What Do Citizens Expect from Web Campaigns?

The Cases of the 2012 France and Quebec Elections

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Abstract

The academic literature on digital campaigning is dominated by the analysis of the “supply side” of parties and candidates’ online campaigns (Gibson & Ward, 2012), and the assessment of the functions of information, interaction and mobilization performed by their websites. This paper will explore the “demand side” of Web campaigns and, more specifically, examine what do citizens expect from parties and candidates’ online campaigns. Are they looking for information, interaction or tools for mobilization? What are the motivations of web-users visiting the websites, Facebook pages or Twitter accounts of parties and candidates? Finally, do citizens consider the use of Internet by parties and candidates as an opportunity to improve electoral communication? To answer these questions, we rely on data from two online surveys conducted after the second round of the 2012 French presidential election and the 2012 Quebec general election among citizens who had used Internet to follow the campaign in each case. This analysis is complemented with qualitative data collected through focus groups. The results showed that these highly politically active citizens were primarily using the Internet to get information and that they were very critical of how parties and candidates had used the Internet and online social media during these campaigns.
Introduction

“I think that the politicians were not prepared enough to do a Web campaign” (P1, France).

“The problem is that politicians are using Twitter as a giant diary or planner. They broadcast information about their other gigs. They were saying things like: ‘I will be doing an interview at this radio station’. They were far, far away from citizens. They didn’t use Internet the way it is supposed to be, since interaction is the keyword and key practice on the Web. A politician doing that could build a strong sympathy capital for himself/herself and the party they represent” (P2, France).

“My principal expectation was that political parties would use Web 2.0 to let us see the person behind the good jacket and the great speech. This was the case for the Coalition avenir Québec and Option nationale, but not so much for the Parti liberal and the Parti québécois” (P1, Quebec).

In an era where Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram are king, where do politicians and parties stand when campaigning? Some have strong feelings of disdain and only do minimal informing, interacting and mobilizing, while others go for full-on Web practices and are all over the Internet and other online social media platforms. As the presence of politicians and parties is well documented by scholars, the perceptions and expectations of citizens about webcampaign are less known. As we can see in the previous quotations, taken from focus groups realized for the webinpolitics.com project, citizens often have different perceptions about the uses of the Internet during an electoral campaign. They judge parties for their good and bad moves. They also sometimes have high expectations of the ways politicians should behave on the Internet and other online social media platforms.

The focus of this paper will be on the “demand side” of Web campaigns and, more specifically, it will examine what citizens expect from parties’ and candidates’ online campaigns, and what are the citizens’ motivations are when using online platforms. This paper is based on a portion of the results generated by the webinpolitics.com project\(^1\), a comparative study of the political uses of the Web. Based on two case studies, the 2012 French presidential election and the 2012 Quebec legislative election, the project has

\(^1\) The data used in this paper comes from the webinpolitics.com research project, a comparative study of the political web as part of the 2012 French presidential election and the 2012 legislative election in Quebec. The project leaders are Thierry Giasson, Associate Professor in the Department of political science at the Université Laval, Quebec, and Fabienne Greffet, Lecturer in Political Science at the ISAM-IAE of the Université de Lorraine. This independent study has received funding for the 2011–2014 period from the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (France) and the Fonds de recherche du Québec, Société et culture. The associate researchers in Quebec are Frédérick Bastien (Université de Montréal), Mireille Lalancette (Université du Québec à Trois Rivières) Mélanie Verville (Université Laval), and Gildas Le Bars (Université Laval), and in France, the associate researchers are Gersende Blanchard (Université Lille 3), Simon Gadras (Université Lumière Lyon 2), and Stéphanie Wojcik (Université Paris-Est Créteil). For more informations on the project, the publications and communications associated with this research visit the enpolitique.com website. The authors want to thank Sofia Tourigny-Koné, from Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières for her help with the focus groups data analysis.
documented Web strategies, practices and perceptions by both political parties and citizens. Using a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative online surveys and qualitative focus-group analysis, this presentation focuses on the perceptions and political attitudes of citizens active on the Web during the 2012 Quebec and French electoral campaign.

