

# Party E-Newsletters in the UK: A Return to Direct Political Communication?

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**ABSTRACT.** E-newsletters offer political parties a potential means of communicating more effectively with both their own members and the wider public. This article seeks to identify whether there is a model of best practice that can guide how parties provide an effective e-newsletter. The Congress Online Model (2003) is tested against the practice of UK political parties. The methodology is based on a content analysis over seven months of the publicly available e-newsletters of five parties, and interviews with the e-campaigners of each of these parties. The results show that the parties focus more on communicating directly with members than attracting floating voters. As a result, the full potential of the e-newsletters for involving people in politics has not yet been met. In conclusion, the Congress Online Model is adapted to take into account the political system in the UK. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>>* © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** British politics, e-newsletters, the Internet, political parties, direct communication

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*In some marginal seats . . . where a few hundred votes decide between victory and defeat, having the right email list could make all the difference.*

–Paddy Ashdown MP, cited in Coleman 2001

### **INTRODUCTION**

Political parties have long had a record of communicating directly with their members and voters via leaflets, public meetings and door-to-door canvassing. The rise of mass communication since the 1960s undermined these forms of direct communication. Increasingly, mediated communication via television became the dominant channel. However, the pendulum may be swinging back with a number of commentators (Wring 1995, Norris 2000, Grefe 2003) suggesting that with new Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), the dominance of mass communication media is being challenged by a new form of direct communication. The Internet has opened up new opportunities for direct communication between parties and citizens.

Political commentators (Painter & Wardle 2001, Coleman 2001, Gibson et al. 2003) have so far concentrated their research on the Web; however, this is a ‘pull’ mechanism where the visitor decides if, and what, they read. E-newsletters as a ‘push’ mechanism (Ollier 1998, Brassington & Pettitt 2003) complement this form of direct communication. Parties can use e-newsletters to promote their message direct to selected key and strategic audiences. E-newsletters offer the opportunity for direct and two-way communication between elected and electors. This article will consider whether a model exists that parties in the UK can follow to use their e-newsletters effectively to communicate directly with members and non-members.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Norris (2000) has identified three separate time frames in political communication over the past 100 years. The pre-modern age up to the 1950s was based on traditional direct contact between either the candidate and/or party with the voter. Therefore public meetings, personal

canvassing and one-to-one contact with opinion formers was common. The next stage, the modern political communication era, results from the rapid growth of mass communication since the 1950s. The role television played in the 1959 General Election was a watershed, and since then politicians have increasingly relied on it to communicate with citizens. Direct communication was still used but the role and impact of, for example, public meetings was secondary to television. Norris (2000) suggests that the UK is now entering the third era, the post-modern, where direct communication between politician and citizen is once again central. The Internet, including e-newsletters, encourages a return to a greater use of direct communication.

Grefe (2003) identifies two main forms of political communication, and categorises them as broadcasting or narrowcasting. Broadcasting is a wide 'shotgun' approach to communication that is primarily based on unsolicited indirect communication. As a consequence not all recipients actually want to receive it, so for many the message is 'wasted.' Narrowcasting by contrast is a targeted 'rifle' approach whereby a dialogue is opened up with those who have identified that they are willing to receive communication. It is, therefore, direct, potentially continuous, and due to the recipient's consent is more efficient. As a result Grefe (2003) believes that narrowcasting can turn the recipients of the message into 'true believers.' Narrowcasting is a potentially powerful tool for political parties.

Direct mail, as a form of narrowcasting, has grown in importance as a communication tool since the 1970s (Tapp 1998, O'Malley et al. 1999). Direct mail helps explain relatively complex ideas through using both words and graphics (Clinton & Clinton 1999). This makes direct mail ideal for communicating party policies, image and interpretation of political events. Perhaps more importantly direct mail allows for the re-establishment of the direct link between political parties and citizens (Plasser 2002).

