

Politics and the Internet: the New Zealand Research

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Abstract

The new wave of information communication technologies is transforming politics around the world. A growing international literature notwithstanding, however, scholarship on the relationship between politics and the internet in New Zealand remains scant.

The purposes of this article are to review the published academic literature regarding the impact of the internet on politics in New Zealand and to sketch a future research agenda which will address the gaps in that scholarship. The focus throughout is on research conducted on or about the New Zealand case – whether by New Zealand scholars or others – and on formal institutional politics.

Keywords

Internet, e-democracy, e-government, e-participation

Bio

Richard Shaw is an Associate Professor in and Coordinator of Massey University's Politics Programme. His principal research interests concern the structuring and provision of political advice in executive government, and the impact of digital technologies on the roles of elected representatives. With Chris Eichbaum, he is co-author of *Public Policy in New Zealand: institutions, processes and outcomes* (2008; Pearson/Prentice Hall), and co-editor of *Partisan Appointees and Public Servants: An International Analysis of the Role of the Political Advisor* (2010; Edward Elgar).

Introduction

The new wave of information communication technologies (ICTs) is transforming politics around the world, and a rich literature has emerged from efforts to comprehend the various impacts on politics of, in particular, the internet and email.¹ In New Zealand, however, the equivalent literature remains scant. While ‘much has been written about the role websites and email play in politic[s]’,² not much of it has been written in – or about – New Zealand.

The purposes of this article are to review the academic literature regarding the impact of the new ICTs – and the submedia of the internet and email in particular – on politics in New Zealand, and to sketch a future research agenda addressing the gaps in that scholarship. The grey literature (including, in particular, departmental publications) is not considered at length; also, the impact on politics of some digital technologies (such as mobile telephony) is not assessed. The focus throughout is on research conducted on the New Zealand case – whether by New Zealand scholars or others – and on formal institutional politics.

The article begins by defining several of the major fields within which are clustered international studies of the associations between politics and ICTs. Those fields then serve to structure the subsequent review of the published record in New Zealand. Having sought to illuminate what is known about the relationship between politics and the internet in New

¹ I would like to thank an anonymous referee for comprehensive and constructive comments on an earlier draft of this paper. The international literature includes Bruce Bimber, ‘The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community and Accelerated Pluralism’, *Polity*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (1998), pp. 133-160; Andrew Chadwick, *Internet Politics: States, Citizens, and New Communication Technologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Andrew Chadwick and Philip Howard, (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics* (London: Routledge, 2009); Patrick Dunleavy, Helen Margetts, Simon Bastow and Jane Tinkler, *Digital Era Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Patrick Dunleavy, Helen Margetts, Simon Bastow and Jane Tinkler, ‘Australian e-government in comparative perspective’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2008), pp. 13-26; Rachel Gibson, Wainer Lusoli and Stephen Ward, ‘Online Participation in the UK: Testing a ‘Contextualised’ Model of Internet Effects’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (2005), pp. 56-83; Rachel Gibson, Michael Margolis, David Resnick and Stephen Ward, ‘Election Campaigning on the WWW in the US and UK: A Comparative Analysis’, *Party Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2003), pp. 47-75; Rachel Gibson and Stephen Ward, ‘U.K. Political Parties and the Internet: “Politics as Usual” in the New Media?’, *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1998), pp. 14-38; Rachel Gibson and Stephen Ward, ‘Virtual Campaigning: Australian Political Parties and the Impact of the Internet’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2002), pp. 99-131; Rachel Gibson and Stephen Ward, ‘Introduction: e-Politics—the Australian Experience’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2008), pp. 1-11; Julie King, ‘Democracy in the Information Age’, *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (2006), pp. 16-32; Brian Krueger, ‘Assessing the Potential of Internet Political Participation In the United States: A Resource Approach’, *American Politics Research*, Vol. 30 (2002), pp. 476-498; Paul Nixon and Hans Johansson, ‘Transparency through technology: the internet and political parties’, in Barry Hague and Brian Loader, (eds.), *Digital Democracy. Discourse and Decision Making in the Digital Age* (London: Routledge, 1999); Sarah Oates, Diana Owen and Rachel Gibson, (eds.), *The internet and politics: citizens, voters and activists* (London: Routledge, 2004); Maria Sudulich and Matthew Wall, ‘Keeping up with the Murphys? Candidate Cyber-campaigning in the 2007 Irish General Election’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (2009), pp. 456-475; Ariadne Vromen, ‘People Try to Put Us Down ...’: Participatory Citizenship of Generation X’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2003), pp. 79-101; Ariadne Vromen, ‘Building virtual spaces: Young people, participation and the Internet,’ *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2008), pp. 79-97; Kevin Wallsten, ‘Agenda Setting and the Blogosphere: An Analysis of the Relationship between Mainstream Media and Political Blogs’, *Review of Policy Research*, Vol. 24, No. 6 (2007), pp. 567-587; Stephen Ward, Wainer Lusoli and Rachel Gibson, ‘Australian MPs and the Internet: Avoiding the Digital Age?’, *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (2007), pp. 210-222.

² Gibson and Ward, ‘Introduction: e-Politics—the Australian Experience’, p. 7.

Zealand, a future research agenda is constructed around issues and areas that remain substantially unresearched.

Fields of study

Various terms are used to denote the fields which structure the theoretical and applied study of the diverse associations between ICTs and politics. Attempting to clearly differentiate between umbrella constructs the meanings of which are fluid and contested is a fraught exercise, although not necessarily one in futility. Stephen Coleman, a leading scholar in the field, puts matters this way:

Do we really know – when we use terms like *e-government*, *e-governance*, *e-democracy* – what any of these terms actually mean? Is the ubiquitous ‘e’ anything more than the 21st century’s favourite quick fix prefix; [a] metaphor in desperate search of tangibility? Can democracy – this term that we throw around as if we all understand it and agree about it – can it, as a term, be regarded as having a coherent and substantive meaning when it is so often appropriated by the self-serving rhetorics of corporate, imperial and other exclusive interests? And when we combine such pliable and hybrid buzzwords and get *e-democracy*, can we expect this to be a term that illuminates more than it hides? We should try to make some sense of these terms at the outset, because too often terms are used as if they are already agreed ... and beyond dispute – and it is precisely at that point in the use of terminology that we get things badly wrong.³

The scholarship reviewed in this article is in such a state of flux that perhaps the best that can be hoped for is to demonstrate how the different fields illuminate one or another aspect of the phenomena under study. With Coleman’s call (and his caveats) in mind, then, this section sketches different understandings of the relevant heuristics. ‘E-democracy’ – which has been characterised as ‘a work in progress, perhaps a work in permanent progress, rather than a completed historical construct’⁴ – is arguably the most all-encompassing of these concepts. Having emerged amidst concerns over the failings (real or perceived) of representative democracy, and evidence of mounting civic disengagement, e-democracy has been defined as ‘the use of information and communications technologies and strategies by “democratic sectors” within the political processes of local communities, states/regions, nations and on the global stage’.⁵ More succinctly, it has been interpreted as ‘the processes and structures of electronic communication which enable the electorate and the elected to connect’.⁶