**From the Supply Side to the Citizen Point of View: Studies about Online Campaigning**

So far, political science and communication scholars have focused on the content of the parties’ websites, and on their use for marketing and promotion purposes, for personalizing campaigns, for attracting new members or for sharing information with their volunteers (Bastien & Greffet, 2009; Giasson & al. 2013; Gulati & Williams, 2007; Lalancette, 2013a, 2013b; Norris, 2003; Schweitzer, 2008; Small, 2008, 2012a, 2012b; Smith & Chen, 2009). More specifically, the academic literature on digital campaigning is dominated by the analysis of the “supply side” of parties’ and candidates’ online campaigns (Gibson & Ward, 2012), and the assessment of the functions of information, interaction and mobilization performed by their websites. A common postulate is that there are benefits for parties and candidates to use the Internet for campaigning. Sometimes the academic literature deplores the ways the parties use the Internet only to inform citizens. The analyses of online campaigns are thus based on the underlying assumption that websites are hierarchized around information, interaction and mobilization functions; functions, which are defined by the technical possibilities of the Web (1.0 and 2.0); and the parties’ and candidates’ ways of seeing their election goals. In this line of thought, research focuses on two agendas: the first one examines how parties and candidates are transferring their goals into cyberspace (Gibson, 2012), and the second one aims at understanding if parties and candidates use the potential of Web-based communication to enhance the way they achieve their goals. For example, Greffet & Vedel (2011), as well as Cardenal (2013), have questioned the ability of campaign teams to improve interactivity, citizens’ political involvement, and mobilization. Lilleker & al. (2011) and Koc-Michalska & Lilleker (2013) developed tools to assess how political parties and candidates use Web 2.0 sites to improve the appeal and interactivity of their online presence.

Though these works meticulously document campaign strategies and the uses of Internet platforms during election time, they solely focus on parties and candidates’ purposes. Thus they don’t take into consideration the perspective of the Web users and how they use it or what they think about it. Do citizens view the Internet as a way of enhancing an electoral campaign and to what end? This field of inquiry stills need to be developed. There seems to be a growing interest in this type of questioning as some more recent research focuses on citizens’ behavior using qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups and surveys. Some scholars are questioning the links between the Internet and political participation: could the Internet fuel other forms of participation (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2011)? Others ask if this tool could attract the attention of non-politicized and/or non-interested citizens (Cantijoch & al., 2013). Other researchers are trying to assess the role of the Internet, as well as traditional media like television and newspapers, as information sources during an

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2 This refers to the seminal research of Gibson & Ward (2000), and using content analysis as a tool of investigation.
electoral campaign. Tolbert & McNeal (2003), Dimitrova & Bystrom (2013), and Towner (2013) evaluate if the Internet fuels participation or not, and whether this participation is done online or offline. For others, the focus is on how citizens use websites and online social media during electoral campaigns. They question the activities of Web users by asking how they are accessing the sites and using the Web and online social media to share and/or produce information (Gibson, Cantijoch & Ward, 2010; Koc Michalska & Vedel, 2009; Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2013). In this line of thought, Jouet & al. (2011) showed that the Internet is a key part of citizen’s information practices where traditional sources (like television, radio and newspaper) and new online practices are used in tandem.

Citizens’ expectations and uses of online electoral campaigns also get the attention of academics, although the focus is more on young voters and their modes of engagement via the Internet. For example, Xenos & Foot (2008) have explored the “generational gap” between youth expectations and preferences on candidates’ usage of the Web. More recently, Loader & al. (2014) questioned the ambiguous relationship that young people have with more traditional civic engagement and participation practices. Thorson (2014) showed that when young people use online social media, their political engagement increases since the Internet can be used as a tool for socialisation and politicization. However, their forms of political expression proved to be different from traditional ones. For example, young voters and citizens tend to use humour, provocation, and network collective action more than their older counterparts. Also, young voters who paid more attention to online social media during a political campaign were also found to be cynical, apathetic and sceptical (Yamamoto & Kushin, 2013).

