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Electoral Information and the Internet

Voter's Use of Campaign Communication Channels

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Electoral information is a key aspect of modern democracies and democratic theory. Dahl (1998:37) maintains that each voter should have equal opportunity to learn about the relevant policy alternatives and their likely consequences. Once, campaigning was about mobilizing the party electorate through mass rallies. Today, the ties between parties and voters have weakened and most people get their information about politics and the campaign from the mass media. Furthermore, the last decade or so has seen the introduction of new information and communication technologies (ICTs). The new media technology, first and foremost the Internet, has increased the available political information as well as provided parties and candidates with new direct channels to the electorate. Indeed, campaigning is said to have entered a new period characterized by extensive use of the new ICTs (Farrell 1996, Farrell and Webb 2000, Norris 2000, Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). Whereas ICTs have received a great deal of attention in the social sciences, concerning electoral politics the focus has mostly been on parties and party websites in particular (Gibson 2004). Less attention has been given to voter use. A central aspect regarding the use of the Internet for electoral information is the differences between groups, and in the literature much attention has been given to the digital divide (e.g. Norris 2001, Van Dijk 2005, Selwyn 2005). This divide refers to the inequalities related to access to and use of the new technology. The young, males and the educated have access to and use the Internet more frequently than elderly, females and the less educated. Moreover, the new media technology are likely to increase information gaps in society as studies show that the well educated use the Internet for information purposes while the less educated use the Internet for entertainment purposes (Shah et al. 2001). Furthermore, voters that visit party websites for information are politically aware, and web-campaigning has been

described as preaching to the converted (Norris 2003). In a democratic sense this is certainly true: online voters are most inclined to participate in elections. However, concerning campaigning a central aspect is to what extent voters that visit websites are available in the electoral marked. Especially as studies of party strategy reveal that a primary objective for party web sites are winning voters (Karlsen 2008a).

In this paper I explore the new ICTs as an electoral information source through a study of the 2005 Norwegian election campaign, and ask: to what extent and in what sense do voters use the Internet for electoral information? Furthermore I explore differences between groups concerning the use of Internet for electoral information based on digital inequalities, and to what extent online voters are available in the electoral marked. In doing so, I differentiate between new independent media e.g. online newspapers, and new party controlled media e.g. party websites. Online newspapers resemble the traditional media in their election coverage and the electorate is able to follow the campaign in much the same manner as when they consume newspaper and television contents. The party websites, on the other hand, are party controlled communication channels where parties are able to present themselves and their policy in a dynamic fashion. Here voters are able to retrieve basic information about the parties. Hence, inexperienced voters in need of elementary information about the alternatives can be expected to visit party websites for information to a greater extent than their more experienced counterparts.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the first part I substantiate my research questions through an account of campaign development and electoral information; a discussion of digital inequalities and the importance of electoral experience; and a critical account of the notion preaching to the converted. In this first part I emphasis how the Internet have introduced both

new party controlled and uncontrolled campaign communication channels. In the second part I explore my research questions empirically. In the final section I discuss the findings in a broader perspective.

Campaign Development and Electoral Information

As already stated, campaigning in post industrialized societies is said to have entered a new stage characterized by extensive use of new ICTs. This assertion originates from an influential conceptual framework that describes campaign evolvement as a modernization process in three stages: a premodern, a modern and a postmodern campaign (Norris 2000 see also Farrell 1996, Farrell and Webb 2000, Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). In the first period campaigning was characterized by strong ties between parties and voters, and campaigning was essentially mobilization of party electorates. Hence, voters got their electoral information mostly through partisan mass rallies and party controlled newspapers. The second period coincides with the introduction of television and the weakening of the ties between parties and voters. With television, almost everybody consumed the same news, and campaigning aimed at winning voters across social categories. As a consequence, the share of the electorate that received political information increased considerably, and indirect modes of communication – mainly television – became the most important source for political and electoral information. The still emerging third period is characterized by the extensive use of the new ICTs as well as considerable involvement of campaign professionals. The new media increases the available political information; contributes to media fragmentation through increasing media outlets; offer the parties a direct channel to the electorate; and give incentives to tailor campaign messages to specific categories of voters. Still, even though the Internet increases the available information, it is necessary to consider what type(s) of campaign communication channels the Internet introduces.

Broadly speaking parties have two main types of mediated communication channels towards the electorate: controlled channels and uncontrolled channels. Controlled communication channels are media where the parties exercise full content control e.g. pamphlets, commercials and advertisements. Uncontrolled communication channels are media where parties do not exercise content control, e.g. television, newspapers radio etc. Concerning the (uncontrolled) media agenda, studies indicate that parties/politicians have some influence on the campaign issues agenda, but little influence concerning the framing of issues (Strömbäck and Nord 2006). The Internet as an electoral information source introduces both new controlled and uncontrolled campaign communication channels. In the typology of campaign communication channels presented below, these two aspects – media type and control – are combined.