E-democracy is frequently imbued with a clear political project: the transformation of the political practices, cultures and institutions of representative democracy (or what has colourfully been described as the establishment of a ‘new Athenian age’⁷). The normative emphasis, in short, is a commitment to increased citizen participation in representative democracies, and to bilateral rather than unidirectional conversations between government and governed. Coleman’s work on direct representation, in which ICTs enable elected representatives to be tightly connected to the preferences and knowledge of the citizenry (albeit in the continuing context of representative institutions), reflects the aspirational nature of much

³ Stephen Coleman, ‘Direct representation: a new agenda for e-democracy’, *Keynote Address to the Australia Electronic Governance Conference* (Centre for Public Policy, University of Melbourne, 2004), <http://www.public-policy.unimelb.edu.au/egovernance/ConferenceContent.html> (October 2009), p. 1.

⁴ Coleman, ‘Direct representation: a new agenda for e-democracy’, p. 2.

⁵ Steven Clift, ‘E-Democracy, E-Governance and Public Net-Work’, 2003, <http://www.publicus.net/articles/edempublikenetwork.html> (October 2009). ‘Democratic sectors’ include governments, elected officials, media, political parties and interest groups, civil society organizations, international governmental organizations, and citizens/voters.

⁶ King, ‘Democracy in the Information Age’, p. 4.

⁷ Coleman, ‘Direct representation: a new agenda for e-democracy’, p. 4.

e-democracy literature.⁸

Perhaps the most recent emergent field is that of 'e-participation'. There is a view – endorsed in this article – that e-participation represents a refinement of research in extant fields; Macintosh, for instance, suggests that it is one of two sub-sets of e-democracy (the other being e-voting), in the sense that e-participation practices constitute means of achieving the normative object of proponents of e-democracy.⁹ Others, however, claim that e-participation is 'becoming an independent area of interest in its own right'.¹⁰ At one level the term has been used to describe the use of ICTs to involve citizens in finding solutions for social problems.¹¹ This approach tends to direct attention to public engagement in policy implementation; in so doing, it tends to take as given prior political processes out of which particular issues have come to be constituted as matters worthy of government's attention.

There are, however, more nuanced conceptions. Thus, e-participation 'involves the extension and transformation of participation in societal democratic and consultative processes mediated by information and communication technologies.'¹² It has also been portrayed as the use of ICTs to 'support information provision and "top-down" engagement, i.e. government-led initiatives, or "ground-up" efforts to empower citizens, civil society organisations and other democratically constituted groups to gain the support of their elected representatives'.¹³ More broadly still, e-participation has been defined as 'all the ways in which citizens interact with one another or with other parties on the Internet' in political, policy or social contexts.¹⁴

These latter definitions permit a focus on material problem solving, but also on the politics of the agenda-setting processes that precede policy implementation, and on those citizen-to-citizen interactions through which social capital accrues. Further, they direct attention not only to participation between government and citizens, but also to interaction between citizens and citizens (both within and beyond formal institutional politics). If the directionality of communication suggested by 'e-government' (see below) is government-to-citizen (where government is the focal point), then that suggested by 'e-participation' is citizen-to-government and/or citizen-to-citizen (where the citizen is the focal point).

As might be expected, there are also competing definitions of 'e-government' (which has led one scholar to complain that the concept suffers from 'definitional vagueness'¹⁵). Thus, e-government – or, as Fountain would have it, either 'digital government' or the 'virtual state',¹⁶ –

⁸ Coleman, 'Direct representation: a new agenda for e-democracy'. See also Stephen Coleman, 'Cutting Out the Middleman: From Virtual Representation to Direct Deliberation' in Barry Hague and Brian Loader, *Digital Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁹ Ann Macintosh, 'Characterizing e-participation in policy-making', *Proceedings of the 37th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (Washington: Computer Society Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Oystein Saebo, Jeremy Rose and Leif Flak, 'The shape of eParticipation: Characterizing an emerging research area', *Government Information Quarterly*, Vol. 25, Issue 3 (2008), pp. 400-428. See also Clive Sanford and Jeremy Rose, 'Characterizing eParticipation', *International Journal of Information Management*, Vol. 27, Issue: 6 (2007), pp. 406-421.

¹¹ Albert Meijer, Nils Burger and Wolfgang Ebbers, 'Citizens4Citizens: Mapping Participatory Practices on the Internet', *Electronic Journal of e-Government*, Vol. 7, Issue 1 (2009), pp. 99-112, available online at www.ejeg.com.

¹² Saebo, Rose and Flak, 'The shape of eParticipation: Characterizing an emerging research area', pp. 400-401.

¹³ Ann Macintosh and Angus Whyte, (2006) 'Evaluating how e-participation changes local democracy', *e-Government Workshop* (Brunel University, London, 2006), <http://www.iseing.org/egov/eGOV06> (October 2009), p. 2.

¹⁴ Meijer, Burger and Ebbers, 'Citizens4Citizens: Mapping Participatory Practices on the Internet', p. 103.

¹⁵ Mete Yildiz, 'E-government research: reviewing the literature, limitations and ways forward', *Government Information Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2007), p. 646.

¹⁶ Jane Fountain, *Building the virtual state: Information technology and institutional change* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001).

has been conceived as ‘the relationships between governments, their customers (businesses, other governments, and citizens), and their suppliers (again, businesses, other governments, and citizens) by the use of electronic means’¹⁷, and as ‘the use of technology, especially Web-based applications, to enhance access to and efficiently deliver government information and services’.¹⁸

E-government definitions of this nature tend to a government-centric view of the digital provision of services to citizens (contra the e-democracy and e-participation literatures, which typically problematise relations between citizens and elected representatives). More recent conceptions are less restricted. For Margetts e-government constitutes ‘the use by government of digital technologies internally and externally, to interact with citizens, firms, other governments, and organizations of all kinds’.¹⁹ While government remains the focal point, this definition is permissive of a range of digitally mediated interactions – within government and between citizens and institutional actors – that extend beyond the electronic delivery of services.

