

Illuminated by the SMOG: Exploring the readability of political websites during the 2010 UK General Election Campaign

Introduction

It is a fact that, since its peak of 83.9% in 1950, there has been a general decline in voter participation at UK General Elections (Denver 2007:28; Kavanagh and Cowley 2010). Although the 2005 General Election saw a mild increase in turnout, it is the record low of 59.4% in 2001 (Kavanagh and Cowley 2010) that appears to have sent a shiver of fear through both the political establishment and academia. Some voiced concern over the potential legitimacy of governments elected on the basis of such a low turnout whilst others highlighted the fact that extremist parties like the BNP might gain the advantage in constituencies where there were high levels of discontent with the current Government. Explanations for the decline in electoral participation are diverse. Some theories are linked to the notion that there is erosion in the level of civic engagement (Butt and Curtice 2010; Clarke et al 2004; Pattie *et al.* 2003). Research has also suggested that it is a generational issue as young people are less likely to engage in politics (see for instance, Electoral Commission 2005; Clarke et al 2004; Heath and Park 1997; Molloy 2002). Moreover, rather than identify any active disengagement from the electoral process, findings indicate that young people are merely “out of the habit of voting” (Electoral Commission 2005:8). However, other authors have claimed that social inequality is to blame, leading to disparate levels of political knowledge and ultimately a lack of engagement (Bynner and Ashford 1994). Finally, for some, citizens’ abstention is due to the time and effort of the voting act itself (Electoral Commission 2005; Sloam 2010).

In order to address this apparent decline in voter numbers, a variety of initiatives have been put in place. Access to postal voting was extended in an attempt to make voting easier for those who, for whatever reasons, were unable or unwilling to access the polling station on Election Day. The Electoral Commission produced a number of public information broadcasts, leaflets and other educational resources to highlight the importance of registering to vote, the relevance of politics to everyday life and the value of actually casting one’s vote in an election. Efforts have also been made to engage young people with politics and, following recommendations in the Crick Report, ‘citizenship education’ has been added to the secondary school curriculum (Pearce and Spencer 1999). Furthermore a review entitled ‘Digital Dialogues’ was commissioned by the Ministry of Justice and carried out by The Hansard Society to explore the uses of new technologies in the process of public engagement and democratic renewal. However, these measures do not appear to have arrested the decline in electoral participation.

There is a significant body of literature that examines the remoteness of certain sections of the electorate to politics and political institutions (Aronowitz 1987; Bartel 1996; Brynner and Ashford 1994; Curtice 2005) whilst others have focused on political understanding (Electoral Commission 2005:21; MacKuen and Parker-Stephen 2006). However, this paper is premised on the notion that for political understanding to occur there has to be a level of functional literacy in order to engage in political discourse. Conversely in order to engage citizens in political discourse political communications must be understandable. Hence, the aim of this paper is to

investigate the readability of a range of political information resources and websites. This will address the issue of whether political communications in their current forms merely exacerbate the apparent disconnect between politics and citizens.

Factors behind the decline in voter numbers

Initial attempts to address the decline in electoral participation outlined earlier may be laudable but the fact that the definitive cause of the problem has yet to be found suggests that they may be addressing the symptoms of the political malaise rather than finding a cure. To date, whilst there has been no shortage of suggestions as to why the decline in participation might have occurred, neither has there been any agreement as to the underlying cause.

Decline in civic duty

One of the most frequently cited suggestions is that the decline in electoral participation is the result of broader social changes, which in turn have prompted growth in levels of civic and electoral disengagement (Blais 2000; Clarke et al. 2005). Putnam (1995) suggests that a growing culture of individualism in the US has not only undermined civic engagement but has also resulted in reduced participation in political life in all of its forms, voting included. This mirrors much of what has been found in the UK where greater levels of individualisation and diversification has been evidenced (Inglehart 1977, Giddens 1991). Particularly apparent are the reduced levels of membership of grassroots political organisations such as civic societies, trade unions and political parties (Dalton 2005; Schudson 1998; Whitely 2001) as well as the reduced levels of voting (Johnson and Jowell 2001). However, some have suggested that there was never active engagement in political participation with Butler and Stokes (1969/1982) illustrating a remoteness of politics to the citizens. This is borne out by seminal works by Berelson et al. (1954); Campbell et al. (1954) amongst others who claimed that there was little involvement and electoral decisions were made purely on the basis of parental voting patterns. However, it is argued that this is an oversimplification. For Whiteley (2011), whilst acknowledging the decline in participation, the nature of participation has changed with the influence of the internet and '*cheque book participation*'.

