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Voerman, Gerrit

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Gerrit Voerman

In 1998 nearly all Dutch political parties that represented in Parliament had established a website (Table 1), beginning with the left-wing parties and then moving to the right. Early in 1994, the social-ecologist GreenLeft was the first Dutch political party to start a site. Labour followed in November. Then came the left-liberal Democrats 1966 (D66) in the middle of 1995, followed by the centre-oriented Christian Democrats (CDA) in February 1996. In May 1997 the right-wing liberal VVD installed a site. Two small right-wing parties brought up the rear in the beginning of 1998.

Table 1. Installation websites political parties, 1994-1998

Established parties		Newcomers	
GL	Jan 1994	NWP	Dec 1996 ?
PvdA	Nov 1994	DG	Jan 1998
D66	mid 1995	NM	Feb 1998 ?
CDA	1 Feb 1996	JIJ	Aug 1997
SP	16 Nov 1996	NWP	?
CD	?	NSVO	Mar 1998
VVD	24 May 1997	VIP	Mar 1998
VVD/TK	24 Jan 1998	KC	30 Mar 1998 ?
GPV	27 Feb 1998		
RPF	Mar 1998 ?		
AOV	?		
S2000	March 1998 ?		

While in general parties on the left were earlier than other parties on the Internet, there are a few exceptions. The extreme right-wing party, CD, seems to have been one of the first Dutch parties to have started a site, although it cannot be ascertained exactly when this happened. Only one party, the rather conservative orthodox-calvinist SGP, has no web presence. For this party, which also refuses to broadcast on television, the new media are still controversial.

An important catalyst for the use of the Internet by parties were the municipal and national elections in March and May of 1998 respectively. Those parties which were already on the Internet renovated and up-graded their sites. Most of the parties without a



site installed one before the start of the election campaign. This was also done by nearly all of the ten newcomers at the national elections. In total, of the 22 parties which ran in these elections, 20 had a site (the VVD even had two: a party site and a special election site).

For the first time, therefore, the election campaign was also fought on the Internet. The new medium offered great opportunities to the parties in terms of the dissemination of quickly retrievable and up-to-date information without media interference. The Internet also offered parties the opportunity to consult of the opinion of the rank-and-file or non-partisan visitors of their website through interactivity. Close observation of the 'digital campaign', however, demonstrated that only a few parties made use of all these possibilities.

Nearly all Dutch parties offered large quantities of information on their web sites. According to an inquiry among the web masters, this was considered the most important function of the party sites: giving information to the voters. As a result, the sites were generally very text-oriented. They mainly contained election platforms, press releases and explanation of political views, along with biographical information on candidates, and news on the campaign agenda. It was striking that the sites were hardly used for 'narrowcasting' - attuning the political message of the party to special groups like younger or female voters. Only VVD and CDA tried to appeal to expatriate voters. Moreover, frequent up-dating of the information proved to be a problem, with only the larger parties being capable of revising their sites daily.

The parties were also reluctant to use their sites for interactive, bottom-up communication - another important potential function of the Internet. The party web masters did not view this as a primary concern, fearing the sites were open to possible abuse from web users. Nevertheless, nearly all the parties (established and newcomers) offered e-mail access to the party's headquarters from their sites. Yet only two gave ample scope for discussion on the party's policies or other topics brought up by visitors: the left-wing, somewhat populist SP, and the right-wing liberal VVD. On a few other sites visitors could participate in a somewhat controlled digital debate.

American commentators have noted the possibilities of rapid response via the Internet, making the medium particularly useful for reacting to unwelcome media reports, or attacks from political opponents during the campaign. Within Dutch political culture, however, negative campaigning is rather unusual and the web sites generally reflected this pattern. In a multi-party system, bigger parties have to work together after the elections, therefore they are not interested in blackening each other.

Similarly, with respect to the design of the sites only a few parties developed the new medium's potential to the full. The Labour Party rather uniquely had quite a lot of web-specific features including a special dynamic 'flash'-version. On this site and two or three others, visitors could play games, listen to audio-fragments, or watch video. The bulk of the sites however, were mostly very static and had few graphics, generally limited to a photo of the party leader.

In addition, rather than levelling the communications playing field for minor parties, it was clear that the smaller and financially less powerful parties were not willing or not able to invest in interactive and/or visually attractive sites. Thus, the advantage the Internet offers to these minor parties, of presenting themselves 'unmediated' to the electorate (independently of the traditional media), is likely to be of little value, since their sites are not as well developed as those of the major parties.

For all the parties, however, it is still debatable how profitable a website is. In 1997 some 8% of the Dutch population over sixteen years was surfing on the Internet every week. This group of frequent Internet-users was predominantly male (74%), under 35 (68%) and earning above-average wages (65%), not exactly a cross-section of the Dutch electorate (research by Trendbox, 22nd July 1997). What is more, not all these surfers can be expected to be interested in party sites. In 1996, only a quarter of the Internet-users in the

United States visited political sites. Only 4% of this group stated that the information they had found had influenced their political opinions (Wu and Weaer, 1997).

Whilst things might change in the future as use of the Internet extends through the population, currently its assets should no be overstated. 'If it does not do any good, it does not do any harm either' - seems to have been the view of many Dutch parties during the last election campaign. No wonder that despite all the opportunities, the 'virtual' campaign did not differ too much from the real one.

References

W. Wu and D. Weaer. (1997). "On-line Democracy or On-line Demagogory? Public Opinion Polls on the Internet", *Press/Politics* 2 (4)