Figure 1. Typology of Mediated Campaign Communication Channels

	Party Control: Uncontrolled	Party Control: Controlled
Traditional media	Newspapers, Television etc.	Party newspapers, Pamphlets, Commercials etc.
New media	Online newspapers Independent blogs, etc.	Parties' and candidate's web sites

The typology identifies four ideal types of communication channels. Uncontrolled traditional media are television, newspapers, radio etc, and the controlled traditional media are, since the day of party controlled newspapers, mostly pamphlets, advertisements and commercials. The new ICTs and particularly the Internet have introduced both new controlled and uncontrolled communication channels. Concerning the uncontrolled media, ICTs contribute to media fragmentation, but online newspapers unsurprisingly tend to cover elections and politics in much the same manner as the traditional uncontrolled media.[1] Concerning controlled

communication channels, the websites enables parties to present news as well as basic information about their policy in a much more dynamic fashion than they were able to via the traditional controlled media.[2] This last point is acknowledged and appreciated by the parties (Karlsen 2008a). So far, the *potential* of the website as a dynamic communication channel has arguably been more emphasized than the *actual impact*: it seems web-campaigning is constantly disappointing political observers. Still, as the typology suggests, party websites should not really be compared to television and newspapers on equal terms. The party web sites should rather be considered a supplement to these media and (maybe) more justifiably be compared to traditional controlled media concerning impact on the campaign. With this in mind, what do we know about voters' use of electoral information sources during campaigns?

Use of Information Sources

Studies show that in most western democracies, television is by far the most important information channel, followed by newspapers. In comparison, it appears that Internet plays a minor part. According to the Pew Research Center (2004), television was the dominant medium in the American Presidential election in 2004. 78 percent mentioned TV as their main source of campaign news. Newspapers followed with 38 percent mentioning it as either the most or second most important medium. Internet was a main source of campaign news for 13 percent of Americans. However, the number of Americans that mentioned Internet as their main source had nearly doubled from the election in 2000. Furthermore, 13 percent stated that they regularly learned something about the candidates and the campaign from Internet. 20 percent of Americans aged 18–29 regularly learned from the Internet. Another 24 percent learned from the Internet sometimes. That adds up to almost half of the young adult population. During the 2005 British campaign, three percent of the population got a lot of their information about the election online. Five percent got some of their information, and another eight percent got a little of their information from the Internet. Accordingly, 83

percent of the British population got none of their information about the election online (Lusoli and Ward 2005). The young (18–24) were twice as likely as the average to get at least a little of their information online. Males and the educated were also more likely to get information from the Internet. In a study of Internet as an electoral information source in 25 countries during the 2004 European Parliament campaign, Lusoli (2005) found similar results. The share of the electorate that searched the net for information about the election ranges from 4 percent in Greece, to 13 percent in Finland. In Finland; 10 percent of the electorate also visited a candidate or party website (Carlson and Strandberg 2005). A study of the 2001 Norwegian Parliamentary election campaign concluded that television and national newspapers were the most important information sources for Norwegian voters (Waldahl and Aardal 2004). However, twice as many mentioned television as newspapers. Only 6 percent mentioned the Internet as their first or second most important source. Even young Norwegians under 30 years of age held back, with less than 1 in 10 mentioning the Internet.

Based on this review, what can we expect concerning the extent and in what sense voters use the Internet for electoral information? Even though campaigning is asserted to have entered a new period characterized by extensive use of ICTs, studies of recent elections in US and the UK show that the Internet is still struggling to make a real impact as an information source. Moreover, a number of system factors might influence the nature of campaigning (Schmitt-Beck 2007). Concerning web-campaigning Ward, Gibson and Lusoli (forthcoming) argue that the British experience is always going to be more low-key than the American. Not because of lower level of Internet use, but because there are fewer incentives for the parties and voters to use the web. In Norway parliamentary elections are pure party elections with PR representation. Voters express list preferences, and there is only a theoretical possibility of influencing the candidate order. Hence campaigning in Norway is party centered as opposed

to the candidate centered US campaign (see Plasser 2002, Dulio 2004). Although some politicians have their own blogs etc, candidate websites are not a widespread phenomenon in Norway. In systems that emphasize individual candidates, independent candidate websites are much more common. The most obvious example is the US, but candidate websites are also common in countries like Finland, where voters have great influence on the candidate order (Carlson and Strandberg 2005, Strandberg and Carlson 2007). It is reasonable to expect that the incentives to go online and check out what the candidates stand for, is greater in a candidate centered campaign than in a party centered campaign where the same parties "always" run for election. If a voter in a party centered campaign like Norway has participated in a couple of elections, the incentive to find out what Labor or the Conservatives stand for is most likely not strong. *Hence, we can expect that the Internet plays a minor role as an electoral information source compared to traditional sources.* However, we can also expect differences in the use of Internet for electoral information based on digital inequalities, electoral experience and ties to the parties. First we turn to digital inequalities.

Digital Inequalities and Electoral Experience

The digital divide refers to inequalities related to access to the new technology and to knowledge about how to use it. So far, studies show that access to Internet is highly correlated to social status – the well educated are online (Norris 2001, Selwyn 2005, van Dijk 2005). According to Norris (2001) these differences echo differences in other forms of information technology, and broad and deep-rooted patterns of social stratification are the major explanations for patterns of Internet diffusion. Therefore, she argues, we should not be shocked to find social inequalities on the internet. The features of the digital divide are expected from the works concerning diffusion of innovations (Rogers 1995). These theories suggest that the adoption of innovations follows a S-shaped pattern. Adoption of new technologies is often slow initially, picking up speed and peaking when penetration levels

reach saturation point. Thereafter, demand slows down again. The early adopters are well educated, and are high earners. The argument is that education is associated with a better understanding for social change and media attention, and that high income is associated with affording to purchase the innovations. However, the inequalities related to new media technology might be more fundamental than suggested by diffusion theory. According to Shah et al. (2001) people with high education use the Internet in more instrumental ways than people with low education. The segments with lower education tend to use the Internet more for entertainment purposes. This suggests that Internet might contribute to the so called information gap. The segments of the population with higher socioeconomic status tend to acquire the available information at a faster rate than the lower status segments (Tichenor, Donahue and Olien 1970:159-160). Hence, when the Internet increases the information available in a society, the gap in knowledge between these segments will increase rather than decrease.

