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## MEDIA@LSE Electronic MSc Dissertation Series

Compiled by Professor Robin Mansell and Dr. Bart Cammaerts

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

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Dissertation submitted to the Department of Media and Communica



## 1. Introduction

On October 10, 2007, citizens of Ontario, Cana

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.<sup>1</sup> 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 follows<sup>2</sup>:

*Which electoral system should Ontario use*

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 t



## 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



Therefore, the conclusion of *The American Voter* suggests th

(2000: 151). The transmission of information and the settin

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issue. These factors combine to significantly impact the campaign

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 ea

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 the



#### 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



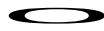




McMillan says, "the coding unit can be expected to vary depending on the theory upon which the study was based, the research question explored, and the hypothesis tested. However, some standardization is needed for context units" (2000: 92-93). She also observes that no such standards have yet emerged 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 traditio



## 5. Method

To ensure the accountability of this research project, this section of the page

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) "defining any of these [micro] units operationally can be challenging particularly when 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 of analysis 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, Peto 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.<sup>9</sup>

#### 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. On page 28

education of th

## 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 i

The participants were recruited by the researcher after being directed to each website by the academic director of the Ontario Citizens' Asse





process leading up to their recommendation. Each site also provided links to ou

### 6.1 iii) Analysis of Audience

The dynamic of this particular p



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-

As a cost and labour effective means of getting out an

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unites the discourse on electoral reform. Even given resources equal to the government campaign