Similarly, some studies that focused on citizens of all ages showed a gap between the online practices of politicians and citizens’ expectations. Understanding citizens’ perceptions of politicians’ Internet usage during election/political campaigns and documenting the forms of interactivity offered, Stromer-Galley & Foot (2002) have demonstrated that citizens perceive the Internet as potentially “enabling them to share their opinions with the candidate and getting feedback on those opinions, raising questions and getting answers, and participating in debates such that the citizens become the questioners in unrehearsed and non-traditional interactions with candidates” (p. 16). They also highlight that citizens are sceptical of the ability and the willingness of the candidates to fully use the “Internet-mediated human interaction” (Ibid). Studying citizens’ expectations and perceptions of the online community platform of the Norwegian Labour Party (MyLabourParty), Lüders & al. (2013) have offered a similar assessment. The surveyed citizens expect and anticipate that online social networks would enable interactions between them and the politicians, and that politicians would be more involved. Comparing the data collected by surveying voters who used the Internet and the results of a content analysis of the applications offered by French candidates and political parties on their websites during the 2007 presidential and 2009 European elections, Koc Michalska & Vedel (2009) showed that visitors of those particular websites were highly interested in politics. However, their study shows that the expectations of citizens did not match what candidates and political parties put on their websites. For example, “voters exhibit a strong interest in online pools or surveys, but these are rarely provided on parties’ and candidates’ websites. Conversely, some functionalities (such as RSS) do not meet a real demand” (p. 12). Reflecting on future research about online
campaigning, Lilleker & Vedel (2013) underlined the importance of taking the citizens’ point of view into consideration in order to better assess their expectations and perceptions of what is offered online by political parties and candidates. Are citizens waiting for more interaction or mobilization?

Following this line of inquiry and the research realized about the political uses of the Web, this paper explores the “demand side” of online campaigns and, more precisely, citizens’ expectations of parties and candidates’ online campaigns. Our research is structured around the following questions:

1) Are citizens primarily looking for information, interaction with candidates, or tools for mobilization?
2) What are the motivations of Internet users who visit the websites, Facebook pages or Twitter accounts of political parties and candidates?
3) Do citizens consider the use of the Internet by parties and candidates as an opportunity to improve electoral communication?

Data Collection and Methods

To answer these questions, we led online surveys and focus groups in France and Quebec. Online surveys were conducted from May 7 to 27, 2012, in France, and from September 6 to 27, 2012, in Quebec. Using both snowball and volunteer sampling methods, our population included citizens over 18 years old, who were eligible to vote, who were able to fill out a French-language questionnaire, and who had not worked for a candidate during the French or Quebec legislative election or for the media since January 1, 2012. These citizens also needed to have used Internet for election purposes during the electoral campaign, i.e., to get or share election information about a candidate, a party, or an issue.

In France, citizens clicked 1641 times to answer our survey, and 922 questionnaires were completed. Once we removed non-eligible units, we obtained a sample of 827 respondents. In Quebec, 1592 questionnaires were started; 912 were completed, of which 804 were eligible.

After completing the survey, participants who were willing to provide additional feedback were invited to leave their name and contact information, to eventually join focus groups. In France, we recruited 16 participants, gathered in four focus groups held in Lille and Paris. In Quebec, we recruited 42 participants, gathered in eight focus groups held in Montreal and Quebec City. The interviewers’ guidelines were basically the same in all cases.

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3 Since that population is hard to reach and too small to be efficiently surveyed through a standard sampling design, as often applied by pollsters to measure vote intentions during a campaign, for instance, our sample is a non-probability one. Population members were recruited through several ways: we contacted some people following a standardized selection process based on digital marks they had left on candidates’ or parties’ websites and social network sites, and we invited them to share our invitation through their own social network; we posted calls on partisan forums and social network sites; we sent invitations to bloggers, candidates’ Twitter followers, journalists, as well as through researchers’ personal digital networks (Blanchard, Gadrás & Wojcik, 2013).
**FINDINGS**

Citizens Looking for Information

Studies have showed that parties and campaigning candidates use the Internet for different purposes. On the basis of features often distinguished in content analyses of party websites (Bastien & Greffet, 2012; Gibson & Ward, 2000; Small, 2008), we designed a set of 12 questions to ascertain citizens’ attitudes regarding information, interaction, and mobilization functions of partisan Internet-based outlets, like websites and social-networking sites. We asked respondents to assess how important these functions are, for them personally, using a 1-to-5 scale (1 being not important and 5 being very important). Figure 1 presents the average score for items related to the information (upper part), interaction (middle part), and mobilization (lower part) components.