Based on this review, what can we expect regarding the extent digital inequalities effects voter's use of Internet for electoral information? *From the extensive research on digital inequalities I expect that the factors related to the digital divide will have an effect concerning the use of the Internet for electoral information.* The young, male, people with high economic status and the politically interested are expected to use the Internet as an information source. On the basis of Shah et al's (2001) finding that the highly educated are more likely to use the Internet in more instrumental ways, *education or socioeconomic status is likely to be significant, even among the group who use Internet frequently.* This applies to both the controlled and uncontrolled new communication channels.

The factors related to the digital divide are also related to political participation, and are likely to predict increased use of any information source. The exception is age: the young are not more likely to be politically engaged, but they are more likely to have access to and use Internet frequently. Above I argued that voters in a candidate centered system will have greater incentives to go online as they know less of the alternatives running for election. The same argument is valid concerning electoral experience in a party centered system. An inexperienced voter has greater need for information than the more experienced voter, and the party website might prove the best source for basic information.[3] Hence, as inexperience at the polls is closely related to age, *there is reason to expect that the youngest voters will use the party websites to a greater extent than their more experienced counterparts, even when Internet use is controlled for.* As discussed above the party controlled party websites offer the most basic information about parties, while the uncontrolled communications channels like the online newspapers follow the campaign in much the same manner as the traditional uncontrolled media. *Hence, although we expect that while the youngest voters will get information from party websites to a greater extent than older cohorts, we do not expect the youngest to follow the campaign online to a greater extent when Internet use is controlled for.*

Web-campaigning: Really Just Preaching to the Converted?

In a study based on 15 EU countries in 2001 Norris (2003) describes online campaigning as preaching to the converted, as the parties are most likely to reach citizens who are already interested and engaged in politics. Furthermore, Hindman (2005) argue that Howard Dean used the fact that web-campaigning is preaching to the converted to his advantage during the 2004 primaries, through using the net to reach the ones most likely to volunteer. In a European context Lusoli and Ward (2004) reports that British party activists are indeed using the net to supplement their traditional activities. However, Norris (2003) actually use converted in a democratic sense as Internet users are likely to participate in elections. This

misconception is due to a lack of distinction between the Internet as a means to enhance democracy e.g. increase democratic participation, and the Internet as a campaign tool, e.g. win voters or activate activists (see Karlsen 2008a). Hence, as stated initially, concerning campaigning an essential aspect is to what extent the online voters are available on the electoral marked. A study of party Internet strategy found that Norwegian parties aim to win voters through their website (Karlsen 2008a), and such a strategy would be in vain if only the party activists use the party websites. However, a study of the Dutch 2002 election found that a large part of the voters that went online for electoral information were floating or undecided voters (Boogers and Voerman 2003). Furthermore, according to Gibson and MacAllister (2006) web-campaigning had an independent effect on the vote in the 2004 Australian campaign. *Hence, as no studies actually have reported that online voters are party-tied, just politically aware, there is reason to expect that the voters who use the party websites for electoral information to some extent are available on the electoral market.*

The Study

My data encompass the Norwegian Election Study 2005. The Norwegian Election Study is a national representative post election-survey. In 2005 the response rate is 68% and the sample N is 2015. The fieldwork was carried out by Statistics Norway.

In order to study the relative importance of the Internet respondents were asked to rank seven information sources. The Online Newspapers were distinguished from other websites in order to distinguish between following the election coverage in the online newspapers and whether voters regarded anything else on the Internet important. To explore the frequency of Internet use for electoral information, respondents were asked how often they read about the election online. In addition respondents were asked if they had visited party websites for information about the election. These two questions are partly designed to operationalize the distinction

between following the campaign coverage online (on the uncontrolled media) and getting information from a party controlled channel: the party website.

Norway is an interesting case as Internet access and use are amongst the highest in the world. According to the European Social Survey, 82 percent of the population had access to the Internet in 2004, and 37 percent used the Internet every day. In Europe, these numbers are only matched by Denmark and Sweden. According to the 2006 European Social Survey, about 50 percent of the population in Norway, Denmark and Sweden used the Internet every day for personal use, a substantially higher rate than other European countries. In Germany, for instance, 21 percent use the Internet every day, 23 percent in Spain, 31 percent in France, and in the UK 30 percent.[4] In the US, 60 percent of the population used Internet from time to time in 2006 (Pew research center 2006).

The political system in Norway is characterized by a multiparty structure and a multidimensional cleavage structure. The largest party is the Labor Party (Ap), which together with the Socialist Left Party (SV) constitute what is called the left on the dominant left-right axis. The Conservative Party (H) and the Progress Party (FrP) constitute the right. The so called center parties are the Liberals (V), The Centre Party (the agrarian party) (Sp) and the Christian People's Party (KrF).

