

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: the Political Strategist and the Internet

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Any interest in the political potential of the Internet we owe to Barack Obama's victory in 2008, and Howard Dean's failed campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in the United States in 2003. Obama succeeded, demonstrating how the Internet could drive public opinion and voter participation (Lee, 2010). Dean's campaign self-destructed in spectacular fashion after his 'I have a scream' speech, Dean had raised a substantial amount of money from small donors using the Internet, and that got people's attention. In Canada, despite some interesting forays by the federal New Democratic Party (NDP), the Internet has yet to really come to the fore – however much people may discuss politics in online forums (Janssen Kies, 2005). Most Canadians are not interested in politics on the Internet because most Canadian are not interested in politics period, whatever pollsters may want you believe. The most Internet-adept segment of society in Canada and a number of other countries, young people, are also the least politically engaged.

This article will argue that the Internet does not transform the practice of democracy, but only molds itself to it, in three parts. First, a review of studies and surveys provides evidence about conformity to the characteristics of the system, but no evidence about any changes to democracy itself as practiced in the liberal, industrialized countries. Second, the analysis a strategist would undertake of the Internet's potential as defined by its policy, regulatory and legal framework is tactical rather than strategic. Third, a consideration of how the good strategist will think of the Internet within his set of tactics shows that the Internet is actually quite far down the list of possible actions, and even then is only used to support other actions. At various levels in the democratic system the strategist uses use the Internet as a tool, as a means to an end, and not as a strategy in itself. In other words, the Internet won't change the system if it is used by a strategist, good or bad. It will only be a means to an end.

1. Studies and Surveys about Democracy and the Internet.

Neither recent studies nor surveys about democracy and the Internet provide any clear-cut evidence that the Internet changes the fundamental nature of politics in Western industrialized liberal democracies. True, the U.S. has used the Internet as a public-participation mechanism, but this has failed to overcome the adversarial culture that characterizes their regulatory process, for example (Zavestoski, Shulman, Schlosberg; 2006). It may be that the government has yet to fully harness the power of information technology, but it seems equally possible that the Internet just allows existing conflicts to play themselves out. More generally, the Internet is perceived as a way to increase participation, and it may in fact affect levels and styles of political participation (Polat, 2005). On the other hand, the Internet does not support either the commitment or cohesiveness needed to underpin a demanding new mode of social and political relations. Concepts of community and social interaction, systems of meaning, political engagement, and social inclusion all suggest that the Internet may be a factor in change, but not the sort of change many are anticipating (Frost, 2006; Seaton, 2005).

The Internet may be more useful at the local level of government than at other levels (Macintosh, McKay-Hubbard, Shell; 2005). Community Councillors in Scotland who previously relied primarily on word of mouth now find that public access to the Internet and web logs offers an opportunity for greater discussion. Back in North America, a telephone survey on how Georgia residents connect with government via the Internet shows that e-democracy is less common than e-commerce or e-research. It also showed that e-democracy resembled traditional political behaviour by being more prevalent among respondents interested in politics and government (Thomas, Streib; 2005).

The factors predicting online participation often differ from the factors that predict offline participation (Best, Krueger; 2005). Those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend to disproportionately possess these distinct online determinants. There is a greater diffusion of richer data about political actors, policy options, and the diversity of actors and opinion in the public sphere, but it is also easier for people can become politically expressive without being substantively engaged (Howard, 2005). Merely providing online tools is not enough to engage young people democratically (Masters, MacIntosh, Smith; 2005). What people may be mistaking for greater democracy is actually a political and intellectual struggle over the appropriation of appropriating electronic communications media (Eisenberg, 2003). Meanwhile, in the United States, Britain, and the European Union, the democratic potential of the Internet has been marginalized because of how government use of this technology has been framed since the early 1990s.

Their executive-driven, managerial model of interaction has assumed dominance at the expense of consultative and participatory possibilities (Chadwick, May: 2003). Finally, the advice available on the Internet to political strategists about the Internet itself is almost entirely tactical, i.e. it does not promote systemic change. For example, according to the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet provided some lessons on ‘what politicians can learn from the sports industry about the Internet.’ (IPDI, 2006). Those lessons include never underestimating the web video audience; not forgetting the at-work audience; using advertising; thinking locally; making users queue up; not being afraid of social networks; providing quality, privileged information; finding out who the audience is and what it does; letting them talk to each other; and going mobile.