Don't know, don't care, don't vote

Given that low participation levels are most evident amongst young people (Heath and Park 1997) this leads to claims that this lack of electoral participation is a generational issue. According to Russell (2005) historically the youngest sections of society have exhibited particularly low levels of civic participation but this situation is usually reversed as they age, marry, have children and buy houses. However, there is some concern that this may no longer be the case as the 18-25 age group do not appear to identify with the formal agents and structures that represent the current political system (Gerodimos 2005) and many are retreating from conventional politics to characterise what Pirie and Worcester (1998) identify as the emergence of an 'apolitical generation'. This view is supported by Molloy (2002), who points to 'apathetic' young citizens, ignorant of politics, and ignored by political institutions and parties. Again, it is more complex, there is evidence to suggest that there are certain groups of young people who are indeed engaging in both civic activity and

electoral behaviour. Phelps (2005) argued though that “*young peoples’ political behaviour is qualitatively different to other age groups*” and research conducted by Wring et al. (1999) noted that different groups of young people demonstrated varying levels of interest and engagement. Young people believed they didn’t have a voice and were not represented by the current political parties (Power Report 2006), so in short is it a representation failure rather than a system failure Henn et al. (2002).

Political disengagement

Whilst the lack of representation is a key issue for political disengagement, other discussions of potential causes of decline in voter turnout have focused upon the characteristics, knowledge and actions of voters themselves. Previously, it has been assumed that the decline in levels of voting over recent years has correlated with a decline in citizens’ knowledge, interest and understanding of the political process (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Lusoli et al. 2006). This is supported by a poll by IpsosMORI for the Hansard Society (2010) which said that 56% of people surveyed could not name their local MP or did so incorrectly and only 37% stated that they knew ‘a great deal’ or ‘a fair amount’ about Westminster politics.

Social inequality

The growing levels of economic inequality between the richest and poorest members of UK society have also been cited as a potential contributor to low voter participation. According to Gentlement and Mulholland (2010) the household wealth of the top 10% (£853,000 or more) of the population is now over one hundred times higher than that of the poorest 10% of households whose wealth, including such items as cars and belongings was valued at £8,800 or below. Salt (2008) suggests that, in line with relative power theory (Goodin and Dryzek 1980) power tends to be concentrated in the hands of those with the greatest resources. As a result, the less affluent struggle to identify with the issues and priorities debated by the political elite and give up on any attempts to engage with a process that appears to have little or no relevance for them. This fact is certainly borne out by the findings of research undertaken by the Hansard society (2008) which said that whilst 66% of citizens of social grade AB said they would be certain to vote, only 34% of those in social grade DE said they would do so.

It might also be noted that, rather than being just a social issue, there is some evidence that the decline in voting might be a reflection of dissatisfaction felt by voters with the mis-behaviour of politicians. A succession of scandals culminating in the recent ‘cash for honours’ scandal and the furore over MPs ‘expenses has resulted in a lack of trust and disillusion felt by voters for the Members of Parliament, political parties and the process of government itself (Hansard Society 2010). Mortimore (2003) notes that this is nothing new and that politicians have long suffered from low levels of trust in the eyes of voters. Indeed, qualitative research undertaken by the Hansard society in 2005 revealed that the public felt politicians to be an elite group of hypocrites and liars (Ram 2006) and ‘greedy fat cats’ (Dean 2007). A view endorsed by Fox (2009) who suggests that the action of political parties and Members of Parliament have done little to encourage willing voter engagement. This is particularly evident in the lower socio economic groups without any recognised academic qualifications (Dean 2007).

Lastly, the lack of differentiation between the main political parties and even politicians themselves has also been cited as a potential reason for lack of participation. The tendency of the main parties to seek the ‘middle ground’ have meant that their relative positions have become less distinctive and, from the perspective of the voter, there is little to choose between them (Gosschalk, Marshall et al. 2002). This uniformity of appearance is not helped by the increasing managerialism of politics has seen the rise and growing dominance of a breed of ‘career politicians’ who share very similar backgrounds, characteristics and demeanour (Russell 2005), As a result, it is common for voters to have difficulty distinguishing both between the parties and between candidates themselves and the value of choosing one over another, let alone the value of voting at all, is not clear.