Voters' Use of Information Channels

Norwegian voters pay a great deal of attention to what is going on in the campaign. According to our data, 65 percent of the electorate followed the campaign very or quite closely. In the subsequent part of this article I am interested in where voters went for information and to what extent voters considered online electoral information important compared to other information sources. The respondents were asked: *It is possible to gather information about*

the election in several different ways. How important was the following sources for you on a scale from 1 to 5, were 1 indicates "not important" and 5 indicates "very important". They were given the following alternatives in this order: online newspapers, national newspapers (not online), regional and local newspapers (not online versions), television, radio, Internet (not online newspapers), and family and friends[5]. Table 1 reports the results.

Table 1 Important information sources in the 2005 campaign. Percent and average.

	Not important				Very important	Mean	N (100%)
	1	2	3	4	5		
Television	6	7	14	22	51	4,04	2009
National Newspapers	19	11	20	24	27	3,29	2009
Family and friends	14	14	29	26	18	3,20	2009
Regional Newspapers	21	14	23	20	23	3,10	2009
Radio	31	18	20	17	14	2,66	2009
Online Newspapers	60	9	11	10	10	2,02	2008
Internet	68	11	9	7	5	1,70	2008

In 2005, as expected, television was by far the most important information source, followed by the national newspapers. More than half the electorate stated that TV was a very important information source, and the mean score was 4.04. The mean for newspapers was 3.29, and for friends and family 3.20. Of the seven ways to get information in a campaign, online newspapers and the Internet (disregarding online newspapers) were considered least important. 60 percent considered online newspapers not important, and 68 percent considered the Internet not important.

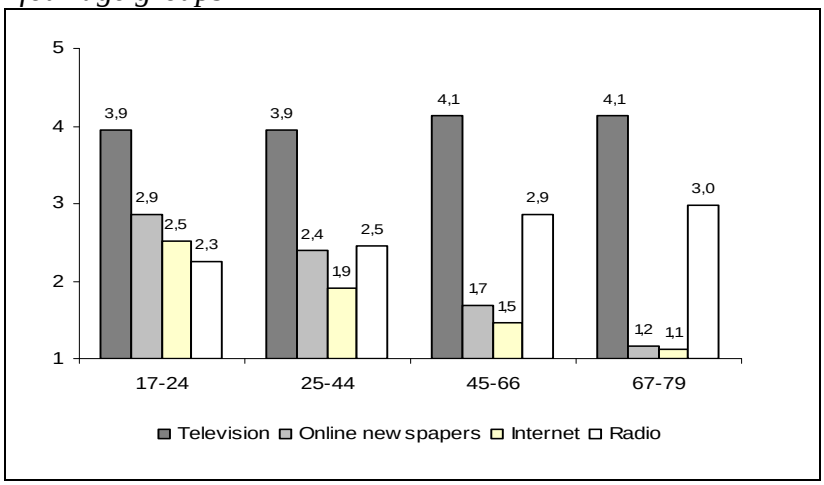
Compared to the other media, the Internet appears to be of minor importance. But, how frequently did respondents go online to get information about the election campaign? According to our material, 85 percent of the Norwegian electorate has an Internet connection. Every tenth person with a connection is never online. That leaves us with 75 percent who used the Internet from time to time, 55 percent of whom – or 40 percent of the whole electorate –

claimed they used the Internet every day. We asked respondents how often they read news about the election on the Internet, and if they visited party websites for information. According to our data, 17 percent of the population read about the election everyday on the Internet; another 17 percent at least once a week; and 15 percent less than once a week. That leaves us with more than half the population never reading about the election online, or conversely: almost half the population read about the election online. The question concerning the party websites was also included in the 2001 election study. Then, 8 percent of the voters had visited party websites. In 2005 13 percent visited party websites, up by five percentage points in four years. This might be a bit less than some – especially the parties – had expected and hoped for. To sum up, Internet appears to be relatively less important than other information sources. However, Internet use differs between voter groups. This is the topic for the subsequent section.

Digital Electoral Divide and Electoral Experience

In this section I explore to what extent to digital inequalities effect voter's use of Internet for electoral information. Before I consider party websites and following the campaign online, I study the effects concerning the relative importance of information sources. Let us first consider age. Figure 1 reports the mean concerning television, radio, online newspapers and Internet (disregarding online newspapers) in four age groups.

Figure 2 Important information channels in four age groups. Mean on a scale from 1-5 for four age groups



Although there are considerable differences between the age groups concerning new media and radio, it seems everybody agree on the most important way to get electoral information: television. However, the young are more inclined to consider the Internet important for electoral information. Still, the means for online newspapers and the Internet do not supersede the scales halfway point for any age group. The discussion on the digital divide and political engagement allowed us to sketch a model to explain variation in the use of information sources. The variables in the model are age, gender, education, socioeconomic status (occupation) and political interest. Political interest, high education and high socioeconomic status are expected to co-vary with high ratings of all information channels. In addition, younger respondents are more likely to consider Internet and online newspapers important. Table 2 reports the results of seven multivariate regressions.[6]

Table 2 Multivariate OLS regression. The effect of age, gender, education, occupation and political interest, for assessment of seven information sources in 2005 Norwegian the campaign (N=1931 for all seven analysis)

