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**To Support or Distort:
An Analysis of Ontario Referendum Campaign
Websites**

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MSc in Politics and Communication

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Dissertation submitted to the Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, September 2007, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MSc in Politics and Communication. Supervised by Dr. Maggie Scammell.

Published by Media@lse, London School of Economics and Political Science ("LSE"), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

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To Support or Distort: An Analysis of Ontario Referendum Campaign Websites

Anna Mather

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of issue-based websites in referendum campaigns. It attempts, through content analysis and open-ended interviews, to assess the level of voter support offered by each campaign website. A theoretical framework model was developed to demonstrate the necessary requirements for sufficient voter support and how the website is incorporated into the greater campaign. The model also acknowledges factors beyond the campaign that support, influence and mobilize voters. The criteria includes: content, audience, accessibility, quality of information and aesthetics. Specifically, the research questions pertain to 1) the evaluation of four campaign websites created by different producers of information: the government and non-profit organizations (NPO's) and 2) the extent to which each campaign website supports voter decision in low-salience referendum campaigns.

This paper begins with the premise that the validity of referendums, as a democratic decision making tool, relies heavily on the voter's comprehension of the issue at hand. Referendum campaigns dealing with low-salience issues enjoy significantly less mass media coverage than general elections. Therefore more emphasis is placed on the individual campaigns to provide support to voters by educating and mobilizing the electorate.

The findings of this research show that the government-sponsored public education campaign website provides sufficient support for voters in the decision making process whereas the NPO-sponsored websites fail to provide an equal level of support. Currently there are no regulations governing the quality of content present on campaign websites, however voter awareness of a minimum standard should be encouraged so that campaigns are inclined to improve the quality of their websites. Interviews with key campaign organizers indicate the desire to provide higher levels of support but also mention their lack of necessary financial and human resources to make that possible.

The implications of this study bring the use of referendums as a major decision making tool into question. The quality of information available to voters by NPO's is inconsistent and lacks the necessary support that would enable all voters to make an informed choice. A minimum standard of content and design has been articulated, however this standard should be further developed and encouraged, even if the chances of formal regulation seems unlikely.

1. Introduction

On October 10, 2007, citizens of Ontario, Canada will go to the polls and cast their vote for a Member of Provincial Parliament. Unique to the 2007 provincial election is the additional opportunity for citizens to participate in a province-wide, binding referendum. This referendum asks Ontarians whether they would like to adopt a new electoral model Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) as proposed by the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, or if they would like to continue to use the existing First Past the Post (FPTP) model.

Challenging the status quo has always been a difficult undertaking for those involved, however the task of generating a passionate and excited army of supporters of (or against) electoral reform seems especially daunting. Against the backdrop of the existing challenges faced by traditional politics in civic education, engagement and mobilization, as well as the challenges faced by those wishing to change the status quo, this study focuses on the potential of new media to educate the public, facilitate civic engagement and effect political change. As Philip Howard (2006) observes, "studies of local activism have revealed that internet tools facilitate social networking across traditional socio-economic boundaries, engage people with group learning experiences, and draw new participants into public life" (63). Conducting content analysis on four websites dedicated to the October 10, 2007 referendum vote in Ontario, as well as conducting semi-structured interviews with key campaign organizers, this study seeks to reveal a) the extent to which websites support voter decisions and b) how the websites collude or differ according to the information producer.

Before reviewing the existing related literature and current debates, it is important to explain the broader context of this project as well as unpack some key terms that will be employed throughout this report.

1.1 A Brief History of Electoral Reform in Ontario

In 2005, the Ontario legislature established an all-party committee to study electoral systems. The committee made recommendations regarding the Citizens' Assembly and the referendum which included filing a regulation. This regulation provided for Elections Ontario to select one citizen at random from each of Ontario's 103 electoral districts to form the

Citizens' Assembly. The Citizens' Assembly was to remain independent from the government however it was facilitated by judge and educator, George Thomson, who was appointed by the government. The role of the Citizens' Assembly was to examine Ontario's current FPTP electoral system and make a recommendation that Ontario a) continue to use FPTP or b) adopt a new electoral system. After meeting twice a month for eight months with each other as well as academics, politicians and other stakeholders and interested citizens, it was recommended that Ontario adopt a new electoral system. The Citizens' Assembly specifically recommended that Ontario adopt the MMP electoral system currently used in New Zealand and Germany. The final recommendation was summarized and published as a report on May 15, 2007.¹ In conjunction with the October 2007 provincial election, the government will put the question of whether to accept the Assembly's recommendation to voters in a province-wide referendum.

The exact wording on the October 10 referendum ballot will be as follows²:

Which electoral system should Ontario use to elect members to the provincial legislature?/Quel système électoral l'Ontario devrait-il utiliser pour élire les députés provinciaux à l'Assemblée législative?

- 1) *The existing electoral system (First-Past-the-Post)/L'actuel système électoral (système de la majorité relative).*
- 2) *The alternative electoral system proposed by the Citizens' Assembly (Mixed Member Proportional)/L'autre système électoral proposé par l'Assemblée des citoyens (système de représentation proportionnelle mixte).*

As evident in the wording of the referendum question, there is an assumed level of voter knowledge of the two electoral systems mentioned. There is no explanation of either of the two electoral systems within the question itself. To ensure the legitimacy of the referendum, regardless of its outcome, an intensive public education campaign is required. As noted by de Vreese and Semetko (2004: 4), "...the learning process about the issue is critical for voters' understanding of the options. For well-known issues, this process of learning may be

¹ A complete copy of the report can be found at <http://www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca/assets/One%20Ballot,%20Two%20Votes.pdf> .

² From the official government-sponsored referendum website, http://www.referendumontario.on.ca/en_ca/seetheballot.aspx

less important given that voters draw on previous knowledge and experiences, so their vote may be driven by prior predispositions or well established attitudes” (4). While this may be the case for general election campaigns, the October 10 referendum about the more complex notion of electoral reform requires that more information be made available to the voters. Vresse and Semetko also observe, “For less salient issues...voters may be more dependent on information that they obtain during the course of a campaign” (4). This places a significant amount of weight on the importance of the educational and informative value of the referendum campaign. As LeDuc (2002: 145) says, “particularly in those instances where the issue(s) of the referendum are new to the voter, the campaign dynamic which ensues becomes critical to the determination of the outcome”. A June 19, 2007 Environics research poll showed that 70% of Ontarians were not familiar with the Citizens’ Assembly proposal.³ Given the significant percentage of the electorate unfamiliar with the proposal, the outcome of the referendum will largely be a result of persuasive arguments of the campaigns themselves, and a significant percentage of the various campaigns will necessarily be dedicated to educating the public about the question presented on the ballot.

This project proposes to evaluate the role of the campaign, particularly the use of both government and non-profit organization (NPO) websites as a tool for educating, persuading and mobilizing the electorate. Specifically, this paper plans to evaluate the official government sponsored website, <http://www.referendumontario.on.ca/>, as well as three NPO websites, <http://www.equalvoiceinpolitics.ca/>, <http://www.voteformmp.com/>, and <http://www.nommp.ca/> ⁴. Conclusions will also be supplemented with interviews from key organizers within each campaign.

1.2 Information Providers; Government and Non-profit Organizations

There are many websites in existence specifically created in conjunction with a larger campaign related to the October 10 referendum in Ontario, each appealing to a variety of interests, depending on the origin and purpose of the site. Both the government and non-profit organizations (NPO’s) have taken advantage of the internet and its ability to economically communicate with the general public with little outside mediation of their intended messages. Due to the relatively nascent nature of this particular arm of research,

³ Environics poll results: http://erg.environics.net/media_room/default.asp?aID=637 (08/10/07)

⁴Multiple attempts were made to contact a representative of the government campaign; however there has been no response and therefore no interview with an organizer of the www.referendumontario.on.ca campaign is included.

there is little available about what kind of referendum-related information is being offered by each sector. After evaluating various sites related to the October 10 referendum in Ontario, the researcher was able to draw some general conclusions regarding the quality of information provided by each site and the degree to which each supports an informed voter decision.

1.2 i) Government

The term government, in a Canadian context, can refer to the federal, provincial, or municipal level. In general, Canadian government websites tend to be multi-purpose and aim for political neutrality. Government-sponsored websites refer to those agencies or organizations that are entirely funded by government bodies and staffed by government employees (Petch 2004).

1.2 ii) Non-profit Organizations

A NPO is one whose primary objective is to support an issue of private interest, or in the context of this paper, public concern, without financial incentive. NPOs are actively involved in a wide range of issues and electoral reform is no exception. There are numerous NPOs offering electoral reform information by way of the internet, almost all of them as a part of a larger, integrated campaign. Unlike government-sponsored websites, NPO sites are highly specific and less politically neutral. For the purpose of this paper, the term NPO refers to organizations that provide information related to the October 10 Ontario referendum to the public, are funded solely by private and outside donations, and are staffed mainly by volunteers.⁵

⁵ Both the www.voteformmp.com and www.equalvoiceinpolitics.ca campaigns are partially funded and staffed by members of their umbrella NPOs, Fair Vote Canada and Equal Voice, respectively.

2. Literature Review

The role of issue-based websites in modern referendum campaigns is a relatively understudied topic compared to the existing academic literature on the use of new media and specifically the internet in political campaigns in general elections. There are however overlapping theoretical contexts that underpin both topics which will be discussed below. These include: 1) the impact of political campaigns on the electorate and whether or not political campaigns matter 2) the public sphere as the battleground in political referendums and 3) recent trends in referendums and general election campaigns.

