]. It was argued that 'as interactivity evolves, it is sure to deviate from the traditional path of campaign communication development' [24, p. 30]. Unlike traditional media, interactive campaigns are consumer-driven rather than producer-driven [26]. Internet interactivity implies the tilting of political communications from vertical to horizontal: dynamics of co-production that challenge producers' control on political messages; the release of creative energies and dissident thought; and viral mobilization, whereby citizens activate other citizens [43]. For the younger generations, the internet implies a shift from locality-based to interest-based engagement, and unlocks participation from traditional authority structures and information gatekeepers [15]. In addition, interactivity matters: it influences participants' perception of candidates as well as their levels of agreement with their policy positions [48]. Focus groups research on the 2000 US election found a broader range of advantages of internet use, including control over the experience, interaction with the campaign and a positive appreciation of 'creative elements that foster a sense of fun' [47, pp. 27–30]. On the one hand, the number of candidates offering interactivity and the range of services – e-mail feedback, online discussion boards, blogs – have expanded over time in many western democracies [1,3,24,29,51,52]. On the other hand, most analysts agree that online campaigns are not truly interactive, as website interactivity is fabricated to have the citizen-consumer on the site for as long and as frequently as possible [26]. During the 2002 US election, 'citizens' responded to the lack of interactivity and top-down nature of candidates' websites by 'forwarding campaign e-mail less often than jokes about the campaigns' [9, p. 3]. But do voters really care about interactivity? According to early evidence, voters went on-line to express opinions, to state facts about one's life and voting intentions and to post information about the candidates [25]. A Dutch survey found that campaign sites' users visited to gather information on candidates and issues, rather than to interact with the campaign [5]. This was confirmed by evidence from the 2005 election in Britain [34].

Third, non-traditional audiences can be reached through campaign websites and e-mail lists. Evidence suggests that more people can be reached on-line at every electoral turn, most of whom are however likely to vote. During the 1994 US congressional race, campaigns effectively connected with a minority of affluent, male, educated, politically sophisticated citizens using bulletin board systems. This complemented traditional strategies of political news gathering, and had a small but significant effect on the vote decision [42]. The 1996 US presidential contest was the first to attract millions of citizens looking for information on candidates and results [6]. A comparative survey of the 1998 and 2000 US elections found 'a sizeable exodus from newspapers to the internet as the primary source of election information for WWB.org [Web White Blue] users . . . a sizeable portion of the WWB.org user population have substituted the internet for newspapers as one of its two main election news sources' [32, p. 23]. While in 1998 one in five reported newspapers as the most important source and one in four chose the web, in 2000 the balance tilted the other way: 34% for the web, 11% for newspapers [31, p. 69]. In the 2000 US presidential elections, online information influenced the voting behaviour of young adults, traditionally the age group with the worst voting record [41]. In the US, the number of 'political news seeker' grew from 33 m in the 2000 election to 46 m in 2002, mainly due to the increasing sophistication of users, the spread of broadband and big news stories [9, p. 13]. In fact, political information remains harder to find online than medical and financial information [9, p. 16]. Other studies draw equally mixed conclusions on the nature of participants and the range of activities engaged in. Drawing on a survey of campaign

site visitors, Boogers and Voerman found that the less engaged in politics are less attracted to campaign websites, although 'political Web sites are successful in reaching young people, a group which is usually less politically active but which uses the internet more intensively' [5, p. 17].