We can now present the second and third parts of the argument. In order to follow those, the reader needs to be able to distinguish properly between strategy and tactics. The reader may do so by asking the questions below: if the answer is yes, it is a strategy. If the answer is not, it is a tactic. (1) Is it memorable i.e. you will easily remember it if you encounter it? (2) Is it intuitively obvious i.e. will you understand it immediately? (3) Does it make coordination easy? (4) Does it engage people and help them stay engaged? (5) Does it have a core idea – metaphor, analogy, image, slogan, role model? (6) Does it help people stay tightly focused on the goal? (7) Does it prevent you from wasting resources? (8) Does it make flexibility easy, does it help people adapt their actions consistently? (9) Does it only change rarely? Not all of these questions can or need to be answered.

2. How a Strategist Will Use the Internet

A political strategist uses the Internet in four main types of activities: governing, lobbying, discussing politicians, and conducting an election campaign. For the purposes of our discussion, we will consider there are also four types of strategists, governing and non-governing, good and bad. A governing strategist is a strategist either in power or acting on behalf of someone who is. A good strategist always uses a core idea, i.e. a metaphor or an image, to facilitate his strategy. A bad strategist will not, and therefore will not harness creativity and intuition in the service of the goal. (Academics like to study bad strategists because they are more interesting, less predictable, and more likely to become their clients.) In general, a strategist will approach any laws about the Internet with an eye to the opportunity or advantages it might create differentially for himself versus his opponents or competitors. Laws will govern what is permissible to express, what financial transactions can occur, what level of privacy is available. What will matter to a good strategist will not be what can be litigated – the law is too slow for most of the good strategist’s tactics and for political life in general. That would be left to the bad strategist.

(a) The governing strategist

A governing strategist is a strategist working on behalf of the government or administration in place, at the local, provincial or territorial, or federal level. If one examines the means by which a government can achieve its goals, which are well-known, it becomes obvious the Internet is only a tool. These means are presented here in increasing order of intrusiveness, the first of which is doing nothing (Dyck, 1991). Letting the problem be handled by forces already existing in society is always an option; the government strategist can either completely ignore the problem or explicitly decide to refer the question to some private sector entity. The second option is the symbolic response, which can mean a statement of government concern, a consultation with those raising problem, the passive dissemination of information, the appointment of a task force or royal commission, or the setting up of a new government department. Here, a strategist might use the Internet to inform the population about the symbolic response, through the creation of a website, discussion forum, interactive features, downloadable publications, etc. It may be valued by the governing strategist because it is a form of direct communications with the public (personal observation, 2003, 2006).

The third means is exhortation, where persuasion is used to secure voluntary compliance with government objectives without recourse to threats or rewards. Again, the possibilities include the creation of websites, discussion forums, etc. The fourth and fifth means are both expenditures. In the case of tax expenditures, there are tax credits and deductions that individuals or companies can claim by spending money in certain ways; political parties, making investments, donating to charities, etc. Bandwidth, website construction, hardware, research costs could be refundable tax credits, for example, or exempt from sales tax or value-added taxes. In the case of public expenditures, there is actual disbursement acquired and controlled by state. There could be granting programs for the internet, for example. Next comes regulation -- almost every aspect of our lives is now regulated by government, in ways we take for granted -- minimum wage laws, highway speed limits, etc. Government regulation tends to interfere with individual or corporate freedom, and so it is more likely to be criticized.

Here, regulation of content and access of the Internet, such as the People’s Republic of China has used, is possible; its promotion or absence can have an impact on traditionally disempowered populations, such as the isolated norther Aboriginal communities in Canada, by increasing dramatically the size of the window on the outside world. There is also taxation, which has the effect of constraining behaviour. The relative extent of intrusiveness of taxation somewhat subjective depending on awareness of and degree of constraint imposed by taxes as well as level of consciousness and support. The tax on buying computers or equipment or provide bandwidth could be taxed separately, as is the case with television’s in the United Kingdom, to provide the budget for the British Broadcast Corporation (BBC). Finally, there is public ownership – in Canada, governments routinely regulate and tax, but nationalization means even more intervention -- it is usually considered a last resort. Here, the government could buy out all the Internet providers and have single provider, whether the public paid for the service, or not.

Because strategic theory assumes that strategy is neutral from an ethical standpoint, the governing strategist is only expected to foster democracy if there is no contradiction between that action and the interests of those already participating in governance, i.e. the established politicians and political parties. The good strategist acting on behalf of the government will use a long term perspective. This strategist will also be different from those who design and deliver programs, policies, plans and services only to the extent that he uses the core idea, or metaphor, in order to act. This guarantees that it will be a strategy and not a plan, which is adopted, and that it will stay relevant as it is implemented. The government strategist is therefore most likely to develop policy, regulation and legislation that will support the status quo, and will not threaten the establishment. It would be consistent with this to have people continue to have to pay for Internet access, and to make it publicly available without making it universally accessible. The bad government strategist is ineffective, but that may also serve the purpose of protecting the status quo.