2.1 Do Campaigns Matter?

For all the media attention given to political campaigns, as Thomas Holbrook (1996) points out, "...students of electoral politics have paid scant attention to the dynamics of presidential campaigns and how campaigns influence public opinion (1)". Political campaigns are regarded as events of significant importance to politicians, media, lobbyists, governments, consultants, and a wide range of political actors. However, according to Schmitt-Beck and Farrell (2002), "the collective views of the academic community can perhaps best be summarized by the word 'undecided' (1)". Kathleen Hall Jamieson (2000) observes that (although disagrees with) the prevailing academic view maintains that from both individual-level and macro-level analyses, campaigns have little effect and that "pre-existing conditions are far more effective predictors of outcomes" (3). This prevailing academic view can, in part, be traced back to one of the earliest studies on voter behavior by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944). The conclusion of this study was three-fold. First, Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) concluded that campaigns had little to do with influencing voter decisions. Secondly, they observed that political campaigns reinforce existing voter intentions or activate latent support. The third conclusion was that the least likely outcome of a political campaign was changing vote intention (102-4). Joseph Klapper's (1960) 'minimal effects' model contests that mass media (including political campaign communications) hold little sway over the beliefs and behaviour of the audience and therefore have little power to influence or change voter choice. Another argument against the influence of political campaigns is 'party identification' as articulated by Campbell, et al. in their seminal work, *The American Voter* (1960). As a long-term attitude that is unlikely to change in response to short-term influences, party identification, "not only influences vote choice but also attitudes toward candidates, issues, and political events" (Holbrook 1996: 6).

Therefore, the conclusion of *The American Voter* suggests that the electorate cast their votes in alignment with their feelings toward the parties and is rarely influenced by political campaign communications. Continuing in the vein of the minimal effects model is V.O. Key (1966) who introduced the concept of retrospective voting. What matters most to voters, according to Key, is their satisfaction with the performance of the incumbent political representative and not the political campaign. Although he acknowledges that campaigning has the potential to change votes and to mobilize the electorate, Key also observes that, "other influences doubtless outweigh the campaign in the determination of the vote. As voters mark their ballots they may have in their minds impressions of the last television spectacular of the campaign, but, more important, they have in their minds recollections of their experiences of the past four years" (1966: 9). Combining Key's concept of retrospective voting with Campbell et al.'s theory of party identification, Fiorina (1981) concludes that over time, retrospective evaluations of a party's performance effects party identification and either indirectly or directly, voter choice.

Thus far, the evidence against campaign effects has been individual-level based, or arrived at from a micro-level analysis. A second group of scholars also ascribe to the minimal effects camp, however their conclusions are based on a macro-level of analysis. It is argued by some that election outcomes can be predicted with significant accuracy by economic conditions and other factors that are present prior to the political campaign (Kramer 1971; Abramowitz 1988; Campbell 1992; Lewis-Beck and Rice 1992). Such forecasting models provide evidence *against* campaign effects by consistently making accurate forecasts of elections based on information reflecting conditions that existed prior to the campaign. In other words, some elections can be accurately predicted without considering any aspect of the campaign itself.

Despite the large body of research supporting the minimal effects and predictive models, this literature is not without its critics. Iyengar and Simon (2000) dismiss the claim that political campaigns have little effect by challenging the traditional notion of a campaign's 'effect'. Noting that traditional research in this area has mainly focused on 'persuasion' as the benchmark for effect, Iyengar and Simon argue that, "Limiting the search to persuasion effects necessarily ignores a variety of other highly relevant campaign effects, the most significant of which may be turnout" (2000: 151). They also argue that, "...the single-minded quest for persuasion effects has also ignored the transmission of information, the setting of campaign agendas, and alteration of the criteria by which candidates are judged"

(2000: 151). The transmission of information and the setting of campaign agendas, as well as priming the electorate should be important objectives of any political campaign. This is particularly true in cases where the central campaign issue is relatively new or obscure to the voters, as is the case of the Ontario referendum on electoral reform. Due to its nature as a low-salience and complex issue, the referendum on electoral reform relies heavily on campaign activity to affect voters; perhaps more so than general elections as the regular predictive factors (state of the economy, satisfaction with the incumbent government, party alignment, lack of long-term socio-political cues, etc.) are no longer at play. An additional reason for the significance of on-line campaigning, particularly in low-salience referendum campaigns, is the lack of mainstream media attention.

2.2 Political Campaigning in Referendums

It is the conclusion of the literature review thus far that under certain circumstances, campaigns do indeed matter, particularly in cases where traditional voting cues are absent. This paper will now review the literature addressing the dynamics of referendum campaigns specifically. As Semetko and de Vreese (2004: 3) point out, increasingly citizen initiatives, plebiscites and referendums are being employed around the world as a means of achieving or resisting political and social change. The success of such initiatives is increasingly dependant on the actors' ability to accumulate and distribute information, especially in western democracies characterized as 'information societies' (Votmer and Rommele 2002). The nature of a referendum campaign, as opposed to a general election or a multiple-issue based campaign is that there are competing actors and a single issue (Schmitt-Beck and Farrell 2002). There are multiple information providers and a variety of sources of information for the general public, as well as differing accounts of the facts and focus of the issue. Therefore, central to campaigning in a referendum is 1) framing the issue and 2) educating the electorate according to your frame. Before discussing the importance of framing and educating in the context of a referendum campaign, it is important to discuss the different *types* of issues that may be presented. As observed by Butler and Stokes (1974), issues can be divided into two separate camps: valence issues and position issues.

Valence issues can be described as those which enjoy a broad base of societal support or consent. Valence issues might include stopping global warming or ending child poverty. Generally a society is in agreement that these are issues which they support, however debate is generated around the best approach to dealing with the issue.

Alternately, position issues present contrary opinions and options for action on the same issue. Position issues might include abortion, capital punishment or the decriminalization of marijuana. The Ontario 2007 referendum on electoral reform presents a unique case. On one hand, it might be interpreted as a valence issue if it is framed using the discourse of democracy. In this event, the campaign will be presented as a fight for the best way to elect representatives and preserve or enhance democracy. On the other hand, the issue may be interpreted as a yes/no debate over the proposed new electoral system, MMP. As will be discussed later in the paper, early evidence from the campaigns presents the referendum as a yes/no debate and therefore frame electoral reform as a position issue. It is also evident that the October 10 referendum will be an *information formation campaign*.

According to LeDuc (2002), referendum campaigns can be divided into three types, each type affecting the dynamic of the campaign in unique ways. The first is the *opinion formation campaign*, in which "voters cannot be expected to have fully formed opinions on an issue that has not previously been a subject of political debate" (LeDuc 2002: 159). In such referendums, voter opinion is formed gradually as the campaign progresses and more information about the issue is made available. A second type of referendum campaign is described as *opinion reversal*. This type of dynamic occurs when opposition groups successfully change the subject, 'reframe' the referendum, or are successful in "raising doubts about the issue that is *really* being discussed" (Leduc 2002: 159). The third identified type of referendum campaign is classified by LeDuc as an *uphill struggle*. Closer in nature to general election campaigns, this type of referendum campaign occurs where voters may already have strong cues derived from party alignment, ideology or from the word of a trusted political or high-profile leader. In such campaigns, "much of the attention is directed towards wavering or 'undecided' voters, in the knowledge that a swing of only a few percentage points might make the crucial difference in the outcome" (LeDuc 2002: 159-160).

The nature of the October 10 referendum on electoral reform in Ontario lends itself to the dynamic of the *opinion formation campaign* over a *position issue* as described above. Not unlike a general election campaign, the referendum campaign will largely be an organized exercise in informing, persuading and mobilizing the general public. Unlike general elections, the referendum issue is unfamiliar. The organizations behind the campaigns are not well funded and the media (thus far)⁶ is reluctant to give coverage to the

⁶ See *Missing Referendum* at <http://www.democraticmedia.ca/mediacheck%20>

issue. These factors combine to significantly impact the campaign communication strategies of all NPO agents as well as the government's own public information campaign. Given recent trends in political campaign communications, it is not surprising to see each campaign rely so heavily on their websites as the central means of information dissemination, persuasion and mobilization. As one top organizer with the no-mmp campaign, Joseph Angolano, remarked in an interview, "You can't have a political campaign these days without a website. Full stop. It is an effective interface with the interested public...It's a cheap and effective way to get the message out".

2.3 Recent Trends

It can be argued that the campaign for electoral reform in Ontario is simultaneously a campaign for social change. It is a campaign which challenges the existing status quo, requires a long-term system change and requires a shift of opinions, attitudes and behaviours of society. The location in society of this struggle, or campaign, is often cited to occur in the public sphere. However the public sphere can be a place of consensus building as well. Before discussing the recent trends in political campaigns and specifically post-modern campaign communication strategies and the central role of the website in referendum campaigns, it is of some merit to first review the existing debate surrounding the public sphere and how this relates to the October 10 referendum on electoral reform in Ontario.

The Habermasian public sphere is the source of much reflection, criticism and debate. There have been many theoretical reformulations of the bourgeoisie public sphere (Negt and Kluge 1993, Fraser 1992). Perhaps most accurately within the context of mature democracies, Todd Gitlin provides a theory of public sphericules (1998). The notion of public sphericules acknowledges the existence of a fragmented public, and therefore implies a plurality of discourses. However, this multiplicity of public spheres does not necessarily equal the weakening of democracy as suggested by Putnam (1995) and Gitlin (1998). The notion of a plurality of discourses, some isolated and others overlapping, provides additional arenas for idea exchange and consensus building which may in turn work to challenge the status quo.. Independent media outlets may function as alternative public spheres in which consensus is built around new ideas (Downing, 2001; Fraser, 1993). This also may facilitate political organization and mobilization in an effort to challenge the status quo of the FPTP electoral model presently used in Ontario.

Currently there is theoretical and ideological consensus between the pro-mmp campaigns, however the degree of cooperation and collusion between the different NPOs is limited to links to and from each other's website, as demonstrated in the content analysis. Campaigning on the internet for a single issue has great potential for the realization of the Habermasian public sphere, particularly as mass media outlets are increasingly owned by fewer companies who serve to shrink and co-opt the public sphere for corporate, political and financial goals rather than the public good (McChesney 2000, Herman and Chomsky 1988).