	Television		National Papers		Regional Papers		Discussions		Radio		Online papers		Internet	
	b	beta	b	beta	b	beta	b	beta	b	beta	b	beta	b	beta
Constant	**3.17**		**1.30**		**2.21**		**1.75**		**1.35**		**2.09**		**1.85**	
Age	0.00	0.05	0.00	-0.04	**0.01**	**0.16**	**-0.02**	**-0.19**	**0.01**	**0.15**	**-0.03**	**-0.37**	**-0.03**	**-0.33**
Gender	-0.02	-0.01	0.01	0.00	0.12	0.04	**0.39**	**0.15**	0.09	0.03	**-0.33**	**-0.12**	-0.13	-0.06
Education	-0.06	-0.03	**0.24**	**0.12**	0.00	0.00	0.04	0.02	0.05	0.03	0.12	0.06	0.01	0.01
Professionals/ managers	0.00	0.00	0.05	0.02	**-0.39**	**-0.12**	0.09	0.03	-0.13	-0.04	**0.44**	**0.14**	**0.30**	**0.11**
Associate prof	0.08	0.03	0.02	0.00	-0.11	-0.03	0.16	0.05	-0.16	-0.05	**0.35**	**0.10**	**0.28**	**0.10**
Service and sales	0.13	0.04	0.06	0.02	-0.18	-0.05	0.01	0.00	**-0.34**	**-0.09**	**0.35**	**0.10**	**0.23**	**0.08**
Agricultural/ fishery	-0.04	-0.01	-0.36	-0.04	0.04	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.16	0.02	-0.16	-0.02	0.07	0.01
Unskilled workers	0.22	0.03	-0.22	-0.03	-0.20	-0.03	-0.03	0.00	-0.32	-0.04	0.05	0.01	0.11	0.02
Students	-0.10	-0.02	0.15	0.03	-0.39	-0.07	-0.05	-0.01	-0.22	-0.04	**0.39**	**0.07**	**0.50**	**0.10**
Political interest	**0.32**	**0.16**	**0.57**	**0.25**	**0.23**	**0.10**	**0.57**	**0.29**	**0.34**	**0.15**	**0.17**	**0.07**	**0.14**	**0.07**
R^2 (adjusted)		0.03		0.09		0.05		0.13		0.06		0.18		0.14

*Bold indicates that the coefficient is significant on 1 percent level

The explained variance (R^2) is highest for online newspapers and the Internet, indicating that the full model is better at explaining the use of these two information channels, than television, national newspapers, regional newspapers, discussions, and radio. It appears that age and socioeconomic status make the biggest difference. Socioeconomic status has little or no effect on any but the two online sources. Interestingly, gender has an effect concerning online newspapers, but not concerning the Internet (disregarding online newspapers). This suggests that men consume more news from online media and in doing so also receive political messages, but do not actively look for other types of political information online to a greater extent than women. We will return to this assertion below.

People's assessment of television, newspapers, radio and discussions is mostly related to political interest. Still: age has an effect for radio, discussions and regional papers as the young are more interested in discussing the campaign while the older segments get more information from radio and regional newspapers; women are more inclined than men to

consider family and friends important for information; and the highly educated are more inclined than the less educated to consider the national newspapers important.

The tendency for the young, men, and people with high socioeconomic status to assess online newspapers and the Internet as important is related to the digital divide and might be explained by wider Internet use patterns. However, as accounted for studies show that the highly educated use the Internet in more instrumental ways, while the less educated are more likely to use it for entertainment purposes (Shah et al. 2001). Hence we expect that the effects of socioeconomic status will have an effect also for the part of the electorate that uses the Internet frequently. Table 3 report the effect of the factors related to the digital divide and political interest on assessing online newspapers and the Internet as important information sources when only respondents that use the Internet every day are included in the analysis.

Table 3 Multivariate OLS regression. The effect of age, gender, education, occupation and political interest on assessing online newspapers and the Internet (disregarding online newspapers) as important. Only respondents that are online everyday are included in the analysis

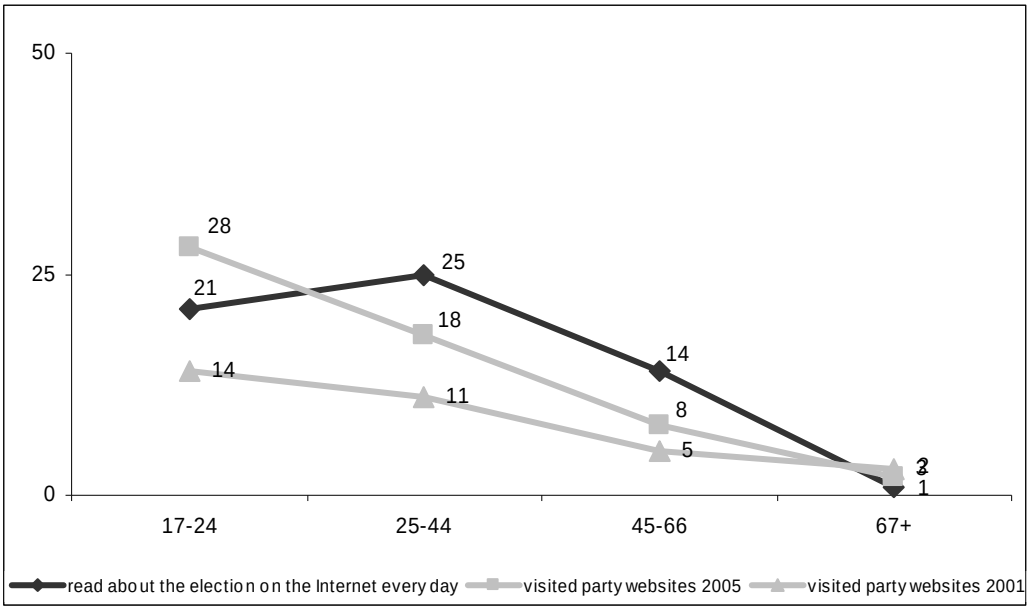
	Online newspapers		Internet	
	b	beta	b	beta
Constant	**2,59**		**2,00**	
Age	**-0,04**	**-0,32**	**-0,03**	**-0,26**
Gender	**-0,36**	**-0,11**	-0,03	-0,01
Education	0,19	0,01	-0,04	-0,02
Occupation				
Professionals/ managers	**0,62**	**0,19**	0,20	0,07
Associate professionals	**0,56**	**0,16**	0,12	0,04
Service and sales	0,49	0,11	0,24	0,06
Agricultural/ fishery	-0,16	-0,01	0,45	0,04
Unskilled workers	0,12	0,01	0,38	0,04
Students	0,02	0,01	0,29	0,07
Political interest	**0,22**	**0,09**	**0,27**	**0,12**
R^2 (adjusted)		0,09	0,07	