**Figure 1**
The importance respondents attached to Internet uses by parties and candidates in France and in Quebec (average scores)

![Figure 1](image)

In both cases, for the respondents in our surveys, the most important features are the information ones. Providing information about the issues and the candidates’ campaign activities is clearly the function that matter the most, with average scores between 4.0 and 4.5 points on the 1-to-5 scales for each items. These information functions are followed by three items of interaction function deemed important by respondents: a) having opportunities to contribute to the electoral platform, b) free discussion in virtual spaces, and c) having a way to contact the candidates, either through e-mail or a web-based form. However, it wasn’t so important to them that candidates participate to chat sessions with voters. Also, the respondents’ moderate interest regarding the mobilization items showed
this function as less important: a) to make a donation or to join the party through online processes, b) to support the candidate or the party by spreading its message with online tools (i.e., by clicking on “share” buttons), and c) to be supplied with mobilization campaign material (e.g., posters, leaflets, and how-to guides).

To summarize these data, we added the scores of each respondent on the information, interaction, and mobilization components in order to create three 4-item scales, whose values range from 4 to 20 points. We tested the reliability of these scales: Cronbach’s alpha values are between .69 and .81, and they systematically decrease when one item is removed, thus demonstrating the quality of these measures. Descriptive statistics appear in Table 1. Both for the France and the Quebec cases, the highest – and most condensed – scores are obtained with the information scale, followed by the interaction and mobilization ones.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics on the importance attached to each function

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Quebec</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cronbach’s alpha</td>
<td>Mean (4-20 point scale)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>.70 14.7 3.7</td>
<td>.69 15.1 3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>.76 14.0 4.3</td>
<td>.79 14.4 4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobilization</td>
<td>.81 13.4 4.8</td>
<td>.80 13.2 4.7</td>
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Attitudes regarding the importance of these political functions of the Internet are strongly inter-correlated. Citizens who believe that one type of feature matters tend to think that other components are also important4. Partisans of some candidates and parties are more likely to attach importance to these functions than others. For example, French respondents who voted for the incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy on the first round have, on average, scores of 16.3, 15.8, and 15.4 points on the information, interaction, and mobilization scales, compared to 14.6, 13.8, and 13.5 among the voters who made the second highest average score for each scale (that is, respectively, supporters of François Hollande, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and Éva Joly)5. In Quebec, a similar pattern appears with voters of Option nationale, whose average scores are 16.4, 16.2, and 15.4 points on these three scales6. We may find an explanation for these differences below.

4 All three bivariate Pearson’s correlation coefficients range from .609 to .686 (p<.01) in France, and from .646 to .664 (p<.01) in Quebec.
5 The frequencies of respondents who voted for each candidate on the first round allow us to distinguish supporters of François Bayrou, François Hollande, Éva Joly, Marine Le Pen, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and Nicolas Sarkozy. Analyses of variance confirm that mean differences between these candidates are statistically significant on information (F=6.860, df=5, p<.01), interaction (F=5.633, df=5, p<.01), and mobilization (F=4.940, df=5, p<.01) scales.
6 In Quebec, the number of respondents who voted for each party allows us to analyze the attitudes of those who supported the Coalition avenir Québec, Liberal Party, Option nationale, Parti québécois, and Québec solidaire. Results of the analyses of variance are F=5.034, df=4, p<.01 for information, F=9.194, df=4, p<.01 for interaction, and F=8.837, df=4, p<.01 for mobilization.
It should be noted that mobilization tools matter more for younger citizens. In France, we observed an average score of 14.4 points among the 18- to 24-year-old respondents, decreasing to 12.7 points among those who were 60 years old and above. In Quebec, figures are quite similar in these categories (14.1 and 12.3 points)\textsuperscript{7}.