As mentioned earlier, the current referendum campaign is characterized by what some commentators would call a 'post-modern' political campaign (Farrell and Webb 2000, Norris 2000, Lilleker and Lees-Marshment 2005) in the sense that all parties are making extensive use of information and communication technology (ITC) and communication for the most part appears to be centralized. However, the campaign communication strategies of all those involved reflects that of a product-oriented party (POP - as defined by the Lees-Marshment model) and the main messages remain closely bound to ideological foundations. Both the no-mmp and yes-mmp parties are heavily campaigning on what they each frame as democratic values. As Lees-Marshment (2005: 8) writes, each party "assumes that voters will realize the worth of its ideas and will therefore vote for it". Relying heavily on their websites as the anchor of their campaigns, all parties indicated at least four specific goals of online campaigning, each of which are supported by the observations of Ward and Gibson (2003). The hypothesis of Ward and Gibson is that the shift towards online, electronic campaigning could result in the following impacts:

1. *The presentation of unmediated information*
2. *Increased effectiveness of targeting and mobilizing supporters*
3. *Initiating a dialogue with voters*

Through retaining control of the messages disseminated to the electorate, and controlling the content of their websites, both pro-mmp, no-mmp, and the government can frame the issue and outline their position and goals without the threat or challenges associated with the mediated or biased slant of the mainstream media. This *presentation of unmediated information* is even more crucial in a low-salience, position-based referendum where each side hopes to present the most persuasive version of the argument to a public with little prior knowledge of the subject. Furthermore, "[parties] can also provide greater detail or

quantities of information for voters via their website using new releases, speeches, audio and video clips, policy documents and campaign diaries" (Ward and Gibson 2003: 189). Given the complexity of the issue at hand, and the lack of mainstream media attention, the websites of these campaigns are the single most important source of information and political resource that the voting public has access to.

Boncheck (1995) argues that "computer-mediated communication (CMC) reduces the transaction costs associated with organizing, thereby facilitating collective political action" (20). He goes on to identify parties who most benefit from CMC, including those groups who place a high value on information as a selective benefit, and those with poor access to mainstream media. All parties involved in the referendum campaign share these characteristics and therefore have much to gain through the use of their websites, particularly in sending personalized messages to individual voters in an effort to *increase the effectiveness of targeting and mobilizing supporters*.

As some scholars observe (Scammell 2003; Morris 2000), voters are increasingly viewed as consumers and treated as such in the process of political campaigning. In that vein, Ward and Gibson argue that "the web allows parties to seek the opinions of voters/members on policies, create on-line opinion polls and gather instant feedback almost continuously" (2003: 190). The possibility of *initiating direct dialogue with the electorate* is particularly important in a single issue campaign such as a referendum, where voters may have more numerous and complex questions than in general elections due to the lack of party cues and media attention.

3. Conceptual Framework and Research Objectives

Appendix A presents a visual model of this research project. The model includes five possible dimensions of a supportive website: content, accessibility, audience, quality of information and aesthetics. These five dimensions may be addressed differently by the different producers of information as described in section 1.2. Furthermore, it is expected that the more balance, accessibility, breadth of audience, high quality of information and use of aesthetic elements incorporated into the website, the better the website is as a tool for supporting voters' decisions. The data for this study was collected from the home page and relevant pages within the four websites under discussion. To supplement the findings of the content analysis, open-ended guided interviews were conducted with key organizers within each individual campaign with the exception of the government who chose not to participate in this aspect of the study for undisclosed reasons.

The objective of this content analysis is to analyze, compare and contrast various related websites according to this model and to observe consistencies or variance among and between the selected sites. Additionally, this study seeks to examine the extent to which each party exploited the potential of the online component of their campaign to best educate the electorate and support voter decisions. Content analysis alone fails to reveal some of the underlying, latent contexts of the chosen websites however. Therefore open-ended, structured interviews were conducted with key organizers of all campaigns to extrapolate more probing and sensitive information that might be overlooked using content analysis alone.

4. Methodology

In order to assess the various ways in which the different campaign websites are designed to support voter's decisions, both a content analysis of the sites and interviews with top campaign organizers were conducted. As a system for quantifying the process of inference, quantitative content analysis is useful in the context of this paper as it, "offers the possibility of obtaining more precise, objective, and reliable observations about the frequency with which given content characteristics occur" (Pool 1959: 8). This enhances the reliability of the findings, however validity may be more difficult to establish. Content analysis was employed in this paper as it provides a useful tool for managing large bodies of texts and for identifying broad patterns or trends. However this method fails to provide the deeper levels of analysis required to reveal underlying discourses which may better inform and contextualize the findings. Whereas content analysis of the texts provides a statistical understanding of relationships within the data, open-ended interviews supplemented this through hour long interviews with selected key campaign organizers in order to identify and extract the more subtle details immeasurable by content analysis alone.

According to McMillan (2000) the majority of studies employing content analysis of websites as their main research method tend to be descriptive in nature. However she goes on to say that, "a few of these studies do seem to be moving more toward hypothesis testing and theory development" (83). Given the importance of the information made available to the electorate over the course of a low-salience referendum, and considering the central role that websites play in each major campaign involved, some level of description of the information available on the agent's websites is important. However simple description without analysis does little to explain the similarities and differences between each site as it contributes to each campaign and supports voter choice as well as the extent to which each party exploits the potential of their website. Open-ended interviews were conducted to extract richer data. This type of interview, as David Silverman (2006) notes, involves "active listening in which the interviewer allows the interviewee the freedom to talk and ascribe meaning while bearing in mind the broader aims of the project" (110). Using both content analysis and open-ended interviews, this paper attempts to analyze how websites support voter choice in low-salience referendum campaigns, as well as how the presentation of information may differ according to the producer of information. The design of both content analysis and the structure of the open-ended interviews are discussed below.

4.1 i) Content Analysis

Content analysis systematically applies a set of rules in order to draw conclusions from text (Weber, 1990). David Silverman (2006) describes content analysis as a method that “involves establishing categories and then counting the numbers of instances when those categories are used in a particular item of text” (158). Alexander Thomas and Polly Smith (2003) speak of content analysis as “the analysis of data recorded by a target population on cultural artifacts” (96). A more nuanced definition from Klaus Krippendorff (2004), defines content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from text to the context of their use” (18). Krippendorff goes on to list four distinguishing features of content analysis that explain why this method is appropriate to the research question at hand.

First of all, content analysis is *unobtrusive*. This means that the process of gathering data does not interfere in the ordinary patterns of life of the subjects being observed. Considering Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle⁷, it is clear that content analysis enables the researcher to avoid situations that may cause undue influence on the situation and therefore taint the data. Secondly, content analysis is flexible, in as much as it can be applied to unstructured matter and treat it as data. A third feature is that content analysis is sensitive to context. As a context-sensitive method, content analysis and other context-sensitive methods, “acknowledge the textuality of the data – that is, they recognize that the data are read by and make sense to others, and they proceed by reference to contexts of their own” (Krippendorff 2004: 42). The fourth feature is that content analysis is able to deal with large volumes of data. It should also be noted that content analysis is not explicitly limited to dealing with large volumes of data and often, where time and financial resources are limited, content analysis is also useful for dealing with smaller amounts of data as is the case of this paper. All of the above listed advantages are equally applicable to web-based content however there have been relatively few attempts to systemically apply content analysis to websites. Although content analysis has been popular for decades in analyzing newspapers, television, speeches, literature and other textual artifacts, there are significantly less examples of this method being applied to the World Wide Web, as indicated by Petch (2004) McMillan (2000), Ha & James (1998) and Mitra & Cohen (1999).

⁷ Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle asserts that the act of measurement necessarily interferes with the phenomena being observed, therefore distorting the data.

4.1 ii) Content Analysis of Websites

The application of content analysis to online content is met with some unique challenges. Especially considering its rapid growth and change, the dynamic and impermanent nature of a website makes traditional content analysis difficult. According to Petch (2004), there are three specific challenges faced by researchers who seek to conduct content analysis on websites. These include: 1) the definition of a website 2) the unit of analysis and 3) the method of sampling.

The definition of a website, according to Okazaki and Rivas (2002: 383) is "a hierarchy of information connected *via* hyperlinks to an infinite number of other pages". Using this definition, this paper accepts that the websites under discussion include the homepage and all secondary pages and content available therein but *exclude* external pages linked to, yet possessing different root directories. The unit of analysis of a website is another area of contention within the literature on web-based content analysis. Ha and James (1998) argue that the homepage is the ideal unit of analysis as visitors to the website make initial decisions about whether or not to browse the rest of the site based on their impression of the homepage. Furthermore, coding an entire website can be incredibly time consuming as some websites have as many as 50 000 pages. Okazaki and Rivas (2002) argue that the homepage is a very limiting unit of analysis as it is often simplistic and contains little important content. Other researchers have assumed a more comprehensive approach to defining the unit of analysis. Clyde (1996), in a study of library websites, chose to code all pages mounted by a library on its server. In her analysis of nineteen studies that applied content analysis techniques to the World Wide Web, McMillan (2000) observed that the most common coding unit was "content categories", however no standard list of content categories appears to have emerged. Another common coding unit observed by McMillan was "structural features' including links, animation, video, etc.

Another recurring issue in the literature is that of sampling. Sample size may vary depending on the goal of the study and multiple methods may be used. However, Krippendorff (2004) notes that a sampling plan must define sampling units "so that (a) connections across sampling units, if they exist, do not bias the analysis; and (b) all relevant information is contained in individual sampling units, or, if it is not, the omissions do not impoverish the analysis" (99). McMillan sites this stage as being perhaps the most difficult aspect of web-based content analysis (81). With regard to defining units of analysis,

McMillan says, "the coding unit can be expected to vary depending on the theory upon which the study was based, the research question explored, and the hypothesis tested. However, some standardization is needed for context units" (2000: 92-93). She also observes that no such standards have yet emerged for the web (in the way that they exist for offline content analysis). This of course presents additional difficulty for the researcher. However, focus, rigor and creativity in defining units of analysis will contribute to the success of any project attempting to apply content analysis to the World Wide Web.