(b) the non-governing strategist

Turning now to the non-government strategist, the means by which that strategist can act are very different. This strategist will either be lobbying, discussing politics, or campaigning. Table 2: Use of the Internet by Strategic Activity, shows how that non-governing strategist will use the Internet.

Table 2: Use of the Internet by Strategic Activity

Activity	The Good Strategist Will...	The Bad or Unethical Strategist Will...
Lobbying/special interest	Provide accurate information to public; foster discussion of specific issue; fundraise	Provide over-specialized information to public; direct public to act in ways which are not the most effective
Discussion	Give prominence to issues or information ignored by media or politicians; mobilize public; end isolation of activists acting alone	Give voice to extreme elements; provide inaccurate or biased information that hurts credibility; intimidate certain individuals or groups that are not likely to participate
Campaigning	Provide information; make commercials and campaign documentation available; raise funds; increase membership; solicit volunteers	Provide information to attack opponents unfairly; give rise to unsubstantiated rumors or stereotypes; raise counter-websites masquerading as legitimate

3. How the Strategist Analyzes the Internet

The strategist uses the Internet as a single tactic, as the actions of a political strategist are called. Tactics can be reviewed by area (legal, electoral, media and public relations, executive, legislative, and administrative), which is how the Internet’s possible role is reviewed. For some areas of tactics, some analytical questions a strategist would ask are also listed. This shows again that the Internet is a tactic and not a strategy, and therefore cannot of itself transform or just change democracy. Although legal and judiciary tactics are probably the first that come to mind to the readership of this journal, from a political strategist’s standpoint, they are expensive, cumbersome, and slow. The decision to use the law or not is genuinely strategic, and what recourse the legal system actually offers varies from state to state and jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

Most liberal democratic governments have watchdog provisions through which citizens can ask to participate in decision-making or review the government’s performance, as well as a variety of checks and balances on its power. As far as by-laws and organizational charters are concerned, the good strategist will always start by studying them. Either way, the good strategist will ask the following questions about any law, regulation or by-law: does this law fit into a system, i.e. a coherent whole of processes or practices that are organized or institutionalized? Does this law or regulation combine with others to produce a predictable effect on the outcome? Does this particular law or regulation ensure a defined function or role, or guarantee the production of a particular result? Is this particular law or regulation helpful to the objectives of the strategist?

Of any other actor? Is this law or regulation enforced through sanctions? Does this law or regulation affect the tactics of a strategist? Of another actor? Does it affect the significance of actions? The good political strategist will only bother with elections at all if he thinks it will put him on the inside track of decision-making on his, or his client's, issue. Otherwise, he will look to other types of tactics. Electoral tactics include running for public office (only effective when the issue at hand is under the control of a single office and that office is not particularly desirable for other reasons, so there is little competition); getting a commitment from a candidate, preferably in public or in writing; getting a plank adopted in a political party's policy platform; getting a bill passed, which is much harder than getting a plank in the platform, even in political systems where there is party discipline; founding a new party; founding a party wing or faction; and mobilizing voter/public participation. The Internet can be used in a variety of ways as a tool to assist in elections. The best advice on using the Internet is actually transferable from sports websites, as mentioned already.

The next area is media and public relations. Among the options available to the strategist in dealing with the media or the public are: appealing for public support, organizing demonstrations, getting a petition started, organizing letter, fax or e-mail campaigns, writing a letter to the editor, organizing a day of action, organizing a strike, organizing a general strike, organizing a work-to-rule campaign, and developing its membership rolls. The strategist will approach the area of media and public relations by asking the following questions: can the party operatives affect the tone of the coverage, the next article or story to be done, or the angle the media might take? Can the campaign staff? Can the pundits, analysts or commentators? Only when these questions are answered will the good strategist think of how to best use the Internet.

Another set of tactics has to do with the executive, either Cabinet (territorial, provincial or federal), a board of directors, or a city council. In dealing with the executive, the political strategist can write a letter, write a fax, make a phone call, start an e-mail campaign, make a presentation, make a contribution in kind, make a financial contribution, try to activate a member of the executive as an advocate for his or her cause, become the *éminence grise* for a member of the executive, or do research on issues or options for a member of the executive. Here the strategist will use the Internet after answering the following questions: what are the steps to achieving the goal? For each step, what are the alternative steps that can also lead to goal? What are the scenarios you can think of that will achieve the goal? Who decides? Who has the power to make the changes? What are the other possibilities? Are any of the alternatives more effective? Any economical? Any likely to succeed? What arguments are convincing to those who decide? What factors affect the decisions of those who decide? If you were to work backwards, how would you set the steps?