Although some commentators (Scammell 1995, Denver & Hands 2002) imply that it was the introduction of the Personal Computer (PC) which created direct mail in the political world, Wring and Horrocks (2001) point out that direct mail was being used in the early twentieth century. For example, they refer to Margaret Bondfield MP who in 1924 sent potential voters a handwritten address, and that in 1950 the Conservatives sent personalised letters to opinion formers. However, the introduction of the PC helped convert these occasional uses of direct mail into a major political communication tool. The SDP in 1981, as a new party with little or no infrastructure, turned to computer-generated

direct mail as a means of raising funds and attracting members (Scammell 1995, Wring & Horrocks 2001). By the mid-1980s the Conservatives piloted a number of direct mail campaigns to communicate with voters (Scammell 1995). However, it was not until software programmes improved in the 1990s that direct mail to both members and non-members became a common political tool (Denver & Hands 2002). As well as being a means of reaching target audiences, direct mail also enhanced control of campaigning by the party elite.

The introduction of Web technologies from the mid-1990s has rapidly altered the way direct mail is handled by organisations (Brassington & Pettitt 2003). Previously direct mail was primarily unsolicited and so more likely to be a 'cold-call,' but the development of 'permission marketing' (Godin 1999, Tezinde et al. 2002) has transformed direct mail. Rather than buying in lists of addresses, ethical e-marketers contact only those people who have given permission to contact them by e-mail. However, email is more than a radical change to how recipients of the message are chosen. Traditional direct mail was primarily one-way, but e-mail enables the development of a two-way and mutually beneficial relationship between a party and its target audiences. With a simple push of the reply button the receiver can give their solicited or unsolicited response to the sender.

E-marketers have quickly learnt the value to them of securing e-mail addresses (Chaffey 2003). E-mail provides a number of practical benefits to the sender (Sterne 2001, Chaffey et al. 2003, Katz 2003) including increased sales, access to new markets, instant feedback and building brand awareness over time. Essentially these benefits result from conversations between the sender and receiver, a phenomenon not associated with postal direct mail. In order to secure the necessary e-mail addresses the sender has to give something in return, often information not easily available elsewhere (Sterne 2001). Mutual benefit from an online relationship has driven the rapid increase in the provision of e-newsletters in the commercial world.

E-newsletters have a number of distinct features. First, they are a soft-sell (Goldsborough 2002, Weil 2004) in that they primarily provide information, rather than immediately trying to persuade the receiver to buy a product or change their attitudes or behaviour. Second, they are not a quick fix, rather e-newsletters represent a slow, gradual and continuous approach to getting across a message (Chaffey 2003). Third, they provide feedback (Miller 2003) and market intelligence (Klein 2002). Fourth, research of 111 commercial e-newsletters by the Nielsen Norman Group (NNG undated) found that the emotional reaction of the

reader of an e-newsletter can create a close bond between receiver and sender. However, they also point out that if there are usability problems these have greater adverse consequences than normal. E-newsletters represent a new, powerful, but potentially difficult to handle, weapon in a party's communication armoury.

Two factors have driven the expansion of the use of e-newsletters. First, they are a relatively cheap and cost-effective communication tool (Collin 2000, Diffley 2002, Katz 2003). Unlike traditional direct mail there are no printing or postage costs. Second, the very ease by which they can be created enables a much more regular communication (Miller 2003, Klein 2002) to be sent out which acts as 'a reminder facility' (Ollier 1998). Consequently, e-newsletters should be attractive to political parties who traditionally have limited budgets and struggle to mobilise support.

Although the first recorded use of e-mail for campaigning was by Jerry Brown in 1993 (Johnson 2002), so far fairly limited consideration has been given to e-direct mail. One major consideration of the literature has been the potential impact of e-mail on the relationship between elected representatives and their constituents, in the U.S. (Carter 1999, Goldschmidt 2002, Alperin & Schultz 2003) and the UK (Coleman 1999, Campbell et al. 1999, Jackson 2003). Common to all of these studies is a concern from elected representatives that e-mail may adversely affect the ability of MPs, congress and state legislators in conducting their work effectively through the sheer amount of inbound e-mail. However, empirical evidence (Jackson 2003) suggests that in the UK, at least, these fears have not yet become a reality.