4.2 Semi-structured Interviews

From a traditional perspective, interviewing can be regarded as "a pipeline for transmitting knowledge" (Holstein and Gubrium 1997: 113). Alternate views maintain that any meaning derived from interviews is socially constructed. Brigs (1986 in Holstein and Gubrium 1997) contends that interviews are not unlike other 'speech events' in that they fundamentally shape and form the content of what is said. According to Kvale (1996), the interview is a move away from gaining knowledge by observing phenomena externally and by experimental manipulation of human subjects "toward an understanding by means of conversations with human beings wanting to be understood" (11). Congruent with the comments of Brigs, Holstein and Gubrium, Kvale suggests that the post-modern approach to interviewing tends to emphasize the "constructive nature of the knowledge created through the interaction of the partners in the interview conversation" (1996: 11). From a methodological perspective, open-ended interviews are useful when exploring complex issues which do not have a predetermined or finite set of responses (Carey, Morgan and Oxtoby 1996). Active interviewing, as described by Holstein and Gubrium (1997: 121) is a "form of interpretive practice involving respondent and interviewer as they articulate ongoing interpretive structures, resources and orientations with 'practical reasoning". Without disregard for the post-modern constructivist perspective of interviewing, active and open-ended interviews appear to be an appropriate method for the purpose of this paper. While the content analysis provided the data for a predetermined set of responses, open-ended interviews were used to provide detailed insight into the motivation and purpose behind decisions made concerning the website under analysis.

5. Method

To ensure the accountability of this research project, this section of the paper will provide a detailed account of the decisions made in the operationalisation of the research question as well as how the findings of the research were obtained.

5.1 Content Analysis

A content analysis was conducted on websites dedicated solely to the October 10 referendum on electoral reform in Ontario in order to assess similarities, differences and overall effectiveness in supporting voter choice. The first step in designing the methodology was to decide on a sample. As the success and validity of this particular, low-salience referendum campaign depends largely on the information available to the public, and considering the lack of mass media coverage, websites of each campaign are expected to play a central role in educating, persuading and mobilizing the public. In order to ensure balance, the websites selected are representative of both non-profit organizations and the government as producers of information. Additionally, all sides of the debate are represented in the analysis. Therefore, the four websites chosen for the sample include those from the pro-mmp campaign, the no-mmp campaign, the women's rights campaign and the official government public education campaign. There are also numerous independent Facebook pages dedicated to this campaign and those will be examined briefly in the discussion section. For the purpose of this paper, the Facebook sites were not included in the sample or analysis.

The criteria for inclusion in the study included: 1) the websites be predominately in English⁸ and 2) the websites be entirely dedicated to the referendum question and exist independently from other education or issue based campaigns. In other words, this study deals exclusively with websites that are written in English and that were established and maintained solely for the purpose of the October 10 referendum campaign. Each of the selected websites were accessed and coded during a four day period (August 13-16 2007). Due to the rapidly evolving nature of the short referendum campaign, the information producers need to quickly react and respond to outside events, and the flexibility that the

⁸ The language criteria are necessary in order to make content analysis possible for this researcher. French language websites also exist for this campaign and given the necessary resources, these would also be included in the study.

website format allows, it was important to place specific limits on the dates the websites were accessed. As previously mentioned, the definition of a website can often be ambiguous, yet it is important to define what is meant by website in this context and to clearly detail the units of analysis for this study. As Foot and Schneider (2006) observe, “defining any of these [micro] units operationally can be challenging particularly when the temporal and malleable aspects of Web objects are considered” (29). This reinforces the importance of setting a specific timeframe for data collection as a part of the unit defining process when using Web objects such as websites as units of analysis.

After defining the unit of analysis (the website as defined above), a coding schedule was developed based on themes expected to support voter decision and maximize the technological potential of the internet, as well as the literature review and previous web-based content analysis reports (Cornfield 2004, Foot and Schneider 2006, Jones 1999, Petch 2004). A second coder was trained and the inter-coder reliability was 80% agreement. The themes of analysis include: content, accessibility, audience, quality of information, and aesthetics. Justification and explanation of the use of these specific themes are discussed below.⁹

5.1 i) Content

Content is a relevant theme in ascertaining the purpose and focus of each website. Content is evaluated based on a number of criteria including how the information providers define the issue of electoral reform as well as the thoroughness of information provided to voters allowing them to make an informed decision. Background and context of the referendum as well as news updates and links to other websites will be examined. Exploring the scope of information available on the website involves digging beyond the level of the homepage and examining the information posted on other pages within the site.

5.1 ii) Accessibility

In spite of the many celebratory discourses that exist surrounding the accessible and democratizing characteristics of the internet, a well documented digital divide presents an alternate reality. While Statistics Canada reports that over 7.9 million (61%) households in Canada are connected to the internet, there are statistically significant differences in usage according to socio-economic factors; specifically, age of the head of household, level of

⁹ See appendix 2 for the coding instructions.

education of the head of household, and household income are strong indicators of internet use.¹⁰ In addition to accessibility to the internet being limited by socio-economic factors, this project also takes into consideration how the four websites address language barriers, literacy and physical disabilities in the construction of their website and presentation of information.

5.1 iii) Audience

The theme of audience is used to address the level of commitment to provide information or to act as a resource to a particular audience. Analysis of the intended audience may provide insight into why certain decisions were made in terms of how and what information is presented. The creator of an effective website (as part of a larger communications campaign) understands who their target audience is as well as how their audience accesses and interprets political information. In the context of a referendum campaign, the parties involved are likely to cast a wide net in terms of targeting specific segments of society which may be expressed through links to pages within the site addressing that audience specifically.

5.1 iv) Quality of Information

While the openness and theoretical accessibility of the internet (for both producers and consumers) are often touted as positive attributes, the same lack of standards or regulation make the World Wide Web a huge source of unsubstantiated opinion presented as fact which may result in users having access to a large amount of misinformation. In campaigns where voters' decisions rely heavily on the information they receive, it is highly important that the information be accurate, unbiased and not misleading. Of course, some degree of bias or spin is expected from each campaign (with the exception of the government website which is expected to be politically neutral). Some researchers point to the inclusion of user feedback mechanisms on the website and the incorporation of user comments into the website as an indication of quality of information (Petch 2004: 15). There are relatively few, if any, widely accepted standards by which to judge the quality of information on a website in a single-issue referendum campaign, however efforts were made by the researcher to develop criteria by which to evaluate the quality and reliability of information presented.

¹⁰ Full statistics can be found at <http://www40.statcan.ca/01/cst01/comm10a.htm> (08/10/07).

5.1 v) Aesthetics

One of the expressed goals of the use of a website in a political campaign, according to Ward and Gibson (2003) is mobilization of the electorate. Through informing voters about the issue of electoral reform, websites contribute to the educating function of a campaign, however efforts to make the campaign more interesting and entertaining may improve levels of citizen engagement and influence voter turnout (Scammell and Langer, 1996; Street, 2003; Norris, 2004). Therefore, the four campaign websites will be evaluated by criteria related to aesthetics such as use of images, audio, video, humour and the mention of famous or popular culture figure endorsements. An analysis of users' first impression of websites by Shenkman and Jonsson (2000) found that the most reliable predictor for the overall judgment by typical users of a website was its beauty. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, only the homepage was coded for aesthetics as the homepage is where users' first impression of the overall website is generally formed.

5.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four key organizers within each campaign with the exception of the government-sponsored public education campaign. Three interviews were conducted in person while the fourth was conducted over the phone and each interview ran approximately one hour in length. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. One sample interview is included in the appendix and the other interview transcriptions are available upon request.

All persons interviewed were high level campaign organizers. Three interviewees were employed by the campaign while one interviewee worked on a volunteer basis. Each respondent played a significant role in their campaign, particularly in the development of the website and its content. Interviewees were provided with background information about both the researcher and the research project that they were being interviewed for. Consent to record and use all parts of the interview for the purpose of this project was granted by all participants with the understanding that any strategically sensitive material would be strictly confidential.

The participants were recruited by the researcher after being directed to each website by the academic director of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly, and contact information for key organizers was obtained from each website. Introductory e-mails and follow-up phone calls were made to each participant and the interviews were arranged. After several attempts to communicate with a contact from the government website, it became clear from their end that there was little interest to participate in this research project. The lack of an interview with this organization does not, however, affect the final analysis of each website to any substantial degree.

The interviews were designed as a series of open-ended questions divided thematically. The interviews were also semi-structured which allowed the researcher to follow up on certain questions in order to obtain sensitive details that a closed and rigidly structured interview might overlook. The basic interview questions given to each interviewee can be located in the appendix.

6. Findings and Discussion

Based on the themes designated previously in this paper, the analysis of the observed data and a discussion of the findings will be presented in the following section in the order that they were introduced and broken down by the main unit of analysis. The analysis and discussion of the content analysis will be presented first, followed by an analysis of the open-ended semi structured interviews conducted with the key organizers within each campaign. It is important to note, as Riffe, Lacy and Fico (1998: 26) point out, "simple description of content has its place in communication research", particularly in instances "where description is an essential early phase of a program of research...with previously unexplored messages or content" as is the case of this research project.

6.1 Content Analysis Findings

For the purpose of clarity in this section, the four websites will be referred to as: Referendum Ontario (www.referendumontario.on.ca), No MMP (www.nommp.ca). Vote for MMP (www.voteformmp.ca) and Electoral Reform for Women (www.equalvoiceinpolitics.ca).

6.1 i) Analysis of Content

It is not surprising to have observed that all websites under study display the date of the referendum on the homepage. However, the similarities between the four websites end there in terms of content and focus. In order to provide voters with a sufficient understanding of the referendum question, campaign websites (at a minimum) should provide voters with an explanation of both electoral models. Only the Referendum Ontario website provides voters with detailed explanations of both FPTP and MPP while each of the other websites studied only provide definitions of MMP. It is somewhat surprising that even the No MMP website failed to include an explanation of the FPTP electoral model. A website that effectively supports voter's decisions and the voting process should also provide an example of the ballot with which they will be presented at the voting booth on October 10 in order to reduce the amount of confusion that may accompany the combined election and referendum. Only the Referendum Ontario and Vote for MMP websites depict an image of the ballot as it will appear. Detailed information on the voting process itself is available on each site save for the No MMP website. The No MMP website is also the only site which does not provide background information on the Ontario Citizens' Assembly or on the

process leading up to their recommendation. Each site also provided links to outside sites which provide voters access to news reports or blogs supporting each campaign except for the Ontario Referendum website which intentionally disassociates from non-governmental sites which may contain biases.