Proposing functional literacy as a compounding cause of political disengagement

A compounding factor for this apparent disconnect is that of a lack of functional literacy amongst UK electors and, it might be argued, amongst the UK political establishment itself. The term ‘functional literacy’ was first coined in World War One and was used in reference to the literacy skills required to meet the needs of modern soldiering (Harman 1977). However, this concept has been broadened to encompass a level of skills that an individual needs to facilitate his or her effective function within a community or group (UNESCO 2010). Dollahite, Thompson *et al.* (1996:123) adopt a similarly broad stance and cite the definition contained in the US’s National Literacy Act of 1991 which states that it is “...*an individual’s ability to read, write, and speak English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one’s goals and develop one’s knowledge and potential*”.

According to a Basic Skills Agency report in May 2000, in some parts of the UK, almost four out of ten adults are functionally illiterate. Furthermore, according to the Commons Public Accounts Committee (2009), up to 16 million adults (nearly half the UK workforce) have reading skills that equate to a level that would normally be expected of children leaving Year 6 of primary school. Kemp and Eagle (2009) summarised age, educational level and expected level of functional literacy in a table that can be found in Appendix 1.

An understanding of the value of literacy within the context of politics and political marketing has long been seen as crucial. Historically literacy, or a lack of it has been used as a tool to maintain systems of hegemony amongst certain classes and within certain societies (Resnick 1983; Scribner 1984). Arnove and Graff (1987) recognised the crippling implications that a lack of literacy holds for citizens through its imposition of economic and societal exclusion and an inability to access resources that might remedy this situation. Conversely, literacy also has the potential to enable citizens to more control over their circumstances and, as such, is seen as an important tool for those seeking to effect social change (Bataille (1976). It is therefore logical that, in order to reverse the social drift away from politics, a priority should be to ensure that the vast majority of the electorate should be functionally and therefore politically literate.

Translated into the field of political marketing, functional *political* literacy may be conceptualised as not only as having an ability to read political material but first

Comment [DD1]: Can we say this?

Comment [JL2]: I put this in originally because I was going to make the argument that the political establishment might be considered they illiterate because the don’t appear to have a functional ability to read, understand and respond to data relating to the levels of literacy in the country – i.e. either they’re illiterate, stupid or they’re ignorant? If you think it’s a useful argument, fine – if not just delete.

having the necessary skills to access information and understand it sufficiently to determine the extent to which there is a need to act upon it as well.

The consequences of poor levels of political literacy amongst the UK population are likely to have a major impact on individual engagement and participation in politics. In an area where the vast proportion of communication is carried by the written word (political manifestos, campaign literature, websites), it is essential for political marketers and political agents to ensure that their material is not only accessible but also comprehensible to the vast majority of the target audience. Therefore the 'readability' of all material designed for consumption by the general public should be tested prior to publication to ensure that it can be both read and understood by its target audience.

Methodology:

Analysing the readability of political information resources/websites

According to Meyer (2003), 'readability' consists of a number of different dimensions, the foundation of which is legibility (Neufeldt et al. 1991, Hartley and Harris 2001, Meyer 2003). According to Allensworth and Luther (1986), legibility encompasses a variety of factors including page layout, use of illustrations, print type, size and colour. Other factors that affect readability include word familiarity and syntactic complexity (Klare 1988), word frequency and sentence length (Meyer 2003, Chall and Dale 1995).

With the objective of analysing the readability of material generated by political organisations at a single point in time, a range of resources were accessed online and analysed on a single given day. Online material, and specifically political party websites, were chosen over printed material to assure currency and to offer clear comparators as to what might be available to a voter seeking information about political parties and the electoral process on a single, given day.

For the purpose of this study, the choice of an appropriate tool to analyse the readability of the text was a challenging one. According to Benjamin (2011) the variety of tools available to the researcher has exploded since the 1980s and there are now in excess of 200 formulas for analysing readability. In this case, the readability of political websites was analysed using the SMOG formula (McLaughlin 1969). SMOG, the acronym for the entertainingly named 'simple measure of gobbledegook', is a measure of the number of years of education required to understand a piece of writing. It has established a reputation for proven accuracy, correctly correlating with other readability formulae and has subsequently achieved widespread use in the academic literature (Mumford, 1997; Wallace & Lemon, 2004). The readability of a piece of writing is calculated using the SMOG index by identifying three groups of 10 consecutive sentences at the beginning, middle and end of a document. All words with three or more syllables within these selected sentences are then counted and the square root of the total calculated and rounded to the nearest integer. Finally, the 'grade level' of the document is calculated by adding the number 3.