Concerning online newspapers, age, gender, socioeconomic status and political interest have a significant effect even when Internet use is controlled for. Concerning the Internet (disregarding online newspapers), only age and political interest have a significant effect. This

indicates that differences concerning socioeconomic status and gender are related to consumption of online news more than getting other types of political information online. Age has an effect: younger voters assess online newspapers and the Internet more important for electoral information than older voters, even when Internet use is controlled for.

As expected the factors related to the digital divide has effect on whether or not the Internet was considered important for electoral information. In what follows I explore the relationship between these factors and the tendency to use party controlled communication channels (web sites) for information and uncontrolled communication channels to follow the campaign (read about the election online). Again we first consider age as we expected that the most inexperienced voters would be more inclined to use the party websites than more experienced voters, while we did not expect them to follow the campaign online to a greater extent. Figure 2 reports the share that read about the election every day in 2005 and visited a party website for information in 2001 and 2005.

Figure 3 The percentage share who have read about the election on the Internet every day 2005. And the percentage share which acquired information from the party websites in 2001 and 2005 in four age groups



The figure shows the highly distinctive impact of age on people's tendency to go online for electoral information. 28 percent aged 17–24, 18 percent aged 25–44, 8 percent aged 45–66 and just 2 percent aged 67+ visited a party website in search of political information during the 2005 election. Interestingly, most of the 2001–2005 increase is in the youngest age group. Concerning following the campaign online, 21 percent aged 17 to 24, and 25 percent aged 25 to 44 read about the election online every day. The share drops to 14 percent for those between 45 and 66 of age, and only 2 percent over the age of 67. As expected, the youngest group tends to get information from party websites to a greater extent, but do not follow the election online to a greater extent than more experienced voters.

Multivariate analysis show that age, education, socioeconomic status, and political interest all have a significant effect on how often Internet was used to gather information about the campaign. The explained variance is also very high.[7] The same applies to visiting the party websites for information, although the effect is less strong. These results are expected in light of the research on digital inequalities, and might be explained fully by wider Internet use patterns. However, as accounted for, studies report that the highly educated use the Internet in more instrumental ways, while the less educated are more likely to use it for entertainment purposes (Shah et al. 2001), and we have already seen that age, socioeconomic status and political interest effect the likelihood of rendering online newspapers important. Hence, are the differences caused by age, education and socioeconomic status replicated in the group of voters that uses the Internet frequently? In the subsequent section we explore this question by only including the parts of the population that are online every day in the analysis. We also explore the expectation formulated initially that inexperienced voters will get their information from the party website to a greater extent than more experienced voters, but not necessarily follow the campaign online to a greater extent. Therefore, we do not include age

as a continuous variable, but rather use three age groups to distinguish the inexperienced voters (aged 17-24) from more experienced voters (aged 25-44 and 45+). Table 3 reports the results of two multivariate regression analyses.

Table 4 Multivariate OLS regression. The effect of age, gender, education, occupation and political interest on followin the campaign online and visit party websites for information. Only those who use Internet every day are included in the analysis. (N=802)

	Follow campaign		Party websites	
	b	beta	b	beta
Constant	0,58		-0,10	
Age				
25-44	-0,17	-0,08	**-0,17**	**-0,20**
45+	**-0,66**	**-0,29**	**-0,27**	**-0,29**
Gender	**-0,26**	**-0,12**	-0,01	-0,02
Education	0,04	0,02	0,01	0,01
Occupation				
Professionals/ managers	**0,43**	**0,19**	0,08	0,09
Associate professionals	0,34	0,14	0,06	0,06
Service and sales	0,29	0,09	0,04	0,04
Agricultural/ fishery	-0,49	-0,05	-0,06	-0,02
Unskilled workers	0,05	0,01	0,04	0,01
Students	0,17	0,05	0,10	0,07
Political interest	**0,45**	**0,26**	**0,16**	**0,23**
R^2 (adjusted)	0.13		0.08	

*Bold coefficients are significant at a 1 percent level

Gender and to some extent socioeconomic status and age, do not only effect Internet use in general but also how often people who use the Internet net everyday use it to follow the campaign. This is true even though we control for political interest. This finding supports the notion that some people use the net for instrumental purposes – in this case to get information about the campaign – while other parts of the population might use the net more for entertainment purposes. Again we see that men are more likely than women to follow the campaign online, even when we control for Internet use. However, they are not more inclined to visit party websites for information. This supports the assertion that gender differences are mostly related to online news consumption.