6.1 ii) Analysis of Accessibility

As mentioned previously, the 'digital divide' is mediated by a variety of socio-economic factors. One such factor is literacy levels. In order for voters to make informed decisions, they not only need to be aware of the issue but they also require a basic understanding of the language and terms used to describe electoral reform, FPTP and MMP. To this end, the websites should include a glossary of technical terms and political jargon. Only the Referendum Ontario website includes such a feature. Media literacy is also an issue. To this end, websites should also include search tools to assist in locating the desired information, as well as a link to the homepage visible from every page within the site. While only the Referendum Ontario and Vote for MMP websites contained a search tool, all campaign websites had a link to their homepage available from every page within the site.

Other barriers to access may be linguistic in nature, age or disability related. Canada has two official languages, English and French. All government-funded websites must be available in both official languages however the same requirement does not apply to NPO websites. There is no legal requirement for political campaign websites to be available in any particular language, however the Vote for MMP campaign website has information available in numerous languages including French, Greek, Serbian and Tamil. English is the only language that information is available in on both the No MMP and Electoral Reform for Women websites. In order to accommodate visually impaired visitors to the website, font size should be adjustable or vital information about the campaign should be available in audio format. Furthermore, a toll-free telephone number should be available for voters who require further clarification about the issues presented on the site. The Referendum Ontario website includes all of the above mentioned features which enables it to support the voting decisions of those who might not otherwise be able to access or understand information presented on the internet. The Electoral Reform for Women and the No MMP website do not include any of these accessibility-related features. The Vote for MMP website includes a clip of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly explanation of their recommendation and a toll-free phone number; however the font size of the site is not adjustable.

6.1 iii) Analysis of Audience

The dynamic of this particular political campaign is unique in that the element of mobilization is less present. The double majority threshold required for the referendum to pass is based on all ballots cast and not on all potential votes. From a strategic standpoint then, it would make sense to target one's campaign to demographics with high voting percentages especially given the limited financial and human resources available. For the most part, however, the interested party websites cast a wide net and avoid targeting specific audiences with the messages and information on their website. The significant exception is the Electoral Reform for Women website which appears to be completely designed and written by and for women. Overall, this category for analysis revealed little about the extent to which each site supports sound voter decisions.

6.1 iv) Analysis of Quality of Information

Assessing the quality of web-based political information is a challenging endeavor with few accepted guidelines for measuring and analyzing such information. However, for voters to make informed decisions based on the information presented to them on political websites, there should be a minimum standard of quality of information made available by each campaign. There have been some attempts by researchers across different fields to develop a framework for analysis and some of these concepts have been used in this study (Kim et al. 1999). The disclosure of authors of content on a website or clearly referenced material indicates a level of transparency that biased or poorly researched websites might not have. The Referendum Ontario website does not disclose the authors of its content, however the Chief Electoral Officer takes responsibility for all information contained on its pages. Links are also provided to Ontario Legislation, research papers on the history of referendums in Ontario, as well as other published official documents. While the Vote for MMP and No MMP campaign websites do not explicitly name the authors or sources of its content, they both list the first and last name of key individuals in the campaign as well as contact information. The Electoral Reform for Women website only lists general contact information and does not reference any information posted to its pages.

In addition to transparency, accountability can be perceived as another measure of quality of information. Accountability to the website audience includes inviting feedback,

posting user comments, hosting a message board and incorporating user feedback into the greater campaign effort. The Referendum Ontario website and the Equal Voice in Politics website have contact information, however they do not explicitly solicit user comments nor do they post user feedback anywhere on their sites. Both Vote for MMP and No MMP websites include user comments and invite feedback. For obvious reasons, the messages posted are filtered to ensure the respective messages remain clear and undistorted.

6.1 v) Analysis of Aesthetics

An important element of supporting voter decision is actually supporting the decision to participate in the referendum. As noted by some scholars, political campaigns are often lacking in style, creativity and general aesthetic appeal which contributes to the trend of growing voter apathy and disengagement. The use of animation, images, video and audio engages voters with the complex information in less conventional ways. In order to impress visitors, maintain their interest and perhaps encourage them to explore more pages of the website, the homepage should incorporate some aesthetic elements as this is where visitors form an instant first impression of the overall website. Additionally, the mention of elite or celebrity endorsements may contribute to the overall aesthetic appeal of the website.

Only the Referendum Ontario website uses flash animation technology on their homepage as well as an informational video available in both official languages. Links to other pages in the website are also presented as icons and an image of the ballot as it will appear is also clearly displayed. There is no mention of endorsements on the government website. The Vote for MMP campaign website has prominently displayed images in a banner across the top of the site. In addition, the site has downloadable icons and banners available for use in blogs and on personal websites. This site also lists high profile endorsements, however these are not featured on the homepage. The Electoral Reform for Women website includes a photograph of the legislature and the text leads off with a quote on electoral reform from Chilean President, Michelle Bachelet. The No MMP website includes a logo however there is no video, audio clips or endorsements present on the homepage.

6.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants within three of the campaigns studied, including Fair Vote Canada's *Vote Yes for MMP* campaign, Equal

Voice's *Equal Voice in Politics* campaign, and the independently organized *No MMP* Campaign. The fourth interview conducted was with the creator and moderator of numerous pro-mmp Facebook pages and youth-oriented pro-mmp campaigns. Throughout the course of the interviews, certain key points were stressed over others and the following analysis and discussion of the interviews are based on these emergent themes. Whereas the content analysis provides insight into how each website supports voter decisions, the intent of the campaign organizers may not have translated as they intended. For that reason, it is of value to assess the organization's rationale and justifications for the decisions behind the content and presentation of their website.

6.2 i) Purpose and Content

Before probing for detail, it was important to ascertain each campaign's motivation for using a website as a part of their overall campaign. Each party seemed to agree that having a website was a critical component. The Electoral Reform for Women (R1) respondent said,

R1: We feel it is one of the most important avenues of outreach. As well, it forms a significant basis for MMP news and events information.

Equal importance was given to the website as a central component to the campaign by the No-MMP respondent (R2).

R2: It's an effective interface with the interested public. It was also established to recruit volunteers. It's a cheap and effective way to get the message out. We never even dreamt of not having a website.

R2 also added that his campaign had plans to use the website to recruit volunteers and for fundraising. The Vote for MMP respondent (R3) pointed out the necessity of the website in the absence of an advertising budget or mainstream media coverage.

R3: We don't have access to the regular media. We don't have the budget to fund massive advertising campaigns. We're getting some earned media, in the sense, usually op ed pieces and letters to the editor... The Toronto Media are ignoring this whole issue for the most part.

As a cost and labour effective means of getting out an unmediated message, the campaign websites are an invaluable resource to both campaign organizers and voters looking for information on the pending referendum.

6.2 ii) Audience

The ability to identify and target a specific audience, be it gender, social status, language, political orientation, sexual orientation, or age, may allow the campaign to customize its message to make it relevant and accessible to the specific audience. R1 mentioned that her campaign attempts to do just that.

R1: We try to appeal to anyone wanting to learn more about MMP, but our specific target group is women.

Both R2 and R3 mentioned very different approaches from R1 and explicitly mention targeting any and every voter in Ontario as their target audience.

R3: Because it's every voter, we're not interested in demographics. We are broad spectrum. If you're over 18 and still breathing, we want you come to the website.

Considering that Ontario has both an aging and culturally diverse voting population, it follows that issues of accessibility should be addressed.

6.2 iii) Accessibility

The content analysis revealed low levels of accessibility on each of the three NPO websites, however this does not mean that issues of access, understanding and usability were not considered. Making the content accessible to audiences of a wide range of reading abilities was a deliberate decision on behalf of the Electoral Reform for Women campaign.

R1: We just tried to provide the information in an accessible manner, not too complicated or long or boring.

R2 and R3 mentioned language as a barrier to access for some people.

R2: We are currently in the process of translation into French and we will definitely try to get some literature out there in different languages. Some people might regard this as pandering to ethnic minorities however some people only really understand an issue by reading it in their own language.

Both R2 and R3 also noted that their desire for a fully-accessible website is likely to go unfulfilled due to the lack of financial resources.

R3: One of the things we're unhappy about is that we can't have a full scale French language brochure. We just don't have the money for it. And the people who could do it aren't available.

Whereas the Vote for MMP website has an informational video embedded in the homepage, this was not mentioned as a feature of accessibility by R3.

6.2 iv) Interactivity

One of the unique features of the internet in political campaigning is the potential for two-way communication. Given the complex nature of the referendum question on electoral reform, voters should be given the opportunity to engage with representatives from all sides of the issue. On a campaign website this communication may manifest itself in various ways.

R1: People can contact us with their questions or input via our website. Changes are made to the website if necessary. If we don't feel it is necessary we'll write them explaining why.

While R1 and R2 both note the posting of user comments to the homepage of their websites, R2 makes an interesting observation about the necessity of *not* having an un-moderated or open message board on the site.

R2: The website should be pristine. We can't control how media interprets the issue or how our comments are used on radio...We have a goal of getting our message out clearly we have to make sure it comes out to the public that way. The website is the one place where we can say what we want to say completely uninterrupted. It is an unmediated expression of what we're trying to do.