Although Casey (2001) has argued that e-mail, and not the Web, may be the most effective campaigning tool, there is limited research into the specific use of e-newsletters by parties. During the 1997 General Election the focus was on the Web as a novel communication tool; e-mail was largely ignored (Ward & Gibson 1998). By the 2001 General Election greater use of e-mail was made (Coleman & Hall 2001, McCarthy & Saxton 2001) but it was still considered a sideshow rather than a core communication tool. The Labour Party made greatest use of e-mail (Coleman & Hall 2001) in terms of number of e-mails and range of uses made, but this activity can be viewed as a means of learning the lessons required to make more effective use of the technology at later elections. There have been two 'how to guides' published for how UK MPs (Steinberg 2001), and U.S. Members of Congress (Congress Online Project 2003) can best design and use e-newsletters for direct communication with constituents. Yet Jackson (2003) found that only 4% of re-

sponding MPs provided an e-newsletter to constituents. Consequently very little research exists on how politicians use their publicly available e-newsletters.

Political parties are in the business of mobilising supporters, converting new contacts into supporters and winning elections. The ability to reach, inform and persuade voters of a party's programme and personnel plays a key role in this mission. As a relatively new communications tool, e-newsletters potentially offer parties five benefits that can help them function more effectively. First, political parties can communicate directly with voters, and so bypass the gatekeepers of the media. Second, regular online communication can facilitate a closer relationship between parties and their members and supporters. Third, e-newsletters, in conjunction with Websites, are a means of attracting floating voters to find out more about a party. Consequently, an e-newsletter may be the first step in converting an undecided voter into a committed supporter of a party. Fourth, if parties can segment their different audiences, they can target specific messages for different audiences. Fifth, the two-way communication nature of e-mail enables parties to use feedback to improve their message, both in terms of delivery mechanism and content. E-newsletters are not just another communication channel, potentially they can fundamentally alter the nature of the relationship between the sender and receiver of a message.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Congress Online Project (2003) has devised a model of best practice for political actors in using e-newsletters. The guide is based on their assessment of a collection of business and political e-newsletters. Although originally designed to assist U.S. Members of Congress and their staff use e-newsletters effectively, this article will test whether the model can be applied to the UK. The Congress Online Project's model has ten recommendations but one of these, to provide an archive, refers to Websites and not an e-newsletter. Therefore, the model has been adapted to 9 rules for creating an effective e-newsletter. Table 1 explains the 9 rules of the model and includes both aspects to cover and to avoid. Therefore, the effectiveness of a political party's e-newsletter depends on two factors. First, to what extent does it cover the 'rules' suggested, and, second, does it avoid the pitfalls? Therefore, a party who applies both positive and negative criteria may actually be less effective

TABLE 1. Creating an effective newsletter.

Rule	To Cover	To Avoid
1. Keep it short	1. Keep to three screens or less 2. Provide multiple headers 3. Provide bullet points 4. Keep paragraphs and sentences short 5. Links for further information 6. Provide brief summaries of long documents	1. Cut and pasting from offline publications 2. Being too long
2. Provide substance	1. Provide news that affects your readers 2. Offer targeted newsletters 3. Separate e-newsletter for media	1. Self-promotion and puffery 2. Campaign commercials
3. Links to your Website	1. Provide link to your Website	
4. Grab readers' attention	1. Carefully craft subject line	1. Attachments
5. Keep content timely and relevant	1. Provide fresh information that addresses topical issues	
6. Have something to say	1. Send it at regular intervals 2. Respond to major events	1. Sending it too often 2. Sending it too infrequently
7. Ask for something	1. Give readers the chance to do something	1. Suggesting meaningless or unachievable things to do
8. Consider e-mail etiquette	1. Make it easy to subscribe 2. Make it easy to unsubscribe	
9. Provide a privacy statement	1. Establish a transparent and comprehensive privacy policy of how you will and will not use personal information provided to you	

Adapted from Congress Online Project 2003.

than a party that uses fewer of the positive criteria, but avoids the pitfalls.

Rules 1, 3, 7, 8 and 9 are fairly straightforward to assess, the rest require explanation. Rule 2 is important in explaining the value of an e-newsletter. The term 'provides news that affects your reader' was assessed by whether non-party members might be interested in the content, therefore it is based on news in the public arena, as opposed to in-house 'gossip.' The two negatives to avoid also need explanation. 'Self-promotion and puffery' was measured by whether any story was pro-