Alongside e-democracy, e-participation and e-government there are other terms being used to capture aspects of the relationship between ICTs and politics, although a thorough review of each of these is beyond the scope of this article. ‘E-governance’, for instance, has been coined to illustrate the role of ICTs in ‘steering the public domain’,²⁰ while ‘digital democracy’, conceived as ‘a collection of attempts to practice democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions, using ICTs ... as an addition, not a replacement for traditional ‘analogue’ political practices’, is preferred by some to e-democracy.²¹ Sometimes these terms denote fields of study; at other times – and occasionally simultaneously – they are used to describe social practices which are facilitated or enhanced by digital technologies and directed at a normative end point. They are used both descriptively (in an attempt to capture some aspect or other of the complex relationship between political agency and technology) and normatively (to reflect a future state of affairs in which the communicative ‘space’ between electors and elected has been reduced, and citizens’ sense of political efficacy enhanced). But what characterises all of this activity, perhaps, is a desire to illuminate how politics – both institutionally and in terms of individual agency – is utilising, and is in turn to some extent being transformed by, the new ICTs.

The internet and politics in New Zealand

In New Zealand, the relevant scholarly endeavour is being played out against a backdrop of increasing internet use. Recent New Zealand data indicate that over 70 per cent of households have a home computer; that some two thirds of all households enjoy access to the internet at home (33 per cent have broadband and 30 per cent dialup access); and that nearly 70 per cent of individuals use the internet at some point in the year.²²

¹⁷ Grady Means and David Schneider, *Meta-capitalism: The e-business revolution and the design of 21st century companies and markets* (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2000).

¹⁸ Mary Brown and Jeffrey Brudney, ‘Achieving advanced electronic government services: An examination of obstacles and implications from an international perspective’, *Paper presented at the National Public Management Research Conference* (Bloomington, Indiana, 2001).

¹⁹ Helen Margetts, ‘Public management change and e-government’, in Chadwick and Howard, *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, p. 114. See also Rachel Silcock, ‘What is e-Government?’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (2001), pp. 88-101.

²⁰ Meijer, Burger and Ebbers, ‘Citizens4Citizens: Mapping Participatory Practices on the Internet’, p. 99.

²¹ Kenneth Hacker and Jan Van Dijk, (eds.), *Digital democracy, issues of theory and practice* (London: Sage Publications, 2000), p. 1.

²² Statistics New Zealand, ‘Household Use of Information and Communication Technology: 2006’, 2007a, <http://www.stats.govt.nz> (March 2009). For further particulars see Allan Bell, Charles Crothers, Ian Goodwin, Karishma Kripalani, Kevin Sherman and Philippa Smith, *The Internet in New Zealand*

More specifically, over 90 per cent of New Zealanders send or receive emails and 85 per cent regularly surf the internet, but only 40 per cent seek online access to information about government organisations or public authorities.²³ On the supply-side of the digital equation, 97 per cent of government organisations have websites. Virtually all of these provide access to static information. Some 56 per cent also contain interactive functionality (such as the opportunity to complete online forms); 28 per cent contain dynamic information (e.g. webcams); and 26 per cent offer online transactional services.²⁴

Further, the 2008 General election was arguably the first in which parties and public agencies made extensive use of the internet (and other digital technologies) in other than a passive, information-delivery manner. That year, parties and agencies used the internet to do everything from encourage young voters to enrol to post campaign speeches on YouTube.

In that wider context, the first challenge – in an article seeking to span the extant research on the relationship between the internet and politics in New Zealand – is to settle on an appropriate means of categorising contributions to the literature. That is not wholly straightforward for, as Saebo *et al.* note, settling on a structured approach is difficult when the relevant literature comprises ‘emerging field[s] with poorly defined boundaries and research styles’.²⁵ Different approaches to this conundrum have been taken. Using an inductive method, Saebo *et al.* generated a classificatory schema (built around actors, contextual factors, e-participation effects, and evaluations) from a close reading of the e-participation scholarship.²⁶ Yildiz’s review of the e-government literature sifts contributions according to authors’ definitions of the construct, preferred means for explaining the evolution of e-government practices, and positions on the organisational impact of adopting new technologies.²⁷ A more ambitious framework is offered by Chadwick and Howard who, in their seminal *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, structure the international literature in various fields around four over-arching foci: institutions, behaviour, identity, and law and politics.²⁸

While each of these approaches has its merits, the modest quantum and scope of the New Zealand literature is such that it seems prudent to organise our own scholarship according to the three major fields of study sketched above: e-democracy, e-participation and e-government. An additional element, however, needs to be added to this mix. Bearing in mind Coleman’s reference to ‘works in progress’, Gibson and Ward’s distinction between macro-, meso- and micro-level studies is used to achieve a more finely-grained classification of New Zealand contributions in the fields of e-participation and e-democracy.²⁹

2007. *Final Report* (Auckland: Institute of Culture, Discourse and Communication, AUT University, 2008); Peter Chen, ‘Online Media’, in Chris Rudd, Janine Hayward and Geoffrey Craig (eds.), *Informing Voters? Politics, Media and the New Zealand Election 2008* (Auckland: Pearson Educational, 2009); Philippa Smith, Nigel Smith, Kevin Sherman, Karishma Kripalani, Ian Goodwin and Allan Bell, ‘The Internet: Social and demographic impacts in Aotearoa New Zealand’, *Observatorio Journal*, Vol. 6 (2008), pp. 307-330.

²³ Bell, Crothers, Goodwin, Kripalani, Sherman and Smith, *The Internet in New Zealand 2007. Final Report*.

²⁴ Statistics New Zealand, ‘Government Use of Information and Communication Technology: 2006’, 2007b, <http://www.stats.govt.nz> (March 2009).

²⁵ Saebo, Rose and Flak, ‘The shape of eParticipation: Characterizing an emerging research area’; Yildiz, ‘E-government research: reviewing the literature, limitations and ways forward’, p. 402.

²⁶ Saebo, Rose and Flak, ‘The shape of eParticipation: Characterizing an emerging research area’.

²⁷ Yildiz, ‘E-government research: reviewing the literature, limitations and ways forward’.

²⁸ Chadwick and Howard, *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*.

²⁹ Gibson and Ward, ‘Introduction: e-Politics—the Australian Experience’.

E-government in New Zealand

Arguably, the field of e-government accounts for the majority of New Zealand studies of the relationship between politics and ICTs. Unsurprisingly, most of this literature has been generated within New Zealand, although New Zealand does feature in at least one comparative collection (in which it attracts less than favourable assessments of its tardiness, relative to other jurisdictions, in developing e-government (and e-commerce) strategies).³⁰ Further, developments within central government tend to be the focus of most research (although Deakins *et al.*, who assessed a series of local government e-initiatives, including the potential use of social networking sites for community engagement, are an exception).³¹

Most studies are concerned with the efficacy and efficiency of service delivery via the internet. A small portion of this work has a comparative dimension. In an early contribution, Hernon compared the approaches to information provision and management of public sector agencies in the USA and New Zealand (noting, somewhat quaintly in retrospect, that 'government information in both countries need not appear in textual form').³² More recently, Gauld *et al.* examined Australian and New Zealand governments' capacity at the state/local and federal/national levels to answer a question posted by email (and found that New Zealand consistently out-performed its neighbour).³³ Similarly, Bundy and Veness *et al.* have also undertaken trans-Tasman comparisons in ICT use in public libraries and medicine respectively.³⁴

The majority of contributions, however, focus on the e-government experience at home. Some of this work – which is spread across the spectrum of government activity from, for instance, health³⁵ and library services³⁶ to digital records management³⁷ – finds evidence of success, or at least of progress. Smith *et al.*, for example, note that the websites of many

³⁰ Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow and Tinkler, *Digital Era Governance*.

