Poli-Clicking
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Review of Selected 2004 Philippine Election Websites

> *Early studies about the potential of the Internet predicted that it will bring people closer to the Athenian concept of direct democracy where citizens act as both the rulers and the ruled (Grossman 1995: 48-49).*

New media technologies are transforming political processes across the globe. Recent studies on politics and the new media, particularly the Internet, present arguments that can be summarized as following two overarching and opposing perspectives. On the one hand, the "cyber-optimists" believe that as Internet access spreads wider across nations and deeper into societies, new opportunities are created for direct access to politically relevant information, and for an unmediated communication between the political organizations and the electorate (Norris 2003). For this group, the Internet introduces changes in civic participation.

On the other hand, to the non-believers or the "cyber-skeptics", the Internet simply reflects and thereby reinforces – rather than transforms – the existing structural features of a country's political system (Hill & Hughes 1998; Norris 2003). To them, the Internet enhances democratic action and participation only among those who are politically active by nature. The technology does not induce change in a community's political discourse; instead, it merely promulgates the existing trends in politics. The more able or powerful ones dominate the usage of the Internet; the less able ones are increasingly isolated from it. Thus, for these cyber-skeptics, the Internet is basically an extension of the traditional media: it does not change people but simply allows them to do what they usually do, *and* to do it better to some extent.

Several studies have documented the political uses of the Internet but these have been done mostly in developed societies in the West (D'Allesio 1997; Farnsworth & Owen 2003; Gibson & Ward 2001; La Pointe 1998; Mianni 2002; Norris 2001a, 2001b; Pace 2003) and in Asia (Ducke 2002; Ho et al 2003; Hong & Chang 2002; Kluver 2001; Tkach-Kawasaki 2003; Wang 2002). In the Philippines, documentation of the impact of the Internet on political action remains anecdotal and informal.

As in the other developing nations, political organizations in the Philippines rely on traditional mass media for their campaigns. Internet use for political purposes is still limited and rudimentary because most politicians, political parties and organizations, voter advocacy groups, and other political stakeholders do not

have the requisite technical and financial resources, as well as the knowledge and skills, for Internet use.

The first distinct usage of the Internet as a political communication tool in the country was when "protest websites and exposés against former President Joseph Estrada were posted in 2001" (Cuevas 2004: 17). The growing discontent with the Estrada administration provoked people - mostly middle and upper income – to post anti-Estrada content in online political fora, news groups, and blogs, as well as to forward "hate" campaigns via e-mail and the short messaging service (SMS or texting) of mobile phones (Jimenez in Cuevas 2004).

Last May 2004, another important political event took place in the country – the national elections. As expected, the candidates as well as the other key players in this event launched their campaigns and information drive largely through the traditional mass media. Some, however, also tapped the Internet for these purposes. This review looks at selected election websites and assesses whether the online features of these sites encouraged any level of engagement among the Filipino electorate, or whether they simply disseminated political information. Despite sidestepping the cyberskeptic-cyberoptimist discourse, this article presents a critical analysis of Internet use for political action during the May 2004 national elections.

Website Review Criteria: Online Features

Website features can be classified into two major categories: content and design elements. More specifically, content elements pertain to information provision, candidate/party promotion, voter participation, political education, and political talk. Meanwhile, web design elements include the images or still photos and audiovisual clips uploaded and streamed in the websites. Interactive capacity, as a website feature, crosses over the content and design categories. Table 1 summarizes the online features used to review the selected election campaign websites.

The Websites Reviewed

This review covers the websites of the candidates for national-level positions only, i.e., from the presidential to senatorial seats. The websites of the congressional and local government unit (LGU) candidates are not considered.

During the May 2004 election campaign season, all the presidential candidates – Pres. Gloria Arroyo, Eddie Villanueva, Raul Roco, Panfilo "Ping" Lacson, the late Fernando Poe Jr., and even the nuisance candidate, Eddie Gil – launched their own official websites (see Figure 1). Candidates for other national posts similarly created and maintained their own websites, i.e., two of the four vice-presidential candidates (Loren Legarda and Noli de Castro), and 14 of the 48 senatorial candidates.

Table 1. Categories of website features used for this review[1]

Categories of Features	Online Website Features
A. Content Features	
1. Information provision: presents essential data to facilitate interaction between the political candidates/parties and the voting	Biography/History/About us
	Speeches
	Endorsements
	Issue positions
2. Candidate/Party promotion: contains the links that directly promote the candidates and the parties	Offline distribution of downloaded campaign materials
	Send-a-link
	Public statements of support
	E-paraphernalia
3. Voter mobilization/participation: solicits deeper commitment from the site visitors	Volunteer
	Join/Become a member
	Get e-mails
	Calendar of activities
	Donate
4. Political education: presents information about official campaign and election procedures	Information on electoral process
	Information on voting process
	Comparison of issue statements
5. Political talk: permits two-way communication between voter and candidates/parties; initiates participation in online forums	Communication spaces
	Contact us
B. Web design elements: Multi-media capacity as indicated by:	
1. Images	
2. Audio-visual campaign materials	

Apart from the individual political candidates, three of the 11 political parties that fielded candidates put up websites as well. In fact, the "Bangon Pilipinas" party owned two, one of which became the official website of presidential candidate Eddie Villanueva.