**Citizens Visiting Websites and Using Online Social Media to Get Information**

Why do citizens look at the Internet-based outlets produced by parties and candidates? We asked respondents who had visited the website, Facebook page, and/or Twitter feed of at least one candidate or party during the campaign to specify their motives. It should be noted that they were able to select up to 3 statements among 8 items related to information, interaction, and mobilization purposes. The results for France and Québec are shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

**Motives for visiting parties’ or candidates’ websites, Facebook pages or Twitter feeds during the campaign (in percentages) in France and in Quebec**

These results add to the argument that the information function is paramount: citizens visit these partisan websites and social network sites first and foremost for information purposes, then for mobilization and interaction. About 50% of the respondents looked at these outlets to supplement to information they already had and to get the latest campaign information rapidly. More than 40% of our respondents wanted to get more information about where the candidates’ or parties’ stand on some of the election issues. The mobilization item – to share information about the campaign – is ranked fourth. Respondents were much less motivated by opportunities to respond to the candidates’ or parties’ proposals, or to feel personally in touch with the candidates.

\textsuperscript{7} We divided our respondents among six categories (18-24, 25-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, and 60+ years old). These mean differences are statistically significant (F=2.935, df=5, p<.05 in France; F=4.471, df=5, p<.001 in Quebec).
Additionally, about one third of the respondents answered that they were motivated by the desire to get, from partisan websites, information that could be more reliable than from the traditional media, like television, radio, and newspapers (37.0% in France and 34.5% in Quebec). In both cases, these percentages are strongly related with vote choice. In France, many more respondents believe that such outlets are more reliable among those who cast a ballot for Marine Le Pen (59.0%), Nicolas Sarkozy (53.2%), and to a lesser extent, Jean-Luc Mélenchon (42.4%) than supporters of François Bayrou (29.9%), Éva Joly (29.3%), and François Hollande (23.0%). In Quebec as many as 63.6% of Option nationale voters had this motive. This is much more than among supporters of Québec solidaire (31.3%), the Parti québécois (29.2%), the Coalition avenir Québec (27.6%), and the Liberal Party (23.9%). These percentage differences are not only statistically significant: the force of these relationships, measured by the Cramer’s $V$, is also pretty strong. Past studies have analyzed the views expressed by the Front national regarding the news media. The party stresses how it is “boycotted” by the news media (Le Bohec, 2004). However, our study does not allow us to verify to what extent this kind of discourse may explain the importance of this motivation for the respondents who cast a ballot for Marine Le Pen (Bastien & Blanchard, 2013). As for voters of Nicolas Sarkozy and Option nationale in Quebec, their dissatisfaction about traditional news media may explain why they attach more importance than other citizens to the various functions of the partisan Internet-based outlets.

What were they looking for when visiting the sites? According to our focus groups, in France and Quebec, participants consulted the online social media and websites of parties and candidates to get information; to look at and compare political platforms; to listen, in some cases, to the parties’ Web radios; and to analyse the arguments of each party. Some respondents said that they used party websites to complement traditional media coverage. For example, some of our focus group respondents in Quebec explained that they had turned to online social media to get a sense of what was going on in their region and community, and to learn about local issues, since traditional media coverage tends to focus more on the discourses of major party leaders. For instance, consulting the Twitter account of their candidates was a way to learn about issues meaningful to them, said a participant from Quebec (P2).

The focus group respondents also welcomed the way parties used the web to address complex issues in a straightforward manner. They liked the fact that the party platforms were presented in simple terms. Focus group respondents saw the videos posted by parties on their websites and online social media as “political education tools”. For instance, the Option nationale video made by Catherine Dorion, a candidate in Quebec City, went viral and was appreciated by a lot of the participants. Others thought that the Quebec solidaire cartoon-like stories were an efficient way to get the message out. In France, the Socialist Party site and Twitter account were appreciated because they were easy to use. The graphic

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8 In France, result of the khi-square test is $\chi^2=45.990$, df=5, p<.001, with Cramer's $V=.27$. In Quebec, values are $\chi^2=56.291$, df=4, p<.001 and Cramer's $V=.28$.