### 3. Framing new media in the 2004 EP elections

Unsurprisingly, therefore, it appears that long standing debates have been well rehearsed concerning the potential of the internet to increasing professionalisation, pluralism and ultimately citizen involvement. With respect to pluralism, the debate concerns familiar equalisation vs. normalisation theses. Concerning professionalisation, it is mainly the capacity of the internet to engage interactively that is under scrutiny. Finally, regarding the role of the audience, the 'mobilisation' and 'reinforcement' scenarios frame most of the literature. It is equally evident that most empirical evidence originates in the US and other Anglo-Saxon countries. Therefore, although some works go to a great length in placing on-line aspects of elections in historical, theoretical and geographical context [20,23], none have relied on systematic, comparative evidence to substantiate their claims. The increased specialisation of the study of on-line campaigns in these three areas has implied a narrowing in analytical scope: geographical (limited to one or maximum two countries), empirical (looking at separate categories of website electoral producers and consumers, mostly parties and candidates) and theoretical (focussing mostly on the production rather than consumption of electoral contents). Very often the role of NGOs, governments and the media has been neglected, as most scholarly attention has focused on political parties and party candidates, predominantly in Anglo-Saxon countries (e.g. [11,19,22,29,44]). Even intuitively, however, one would expect some variation in the extent and style of online campaigns across nations. One may expect different stakeholders in different countries to be unequally active online, in qualitatively different ways. Related to the first two points, such strategies, enacted by different players using different media, may have different consequences for the consumption of the electoral message, and possibly for the voting act.

This theme issue is a first attempt to expand the focus of the study of on-line aspects of elections, in all these three respects, based on the comparative study of the 2004 EP elections. Part of the Internet & Elections Project [<http://oase.uci.kun.nl/~jankow/elections/>], researchers from 11 EU countries, old and new, examine the online structure of political communications, the amount and nature of electoral information supplied, and the engagement opportunities provided through the internet by different political actors during the EP election campaign. Contributors examine the internet strategies of a wide range of players – candidates, citizens, parties, government, pressure groups and the media. Theoretical linkage is provided by the concepts of 'electoral websphere' and 'on-line structure for political action', introduced by Foot and Schneider [43] and referenced now in a range of studies. According to the former, a hyperlinked, shared semantic space exists on the internet during elections that is concerned with the communication of the election campaign. This 'electoral websphere' encompasses the websites and website-induced information and engagement opportunities offered online by a range of traditional and new purveyors of electoral information. This structure of political opportunity constitutes the modern day equivalent of traditional campaign machinery such as the campaign office, the newsagent, the square corner soap box, electoral buses and registration drives, street stalls and TV broadcasts. This is available through a single medium, 24/7 to an increasing number of European citizens who access the internet. As such, the electoral websphere provides the government, political parties and other organizations and citizens with a space and tool for the enactment of the EP election. The articles treat this statement as an

empirical question, and address issues of pluralisation, increased professionalisation and the role of the audience based on EP 2004 evidence.

As a method then, the 'comparative' is integral to this theme issue. A common feature analysis methodology is employed by most articles for the assessment of the online campaign [45]. This is based on the identification, sampling and coding of campaign websites' features through agreed protocols and routines. In addition to this common framework, individual studies employ qualitative and quantitative content analysis of websites, interviews with website producers and use secondary data sources to assist statistical analysis. In addition, contributors carry out content analysis of traditional media coverage, they utilize EuroBarometer data and other original micro data to investigate EU citizen use of the internet during the election. Original studies of media campaign coverage of the EP election and of the context of election campaigns in a range of countries provide additional insights. The 'comparative' is directly address in a number of contributions [7,14,28,33], and is manifest throughout the other articles.

Finally, the question is often asked: 'why study EP elections?'. Traditionally, such elections have been associated with low turnout rates, sparse media coverage, and low-intensity political campaigning [27, 36]. However, in 2004 the 'why' question found an unusually natural answer, as the election was a significant moment in the EU timeline. It marked the enlargement of the EU to include ten additional member states, mostly among Eastern European countries, shortly after the introduction of a common currency in the EU 12. Elections took place in 25 countries, involving more than 350 million people in the election of 732 European legislators. They narrowly preceded the agreement of the European Constitutional Treaty, which was then followed by significant controversy during the ratification process (or lack thereof). The expectation might have been that such circumstances would interrupt the vicious-circular dynamics of second-order EP elections. As it turned out, average interest and voting declined in the enlarged Union. The overall average of voter turnout fell below the 50% level for the first time in the history of EP elections. Less than 30% of eligible voters in five of the new member states cast ballots. Several older member states had turnouts of around 40%. However, citizen engagement increased in counties where parties and governments were more active in reaching out to public opinion. Furthermore, data suggests, more activity occurred in those countries where internet penetration is higher [16]. In the context of EP elections, the internet may, or may not, have been conducive to increased media efficacy, elite responsiveness, and ultimately citizen engagement.