Two types of political organisation were selected for analysis: organisations whose mission is to disseminate information about political institutions and to support the democratic process (The Electoral Commission and The Hansard Society) and five

political parties whose aim, prior to the 2010 UK General Election, was to try to communicate their relative value to the electorate in an effort to win their votes. Three parties, The Labour Party, The Conservative Party and The Liberal Democrats were selected for analysis because they are considered the mainstream political parties and ones that the vast majority of those who cast their votes are likely to choose between. In contrast, The Green Party and The British National Party, were chosen for analysis because, whilst perceived to represent the fringe elements of the current political system, they also have a distinct following and both offer quite distinct propositions from those offered by the mainstream parties.

For each of the organisations selected, three web pages or on-line resources were selected for analysis: the website front page and two others that were deemed comparable. For The Electoral Commission and The Hansard Society, it was difficult to find comparable sections for analysis. Therefore, as both of their roles contain elements of the educational, downloadable leaflets or pages containing informative content were identified and analysed. In contrast, comparable material was much more accessible for the political parties. As a result, the front page of each party's website together with material on pages pertaining to economic and health policy were analysed using the SMOG methodology.

FINDINGS

Appendix 2 contains a summary of the web pages and resources analysed, the content, a readability rating per page analysed and an average readability rating per originator. Without exception, all of the material analysed scored in excess of 16 in the SMOG index; a level of literacy that would normally be expected to be achieved following a full and successful secondary school education. However, it has already been noted that, of the UK population, only half are in possession of literacy skills of a level that would enable them to understand the material that has been published on these websites. Possibly of greater concern is that The Electoral Commission and The Hansard Society, organisations tasked with supporting the democratic process through dissemination of information, are themselves just as guilty of pitching the level of their published literature too high.

Also interesting is the fact that it appears the more right wing the political party, the higher the SMOG index score and therefore the lower the level of readability. The Labour Party, traditionally perceived to occupy a leftist position in the political spectrum, had the lowest of the average index score of 16.3, followed jointly by The Green Party and the Liberal Democrats, parties often assumed to have leftist leanings, both with a score of 16.8. The Conservative Party, traditionally perceived to be located on the right of the political spectrum, registered a score of 19.8 according to the SMOG index, followed by the extreme right wing British National Party (BNP) with a score of 20.86. This is counterintuitive, as extremist parties tend to rely on propagandist methods rather than a sophisticated political discourse.

A feature of the results that yielded particular concern was that, in the case of three of the political parties (Conservative, Labour and BNP), the pages that required the highest levels of functional literacy were the web sites' front pages. Where front pages require high levels of functional literacy there is the potential for them to effectively act as a barrier to entry. In such cases where voters encounter such

websites, they may well be dissuaded from any further exploration and turn to less direct but more easily accessible and comprehensible sources of information.

Limitations

However, it should be noted that the test method used and therefore these results are not without limitations. Dollahite et al (1996) highlight that readability formulas such as SMOG do not take into account factors such as 'complexity of ideas, creative thinking patterns of the reader and the reality of adult experiences, including interest, motivation and prior knowledge' (p. 131). This perspective raises a number of questions, in particular whether these parties are actively targeting voter segments who have a certain level of functional literacy or, is it the case, that in pitching the content of their communications so high, they are actively excluding some? Alternatively, one must also question whether any of the bodies analysed in this study took levels of functional literacy into account when constructing their communications strategies. Whatever the case, it is clear that the levels of functional literacy of the UK population have not been taken into account when constructing the web pages analysed here.

Managerial Implications: Getting Through to the Voters

Our findings have important implications for political marketing communications. Whilst it must be acknowledged that this study only covers a minute proportion of the political communications material generated by the organisations studied, it must be assumed that whilst not fully representative, the material examined here is likely to be a strong indicator of the readability of other material produced for the consumption of voters. Therefore, there can be no doubt that it has highlighted one further potential contributor to the problem: a failure to take into account the level of functional literacy possessed by UK citizens when trying to communicate with them.