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 we



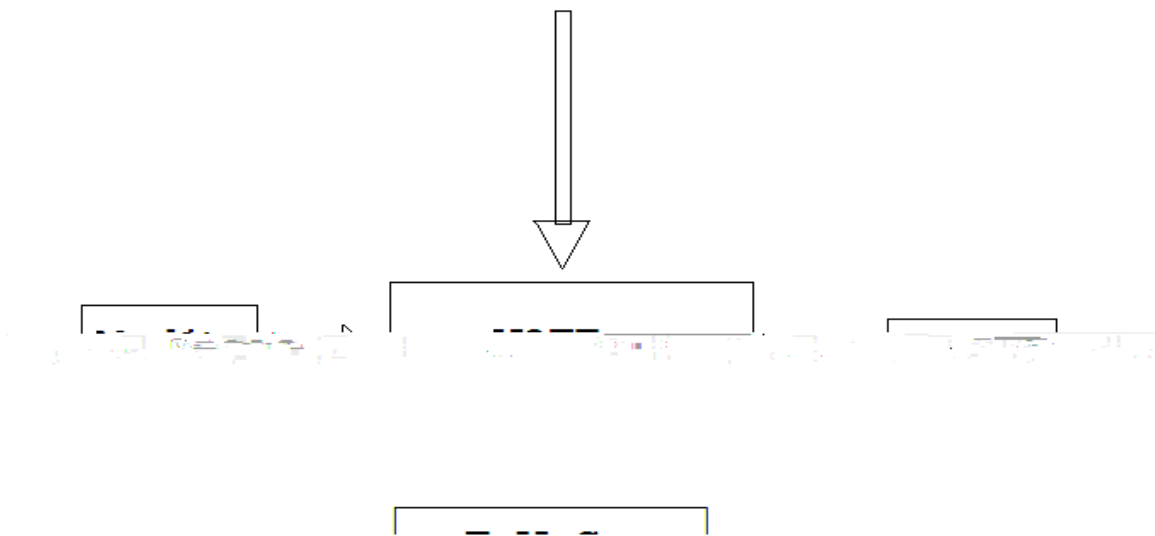
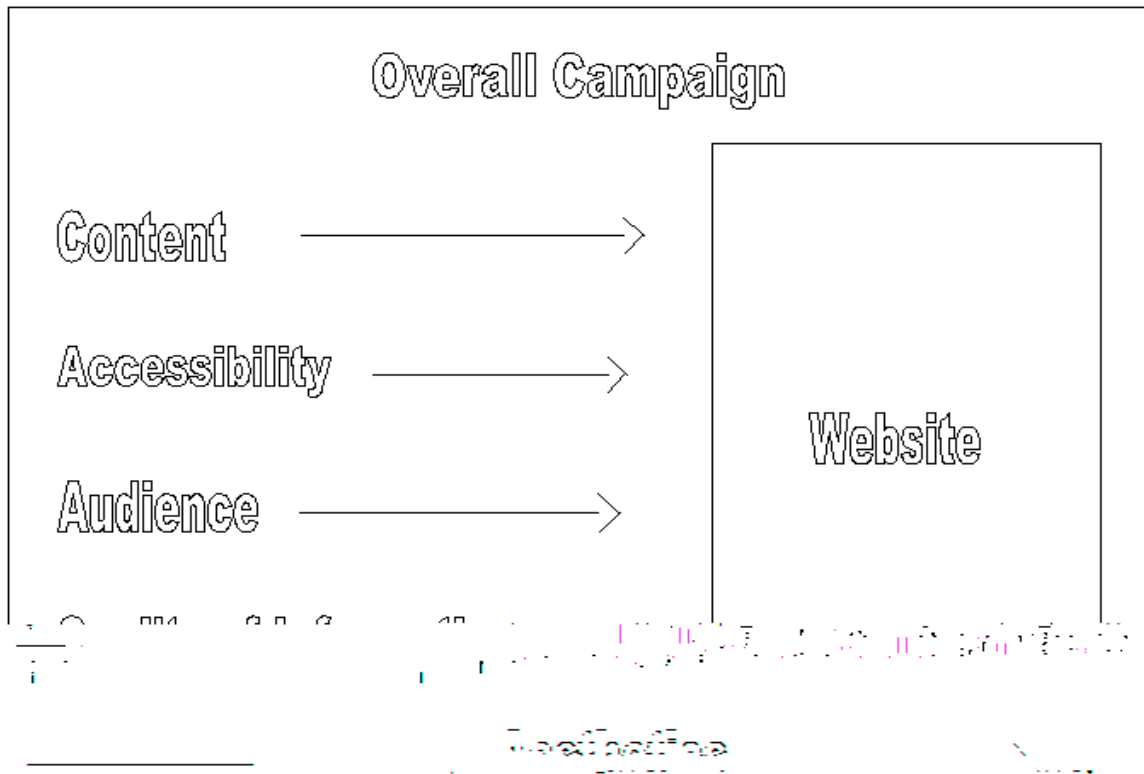
Holstein,

Okasaki, S. and Rivas, J. (2002) 'A Content Analys



10. Appendices

A. Conceptual Framework Model



SEC = Socioeconomic Conditions  
Cues

T.V.C. = Traditional Voting





C. Vote for MMP

Content Analysis Coding Frame: Referendum Campaign Websites					
Content		YES	NO	N/A	Comments
	a) Defines MMP	x			
	b) Defines FPTP		x		



Website Address Sector	<a href="http://www.equalvoiceinpolitics.ca">http://www.equalvoiceinpolitics.ca</a> NPO
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E. No MMP

Content Analysis Coding Frame: Referendum Campaign Websites					
		YES	NO	N/A	Comments
Content	a) Defines MMP	x			

Website Address Sector	<a href="http://www.nommp.ca">http://www.nommp.ca</a> NPO
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F. Referendum Ontario

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				
	h) Links to government sites	x			
	i) Shows ballot	x			
	j) Date of referendum				





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 Face



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

As an academic, I have spent years studying theories and as much as possible and believe the merits of getting personal

ideas and as much as possible and believe the merits of getting personal

Audience

AM: ... the site

R2: ... the yes side have controlling the democracy is about tell people are going If ... are we going

the yes side have controlling the democracy is about tell people are going If ... are we going

Are the ex

450045132007m(s) 3007m(j)45004m(l)7707m(l)745004517707745004510607m(s)7

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 f



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