9 In France, some parties, such as Le Front National, have their own radio and television web broadcasts. The candidate of the Socialist Party, F. Hollande also introduced a web radio as a tool to communicate with their voters during the 2012 presidential campaign.
quality of their website was also discussed as a key factor in likability. “We must want to share the videos,” said a French respondent (P2, France).

In this vein of thought, in both Quebec and France, sharing information with friends on Facebook and Twitter was a strong motivation for using the social media sites of political parties and candidates. For our respondents, a successful Web campaign gets beyond the most motivated supporters, reaches out to the “normal citizen”, and is also covered by the media. In this sense, they liked the Internet because it allowed them to literally support the campaign of their candidates from their living room. However, some of them felt that, at one point or another during the campaign, they were overwhelmed by information coming from all sources: television, radio, and especially the Internet.

Citizens Looking for a Meaningful Use of Online Social Media

As previously indicated, the citizens interviewed were primarily looking for information and facts to help them make their decision on Election Day. In this sense, they considered online social media like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to be entertaining, but not necessarily reliable. Although they enjoyed the spectacular side of some of the exchanges on Twitter, they disapproved of their shallowness and triviality. Perhaps because our respondents were expecting a meaningful use of online social media by candidates and political parties during the campaign, they were highly critical of how these tools were exploited by the various actors. For them, politicians must be on these platforms and perform in ways that respect what Jackson & Lilleker (2009) call the “Internet code”, a code of behavior “commonly center upon the concepts of collaboration, conversation, and interaction” (p. 233). In line with this code, our respondents expected candidates to be continuously present on the Internet. “Some parties neglected their Web presence, and underestimated the importance of Quebecers using this platform during this campaign. Internet is now the most important media even if television still plays a major role” (P4, Quebec). Likewise, the way parties were mobilizing on the Internet and online social media was perceived as only addressed at their members, as if preaching to the converted. “Social media were not for me a real place for discussion and debate. They were more a place to reinforce attitudes, and behavior”, said a Quebec participant (P3). In this sense, several of our respondents felt unconcerned by the political messages on these platforms.

Our focus group participants had high expectations with regards to the use of the online social media by candidates. They were also looking for an “authentic” use of these media platforms, and wanted the candidates themselves to be the real users of Twitter or Facebook, rather than their communication specialists. “I was expecting transparency; politicians using Web 2.0 to let us see their real personalities. To give us access to the person underneath the beautiful discourses. Some politicians like François Legault as well as the Option Nationale party did it, but the Parti Québécois and Parti Libéral practices were not satisfying to me” (P6, Quebec). “If it is the communications team or the politician talking, we want to see the difference. If it is the politician, we want to see his signature: “A.J.” for example” (P3, France). In a similar way, one participant explained: “If I send a
tweet to François Legault, I expect François Legault to respond to me personally instead of any political advisor” (P5, Quebec).

Likewise, the respondents of our focus groups were looking for proximity to and feedback from their political leaders/candidates. They also wanted to post opinions and comments, something that was not always possible on parties or candidates’ websites. This partially contradicts the results of our surveys in which motivations for following the Facebook and Twitter accounts of candidates were not about feeling personally in touch with the candidates (as illustrated on page 10). For party members and strong supporters, finding a reasonable balance between informing efficiently, debating complex issues, attacking opponents, and simply being present in the online social media is perceived as delicate, considering that too much or too little is not accepted. For example, in Quebec, the online social media absence of Jean Charest and the Liberals was noted and criticized by almost everyone in our focus groups, even if they were partisans of that party. Also, while some of our respondents indicated that the efforts of Option nationale were to be respected, others condemned the zealous and somewhat aggressive tone they used when addressing political issues. A citizen even said that their tactics had an “evangelical style”. Overtly present on Twitter, François Legault, the CAQ party leader, was labelled as a “TwittoManiac” by some of our interviewees. Similarly, the highly partisan blog posts of Jean-François Lisée, candidate for the PQ in Montreal, were presented as “laughable”, while attacks from hard-core cybersupporters on Twitter and Facebook were rapidly condemned: “At one moment it became only insults” (P2, Quebec), or “It was getting terrible, and I was shocked to see that party officials were not doing anything to calm things down” (P7, Quebec). French participants made similar observations. They were highly critical of the use of online social media by parties, and, above all, by aggressive supporters: “I expect politicians to be rigorous on the Internet in general and on Twitter in particular”, explains one French participant (P4, France).