#### **4. Themes from the 2004 EP election**

First, how did a range of political actors – national and regional governments, print and broadcast media, political parties and candidates, and agents of civil society – employ the internet during the course of the EP election campaign? What institutional conditions – political culture, institutional settings, and electoral rules – influenced deployment of the internet during the EP election campaign? Overwhelmingly two traditional mediators, political parties and candidates, constitute the backbone of the electoral websphere, by providing electoral information and engagement opportunities far in excess of any other actors, including the media and governments. Political parties are dominant in a range of countries [12], as they offer a particular perspective on European news, issues and events, suggesting whether and why discrete issues broadly concerning Europe are (or should be) socially and politically relevant [49]. To a lesser extent, they also offer in-depth information on campaigns, voting procedures and the campaign itself. In some countries, however, such as Finland and the Netherlands, individual candidates' campaigns are more prominent. In such countries, candidates seem to think that the web is an unavoidable necessity, and tailor their online behaviour accordingly [7,12]. However, not all

candidates are equally aware of this opportunity, as internet adopters are younger (as in Luxembourg) and stand for main parties rather than smaller parties (as in Finland). This is consistent with existing 'normalisation' evidence. In addition, there is some evidence that electoral rules and practices matters, as in countries where it was possible to vote for one candidate vis-à-vis a party list, as in Finland, Ireland and the Netherlands more candidates had campaign websites [7]. On the other hand, however, the articles strongly point to the deafening silence of NGOs, trade unions and lay citizens in the construction of the electoral websphere. Some organisations have little incentive in mobilising their supporters for the election, or they may be more oriented towards civil society and the labour world more generally. Thus their lack of on-line engagement is striking. The same goes for citizens, who have an increasingly visible on-line presence through blogging. These results contradict one of the main tenets of increased pluralisation qua new media: the very idea that the internet lowers the barrier to access and grants non-conventional actors greater access to the electoral circuit.

Concerning the media and governments, mixed conclusions can be drawn. Overall, media and government websites were not very active in the coverage of the procedural and substantive aspects of the election, in most of the countries covered in this theme issue. The 'public' side of elections may thus be shrinking on the internet, as well as on television [14], as both politicians and the media do not get the message across. Despite limited innovation, as candidate selectors appeared in a number of countries on new and traditional media websites, and that a significant proportion of electoral websites were produced by government institutions in some countries (Slovenia, Hungary [12] and Ireland), the on-line coverage was scanty. While one may expect increasing patterns of media specialisation, determined partly by the advertising logic and partly, some authors note, by competing news stories, the sheer lack of internet coverage of the elections by most European governments is striking. However, very pragmatically, such behaviour may not be misguided, as once again those who access the internet for political information are the minority of the already well connected [7]. It is therefore not surprising that across the board, at the aggregate level, more electoral information is supplied on-line in large countries with higher levels of political activism [28].

Second: what is the added involvement value, if any, of the Internet? Is there a clear trend of professionalisation in most countries, or is the internet still used a cyber-brochure? In what ways and to what extent do online structures enable political action across different political systems? Again, the contributions offer mixed evidence. Consistently with the existing evidence, most accounts agree that, on average, campaign interactivity and involvement are still superficial or occasional on most producers' websites in most countries. People could 'engage' with an increasing range of contents online, but were offered very little chance to talk back to the campaigns, be involved in campaign activities and overall spread the word about the election. While the interested reader can consult the articles in this issue to substantiate this statement in specific contexts, or the overview provided by Jankowski and colleagues [28], which examines engagement features in eleven countries, a number of wider trends are worth noting here.