The expectation that inexperienced voters will visit the party websites to a greater extent than more experienced voters but not necessarily follow the campaign online to a greater extent is also met. While voters aged 25-44 are less inclined to visit party websites than voters aged 17-24, they are not less inclined to read about the election online. This is not due to the frequency of Internet use as the analysis only includes the parts of the population that use the Internet every day.

Available Online Electorate

In this section I explore the online population's ties to the parties in general and more specific whether the parts of the electorate that visit party websites for electoral information are available on the electoral marked. As a point of departure I first examine if there are any differences between the parties' electorates concerning going online for electoral information. Table 5 reports the share in the different party voter groups that were online every day, got information from a party website, and read about the election online.

Table 5 Percentage share of the party electorates that are online every day, gathered information from a party website or read about the election online

		Party website		Read about the election online			
	Share online every day	2001	2005	At least once a week	Every day	Once a week	N
SV	48	10	18	39	22	17	174
Ap	36	7	11	34	17	17	568
Sp	25	4	11	23	12	11	129
KrF	26	5	10	27	13	14	90
V	51	23	18	44	20	24	98
H	61	9	17	50	26	24	272
FrP	38	11	12	34	18	16	310

Conservative voters use the Internet most frequently, followed by Liberal voters and the SV voters. 38 percent of FrP voters and 36 percent of Labor voters use the Internet every day. Centre Party and Christian People's Party voters use the Internet less frequently. These differences between the voter groups are also valid concerning getting information from a party website. In 2005, SV, Liberal, and Conservative voters were most likely to visit a party website for information. Around 18 percent of the three parties obtained information at a party

website, compared to only 10 to 12 percent of voters in the four other parties. There is an increase in all groups except the liberal voters. However, the share of Liberal voters retrieving information online in 2001 was very high. It should be noted that although the Conservative Party's, the Socialist Left Party's and the Liberal Party's electorates were online more frequently, most people who got information from a party website voted for the Labor Party.

As accounted for, although online campaigning has been described as preaching to the converted, the Norwegian campaign strategists emphasis the potential to win voters through the website. In what follows we study the electoral availability of the voters that visited party websites for electoral information. If the group consists of non-party members, voters that do not identify with a party, voters that decide what party to vote for during the campaign, and voters that change party preference from one election to the next, it is possible to influence their vote choice through the website.

Table 6 The electoral availability of the voters that visited party websites for electoral information 2001 and 2005

	2001		2005	
Party member				
Member	15		15	
Not member	85		85	
	100	(N=162)	100	(n=260)
Party identification				
Yes	42		50	
No	58		50	
	100	(N=161)	100	(n=260)
Time of decision				
Before the campaign	40		41	
During the campaign	60		59	
	100	(N=156)	100	(n=244)
Changed party 01-05				
Same party	53		42	
Changed party	47		58	
	100	(N=58)	100	(n=74)

According to table 6, online campaigning is more than preaching to the converted. In 2005, 85 percent of the group that got information from a party website was not a party member. 50

percent did not identify with a party. 59 percent did not decide what party to vote for before the campaign, and 59 percent changed party preference between 2001 and 2005. Although the share of the electorate that visited party websites increased from 2001 to 2005, the numbers are very similar both years. However, it most be noted that party members are more likely to visit party websites than others as 8 percent of the electorate are party members, but 15 percent of online voters are party members. Even so, web campaigning can not be considered preaching to the converted, if being converted implies already supporting the party, and it seems evident that that party websites can be considered a tool to win voters during campaigns.

Discussion and Conclusion

Internet is increasingly important in modern election campaigning (Gibson 2004). The aim of this paper was to study to what extent and in what sense the Internet is used as an electoral information source compared to other communication channels. Furthermore the paper aimed to explore differences between groups concerning getting electoral information online. The study of the 2005 Norwegian election campaign, reveal that Internet was an important information source for a relatively small, but none the less substantial part of the electorate. The online newspapers were considered more prominent than other aspects of the Internet. However, most other channels of communication were considered more important. No doubt television is still the most influential medium. We have seen that 13 percent of the electorate visited a party website for information, a rise from 8 percent in 2001. Furthermore, 15 percent read about the election online every day, while almost half the population read about the election online sometime during the campaign. Nevertheless: to most the Internet is not an essential information source on electoral matters. Concerning the parties, all have a substantial share – from 10 to 18 percent – of voters that went online to get political information from a party website. The tendency to go online was, greater amongst the

Conservative-, the Socialist Left- and the Liberal-voters, so these parties might have a greater incentive to develop their Internet strategy. On the other hand, most of the people that got information from a party website voted for the Labor Party. The fact that the *politically aware* use the Internet most frequently for political purposes, made Norris (2003) describe online campaigning as preaching to the converted. However, the findings in this article show that far from all the voters that visited a party site can be considered converted to a party: most are rather part of the available electorate. Just 15 percent of the ones that got information from a party website is a party member, six of ten decided what party to vote for during the campaign, and six of ten changed party from 2001 to 2005. Still, voters with close party ties are more likely to use party web sites than other parts of the electorate. Consequently, a dual Internet campaign strategy that includes both *winning voters* and *activating activists* appears sound.