³¹ Eric Deakins, Stuart Dillon and Hamed Al Namani, 'Local e-Government Development Philosophy in China, New Zealand, Oman, and the United Kingdom', in Dan Remenyi, (ed.), *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on E-Government* (RMIT University: Melbourne, 2008a), pp. 109-119; Eric Deakins, Stuart Dillon and Hamed Al Namani, 'The Role of Online Social Networking in Public Administration', in Dan Remenyi, (ed.), *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on E-Government* (RMIT University: Melbourne, 2008b), pp. 299-307.

³² Peter Hernon, 'Government on the Web: A Comparison between the United States and New Zealand', *Government Information Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (1996), pp. 419-443.

³³ Robin Gauld, Andrew Gray and Sasha McComb, 'How responsive is E-Government? Evidence from Australia and New Zealand', *Government Information Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2009), pp. 69-74.

³⁴ Alan Bundy, 'Places of Connection: New Public and Academic Library Buildings in Australia and New Zealand', *APLIS*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2004), pp. 32-47; Michael Veness, Glenys Rikard-Bell and Jeanette Ward, 'Views of Australian and New Zealand radiation oncologists and registrars about evidence-based medicine and their access to Internet based sources of evidence', *Australasian Radiology*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (2003), pp. 409-415.

³⁵ Jason Eberhart-Phillips, Katherine Hall, G Peter Herbison, Sarah Jenkins, Joanna Lambert, Richard Ng, Martha Nicholson and Lorna Rankin 'Internet use amongst New Zealand general practitioners', *New Zealand Medical Journal*, Vol. 113, No. 1108 (2000), pp. 135-137; Eunicia Tan and Kimm Yates, 'Use of information technology in New Zealand emergency departments', *Emergency Medicine Australasia*, Vol. 19, No. 6 (2007), pp. 515-522.

³⁶ Brett Parker, 'Maori access to information technology', *Electronic Library*, Vol. 21, No. 5 (2003), pp. 456-460; Joanne Shaw, 'Wireless Solutions for Public Libraries', *APLIS*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2006), pp. 85-88.

³⁷ Daniel Dorner, 'Public sector readiness for digital preservation in New Zealand: The rate of adoption of an innovation in records management practices', *Government Information Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2009), pp. 341-348.

government departments now enable considerable interactivity, including the capacity to navigate around a site in Maori.³⁸

Other scholarship, however, is more critical. In a finding that is consistent with the wider international experience,³⁹ Cullen and Houghton note that in many instances the gap between intentions and outcomes remains wide, and that the significant degree of interagency cooperation that is essential to successful e-government remains a substantial obstacle.⁴⁰ In a similar vein, and on more than one occasion, Gauld has drawn attention to the influence which machinery-of-government and other contextual variables have had on failures in electronic information management in the public health sector.⁴¹ Gauld and Goldfinch provide perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of the causes and consequences of e-government failure.⁴² Their publication predated the 2009 furore concerning the State Services Commission's procurement and contracting arrangements with Voco Ltd., but in aggregate their case studies stand as a salutary reminder of the importance of guarding against over-stating the benefits (such as savings, efficiencies and enhanced community participation) that are often claimed for e-government initiatives.⁴³

A second thematic constant in the e-government literature – and one compatible with a focus extending beyond service delivery – concerns the extent to which new technologies contribute to fundamental social change. On this, Lips has observed that:

transformation may not be driven purely by technology; that, actually, the technology, or the 'e' in E-Government, is often the least important factor in successful E-Government initiatives. And, most challengingly, [it is increasingly acknowledged] that truly transformed, citizen-centric government ... may well require the input of citizens at the design as well as the consumption stage of E-Government.⁴⁴

The call, then, is for what has been largely a supply-side project to accommodate more extensive public input (although whether there exists a corresponding demand on the part of those citizens for opportunities to make such a contribution remains unclear). Lips cites the wiki which enabled people to contribute to the drafting of the new Police Act as an example of just such a project.⁴⁵ Other recent opportunities for citizen input include the use of two social networking sites by the Electoral Commission in the run up to the 2008 General election (although these were intended to encourage young voters to enrol, rather than to provide channels for contributing directly to policy formation).⁴⁶

³⁸ Smith, Smith, Sherman, Kripalani, Goodwin, and Bell, 'The Internet: Social and demographic impacts in Aotearoa New Zealand'.

³⁹ Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow and Tinkler, *Digital Era Governance*.

⁴⁰ Rowena Cullen and Caroline Houghton, 'Democracy online: an assessment of New Zealand government Websites', *Government Information Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2000), pp. 243-267.

⁴¹ Robin Gauld, 'One step forward, one step back? Restructuring, evolving policy, and information management and technology in the New Zealand health sector', *Government Information Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2004), pp. 125-142; Robin Gauld, 'Public sector information system project failures: Lessons from a New Zealand hospital organization', *Government Information Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2007), pp. 102-114.

⁴² Robin Gauld and Shaun Goldfinch, *Dangerous enthusiasms: E-government, computer failure and information system development* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2006).

⁴³ For Neil Walters report on this see <http://www.ssc.govt.nz/display/document.asp?DocID=7122>

⁴⁴ Miriam Lips, 'Before, After or During the reforms? Towards Information-Age Government in New Zealand', *Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2008a), p. 22.

⁴⁵ Lips, 'Before, After or During the reforms? Towards Information-Age Government in New Zealand'. Visit <http://wiki.policeact.govt.nz>; see also www.stuff.co.nz/4215797a10.html

⁴⁶ See <http://www.elections.org.nz/news/challenge-issued-2008.html>. The Electoral Enrolment Centre, the Electoral Commission and the Chief Electoral Office also co-host a website (ivotenz.org.nz) which informs young voters about voting, elections and the electoral system.