Of the national candidates' websites, the two featuring Eddie Villanueva are the most complete and sophisticated, in terms of content and design elements. Figure 2 shows one of Villanueva's websites. In this site, his standpoints on specific issues are clearly outlined. There are a number of links that encourage participation from the site visitors, such as asking them to volunteer, join, or donate for the campaign. This site also maximizes the capacity of the Internet to store large amounts of data by uploading campaign jingles and downloadable campaign

Figure 1. Official campaign websites of the 2004 Philippine presidential candidates (Retrieved on April 6, 2004*)*.

materials, as well as the streaming of campaign video clips. Moreover, Villanueva's site is one of the few, if not the only one, that tapped into the power and potential of SMS technology (e.g., "Support the presidential bid of Bro. Eddie Villanueva by texting BRO. EDDIE to 46333"). Similarly, the two political party websites of Bangon Pilipinas, Villanueva's party, contain more online features than the websites of the other political parties.

However, this reviewer personally considers the official website of (then senatorial candidate) Mar Roxas as the best-conceptualized website for a political campaign. Roxas, also known as "Mr. Palengke", created an admirable consistency in his campaign strategy in the offline and online environments. His website carried the signature yellow and blue color combination that he used in all other campaign paraphernalia (see Figure 3), a significant nuance that most of the candidates often glossed over. Interestingly, too, Roxas was the only candidate who encouraged the site visitors to rate his campaign jingles and TV ads via the Internet.
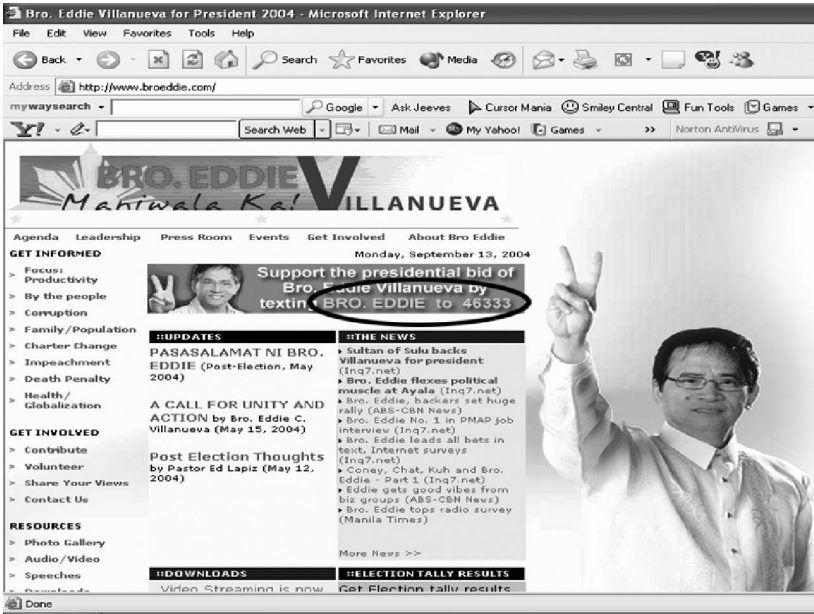
Figure 2. Official website of Bangon Pilipinas standard bearer, Eddie Villanueva (Retrieved from www.broeddie.com on May 16, 2004).
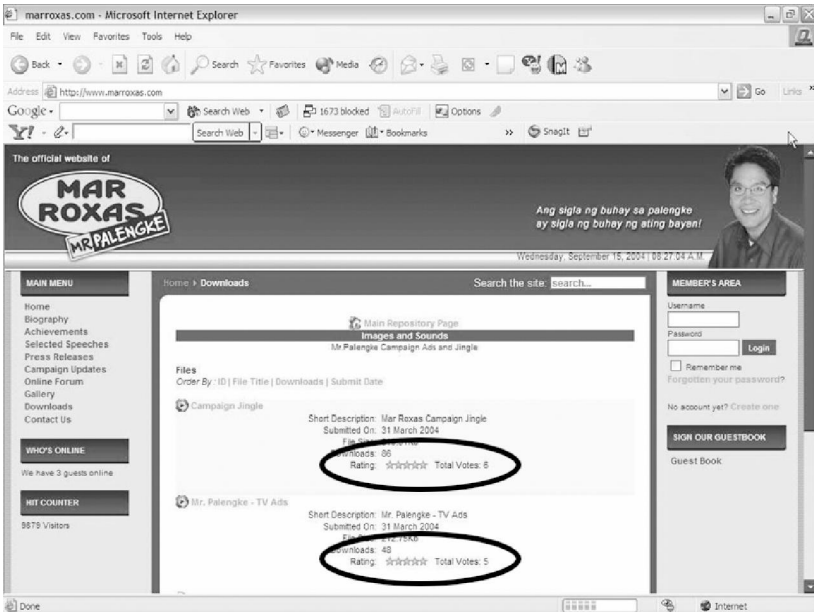

Figure 3. Official website of Senator Mar Roxas (Retrieved from www.marroxas.com on April 6, 2004).