In dealing with the legislative, the political strategist may: provide a legislator or legislators with questions for the house proceedings, provide media briefings or talking points to legislators, provide research on issues to legislators, write letters, organize letter writing campaigns, make presentations to individual legislators, make presentations to groups of legislators such as parties or caucuses, give briefings before committee or commission meetings, write speeches, make contributions in kind to political campaigns or offices, make contributions in money to electoral campaigns. Among the questions members of the legislature are going to ask of the strategist are: what are the critical actors, actions, resources, rules? Where are they situated on in relationship to another? Is the strategy focused on those nodes? Are the efforts concentrated there? How does this change the strategy? How does this affect the tactics? These are the questions to be asked of the Internet as well.

In dealing with the administrative branch of government or organizations, the political strategist can write position papers, provide research or information, make contributions in kind, make contributions in money to electoral campaigns, provide opportunities to speak with interested members of public, write letters, organize letter writing campaigns, make phone calls, organize phone call campaigns, write and send faxes, organize fax campaigns, write and send e-mail, organize email campaigns. A number of these options (providing research or information, make contributions in kind, make contributions in money to electoral campaigns, write letters, organize letter writing campaigns, make phone calls, organize phone call campaigns, send faxes, organize fax campaigns, write e-mails, and organize e-mail campaigns) have already been discussed. In the area of the Internet as tactic, is the change organizational, like in a school, or hospital? Is the change local, like at city hall, town council or band council? Is the change provincial or state? Is it federal, like about national parks? Is the change international, like about the United Nations or the Red Cross? On the tactic's immediate issue, what situation do they want to change? As for the goal of the tactic, what frustrates them, what bothers them? What changes do they want to have happen? Change of government? President? Economic policy? Regulation in their town? Attitudes of people? What would they like to see changed? Regarding the actions taken, who makes the decision to change or not change? Is it the person formally in charge, like the mayor or premier, or is it actually someone else? When have decisions to change been made in the past?

What influenced that decision? What arguments can or have they made that will make the decision go their way? When are they going to make another decision? How can they convince the decision makers to think about another decision? Where can they get the facts that will make the decision go my way? What techniques (letter-writing, presentation, one-on-one lobbying, focusing attention, protesting, etc.) Have they used/not used to change the minds of the people in charge? Who do they try to communicate with, the executive, legislative, voters, media? Turning to resources: what do the bureaucrats need to get the job done? Money? If so, how much? From where? To spend on what? Is it absolutely necessary? How much time do they need? Do they need someone's permission for any step along the way? Who? When? To do what? Do they need anyone's cooperation? Who? When? About what? How do they get it? When do they contact others? How do they follow up? Do they make sure certain people stay out of their way?

There have been some interesting suggestions and experiments with the Internet in recent years, including one proposing to reinvent the town hall meeting and one proposing the involvement of students in foreign policy development (Graham, 2003). The problem with the former is that it does not result in any savings – an electronic town hall meeting is expensive to put together – and it is lacking in the advantages of direct human contact. The problem with the latter is that it is transparently aimed at building a constituency for the policy, since the department will certainly feel entitled to dismiss some policy advice from university students as fooling or impractical. It is also much easier for decision-makers to absent themselves from the event, either physically or by bringing so much work with them that it guarantees their minds are elsewhere. It has been my observation so far, as anecdotal as it has been, that bad strategists are much more common. These are the people who are likely to use the Internet in place of a strategy, and will frame problems or questions in a way that allows them to use the Internet as a solution. This is garbage-can decision-making at its worst.

Conclusion

The Internet is not as universal as the vote, or even available to everyone who usually votes. It is therefore not entirely democratic. To have access, you must own a computer of recent enough vintage to be able to surf easily, and be able to pay the monthly fee to an Internet provider. In the alternative, you need regular access either through high school, in which case you are not likely to be of voting age, or through a university or college because you are a student there. There are access points for the Internet in public places, but these do not allow for the sort of time necessary for political interests to be developed. There is Internet access in workplaces, but increasingly the use of the Internet for personal purposes is monitored by employers. If the Internet ever does become the mainstay of political information, then the poor will have become disenfranchised indeed. I would compare the advent of the Internet in a democracy to the advent of radio in the age of the general magazine, and the advent of television in the age of radio. It will dominate for some time, and it already represents a new expense for political actors without reaching appreciably more people. But it is nonetheless already considered essential. What all of this brings us to, of course, is that the Internet does not represent a new theoretical challenge to the strategic theorist to investigate, but is simply another area of tactics which the strategist will employ, well or badly, for good or ill.

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