This more overtly normative strand within the e-government literature challenges practitioners to move ‘beyond the surface of benchmarking findings [and to] demonstrat[e] actual change’.⁴⁷ It reflects mounting scepticism about what can, or should, be attempted via e-government. Gauld and Goldfinch, for instance, express concerns about the incidence, and cost, of e-government failures, and warn against the tendency of enthusiasts to exaggerate what can be achieved online.⁴⁸ But this emerging disposition also reflects an awareness that what is of interest is how, if at all, political actors – both institutional and informal – are actually *using* the new ICTs. As Lips has pointed out, ‘[e]-Government is not just about applying the technology: it involves redesigning the way government works’.⁴⁹

E-democracy and e-participation in New Zealand

There are also New Zealand studies consistent with the fields of e-democracy and e-participation. However, given that the extent to which e-democracy and e-participation constitute discrete fields of study remains open to contest, precisely which of these two areas specific contributions sit most comfortably in is frequently unclear. For instance, while Hopkin’s and Matheson’s article on political blogging might be considered an inquiry into e-democracy, it might equally be treated as a commentary on a specific mode of e-participation.⁵⁰

research at the systemic level

By approaching matters from an institutional perspective, however, a typology developed by Gibson and Ward allows research that falls under the broad rubric of e-democracy/e-participation to be sorted into three categories: systemic, meso and micro. Systemic level studies are primarily concerned with ‘structural shifts in the workings of government and the balance of power between the citizen and the state’.⁵¹ In the New Zealand context, the bulk of the relevant work falls within the field of e-government. But this category would also encompass research on, say, ways in which digital technologies are being deployed by citizens to strengthen mutual relationships between citizens and elected representatives, or to recalibrate the informal rules of the political game. As will become apparent, however, with the exception of the e-government studies reviewed above, there remains relatively little research in New Zealand research at the systemic level.

research at the meso level

Meso level research examines ‘how the mediating or organisational supports of the representative system, such as parties and the established mass media’ have adapted to the internet.⁵² Such research includes analyses of changes in the relationship between the Fourth Estate and political parties occasioned by the advent of the internet, and studies of the extent to which use of digital technologies is influencing the *modus operandi* of parties, their campaign practices, intra-party relations, and relations between parties and citizens.

E-government studies aside, perhaps the greatest concentration of research in New Zealand concerns the use made of the internet and sundry submedia by political parties, especially in the context of election campaigns. Typically, these focus on parties’ uses of websites, and on

⁴⁷ Miriam Lips, ‘E-lectrifying Government’: Challenges and Opportunities for E-Government Research’, *Keynote Address to the ICEO8 Conference* (Wellington: Victoria University, 2008b).

⁴⁸ Gauld and Goldfinch, *Dangerous enthusiasms: E-government, computer failure and information system development*.

⁴⁹ Lips, ‘Before, After or During the reforms? Towards Information-Age Government in New Zealand’, p. 22.

⁵⁰ Kane Hopkins and Donald Matheson, ‘Blogging the New Zealand Election: The Impact of New Media Practices on the Old Game’, *Political Science*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (2005), pp. 93-107.

⁵¹ Gibson and Ward, ‘Introduction: e-Politics—the Australian Experience’, p. 1.

⁵² Gibson and Ward, ‘Introduction: e-Politics—the Australian Experience’, p. 1.

whether or not the internet has levelled the political playing field or simply reinforced the institutional advantages some parties (particularly those with parliamentary representation) enjoy over others. One of the earliest such contributions is from Roper who, in the infancy of the internet, concluded that most parties had no clear, coherent sense of how to use the new technology for political purposes, and tended therefore to establish websites simply because they felt they ought to.⁵³

As the internet became more familiar, so parties increasingly wove it into their campaigns – if not altogether successfully or effectively. Barker surveyed candidates in the 2002 General election, seeking their views on the value of websites as campaigning tools.⁵⁴ Her study is unusual in that as well as surveying parties' candidates she also sought the views of a small number of voters on various aspects of parties' websites (including overall attractiveness, clarity of layout, scope for interaction, etc.). What is not unusual is her conclusion that in 2002 (with the partial exception of the ACT Party) websites were used by parties and candidates in a 'top-down' manner. Opportunities for interaction between institutional and non-institutional political actors were limited, such that parties' online presences amounted to little more than 'a brochure in the sky',⁵⁵ and fell some way short of providing interactive means of engaging voters.

Those conclusions have since been echoed by others. Ray Miller has also found that, at least during campaigns, parties tend to emphasise the delivery of information to, rather than active engagement with, voters.⁵⁶ Likewise, Conway and Dorner, in a quantitative study which is atypical for having examined website design and use outside of election campaigns, concluded that (the Greens aside) New Zealand's parties were under-utilising the potential of their websites.⁵⁷ Capturing the tenor of these views, Pederson has described the campaign websites of most New Zealand parties as virtual 'phonebook[s]'.⁵⁸

More recently, there have been some indications that parties are gradually coming to terms with the potentiality of the internet. Chen's research, in particular, suggests that the 2008 General election campaign marked the point at which most parties set aside a one-to-many mode of engagement in favour of using the internet for more personalised and, to some extent, interactive engagement.⁵⁹ The Maori Party's website centred on a blog; the Greens deployed a range of submedia including viral videoing, text messaging, and the capacity for visitors to customise online billboards; and the National Party encouraged networking amongst its overseas supporters via a secondary website. By distinguishing between 'old' new media (such as websites and email) and 'new' new media (principally social networking sites and online video), Chen is able to frame citizens' engagement with campaigns as either passive (as consumers of online political content) and/or active (as creators of content). Further, while the strength, if any, of the association between parties' and candidates' use of online media and election outcomes remains unclear, it does appear that the deployment of those media has some bearing on public perceptions of different parties, and of their fitness for public office.

⁵³ Juliet Roper, 'New Zealand Political Parties On-line: The World Wide Web as a tool for democratisation or for political marketing?', in Chris Toulouse and Timothy Luke, (eds.), *The Politics of Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

⁵⁴ Liz Barker, 'Party Websites', in Janine Hayward and Chris Rudd, (eds.), *Political Communication in New Zealand* (Auckland: Pearson Education, 2004).

⁵⁵ Barker, 'Party Websites', p. 89.

⁵⁶ Ray Miller, *Party Politics in New Zealand* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵⁷ Matthew Conway and Dan Dorner, 'An evaluation of New Zealand Party Political Websites', *Information Research: An International Electronic Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2004), article 196, <http://informationr.net/ir/9-4/paper196.html> (March 2009).

⁵⁸ Karina Pederson, 'Electioneering in Cyberspace', in Stephen Levine and Nigel Roberts, (eds.), *The Baubles of Office. The New Zealand Election of 2005* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2007), p. 236.

⁵⁹ Chen, 'Online Media'.