Similarly, participants in our focus groups repeatedly highlighted that this ongoing Web presence should have been an intelligent debate between parties and candidates. They were looking for discussions about ideas whereas the campaign seemed to be idling for the most part. In this sense, they said that the parties had failed to reach them. For a respondent, the solution to these problems would be for parties to organize a campaign more centered on the diffusion of information instead of attacks and reactions: “This way they would be winners” (P8, Quebec). Correspondingly, and aside from their political affiliation, respondents disliked negative attacks since these tend to choke the exchange of ideas. In fact, in both Quebec and France, attacks and ripostes by hard-core supporters were considered useless and uninteresting. “It was too much”, said a French respondent (P4). These overwhelming messages made some of them desert the Internet platforms. Some even said that this practice caused a breach of confidence and resulted in a negative image for politicians and their partisans using Twitter in this manner. Furthermore, instead of creating the expected aversion for the criticized person of the opposing party, our respondents said that it created a surge of sympathy for him or her. The reliability of the information circulating on these sites was also questioned.
Citizens Looking for Balance Between Information and Interaction: Between Faith and Cynicism…

Since citizens were looking for online social media to be used meaningfully, they expected that the discourses conveyed with this tool would be adapted to the different platforms. In this sense, interactivity on Facebook and Twitter was taken for granted.

The media kept trumpeting that this campaign would be THE 2.0 campaign! That social media would be widely used. Frankly, I was not impressed. The messages displayed on social media platforms were not all that different. The way these messages were carried was, in many ways, similar to classic political communication. It is not that I am disappointed; I am just stating a fact: the interaction part of the campaign simply did not happen (P9, Quebec).

Therefore, the web campaign did not appear to be what citizens had expected. The Internet was coopted as a new tool to convey old discourses. In this sense, when politicians just used it to signal their presence on a television show or in a specific city, respondents thought things like: “It made them look as if they were in a distant world, away from citizens and their preoccupations. Interactivity is the key, if they use this way, they can build a sympathy capital, and also look more trustworthy. But, most of them don’t do that” (P2, France). Participants considered that “Politicians were not prepared enough for this kind of campaign” (P5, France).

As said earlier, in both Quebec and France, some participants in our study felt that new media were used, by parties and candidates, in the old-fashioned way. Respondents were highly critical of the formal and rigid tone of the discourses presented on the Web and online social media platforms. “It was as if Moscow were talking to us,” said a French participant (P4, France), referring to the highly controlled/well-ordered way politicians were addressing voters. In Quebec, these official and structured communication tactics were also criticized: “There was nothing extraordinary, nothing that caught my attention. Unfortunately, my perception is that it was extremely formatted and classical. Politicians were not going far enough in their involvement, remaining mostly vague” (P10, Quebec).

Perceptions of How Parties and Candidates Use the Internet to Improve Electoral Communication: From Mobilization to Same Old, Same Old