7. Summary of Findings and Discussion

The findings of this research show that the government-sponsored public education campaign website provides sufficient support for voters in the decision making process whereas the NPO-sponsored websites fail to provide an equal level of support. As an *information forming campaign*, it is understood that voters have little prior knowledge of the referendum issue and therefore rely heavily on whatever outside information is available to them. The Referendum Ontario website provides voters with detailed explanations of electoral models, an on-line glossary, adjustable font size, audio and video with subtitles and the entire website is also available in French. Aesthetically, the site is pleasing and the numerous links to academic and official government studies on electoral reform and referendums in Canada help to ensure the quality and validity of the information presented. As expected, there is no targeted audience as this would indicate bias toward or against particular groups and the government-sponsored website must remain completely politically neutral. It is not surprising that the government website provides superior voter support over the three NPO websites as the overall Referendum Ontario public education campaign is backed by over ten million dollars, is organized and researched by paid professional staffers and it has contracted outside communications consultants to handle media. Regardless of the strong financial position of the Referendum Ontario campaign, its website can be regarded as a strong model for informing and supporting voters in their decision making process.

The voter support provided by each of the NPO websites is considerably less than that provided by the government-sponsored website. That is not to say, however, that all NPO websites offer the same level of voter support. As expected, the official 'No' and 'Yes' campaigns express considerable bias in the information presented on their websites in terms of defining the issue, providing an accurate historical context of the referendum, in the comments and quotes they choose to display, and in the news items and blogs that each site provides links to. The Electoral Reform for Women campaign website shows equal levels of bias and a lack of accessibility enhancing features. It is interesting to note the lack of cooperation between the two 'Yes' campaigns. As mentioned in the discussion on the public sphere, the plurality of discourses present in late-modern society provides the arenas necessary for idea exchange and consensus building which may in turn work to challenge the status quo or dominant hegemonic discourse of the day. This 'idea exchange' between parties of common ideology is lacking in this campaign and thus fragments rather than

unites the discourse on electoral reform. Even given resources equal to the government campaign, it is possible but unlikely that the NPO websites would provide an equal level of voter support. As the October 10 referendum has shaped up to be a yes/no debate, there is little motivation for interested parties to present information neutrally. Each NPO respondent seemed confident that if the public was presented with all the facts, they would support their (the respondent's) campaign. This sentiment is summed up neatly by R2's comment, "*If we do come out on top, it's proof that the message matters not just big bucks*". As it stands, if voters are to make an informed decision on October 10, they should be encouraged to seek out more balanced, accountable, accessible and accurate sources of information than is currently provided by the NPO campaigns.

8. Conclusion

The result of the October 10 referendum on electoral reform in Ontario will rely heavily on the amount and quality of information available to the electorate on the issue of electoral reform. In order for the referendum to pass, a double majority must be achieved. This means that 50% of the voters in 64 electoral districts must vote for MMP *in addition to* at least 60% of all the referendum ballots across the province choosing the alternative system recommended by the Citizens' Assembly. If this occurs, the new government must introduce a law by December 31, 2008 to officially make MMP Ontario's new electoral system. The role of the government in the lead-up to the referendum vote (specifically the Chief Electoral Officer, Mr. John Hollins) is to "provide education on the referendum process, the date, the referendum question and the content of the choices", according to the Referendum Ontario website.¹¹ For a truly democratic result, citizens must possess a basic understanding of the question being asked. De Vreese and Semetko (2004) note a relationship between media coverage of a referendum and issue salience (20). The lack of media coverage renders this issue low-salience and therefore greater emphasis is put on the individual campaigns to educate the public. If the hypothesis of Ward and Gibson (2003) proves correct, the trend toward online campaigning has definite potential to strengthen democracy through disseminating unmediated messages, initiating a direct dialogue with voters and through creating the necessary conditions for increased civic participation and mobilization. This study shows that each party utilizes the technology of the internet to these ends, however only the government-sponsored website presents sufficient voter support according to the criteria defined in the conceptual framework.

While this study has focused on the degree of voter support each campaign website provides, it is important to note that the websites are only one component (in some cases a significant component) of a larger campaign. The conceptual framework acknowledge the effect of factors other than the campaign in the voting decision, however this paper emphasizes the role of the website as this is a relatively understudied topic in referendum-based research. Further refinement of the conceptual framework is suggested in order to provide both campaigners and voters with a better understanding of what a supportive website should entail. It should also be noted that visitors to each website may have preconceived notions about the different electoral systems and visit only those websites which endorse their original stance on an issue. A further consideration is the limited sample

size. Given the time and resources, it may be of both theoretical and practical value to expand the scope of the research to include more referendum-related websites as well as to analyze the user reaction to each site. It may also be of value to analyze the campaigns mounted during the other Canadian referendums on electoral reform which were held recently in British Columbia and Prince Edward Island.

As popular as the referendum is as a political decision making tool, the process itself has its critics. In the absence of a well informed and mobilized public, the result of a referendum may simply echo the message of the wealthier, more organized party. The use of websites in low-salience referendum campaigns presents the opportunity for a plurality of voices and opinions to be heard; voices that would otherwise be overlooked or ignored by the voting public. A minimum standard of content and design has been articulated, however this standard should be further developed and encouraged, even if the chances of formal regulation seems unlikely. The emphasis now rests with the campaign organizers who should be encouraged to participate in the democratic process by providing genuine support to voters and less political spin.

¹¹ See http://www.referendumontario.on.ca/en_ca/default.aspx (08/25/07).

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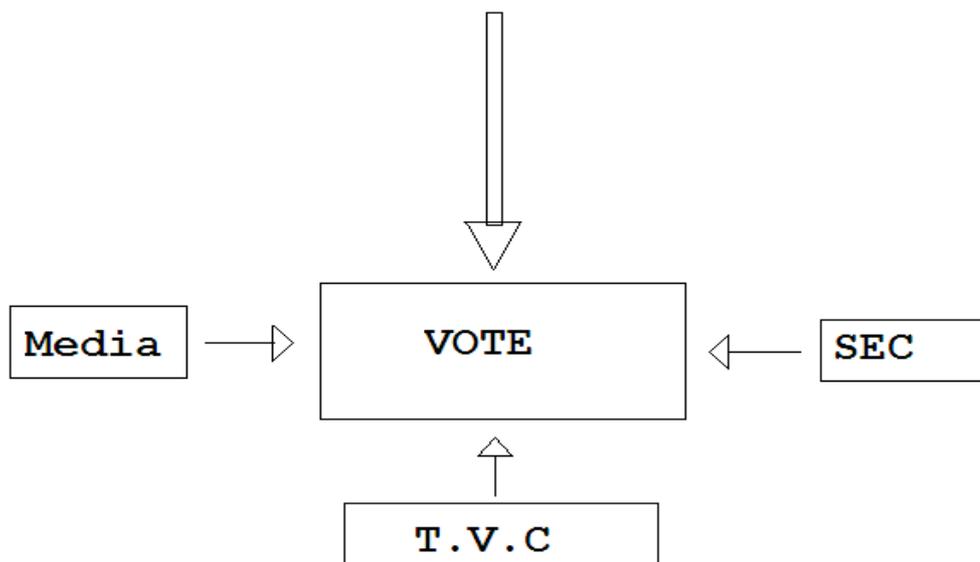
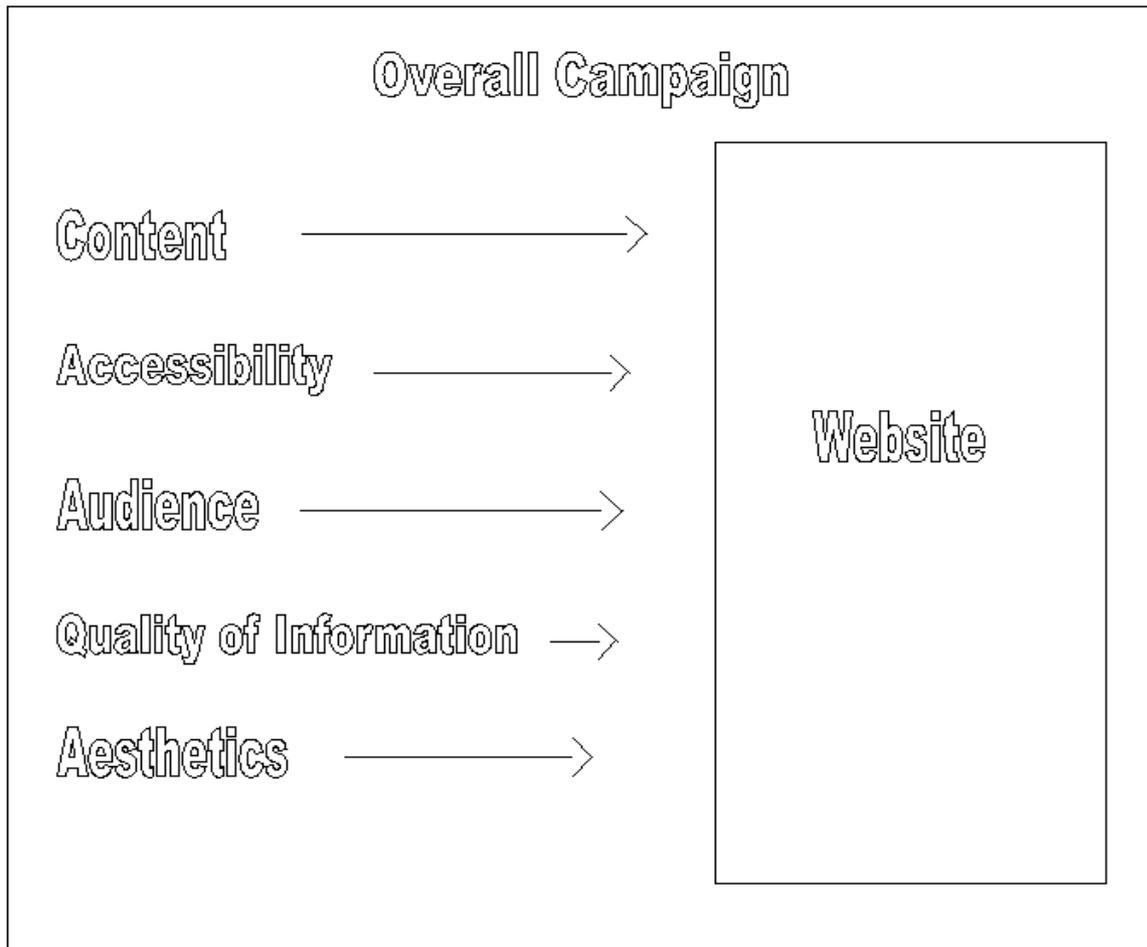
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- <http://www.nommp.ca/> (retrieved 08/15/07)
- <http://www.democraticmedia.ca/mediacheck%20> (retrieved 08/12/07)
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- <http://www40.statcan.ca/l01/cst01/comm10a.htm> (retrieved 08/10/07)
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10. Appendices