Perhaps reflecting the emerging nature of such research in New Zealand, many studies have sought to lay a descriptive foundation of parties' use of the internet. With one or two exceptions theorisation remains under-emphasised. One such is Pederson's exploration of New Zealand parties' use of websites in the 2005 General election campaign, which found evidence in support of both the 'normalisation' and 'levelling of the playing field' hypotheses.⁶⁰ Assessing the extent to which parties' websites provide information, generate resources, and encourage participation in the party's affairs, Pedersen concludes that while the internet reduces disparities in the capacity of non-parliamentary and parliamentary parties to disseminate their messages, smaller parliamentary parties do not appear similarly advantaged relative to their larger parliamentary counterparts. A presence in parliament, and the various institutional and other resource advantages that subsequently accrue, appears to be a critical independent variable in shaping parties' capacities' to make the most of the internet.

research at the micro level

Studies undertaken at the individual or micro level explore 'public attitudes towards, and use of, the internet for engagement in the political process'.⁶¹ Much of this work focuses on the prospects the internet holds out for the encouragement of political re-engagement (especially on the part of young people): what tends to motivate research of this nature - a la Coleman - is a desire to establish whether or not use of the new technology has, or might, enhance the quality of democracy and blur the boundary between the private and the public realms occasioned by the erection of institutions of representative democracy.

There has been only a limited amount of micro-level research in New Zealand, and most of that has concerned public engagement with and attitudes to the political deployment of the internet.⁶² Citizens' participation in politically related cyber-practices such as political blogging, and the extent to which this activity has any material bearing on the political process, has received particular attention.⁶³ Hopkins, and Hopkins and Matheson, have assessed the degree to which political blogs (which, they point out, constitute a small proportion of all blogs) added to the quality of, as opposed to the quantum level of 'noise' in, public debate in the run-up to the 2005 General election.⁶⁴ Their conclusion - that any impact was disappointingly minor - contradicts the common assumption that blogs rejuvenate political debate by bypassing mainstream media outlets and enabling a larger number of voices to be heard.

There is evidence, for instance, that - much as is the case with mainstream media outlets - blogs tend to cover elections as spectacles, rather than focusing on substantive policy issues.⁶⁵ And a certain circularity appears to apply: not only do most blogs recycle news generated by mainstream media outlets rather than investigate and break new stories, 'the highest profile

⁶⁰ Karina Pederson, 'New Zealand Parties in Cyberspace', *Political Science*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (2005), pp. 107-117.

⁶¹ Gibson and Ward, 'Introduction: e-Politics-the Australian Experience', p. 1.

⁶² Bell, Crothers, Goodwin, Kripalani, Sherman, and Smith, *The Internet in New Zealand 2007. Final Report*; Peter Fitzjohn and Rob Salmond, 'The Battle of the Blogs: A Phony War?', in Stephen Levine and Nigel Roberts, (eds.), *The Baubles of Office. The New Zealand Election of 2005* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2007); K. Hopkins, *Blogs, political discussion and the 2005 New Zealand General Election* (PhD thesis, Massey University, Palmerston North, 2008); Hopkins and Matheson, 'Blogging the New Zealand Election: The Impact of New Media Practices on the Old Game'; Miller, *Party Politics in New Zealand*; Smith, Smith, Sherman, Kripalani, Goodwin, and Bell, 'The Internet: Social and demographic impacts in Aotearoa New Zealand'.

⁶³ Blogging by parties' candidates and by MPs has, in contrast, received little attention thus far (which may reflect that many such blogs allow little or no interactivity, and tend to read like recycled press releases).

⁶⁴ Hopkins, *Blogs, political discussion and the 2005 New Zealand General Election*; Hopkins and Matheson, 'Blogging the New Zealand Election: The Impact of New Media Practices on the Old Game'.

⁶⁵ Hopkins, *Blogs, political discussion and the 2005 New Zealand General Election*, p. 241.

blogs on public affairs [are] read disproportionately within the media and political cultures for their insider gossip and argument'.⁶⁶ In addition, Fitzjohn and Salmond explain that '[c]ompared to other forms of media, the audience for blogs is small and heavily tilted towards the political élite'.⁶⁷ In effect, not only are the vast majority of blogs viewed by few people other than their authors, the most popular political blogs risk becoming part of the very political establishment they may set out to disrupt. Moreover, as they tend to be read by people with well-formed partisan preferences, their capacity to mobilise or influence undecided voters – or indeed to serve as a forum for engaging with issues in a reflexive and mature manner – appears to be relatively modest. If anything, the New Zealand research suggests that 'individuals, freed from institutional requirements to be fair, balanced and accountable for their statements, have tended to rant'.⁶⁸

Other studies, too, find little evidence to suggest that the internet has thus far rejuvenated the political process in New Zealand at the individual level. Rather, it seems that New Zealanders' relative disengagement with formal politics is being reproduced online. In 2002, for instance, just 6 per cent of those surveyed by the New Zealand Election Study used the internet several times or more to gather news or information concerning that year's election.⁶⁹ Things have since improved, but only marginally: the corresponding figure for the 2005 General election was just on 10 per cent.⁷⁰ Further, in a recent survey on internet use in New Zealand, only 15 per cent of respondents reported using the internet on a regular basis to access information regarding political parties, and just 13 per cent had heard of the government's digital strategy.⁷¹

What we currently know

A decade or so since the first formal studies began emerging, what can we say about the state of our knowledge regarding associations between the internet and politics in New Zealand?

The first thing that might be said is that much - perhaps most - relevant research sits squarely in the field of e-government. Some of this seeks to capture the span of e-government activity; some to detail the minutiae of policy implementation; almost all of it draws attention to the challenges associated with trying to roll out cross-agency initiatives in an institutionally diverse landscape. Following the first flush of enthusiasm, there are also indications of a more probing and sceptical orientation to the putative benefits of e-government. Clearly, there is something to be gained from facilitating online access to services for citizens and communities. Equally, the scholarship reflects a growing awareness of the need not to be seduced by technological bells and whistles (or by what Gauld and Goldfinch call 'faddism'⁷²). There is also an increasing emphasis, reflected in the recent establishment of a Chair in E-Government at Victoria University, on the need to both secure and better understand citizen input into the design (as well as the utilisation) of e-government services. E-government studies in New

⁶⁶ Hopkins and Matheson, 'Blogging the New Zealand Election: The Impact of New Media Practices on the Old Game', p. 97.

⁶⁷ Fitzjohn and Salmond, 'The Battle of the Blogs: A Phony War?', p. 253.

⁶⁸ Hopkins and Matheson, 'Blogging the New Zealand Election: The Impact of New Media Practices on the Old Game', p. 104.

⁶⁹ Jack Vowles, Peter Aimer, Susan Baldacci, Jeffrey Karp and Ray Miller, (eds.), *Voters' Veto. The 2002 Election in New Zealand and the Consolidation of Minority Government* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2004).

⁷⁰ www.nzes.org/exec/show/freq_2005a Equivalent data from the 2008 General election are not yet publically available.