In terms of professionalisation, ample evidence is provided that parties and candidates did a more professional job of providing information and engagement features, interactivity, involvement, as well as graphically and architecturally appealing websites. Other non-traditional mediators were outplayed by parties and candidates in most respects. In the case of youth websites, for instance, the offer ranged from the high-tech, feature-rich websites of the main political parties to the cheaply designed, barely-maintained Web presence of other, less financially endowed organisations. This may be due to the economy of scale benefits of template sites for local parties and candidates. Indeed, candidate templates are increasingly common in most countries, such as in the Czech Republic, the Netherlands

and Finland [50], thus confirming trends in other European countries. On the other hand, however, in countries such as Hungary and France, the internet allowed for a more direct, less interpretive reporting of European issues through the campaign websites of political parties and the online media [14,49]. The internet, one may argue, has a clear potential to structure, clarify the political debate. For instance, Ward reports that the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) provided an on-line tool that allowed for the comparison of positions, a clear example of an action designed to afford young people with clear, comparable information, and an illustration of how material can be made available both online and offline. Similar candidate selectors were also very common in Finland, where they attracted large number of users, and in Hungary. Structuration is not limited to information, but clearly extends to the framing of issues. As a counterpoint to the perceived Americanisation of election campaigns, one should perhaps think of nationalisation vs. Europeanization of political communications. Evidence, albeit inconclusive, suggests that there is a tension in the coverage of European issues on electoral websites, intertwined with the discussion of national interest in both older [49] and newer member states [12]. However, it is parties and the media who lead in this respect. The limited uptake of the internet as a campaign tool by civil society, reported in the UK and Ireland by Ward [50], in France by Van Os [49] and in Hungary by Dányi and Galács [12] may be seen as a sign of limited cognitive engagement with the EU in general, or more specifically as a reflection of the limited stakes in this particular election.

In addition, such structure for cognitive engagement is not equally distributed across Europe. It is revealing to compare the internet with television, the most important source of electoral information for EU citizens. While the election received more coverage by television broadcasters in smaller countries and in new member states [14], perhaps reflecting the enlargement novelty, quite the opposite was true for internet coverage of elections: more on-line engagement opportunities were available in larger, more affluent countries where citizens participate in politics to a greater degree [28]. Strikingly, general electoral information is segmented along a north-south line of demarcation, rather than an east-west divide. Contrary to previous evidence on the digital divide in Europe [37], southern countries provided more electoral information on-line than northern countries. While 'information' may fit a pattern of 'mobilisation', it is definitely 'reinforcement' as concerns the most interactive opportunities offered by the internet.

Third, and related to the latter point, who took advantage of the limited opportunities for political information and engagement available on-line? What are the consequences of the online campaign in terms of voter information and preferences, in the countries considered? In line with previous studies, younger male voters, with higher formal education [33], and those who live in urban or semi-urban milieus [7] used the internet as a source of electoral information. Other more specialised sources of information, such as candidate selectors, attract a similar though slightly older segment of the population (35–49 years). Interestingly, those internet users who accessed online election information relied less on newspapers than those who did not (and of course more than non users), but equally on television. By far, television still remains the main source of EP election information in most countries [14]. Considerations valid for European television that national broadcasters provide an information edge to the politically interested but also an informational lifeline for the disconnected hold only partially for the internet. Consistent with previous evidence, contributors agree that the internet is a complementary tool for the already engaged. Whilst even during low-key elections TV remains the staple of most Europeans media diet, the internet perhaps requires a bit of drama to get going. In line with previous studies, it is suggested here that the new media are a higher-intensity tool, apt to sustain momentum rather than to generate it. The internet has yet to enter the European popular consciousness as a political conduit. There is, of course, the obvious exception of young people, as they tend to use the internet for political information

to a greater extent. In turn, one of the constants of EP and national elections alike in European countries is that young citizens are much less likely to be interested in the campaign and eventually to vote. Ironically, because of low competition, more room for manoeuvre is available to the concerned few who are fighting the election. Youth organisations have a good opportunity to reach out to many more unconvinced voting-age youngsters who were 'born digital' [14,30].