A. Conceptual Framework Model



**SEC = Socioeconomic Conditions
Cues**

T.V.C. = Traditional Voting

B. Coding Schedule

| Content Analysis Coding Frame: Referendum Campaign Websites | | | | | |
|--|---|-----|----|-----|----------|
| | | YES | NO | N/A | Comments |
| Content | a) Defines MMP b) Defines FPTP c) Background on OCA d) Explains referendum e) Links to MMP news/blogs f) Links to FPTP news/blogs g) Info on voting process h) Links to government sites i) Shows ballot j) Date of referendum | | | | |
| Accessibility | a) Link to homepage from each page b) Search feature c) On-line glossary d) All info. in other languages e) Some info. In other languages f) Adjustable font size g) Vital information in audio h) Toll-free telephone number | | | | |
| Audience | a) Link/page/info. for youth b) Link/page/info for seniors c) Link/page/info for NDP members d) Link/page/info for Liberals e) Link/page/info for Conservatives f) Link/page/info for Greens g) Link/page/info for people with disabilities h) Link/page/info for immigrants k) Link/page/info for men l) Link/page/info for women | | | | |
| Quality of Info. | a) Disclosure of authors b) References cited c) Contact info for site developer d) Links to supporting literature e) User feedback invited f) User comments posted g) Message board | | | | |
| Aesthetics | a) Flash animation b) Photographs or images c) Video or links to video d) Audio or links to audio e) Frames f) Icon links g) Elite figure endorsement | | | | |
| Website Name Website Address Sector | | | | | |

C. Vote for MMP

| Content Analysis Coding Frame: Referendum Campaign Websites | | | | | |
|--|---|-----|----|-----|----------|
| Content | | YES | NO | N/A | Comments |
| Content | a) Defines MMP | X | | | |
| | b) Defines FPTP | | X | | |
| | c) Background on OCA | X | | | |
| | d) Explains referendum | X | | | |
| | e) Links to MMP news/blogs | X | | | |
| | f) Links to FPTP news/blogs | | X | | |
| | g) Info on voting process | X | | | |
| | h) Links to government sites | X | | | |
| | i) Shows ballot | X | | | |
| | j) Date of referendum | X | | | |
| Accessibility | a) Link to homepage from each page | X | | | |
| | b) Search feature | X | | | |
| | c) On-line glossary | | X | | |
| | d) All info. in other languages | | X | | |
| | e) Some info. In other languages | X | | | |
| | f) Adjustable font size | | X | | |
| | g) Vital information in audio | X | | | |
| | h) Toll-free telephone number | X | | | |
| Audience | a) Link/page/info. for youth | | X | | |
| | b) Link/page/info for seniors | | X | | |
| | c) Link/page/info for NDP members | | X | | |
| | d) Link/page/info for Liberals | X | | | |
| | e) Link/page/info for Conservatives | X | | | |
| | f) Link/page/info for Greens | | X | | |
| | g) Link/page/info for people with disabilities | | X | | |
| | h) Link/page/info for immigrants | | X | | |
| | k) Link/page/info for men | | X | | |
| | l) Link/page/info for women | X | | | |
| Quality of Info. | a) Disclosure of authors | X | | | |
| | b) References cited | | X | | |
| | c) Contact info for site developer | X | | | |
| | d) Links to supporting literature | X | | | |
| | e) User feedback invited | X | | | |
| | f) User comments posted | X | | | |
| | g) Message board | | X | | |
| Aesthetics | a) Flash animation | | X | | |
| | b) Photographs or images | X | | | |
| | c) Video or links to video | X | | | |
| | d) Audio or links to audio | X | | | |
| | e) Frames | X | | | |
| | f) Icon links | X | | | |
| | g) Elite figure endorsement | X | | | |
| Website Name | Vote for MMP | | | | |
| Website Address | http://www.voteformmp.ca | | | | |

| | |
|--------|-----|
| Sector | NPO |
|--------|-----|

D. Electoral Reform for Women

| Content Analysis Coding Frame: Referendum Campaign Websites | | | | | |
|--|--|-----|----|-----|----------|
| Content | | YES | NO | N/A | Comments |
| Content | a) Defines MMP | x | | | |
| | b) Defines FPTP | | x | | |
| | c) Background on OCA | x | | | |
| | d) Explains referendum | x | | | |
| | e) Links to MMP news/blogs | x | | | |
| | f) Links to FPTP news/blogs | | x | | |
| | g) Info on voting process | x | | | |
| | h) Links to government sites | x | | | |
| | i) Shows ballot | | x | | |
| | j) Date of referendum | x | | | |
| Accessibility | a) Link to homepage from each page | x | | | |
| | b) Search feature | | x | | |
| | c) On-line glossary | | x | | |
| | d) All info. in other languages | | x | | |
| | e) Some info. In other languages | | x | | |
| | f) Adjustable font size | | x | | |
| | g) Vital information in audio | | x | | |
| | h) Toll-free telephone number | | x | | |
| | i) Toll-free telephone number | | x | | |
| Audience | a) Link/page/info. For youth | | x | | |
| | b) Link/page/info for seniors | | x | | |
| | c) Link/page/info for NDP members | | x | | |
| | d) Link/page/info for Liberals | | x | | |
| | e) Link/page/info for Conservatives | | x | | |
| | f) Link/page/info for Greens | | x | | |
| | g) Link/page/info for people with disabilities | | x | | |
| | k) Link/page/info for immigrants | | x | | |
| | l) Link/page/info for men | x | | | |
| | l) Link/page/info for women | x | | | |
| Quality of Info. | a) Disclosure of authors | | x | | |
| | b) References cited | | x | | |
| | c) Contact info for site developer | x | | | |
| | d) Links to supporting literature | | x | | |
| | e) User feedback invited | | x | | |
| | f) User comments posted | | x | | |
| | g) Message board | | x | | |
| | | | | | |
| Aesthetics | a) Flash animation | | x | | |
| | b) Photographs or images | x | | | |
| | c) Video or links to video | | x | | |
| | d) Audio or links to audio | | x | | |
| | e) Frames | x | | | |
| | f) Icon links | | x | | |
| | g) Elite figure endorsement | x | | | |
| | | | | | |
| Website Name | Electoral Reform for Women | | | | |

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Website Address | http://www.equalvoiceinpolitics.ca |
| Sector | NPO |

E. No MMP

| Content Analysis Coding Frame: Referendum Campaign Websites | | | | | |
|--|--|-----|----|-----|----------|
| Content | | YES | NO | N/A | Comments |
| | a) Defines MMP | x | | | |
| | b) Defines FPTP | | x | | |
| | c) Background on OCA | | x | | |
| | d) Explains referendum | | x | | |
| | e) Links to MMP news/blogs | | x | | |
| | f) Links to FPTP news/blogs | x | | | |
| | g) Info on voting process | | x | | |
| | h) Links to government sites | | x | | |
| | i) Shows ballot | | x | | |
| | j) Date of referendum | x | | | |
| Accessibility | a) Link to homepage from each page | x | | | |
| | b) Search feature | | x | | |
| | c) On-line glossary | | x | | |
| | d) All info. in other languages | | x | | |
| | e) Some info. In other languages | | x | | |
| | f) Adjustable font size | | x | | |
| | g) Vital information in audio | | x | | |
| | h) Toll-free telephone number | | x | | |
| Audience | a) Link/page/info. for youth | | x | | |
| | b) Link/page/info for seniors | | x | | |
| | c) Link/page/info for NDP members | | x | | |
| | d) Link/page/info for Liberals | | x | | |
| | e) Link/page/info for Conservatives | | x | | |
| | f) Link/page/info for Greens | | x | | |
| | g) Link/page/info for people with disabilities | | x | | |
| | h) Link/page/info for immigrants | | x | | |
| | k) Link/page/info for men | | x | | |
| | l) Link/page/info for women | | x | | |
| Quality of Info. | a) Disclosure of authors | x | | | |
| | b) References cited | | x | | |
| | c) Contact info for site developer | x | | | |
| | d) Links to supporting literature | | x | | |
| | e) User feedback invited | | x | | |
| | f) User comments posted | x | | | |
| | g) Message board | | x | | |
| Aesthetics | a) Flash animation | | x | | |
| | b) Photographs or images | x | | | |
| | c) Video or links to video | | x | | |
| | d) Audio or links to audio | | x | | |
| | e) Frames | x | | | |
| | f) Icon links | | x | | |
| | g) Elite figure endorsement | | x | | |
| Website Name | No MMP | | | | |

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| Website Address Sector | http://www.nommp.ca NPO |
|------------------------|--|