⁷¹ Bell, Crothers, Goodwin, Kripalani, Sherman, and Smith, *The Internet in New Zealand 2007. Final Report*.

⁷² Gauld and Goldfinch, *Dangerous enthusiasms: E-government, computer failure and information system development*, p. 129.

Zealand, it appears, are gradually complementing the orthodox government-centric orientation with a citizen-centric focus.

Secondly, most of the e-democracy/e-participation literature is meso level research dealing with political parties' deployment of various ICTs in the context of election campaigns. As far as the directionality and tenor of relations with voters is concerned, there is increasing evidence that most political parties have simply taken extant practices online; only very recently has the functionality of parties' websites suggested a preparedness to interact and engage with voters, rather than simply inform them of the latest policy and political goings-on. Even these efforts, however, do not approximate the sort of relationship between parties and voters envisaged by cyber-optimists: vertical communication of content *to* citizens, rather than horizontal engagement *with* them, remains the dominant mode of engagement.

At the micro level, too, the evidence suggests that the advent of the internet and email has had little, if any, regenerative effect. New Zealanders are heavy users of ICTs, but not typically for political purposes (however generously defined). To the extent that people do engage with politics online, it is as passive consumers of news and information rather than as active participants in the political process writ large. And as with meso level studies, with a handful of exceptions the scholarship is centred on political engagement – typically via blogs – during election campaigns. What has been established empirically reveals that, beyond a clique of political élites and 'A-list' bloggers, blogging has not yet achieved the sort of 'outreach' effects hoped for by some optimistic souls. Further, the political blogosphere in New Zealand falls short of the online deliberative commons envisaged by those for whom the internet could and should serve as a public sphere. Rather, the partisan attachments of many political bloggers are such that moderate voices are often drowned out, and reflexivity, deliberation and consensus-building struggle to feature in an extended process of bloggers talking past each other.

In all of this, we are not alone. As already indicated, comparative research confirms that agreement on quite what constitutes 'e-government' remains elusive, and that research has tended to focus on the technicalities (and success or otherwise) of e-service delivery, rather than on the deeper, transformative potentialities of e-government.⁷³ And in the fields of e-democracy and e-participation, it also establishes that political parties tend to use websites to convey information rather than to engage citizens in substantive debate (such that control remains centralised at the top); that new technologies are being deployed in the context of the increasing professionalisation of parties (rather than using them to increase the intensity and influence of members' participation); and that – the potential for new and imaginative approaches to campaigning notwithstanding – access to the internet is not, in and of itself, having a significant effect on citizen (re)engagement with the political process.⁷⁴ Given that technologies tend to reflect the disposition of users, that should not, perhaps, come as much of a surprise.

In short, New Zealand studies sit within a wider international oeuvre that offers a sober assessment of the effects of the internet on politics.⁷⁵ Optimistic assumptions that the internet would fundamentally revitalise democratic politics have given way to a more mature (and empirical) tendency to question the extent to which it has heralded a 'new' or 'transformative' politics.⁷⁶ Indeed, some worry that the internet has instead generated a 'push-button' approach

⁷³ Yildiz, 'E-government research: reviewing the literature, limitations and ways forward'.

⁷⁴ Gibson and Ward, 'U.K. Political Parties and the Internet: "Politics as Usual" in the New Media?'; Gibson and Ward, 'Virtual Campaigning: Australian Political Parties and the Impact of the Internet'; Rachel Gibson, Paul Nixon and Stephen Ward, *Political Parties and the Internet. Net Gain?* (London: Routledge, 2003); Nixon and Johansson, 'Transparency through technology: the internet and political parties'.

⁷⁵ Rachel Gibson, Andrea Rommele and Stephen Ward, (eds.), *Electronic Democracy: Mobilisation, organization and participation via new ICTs* (London: Routledge, 2004); Michael Margolis and David Resnick, *Politics as Usual: The Cyberspace Revolution* (London: Sage Publications, 2000).

⁷⁶ Lincoln Dahlberg, 'The Internet and Democratic Discourse: Exploring The Prospects of Online Deliberative Forums Extending the Public Sphere', *Information, Communication and Society*, Vol. 4, No.

to conventional politics and reinforced existing partisan divides.⁷⁷ (Although see van Onselen and van Onselen for a more hopeful view, at least as far as the impact of the internet amongst young people in Australia is concerned; and Bennett for evidence that protest politics have utilised the new technologies to good effect.⁷⁸) It is clear that the advent of new ICTs has not, in and of itself, demonstrably altered people's engagement with politics. Politically engaged citizens tend to use the internet to extend their engagement; unengaged citizens tend to go online for non-political reasons; and people tend to visit sites with content that is consistent with their own extant normative preferences.⁷⁹

What we have yet to establish: a research agenda for the future

This relatively sombre assessment should be set against the fact that there is a good deal we do *not* yet know about the relationship between the internet and politics in New Zealand. The incomplete state of our knowledge is such that it is a little soon to be reaching anything other than tentative conclusions.

For example, there appears to be no research on the *political* executive to complement the characteristic focus on the administrative executive in the e-government literature in New Zealand. Virtually all studies centre on public sector agencies; conversely, ministers' deployment of email or the internet – in the context of managing the business of the ministerial office, say, or in facilitating ministerial oversight of the implementation activities of departments and agencies – remains *terra incognita*.

In the field of e-democracy, an especially glaring gap is the absence of rigorous empirical analyses of the relationship between the internet and elected representatives (MPs).⁸⁰ That this review failed to unearth a single formal study of MPs' views regarding or use of the internet reflects the tendency of much of the extant New Zealand scholarship to focus on public attitudes towards, and use of, the internet for political purposes.⁸¹ Thus, while we know something about citizens' political engagement via the internet (although much of this concerns political bloggers, who comprise a small subsection of the wider blogging population and an even smaller proportion of all citizens), little or nothing is known about New Zealand MPs' online practices, or their perceptions of the ways the technology may be shaping their roles as legislators, members of political parties, and constituents' representatives. The point has been made that only 'limited evidence has been gathered [internationally]... on whether, and how, legislators use the internet, and what the consequences are for the representative nexus'.⁸² That is certainly the case here, as a consequence of which we have a poor grasp of the extent to

4 (2001a), pp. 615-633; Lincoln Dahlberg, 'Computer-Mediated Communication and The Public Sphere: A Critical Analysis,' *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2001b), <http://tinyurl.com/5blvgb> (December 2008).

⁷⁷ Gibson and Ward, 'Introduction: e-Politics—the Australian Experience', p. 2.

⁷⁸ Ainslie van Onselen and Peter van Onselen, 'On message or out of touch? Secure websites and political campaigning in Australia', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2008), pp. 43-58; Lance Bennett, 'Communicating Global Activism: Strengths and Vulnerabilities of Networked Politics', *Information Communication and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2003), pp. 143-168.

