Politics and the Internet: the New Zealand Research

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Abstract

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

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

Keywords

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

Bio

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

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

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

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


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

Fields of study

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

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

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

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

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6 King, ‘Democracy in the Information Age’, p. 4.
perhaps the most recent emergent field is that of ‘e-participation’. There is a view – endorsed in this article – that e-participation represents a refinement of research in extant fields; Macintosh, for instance, suggests that it is one of two sub-sets of e-democracy (the other being e-voting), in the sense that e-participation practices constitute means of achieving the normative object of proponents of e-democracy. Others, however, claim that e-participation is ‘becoming an independent area of interest in its own right’. At one level the term has been used to describe the use of ICTs to involve citizens in finding solutions for social problems. This approach tends to direct attention to public engagement in policy implementation; in so doing, it tends to take as given prior political processes out of which particular issues have come to be constituted as matters worthy of government’s attention.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The internet and politics in New Zealand

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

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

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

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

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


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

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

Chadwick and Howard, Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics.

E-government in New Zealand

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

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

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

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30 Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow and Tinkler, Digital Era Governance.
government departments now enable considerable interactivity, including the capacity to navigate around a site in Maori.38

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

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

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

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

38 Smith, Smith, Sherman, Kripalani, Goodwin, and Bell, ‘The Internet: Social and demographic impacts in Aotearoa New Zealand’.
39 Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow and Tinkler, Digital Era Governance.
42 Robin Gauld and Shaun Goldfinch, Dangerous enthusiasms: E-government, computer failure and information system development (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2006).
This more overtly normative strand within the e-government literature challenges practitioners to move ‘beyond the surface of benchmarking findings [and to] demonstrate actual change’. It reflects mounting scepticism about what can, or should, be attempted via e-government. Gauld and Goldfinch, for instance, express concerns about the incidence, and cost, of e-government failures, and warn against the tendency of enthusiasts to exaggerate what can be achieved online. But this emerging disposition also reflects an awareness that what is of interest is how, if at all, political actors – both institutional and informal – are actually using the new ICTs. As Lips has pointed out, ‘[e]-Government is not just about applying the technology: it involves redesigning the way government works’.

E-democracy and e-participation in New Zealand

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

research at the systemic level

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

research at the meso level

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

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

48 Gauld and Goldfinch, Dangerous enthusiasms: E-government, computer failure and information system development.
49 Lips, ‘Before, After or During the reforms? Towards Information-Age Government in New Zealand’, p. 22.
whether or not the internet has levelled the political playing field or simply reinforced the institutional advantages some parties (particularly those with parliamentary representation) enjoy over others. One of the earliest such contributions is from Roper who, in the infancy of the internet, concluded that most parties had no clear, coherent sense of how to use the new technology for political purposes, and tended therefore to establish websites simply because they felt they ought to.\(^{53}\)

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

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

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

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

**research at the micro level**

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

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

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

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

\(^64\) Hopkins, *Blogs, political discussion and the 2005 New Zealand General Election*; Hopkins and Matheson, ‘Blogging the New Zealand Election: The Impact of New Media Practices on the Old Game’.

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

Other studies, too, find little evidence to suggest that the internet has thus far rejuvenated the political process in New Zealand at the individual level. Rather, it seems that New Zealanders’ relative disengagement with formal politics is being reproduced online. In 2002, for instance, just 6 per cent of those surveyed by the New Zealand Election Study used the internet several times or more to gather news or information concerning that year’s election.69 Things have since improved, but only marginally: the corresponding figure for the 2005 General election was just on 10 per cent.68 Further, in a recent survey on internet use in New Zealand, only 15 per cent of respondents reported using the internet on a regular basis to access information regarding political parties, and just 13 per cent had heard of the government’s digital strategy.71

**What we currently know**

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

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

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72 Gauld and Goldfinch, Dangerous enthusiasms: *E-government, computer failure and information system development*, p. 129.
Zealand, it appears, are gradually complementing the orthodox government-centric orientation with a citizen-centric focus.

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

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

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

In short, New Zealand studies sit within a wider international oeuvre that offers a sober assessment of the effects of the internet on politics. Optimistic assumptions that the internet would fundamentally revitalise democratic politics have given way to a more mature (and empirical) tendency to question the extent to which it has heralded a ‘new’ or ‘transformative’ politics. Indeed, some worry that the internet has instead generated a ‘push-button’ approach...
to conventional politics and reinforced existing partisan divides.77 (Although see van Onselen and van Onselen for a more hopeful view, at least as far as the impact of the internet amongst young people in Australia is concerned; and Bennett for evidence that protest politics have utilised the new technologies to good effect.78) It is clear that the advent of new ICTs has not, in and of itself, demonstrably altered people’s engagement with politics. Politically engaged citizens tend to use the internet to extend their engagement; unengaged citizens tend to go online for non-political reasons; and people tend to visit sites with content that is consistent with their own extant normative preferences.79

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

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

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

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

80 There has been some media attention to these issues. For instance, see http://tinyurl.com/mmgkzo for a New Zealand Herald article on Asian politicians’ use of social networking sites. See also the Sunday Star Times (11 July 2004: A7) for a piece on MPs’ use of email.
81 The 2008 New Zealand Election Study included internet use questions in its 2008 survey of political parties’ candidates (some of which, presumably, were sitting MPs), but those data are still being processed.
82 Ward, Lusoli, and Gibson, ‘Australian MPs and the Internet: Avoiding the Digital Age?’, p. 211.
which use of the internet may be having consequences for elected representation in New Zealand.

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

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

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

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

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

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83 Chen, ‘Online Media’.
86 Bell, Crothers, Goodwin, Kripalani, Sherman and Smith, The Internet in New Zealand 2007. Final Report; Smith, Smith, Sherman, Kripalani, Goodwin and Bell, ‘The Internet: Social and demographic impacts in Aotearoa New Zealand’.
Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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