It has been noted at the outset that, in seeking to understand the reasons why voters appear to have disengaged with conventional vehicles of political participation, a number of potential causes have been identified. The findings from this study illustrate that functional literacy serves to compound disengagement from politics.

Our study shows that the implications for misjudging or ignoring levels of functional literacy when constructing political marketing communications are potentially dire for levels of political participation. In situations where voters do not have the functional literacy skills to understand how to access information generated by political organisations, or struggle to understand the information they do encounter, they are likely either switch off or turn to more accessible sources. These may take the form of such things as 'sound bites' on television or radio, satirical programmes that have political themes such as 'Have I Got News for You' or 'Mock the Week' or formative opinion leaders in the form of friends, family or members of their community. Unfortunately, it is often the case that such sources are rarely balanced, contain little background and often ridicule the political processes. This further undermines political institutions and reinforces any disconnection between the voters and the political process.

Alternatively, individuals keen to get involved in some sort of political activity but finding that they cannot either access or understand the material they are presented with may turn to non-conventional political groups such as consumer or protest groups. In some situations, unfortunately, it results in some individuals being attracted to extreme politics, whose messages are often clearly, if bluntly conveyed.

There are also implications for potential voters who have a willingness to access information about the political process and the candidates, there will always be those who, for reasons of functional illiteracy, may misunderstand the promises made by politicians and political parties. The danger here too is that such individuals may not fully appreciate the implications and consequences of policy decisions made on their behalf and there is potential for disillusionment and disappointment which, ultimately, might lead to disengagement from the political system. It therefore behoves political marketers to maintain a clear message and an on-going dialogue with the electorate to justify policy decisions and clearly explain the reasons for any unexpected outcomes in a way that the majority of the electorate can understand. The key here is delivering a clear message of small, achievable promises, a strategy successfully adopted by the New Labour party (Gould 1998:7).

However, whilst the potential danger for political organisations of ignoring levels of functional literacy amongst the voting public cannot be too heavily stressed, so too should the benefits of taking levels of functional literacy into account. From the perspective of voter persuasion, voters in possession of information in a form they are able to understand, are then able to make judgements about how those decisions will impact upon not only them personally but upon their community and not have to rely upon 'sound-bites' and 'hearsay'. As such, identifying the target audiences level of functional literacy can only enhance the effectiveness of political marketing communication.

In a wider sense, whilst it has been noted that a lack of functional literacy can result in social and economic exclusion, improved functional literacy can improve opportunities for social change. Functional literacy, like any other skill, improves with practice and therefore if 'entry-level' communications can entice voters to engage with conventional politics even at a very low level, there will be significant scope to develop those skills and improve levels of voter engagement.

There are also managerial implications for the political organisations who need to look to their own levels of functional literacy. Defined as the ability to function within a social and practical context, functional literacy may also be measured by one's ability to 'read' a situation, understand it and react in a way that is both constructive and appropriate. This being the case, the inability of political organisations to appreciate the challenges faced by the electorate in accessing and understanding the material that has apparently been generated for their benefit is concerning. Central to all forms of marketing, political or otherwise, is the belief that consumer needs should be central to every decision made – including their need for material that they can both access and understand. Where consumers' needs are not satisfied, they will either look elsewhere, or not buy into the concept at all.

Conclusion

Comment [DD3]: I don't know if we can say this due to the results from the BNP data we have. And we don't have any evidence to support this

Comment [DD4]: I would take this whole section out as it is speculation

Comment [JL5]: I see what you mean but as this is the discussion of potential implications, does it really matter that it's speculation? If you're not happy with it, take it out – frankly I'm very relaxed.

This paper examined the functional literacy of political organisation websites. Although there are distinctions between the communication objectives of the Electoral Commission and Hansard compared with the political parties selected; they all fail to communicate at the required level in order to engage a large proportion of the electorate. To this end, it is the responsibility of all organisations associated with the field of conventional politics to look to their own levels of functional literacy. The inability of political organisations to appreciate the challenges faced by the electorate in accessing and understanding the material that has apparently been generated for their benefit is concerning. Central to all forms of marketing, political or otherwise, is the belief that consumer need should be central to every decision made – including their need for material that they can both access and understood. **Where consumers' needs are not satisfied, they will either look elsewhere, or not buy into the concept at all.** Finally, in representative democracy it is the responsibility of the political elites to engage all the electorate or democracy is ultimately undermined.

Comment [JL6]: If we take the speculative element out earlier, should we take this out also?

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