⁷⁹ Diana Mutz and Paul Martin, 'Facilitating Communication Across Lines of Political Difference: The Role of Mass Media', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (2001), pp. 97-114.

⁸⁰ There has been some media attention to these issues. For instance, see <http://tinyurl.com/mmgkzo> for a *New Zealand Herald* article on Asian politicians' use of social networking sites. See also the *Sunday Star Times* (11 July 2004: A7) for a piece on MPs' use of email.

⁸¹ The 2008 New Zealand Election Study included internet use questions in its 2008 survey of political parties' candidates (some of which, presumably, were sitting MPs), but those data are still being processed.

⁸² Ward, Lusoli, and Gibson, 'Australian MPs and the Internet: Avoiding the Digital Age?', p. 211.

which use of the internet may be having consequences for elected representation in New Zealand.

A further compelling reason for additional research at this level concerns New Zealand's electoral arrangements. As an institutional variable, mixed-member proportional representation (MMP) distinguishes us from others in the Westminster family of nations. MMP has produced multi-party parliaments, party list MPs, and minority and coalition governments; its adoption also coincided with a significant increase in the size of the House of Representatives. These changes have generated roles and relationships for MPs that differ to those found in countries with simple plurality electoral rules. Consequently, New Zealand provides unique research opportunities to explore MPs' use of the internet in a fragmented and fluid parliamentary environment. Chen's conclusion, which is that during the 2008 General election campaign candidates for electorate seats made greater use of online sub-media than did list candidates, perhaps points the way in this respect (although he focused on candidates rather than elected MPs).⁸³

As for future e-democracy or e-participation research, at least three foci suggest themselves. The first concerns the need to better understand how the new ICTs are being used *between* election campaigns. Conway and Dorner's work aside, there is little available evidence concerning use of the internet outside of the campaign season, even though the international data confirm that extra-campaign effects differ from those during campaigns.⁸⁴ Such research could explore parties' applications of the technology, or how (if at all), in a routinised and ongoing basis, citizens and interest groups use ICTs to engage with parties and media.

The second has to do with the impacts which ICT use are having *within* political parties. Virtually all New Zealand research in this area has addressed relations between parties and voters: what we lack is an equivalent of the work undertaken in the Australian context by, for example, Chen, and van Onselen and van Onselen, who have studied the ramifications of the deployment of online media within party organisations.⁸⁵ By and large, that research supports the thesis that parties typically use the internet to reinforce centralised control of parties' political messages and policy content, and finds that new technologies amplify the drift towards electoral-professional parties (further distancing parties from civil society by centralising power in the hands of parties' élites). Whether or not such is also the case in New Zealand we do not yet know.

A third possible focus is on the ways in which interest groups make political use of the internet. A fair measure of e-democracy research is characterised by a sort of methodological individualism, inasmuch as it seeks explanations at the level of the individual blogger-citizen. We could learn much from research that explored the ways in which the internet is being deployed in the interests of collective action by organised interests.

Finally, there remains more to be done at the individual level. Bell *et al.* and Smith *et al.* have gathered some data on citizens' political use of the internet, as has the New Zealand Electoral Study, but beyond the various studies of political bloggers there is a gap in the published record concerning the nature and extent of the relationship between online activity and, for instance, preference formation or voting behaviour.⁸⁶

⁸³ Chen, 'Online Media'.

⁸⁴ Gibson, Margolis, Resnick and Ward, 'Election Campaigning on the WWW in the US and UK: A Comparative Analysis'.

⁸⁵ Peter Chen, 'e-lection 2004? New Media and the Campaign', in Marian Simms and John Warhurst, (eds.), *Mortgage Nation: The Australian Federal Election 2004* (Perth: API-Bentley, 2005); van Onselen and van Onselen, 'On message or out of touch? Secure websites and political campaigning in Australia'. For a synopsis of intra-party use of the internet, see Gibson and Ward, 'Introduction: e-Politics—the Australian Experience'.

⁸⁶ Bell, Crothers, Goodwin, Kripalani, Sherman and Smith, *The Internet in New Zealand 2007. Final Report*; Smith, Smith, Sherman, Kripalani, Goodwin and Bell, 'The Internet: Social and demographic impacts in Aotearoa New Zealand'.

Conclusion

As recently as 2005 Hopkins and Matheson were able to state that ‘empirical research on weblogs and bloggers ... has been limited.’⁸⁷ Much the same observation could reasonably have been offered concerning the wider relationship between politics and new ICTs in New Zealand. Progress has since been made, but much remains to be done. Indeed, it is difficult not to compare the state of our own literature with the situation in Australia, where considerable academic attention has been paid to such matters: recently, an entire edition of the *Australian Journal of Political Science* (Vol. 43, No.1) was given over to research on the impact of the internet on various dimensions of the Australian polity.

Whatever the reasons for the relative indifference to such matters amongst scholars on this side of the Tasman, political science in New Zealand should pay closer attention to these matters than it has done to date. We should be asking the sorts of questions being put by our Australian (and English, Irish, American and European) colleagues if we are to do more than offer impressionistic and anecdotal answers to the important issues posed by the advent and deployment of the new ICTs. Further, in this we could do worse than join forces with colleagues in proximate disciplines who are also undertaking internet-related research, albeit from slightly different epistemological or methodological slants.

The imperatives for further research stem from the contradictory nature of politics conducted online. From one view, the internet holds out the promise of a narrowing of the space between the public and private realms. But from another, while it may very well constitute a ‘disruptive’ technology with the potential to shake up existing political structures and practices, the internet’s promise cuts both ways. To the extent that it may facilitate the individualization of politics and encourage like-minded people to congregate defensively online, the technology may, in fact, be inimical to the ideal of a public political space.

Understanding the degree to which either perspective – or both – help make sense of the New Zealand experience is important. As Stoker reminds us, politics matters because it enables us ‘to address and potentially patch up the disagreements that characterise our societies without recourse to illegitimate coercion or violence’.⁸⁸ But as membership of political parties plummets, trust in politicians and political institutions erodes, and turnout at elections falls away, politics in New Zealand arguably faces a ‘crisis of quality’.⁸⁹ The internet is a defining technology of the early 21st century: comprehending its impacts here at home, and perhaps its potential to address the present democratic malaise, are matters worthy of closer attention.

⁸⁷ Hopkins and Matheson, ‘Blogging the New Zealand Election: The Impact of New Media Practices on the Old Game’, p. 94.

⁸⁸ Gerry Stoker, *Why Politics Matters: Making Democracy Work* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2006), p. 7.

⁸⁹ Paul Ginsborg, *Democracy: Crisis and Renewal* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2008), p. 26.

Politics and the internet: The New Zealand research

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