## 5. Comparing electoral spheres: the way ahead?

Overall, therefore, this issue is an exercise in challenging the common wisdom of 'politics as usual'. It is not argued that the internet, as adopted in the EP campaigns, will reverse entrenched citizen ignorance, media cynicism and politicians' apathy. Neither is it claimed that the internet, by virtue of its decentralised nature, necessarily equalises the balance of power among the producers of political communications in European advanced industrial democracies. The growing body of literature on on-line campaigns, and at the contributions included here, suggests otherwise. The 'potential' is on display, although on the shelf. Rather, the idea is advanced that it may well be politics as usual, but not in the way we have known politics before. We can now claim with a reasonable degree of confidence that the internet provides complex structures for political action to an increasing number of punters. These structures are shaped by individual and collective stakes, system and organisational resources, political culture, institutional and electoral settings, technological development and citizens' political appetites. Not merely the extension of physical campaign infrastructure, the internet represents a 'a hybrid public/political communication space for a broader range of communicators than simply parties and candidates, whereby existing strategies can be replicated and innovative, interactive campaigns can be tested' [8, p. 89]. The internet does attract a younger audience and forces politicians to come to terms with the new medium. It provides structure to the election and to election issues. The electoral politics enacted through the internet is both 'Machiavellian' and discursive, as predicted by Blumler and Kavanagh [4].

Of course, due to the novelty of the approach, and to the lack of previous benchmarks, the studies presented here are necessarily exploratory rather than hypothesis testing. They thus help raise more questions than they answer, thus opening the field to further research. However, the articles in this issue also suggest a number of possible ways to set out and examine the nature of online election. Firstly, the triangulation of data sources should become common practice for the study of on-line elections. Although some studies complement content analysis with producer interviews and audience data to highlight the context and aims of new media production [21,53], content analysis remains the prominent tool by which online elections are examined. In this issue, Dányi and Galács offer a novel way to triangulate contents and intentions [12]. They use a 'magnifying glass' technique to look at different levels of enquiry, the strategic and the tactical, the provision of websites and their use. They examine the ontology of web structure and the ecology of online action, by looking at how political communication professionals respond to citizen's attitudes and actual online behaviour. Similar results are obtained by De Vreese and colleagues, who triangulate media coverage of the EP election and citizens' consumption behaviours [14]. Jankowski et al. employ comparative statistical analysis with qualitative evidence from Internet & Elections country reports [28], while Carlson and Strandberg triangulate feature analysis and micro evidence from Finland [7].

Secondly, and traditionally, comparative research means, among other things, comparing phenomena across a relatively large sample in a theoretically significant setting. Regarding on-line elections, this means examining campaigns at national, regional and local level, the institutional units of context

for electoral studies. While, of course, comparative work has been conducted before concerning online campaigns [20], only recently has larger-scale comparative work been attempted. Jankowski and colleagues report here the preliminary findings of the Internet & Elections Project [28]. The project aims to explain variation in the morphology of national online elections in 22 countries by reference to a range of indicators of political culture, activity, media environment and technological development. In this issue, both de Vreese and Lusoli [14,33] show how it may be possible to integrate such understanding with data on the consumption of traditional media and the internet for electoral information (and engagement). The future 'comparative' study of online elections should complement structural explanations of supply-side information on the electoral websphere with demand-side survey data about citizens' online activity. However, this does not necessarily require traditional survey methodology involving large samples; recent works on the reasons why people go online during elections and what they think once they are there [8,46] demonstrate that theoretical ingenuity pays empirical dividends.

Thirdly, the novelty of new media campaigns is best understood in the context of traditional mediation and representation of political institutions. Increasingly, social institutions such as political parties and parliaments are mediated, constructed through the internet. In this issue, Van Os argues that European parties' websites reflect their stance on Europe, laying bare their interests, identity and values [49]. The websites of youth political organisation and the in-depth annotation and analysis of message, layout, structure, position gives precious hints as to the stance of such organisation with respect to elections and civil society [50]. Hungarian electoral politics unfolds online on websites that lie outside well-trodden institutional paths, and are transformative of the electoral nexus [12]. To an extent, all these websites may be contributing, either in the positive or in the negative, to the discursive construction of a 'European public sphere', so far mediated and constructed, or not, by television broadcasting [14]. It is such online venues that further research should explore, to add complexity and variance to the ramification extinction obtained through comparative analysis and triangulation. Of course, the next obvious step, one that will require far-reaching thinking, organising and resources, is to accumulate longitudinal data on online elections, where the producers' perspective, citizens uses, techno-political cultures and traditional media can be placed on comparative perspective. This issue of *Information Polity* is a first, important step in that direction.

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