Some of our respondents have a lot of faith in the Internet as a tool for mobilization and for improving electoral communication. There is hope that the Internet could help “renew the democratic trust” (P6, France) since it is a “young democratic tool with great potential” (P7, France). This potential remains to be fully exploited, as “the Web gives an impression of accessibility that is not real” (P2, France). Similarly, the “potential is there”, says a Quebec participant. “It will be great as long as we sense that the use is authentic and not governed by partisanship” (P10, Quebec). Others view the Internet as a mobilizing tool that can help undecided citizens and citizens who have lost confidence in their institutions. In this sense, the Internet could be used for outreach; parties could use it for “posting video online, videos
with more explanations for citizens. They can also use the Internet to ask feedback from them” (P11, Quebec). “It could help bridge the gap between parties and citizens” (P8 and P12, Quebec). For some, this gap could be one of information: “if there is more information in circulation, this could be another mobilization factor” (P5, France). However, cynicism is never far away, since our respondents know that the Internet will not change all political practices, like the temptation to use “empty discourses and negative campaigning”. From their point of view, for citizens with an apathetic view of politics, the Web will not be sufficient, on its own, to inspire confidence, as it is not the tool, but the actions and integrity of politicians that are important (P13 and P14, Quebec).

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This research has offered a look at the “demand side” of Web campaigns. We have showed that citizens are mostly looking for information about issues and the candidates’ campaign activities. This online information is considered as complementary to that offered by the traditional media. The surveyed and interviewed citizens wanted to learn more about regional issues and candidates’ thoughts on specific questions. Our respondents were also looking for intelligent debates from political parties’ and candidates’ websites and online social media platforms. In some cases, they also want more interaction. For example, they wanted to be able to use the online social media features like comments on Facebook walls and YouTube videos. Both the French and the Quebec respondents of the webinpolitics.com project wanted to participate in online political discussions, which was also the case for the citizens studied by Stromer-Galley (2002) and Stromer-Galley & Wichowski (2011). However, these results are quite different from what Koc Michalska & Lilleker (2013) noticed using the data collected by surveying a representative sample of French internet users during the 2012 French presidential election which show the lack of a “demand for the ability to ask questions or participate beyond active information seeking” (Koc Michalska & Lilleker, 2013, p.11). Respondents were also highly critical when strong supporters, and politicians got out of control when using online social media. These practices even led some of them to disengage themselves from the campaign.

It should be noted that our research was based on a highly interested and political group of citizens who were active on the Web and who wanted to share their thoughts about political practices. Therefore, we could ask if their expectations were too high or if they were simply too different from traditional political practices? How can candidates and political parties simultaneously reach and please citizens of all ages and backgrounds, their most loyal supporters, and the media? The Internet and online social media certainly offer tremendous potential for enhancing communication during election campaigns, but, as our respondents have observed, considerable fine-tuning will be required to use these new tools to their full potential, and to adapt current political practices to meet the new or more specific expectations of citizens using the Web. These citizens surveyed for our project are part of an elite group, and their perceptions and expectations cannot be generalized to the general population.

Our results and the fact that the information has proven to be so significant for our respondents could lead to new research investigating, in the line of the “uses and
gratification” studies, the citizens incentives’ to consume information, the preferred type of information, whether or not this information fits their expectations, and the ways this could be linked to their relationship with politics. For example, Ohr & Schrott (2001) showed with direct interviews conducted offline during a local election campaign in Germany that political attentiveness can mainly be explained by non-political motives, such as: “social expectations to be politically informed; a personal duty to stay politically informed; a desire to express one’s political orientations through voting; and the entertainment aspect of politics” (p. 419). Jackson & Lilleker (2007) studied the uses of political parties e-newsletters. In a similar way, an online survey conducted by Kaye & Johnson (2002) a few weeks after the 1996 U.S. presidential election identified four unequal motivational categories for connecting to politically-oriented websites: a) guidance; b) information seeking/surveillance; c) entertainment, and d) social utility. Though this kind of research is not new, it could lead us to identify various factors explaining political information seeking.

Furthermore, when our respondents answered that the Web enabled them to “support the campaign from their living room”, this raises some challenging questions about the uses of the Internet and online social media and the emergence of new forms of political participation where risk and commitment take different forms (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). This line of inquiry could also be explored. Finally, with the ongoing popularity of tablets, cell phones and the prevalence of apps and smart devices, politicians will face many future challenges to keep pace, please citizens and meet ever-changing expectations. This will certainly fuel more research questions and also create many methodological challenges for political communication scholars.

References