F. Referendum Ontario

| Content Analysis Coding Frame: Referendum Campaign Websites | | | | | |
|--|--|-----|----|-----|----------|
| Content | | YES | NO | N/A | Comments |
| Content | a) Defines MMP | X | | | |
| | b) Defines FPTP | X | | | |
| | c) Background on OCA | X | | | |
| | d) Explains referendum | X | | | |
| | e) Links to MMP news/blogs | | X | | |
| | f) Links to FPTP news/blogs | | X | | |
| | g) Info on voting process | | | | |
| | h) Links to government sites | X | | | |
| | i) Shows ballot | X | | | |
| | j) Date of referendum | X | | | |
| Accessibility | a) Link to homepage from each page | X | | | |
| | b) Search feature | X | | | |
| | c) On-line glossary | X | | | |
| | d) All info. in other languages | X | | | |
| | e) Some info. In other languages | X | | | |
| | f) Adjustable font size | X | | | |
| | g) Vital information in audio | X | | | |
| | h) Toll-free telephone number | X | | | |
| Audience | a) Link/page/info. for youth | | X | | |
| | b) Link/page/info for seniors | | X | | |
| | c) Link/page/info for NDP members | | X | | |
| | d) Link/page/info for Liberals | | X | | |
| | e) Link/page/info for Conservatives | | X | | |
| | f) Link/page/info for Greens | | X | | |
| | g) Link/page/info for people with disabilities | | X | | |
| | h) Link/page/info for immigrants | | X | | |
| | k) Link/page/info for men | | X | | |
| l) Link/page/info for women | | X | | | |
| Quality of Info. | a) Disclosure of authors | X | | | |
| | b) References cited | X | | | |
| | c) Contact info for site developer | X | | | |
| | d) Links to supporting literature | X | | | |
| | e) User feedback invited | | X | | |
| | f) User comments posted | | X | | |
| | g) Message board | | X | | |
| Aesthetics | a) Flash animation | X | | | |
| | b) Photographs or images | X | | | |
| | c) Video or links to video | X | | | |
| | d) Audio or links to audio | X | | | |
| | e) Frames | X | | | |
| | f) Icon links | X | | | |
| | g) Elite figure endorsement | X | | | |

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Website Name | Referendum Ontario |
| Website Address | http://www.referendumontario.on.ca/ |
| Sector | Government |

G. Interview Guide

General Information

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your involvement in the Ontario public education campaign?
2. Specifically, can you tell me about your involvement with the www.xyz.ca page?

History of Site

3. Can you tell me about the history of the site?
4. When did it begin?
5. Why was it established?
6. What are the goals in communicating electoral reform information via the internet?
7. How has the site changed or been modified since its creation?

Content-related Questions

8. What was involved in putting together the site?
9. How did you decide what information (i.e. content) should be presented on the site?
10. How did you decide on the focus?
11. In developing the page, what ethical and legal concerns, if any, did you consider?

Audience-related Questions

12. Who is the intended audience of the site?
13. What measures did you take to ensure that the content you chose to include was relevant to your target audience(s)?

Accessibility-related Questions

14. What steps were taken to ensure the content of the site is accessible to the general public?

Quality-related Questions

15. What research was conducted prior to posting information to the site?
16. What resources were used?

Feedback-related Questions

17. Is audience feedback incorporated into the larger campaign?
18. How is feedback incorporated?
19. How is negative or challenging feedback dealt with?

Future Plans

20. Are there plans to expand or alter the content of the site in the future?
21. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about www.xyz.ca and how it contributes to the general campaign?

H. Transcription of Interview with Joseph Angolano (No-MMP campaign website)

Interviewer = AM

Respondent = R2

General Information

AM: Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your involvement in the Ontario public education campaign?

R2: I am currently finishing a PhD at LSE in the government department and came back to Canada to complete the written component. I became involved in the "No MMP" campaign via Facebook. My involvement in the no-mmp campaign really solidified when I became engaged in an online debate, on Facebook, against supporters of the pro-mmp campaign who had infiltrated the no-mmp Facebook page. The now chair of the no-mmp campaign found me that way. He contacted me through my Facebook account. The core of the campaign was formed by mutual friends in an effort to be non partisan organization. In fact we got many volunteers including myself and our website designer via Facebook, a total of about 8 of the core committee via Facebook.

AM: Specifically, can you tell me about your involvement with the www.nommp.ca page?

R2: I actually wrote most of it. I also update the news section as well as the 'truth about MMP' section.

History of Site

AM: Can you tell me about the history of the site?

R2: It was officially launched on Monday, August 6th and we sent out the news release on August 8th. Since then I've received about one media request a day with outlets such as the Toronto Star, CBC Radio One, and local publications in Sarnia, Ottawa, and Cornwall.

AM: Why was it established?

R2: You can't have a political campaign these days without a website. Full stop. It's an effective interface with the interested public. It was also established to recruit volunteers. It's a cheap and effective way to get the message out. We never even dreamt of not having a website. Every major candidate in any election needs a website if they want a serious chance at office. The media is also looking for the 'no' side. Once the website was launched, the blogosphere went crazy. One high-profile blogger on our side particularly, Jason Cherniak, experienced an increase of about 50-60 online comments (from 20 to 60 or 70) after posting a blog about the launch of the no-mmp campaign.

AM: What are the goals in communicating electoral reform information via the internet?

R2: First of all, the website will be useful in getting media attention. We also hope the website will be used as a first stop for research and soon we hope to use it as a tool for fundraising.

AM: How has the site changed or been modified since its creation?

R2: We have since added a space for volunteer signups, including their ridings. Additionally, we have gone onto the no-mmp Facebook site and have asked people why they are against the system. Those responses are displayed on an automatically rotating basis in a section called 'what people are saying'.

Content-related Questions

AM: How did you decide what information (i.e. content) should be presented on the site?

R2: This is an ongoing process but we knew the basics were that it had to have contact information on a contact page and it was essential that we had to have a clear and detailed response to why we don't think mmp is a great idea.

For the news section; again it was obvious. Every time we got a mention in media or someone said something negative about mmp it gets out there. Every time I see something in the media that helps our case it goes on there immediately.

Facebook is also good for this, but a website is better as there are pro-mmp people on the no-mmp Facebook site which makes us open to sabotage. On the website, however, we can filter them out and we don't have to give them key information or anything of strategic significance.

We are also building up a database so we know where our volunteers are, where they can volunteer and we can give people a quick response to any inquiries. The database builds up really quickly and is a good tool if you know how to use it

If we do come out on top, its proof that the message matters not just big bucks
But we're new. We'll see.

AM: In developing the page, what ethical and legal concerns, if any, did you consider?

R2: My concerns were mainly ethical although legal concerns may have been in the back of our minds. I had to be very careful about what I wrote, knowing that everything would be dissected. That is forefront in my mind. We made the conscious decision that we would fight this campaign hard but not dirty. This also pertains to website. There were times I sat down and wrote something and thought about it, for example, "the yes side is deliberately misleading the public", but then changed the wording.

As an academic I thought, 'this is great.' For the first time we can talk about ideas and theories and why we have these democratic institutions. I wanted to keep it as much as possible a debate about ideas although it is tempting to make it personal. I believe the merits of our arguments are pretty good and we can convince people without getting personal.

Audience-related Questions

AM: Who is the intended audience of the site?

R2: Anybody and everybody who wants more information. We couldn't let the yes side have complete control of the public sphere. It would be disastrous with one group controlling the public sphere. If all voices aren't heard equally democracy is eroded – democracy is about opposition. If they get 100% of the media attention and if we don't at least tell people about their options, then Ontarians are going to make a poor decision. If we didn't form it would be disastrous. If only one group is going to talk how are we going to get the full story?

Accessibility-related Questions

AM: What steps were taken to ensure the content of the site is accessible to the general public?

R2: We are currently in the process of translation into French and we will definitely try to get some literature out there in different languages. Some people might regard this as pandering ethnic minorities however some people only really understand an issue by reading it in their own language. We will definitely be getting literature out in different languages.

As far as disabled people go, we'd like everyone to participate some things are not possible given the resources, however at the next meeting I will mention it because,
1) it's the right things to do, and
2) the francophone are furious at the proposal and we need to get our message out to them.

Quality-related Questions

AM: What research was conducted prior to posting information to the site?

R2: My expertise is in democratic theory and social choice. That's the area in which I am completing my PhD at LSE.

My own background in social choice showed there was a certain amount of irrationality that you had to accept in an electoral system and every electoral system can be manipulated in some way. Electoral systems just decide who wins but all electoral systems have problems. The reasons to keep one or another have nothing to do with how well they perform or how perfect they are.

I personally attended one of the Citizen's Assembly meetings and in them they said it (MMP) was perfect for reasons xyz – That was when I thought, "hold it!"

Their claims are simply wrong and contradicted by Nobel winning literature. Research shows that mmp is no better, and in some cases its worse. Furthermore, every system can be manipulated and the yes side doesn't acknowledge this.

Research also included studies from New Zealand and Germany and how they liked the system. All facts posted to the site are checked and double checked.

Feedback-related Questions

AM: Is audience feedback incorporated into the larger campaign?

R2: No, not through the website. We can't have audience feedback in the form of unrestricted forums or we'll have 10000 posts from the yes campaign flooding the forums. We'd do the same thing. It is cheap and easy and it creates a groundswell and we didn't want that/

AM: How is other feedback incorporated?

R2: I read all suggestions. A lot of feedback is personal and I've even received feedback face to face. Given the limited resources and manpower of the campaign, it is difficult to incorporate all suggestions however there was one made to have a comment section which we now have.

AM: How is negative or challenging feedback dealt with?

R2: The website should be pristine. We can't control how media interprets the issue or how our comments are used on radio. The website is unmediated and we must keep it pristine. We have a goal of getting our message out clearly we have to make sure it comes out to the public that way. The website is the one place where we can say what we want to say completely uninterrupted. It is an unmediated expression of what we're trying to do.

Future Plans

AM: Are there plans to expand or alter the content of the site in the future?

R2: Yes, we will eventually have more than the four links currently at the top. You will also see contacts of everyone involved. We will have media packages available for download as well. We will have fliers available and list the dates of our events including when we attend or public speaking debates. We also plan to create a technical, detailed account of our argument against mmp in a longer book.

AM: Is there anything else you would like to tell me about www.nommp.ca and how it contributes to the general campaign that?

R2: The website is something we need to publicize and the website in turn makes publicity for the campaign. Facebook is also a great way of reinforcing the website. We can ask our Facebook members to look at our website which generates traffic. The traffic in turn generates hits and this gives us something to talk to the media about.

How can you have a campaign without a website? It's just unfathomable. We make sure to tell everyone who talks to media to mention the website.

End of interview.

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