Assessment of the Use of the Internet for Election Campaigns and Information Dissemination

Being a new medium for political campaigning, the Internet was not adequately exploited in the 2004 Philippine national elections. The candidates and their website developers missed out on opportunities afforded by the highly deregulated online environment in the country, i.e., the absence of laws[2] regulating the use of the Internet for political communication. Being new and largely unregulated, the Internet could have been maximized as a political campaigning/advertising medium. In such an environment, one would expect the sprouting of election-related websites with information and engagement features that encourage political participation on the Web. But the data reported here suggest the opposite.

Despite the wide range of content that can be uploaded to websites (see summary of categories in Table 1), most of the political websites reviewed limited themselves to basic information provision. In fact, many of the websites could be described at best as "virtual" or "electronic brochures" (Kamarck 1998) of the campaign materials that were distributed in the offline environment. Similar with the offline printed brochures, the websites were highly graphical as indicated by the prevalence of the colorful images or still photos posted.

The potential of the Internet for interactivity or public engagement was likewise under-utilized. Most of the websites offered only the most basic of the interactive features such as message boards, chats, weblogs, etc. Other interactive features, such as downloading of e-paraphernalia (e.g., desktop wallpapers and screensavers) or donating monetary support to the campaigns via online bank transactions, were almost non-existent.

Aside from interactivity, the Internet's multimedia capacity was also not fully utilized in the websites created for the election campaign. By merely uploading still photos and other graphical images, site producers failed to maximize the technology's audio- and visual- streaming capabilities, features that do not entail extra production costs. The "sophistication", therefore, of their respective website designs concentrated more on the principles of aesthetics than on the interactive capacity of the Internet.

It appears that Internet usage in the Philippines for political purposes by political entities is reflective of the over-arching political psyche in the Philippines. In the "offline" environment, Philippine politics is more personality-based than issue-based. Philippine political parties are often seen as convenient electoral mechanisms that can be easily formed, dissolved, or grouped into coalitions, i.e., "parties or coalitions of convenience" wherein candidates can easily switch from

one party to another, whenever they see it fit to do so (Arugay 2004). Elections in the Philippines are principally won through personalities, and not on the basis of the platforms of the political parties. Political candidates, apart from their personality, are drafted based on their potential to win and get elected based on their ability to extend personal favors to their supporters later on. After elections, politicians become detached from their party programs and proceed to work as "independent" public seat holders.

Such candidate-focused orientation that more often than not neglects the party platform is manifest in the online environment. Instead of encouraging active online discussions on important political concerns and issues, and thereby maximizing interactivity, websites have ,thus far, simply offered basic information about the political candidates and parties. Moreover, most of the websites were created upon the initiative of the individual political candidates instead of the parties to which they belonged. This reviewer sees this as another consequence of the personality-based orientation of Philippine politics. Because political parties are continually altering their political positions, it is more difficult to "sell" themselves to the public. Meanwhile, individual candidates can more easily anchor their campaigns on their personalities, rather than on the political platforms that their political parties embody.

Harnessing the Internet as Information Dissemination and Civic Engagement Tool

The Internet has strong potentials for bridging offline and online political activities. In the Philippines, however , it will take some time for the Internet to become an effective tool for political participation, and it can only happen when there is the right combination of resources, access, opportunities, education, and civic motivation. The Web does seem poised to contribute to a shift in the structure of political opportunities in the country, that could then pave the way for significant social and/or political changes. This review of the websites of selected actors in the 2004 Philippine national election has pointed to several possibilities through which the Internet – as harnessed by electoral candidates – may alter the nature of Philippine political discourse. It did not look into the other half of the discourse, i.e., how citizens use the Internet for their own political empowerment. That is yet another area of inquiry that needs to be pursued. ▶

Notes

1   These categories were formulated for the ongoing comparative and longitudinal study entitled *The Global Internet and Elections Project: An International Project on the Comparative Study of the Role of the Internet in the Electoral Process.* The reviewer is one of the two researchers for the Philippine component of this study.

2   While the 2001 Fair Elections Act (Republic Act. No. 9006) lifted the ban on political advertising, it nonetheless provided clear-cut rules regarding the use of traditional mass media (i.e., television, radio, film, and print) for political campaign purposes. For the 2004 campaign season, no amendments were made to RA 9006 for purposes of monitoring the use of the Internet for political campaigns.

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