It is evident from the analysis that digital electoral information inequalities persist: age, gender, socioeconomic status and political interest have a distinct effect on using the Internet for electoral information. This is related to the much talked-about digital divide. As mentioned this divide is expected from works on diffusion of innovations (Rogers 1995). Internet as a medium is still quite young, and although most people have access, some have had access and used the medium for over a decade, while others came online only recently. However, as accounted for above, Shah et al. (2001) argue that the educated use Internet for instrumental purposes while the less educated use the Internet more for entertainment purposes. The findings in this article add somewhat mixed evidence to this assertion. Focusing on the group who use Internet every day, high socio-economic status co-varies with a tendency to read more frequently about the election online, even when political interest is controlled for. This is particularly important in relation to the information gap thesis

(Tichenor et al. 1970). While massive media attention on a topic may reduce what is called the *awareness* knowledge gap, the *depth* knowledge gaps may be widening at the same time (Gaziano and Gaziano 1996). The point is that the Internet offers the interested public an opportunity to learn more about a topic, e.g. party policy, very easily.

However, the distinction between party controlled and uncontrolled communication channels offers some interesting insight concerning the information gap. When Internet use is controlled for, socioeconomic status has an effect regarding assessing the online newspapers important as well as following the campaign online. However, high socioeconomic status does not have an effect concerning assessing the Internet (disregarding online newspapers) important and does not increase the likelihood to visit party websites for information. It seems socioeconomic status has more to do with the consumption of online news than with an ambition to learn about politics. Furthermore, both gender and age have a somewhat different effect concerning the two types of online information channels. Concerning gender, while men follow the campaign online to a greater extent and consider the online newspapers more important for electoral information than women, they do not visit the party websites for information to a greater extent. Nor do they consider the Internet (disregarding online newspapers) more important for electoral information than women. Hence, gender differences also appear to be mostly related to consumption of online news. Concerning age, the trend that the youngest most inexperienced voters seek information on party websites might predict more extensive use in the future. However, initially I argued that the inexperienced parts or the electorate, the young, will most likely always use the party websites more extensively than their older counterparts, as the young have greater need for basic information than more experienced voters. The analysis supports this argument: the youngest voters visited party websites more frequently than more experienced voters. This could be due to the fact that the

youngest use the net more extensively than older groups. However, two conditions contradict this argument. First, the finding is valid even amongst the part of the electorate that used the Internet every day. Second, although the young aged 17 to 24 visited party websites for information to a greater extent than voters aged 25 to 44, they did not follow the campaign online to a greater extent. This has implications both from a campaigning and a democratic point of view. Concerning campaigning parties are able to reach out to young, interested and undecided voters with their self presentation. When 13 percent of the electorate visits party websites most parties will probably consider it somewhat important to maintain a relatively decent Internet campaign strategy. However, when more than one fourth of the most inexperienced voters visit party websites, the Internet strategy might prove crucial. From a democratic point of view, party websites increase the available information about the policy alternatives. Evidence that a major part of the most inexperienced voters access the party websites for information increases the significance of this new party controlled communication channel. One the other hand, there might be reasons to caution against voters' consumption of party propaganda on websites: the electorate might need the critical eye of the journalists. Still, keep in mind, party websites are just a supplement to television, newspapers, online news sites as well as other electoral information sources like friends and family (see Karlsen 2008b).

To conclude, television is still the dominant medium in the contemporary Norwegian campaign, as in other modern democracies like the US and Great Britain. In this respect the notion of a third age of campaigning characterized by extensive use of new ICTs sounds a little off. However, the assertion relies on several other aspects of campaigning like the increasing involvement of professionals, and some tendencies are undoubtedly exaggerated for the sake of the argument. Even so, indirect modes of communication (television) still

dominate political communication in the contemporary campaign. Despite the findings already accounted for concerning the distinction between independent and party controlled online communication channels, the main message of this paper must be that online electoral communication channels still play a limited and supporting role in election campaigns. We must surely expect that the Internet will take on greater importance in the future, but in what manner or fashion is not easy to predict.

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Notes

[1] The independent blogs seems to constitute a new voice in campaigning, indicating that new media technology has to some extent have introduced a new media type.

[2] However, during the 2007 Norwegian local elections all party leaders had their own blog on the largest online newspaper www.vg.no. This tendency for politicians to blog within online newspapers's platforms might challenge the distinction between party controlled and uncontrolled communication channels. The same applies to parties and candidates use of youtube, facebook etc. However, I would argue that this is party controlled communication channels on external platforms.

[3] Lusoli (2005), in a study of Internet as an electoral information source in 24 European countries, makes a similar assumption concerning systems with the possibility to choose between candidates and the incentives to go online and learn about the candidates. However, he finds no connection between systems that offers the possibility to choose between candidates and the share of voters using Internet as an information source. In this respect, a feature of the campaign environment might be important. It is likely that multiparty system increases an inexperienced voter's need for basic information. The dichotomy in a two-party system makes it easier to maneuver based on the dominant left right axis. However, a multiparty system leaves several alternatives based on a left-right interpretation of politics.

[4] For details on coding contact the author

[5] The question was formulated as "conversation or discussions with family or friends".

[6] Age is a continuous variable, number of years above 17. Gender: female=1, male=0. Education: primary=1, high school=2, university=3. Occupation is based on the international ISCO standard. In this context we use a variable with six categories (reduced from the original 10). In addition, students are included as a category. Reference category in the analysis is "craft workers and machine operators".

[7] R^2 =.29, OLS regression.