moting the party and/or its spokespersons. 'Campaign commercial' refers to promoting the party's activity during election campaigns, such as asking people to vote for them or volunteer support. Rule 4 refers to the header of the e-mail that may influence whether the receiver opens the message. Therefore 'a carefully crafted subject line' will be different for each e-mail and should give a good indication of what is contained in the e-newsletter. Whether 'fresh information' was provided in Rule 5 was judged by whether the information was adding to the readers' knowledge of a topical issue. It is important to note that the judgement was made from the perspective of a member of the public and not a party member or journalist. Most of Rule 6 is fairly easy to follow, but 'respond to major events' requires explanation. Three of the parties are national in that they stand for seats all over Great Britain, but two of the parties seek election only in their region. What is a major event in Northern Ireland for the Democratic Ulster Unionist (DUP), or in Scotland for the Scottish National Party (SNP) is likely to be more parochial; however, it would still be considered 'major.' There is, therefore, some subjective judgement contained in the measures.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This article seeks to significantly increase our knowledge of parties' use of e-newsletters by addressing the following research question:

Can a model of best practice help UK parties provide an effective e-newsletter?

To answer this question two related methodologies were used:

1. Content analysis of party e-newsletters freely available to members of the public.
2. Interviews with the five e-campaigners responsible for producing and managing their party's e-newsletter.

Out of the 51 registered political parties in April 2003<sup>1</sup> only eight claimed to have an e-newsletter or collect e-mail addresses for subsequent communication. These e-newsletters were available to members of the public and should not be confused with any separate pass-protected e-newsletters available only to party members or journalists. Out of the eight a regular e-newsletter was subsequently received from five



of the parties: Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat, SNP and DUP. The other three parties may indeed have distributed e-newsletters but they were not received.

The content analysis of the e-newsletters distributed by the five parties was

conducted over seven months from 1st April 2003 until 31st October 2003. This period included some political fallout over the Gulf War II, the elections to the Scottish Parliament, the Brent East by-election and the Party Conference season. During the period of research the number of e-newsletters received was:

- Conservatives–19
- Labour–35
- Liberal Democrats–50
- SNP–20
- DUP–309

**RESULTS:**  
**DO POLITICAL PARTIES' USE OF E-NEWSLETTERS**  
**MEET BEST PRACTICE?**

***Keeping It Short***

All five parties broadly followed the suggested rules in regard to basic format, with the main exceptions involving the Conservatives and the SNP. Table 2 shows that only the Liberal Democrats and the DUP always keep their e-newsletters to 3 screens or less. The Conservatives' tendency to send an e-newsletter of more than three screens can be explained by the lower frequency of their e-mails, as they may be 'saving up' some of their content. The SNP's figures can be explained by the fact that after two months of the research project they made a conscious decision to change the format and style of the e-newsletter to make it shorter and punchier.<sup>2</sup> This would also explain why only 68% of SNP e-newsletters used short paragraphs and that 33.3% of their e-newsletters were considered too long.

In terms of the pitfalls there appears to be a binary divide based on party size and available resources. The Labour and Conservative e-newsletters are edited versions of a range of sources, whereas the other three parties essentially cut and paste press releases produced by other staff in the party. With larger e-campaigning teams the two main parties

can afford to collect data such as party press releases, and then rewrite them specifically for the general public.

### *Providing Substance*

Table 3 suggests that there is a correlation between the provision of news that affects the reader, and the respective parliamentary strength of each party. As the Government, Labour clearly has an advantage with

TABLE 2. Percentage of e-newsletters that are short.

Rule	Labour	Cons	Lib Dem	SNP	DUP
To Cover:					
1. 3 screens or less	91.4%	31.6%	100%	64.2% (2)	100%
2. Multiple headers	92.4%	100%	100%	100%	100%
3. Bullet points	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
4. Short paragraphs and sentences	100%	100%	100%	68.3% (2)	100%
5. Links	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
6. Provide brief summaries	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
To Avoid:					
1. Cut and paste from elsewhere	5.7%	0%	100% (1)	100% (1)	100% (1)
2. Too long	0%	0%	0%	33% (2)	0%

1. E-newsletter is primarily based on press releases.
2. Style and length of e-newsletter was deliberately changed whilst the research was being conducted.

TABLE 3. Percentage of e-mails based on substance.

Rule	Labour	Cons	Lib Dem	SNP	DUP
To Cover:					
1. Provides news that affects the reader	97.1%	68.4%	62%	55.8%	33.3%
2. Offers target e-newsletters	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
3. Separate e-newsletter for media	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
To Avoid:					
1. Self-promotion and puffery	77.1%	73.7%	52%	85.8%	43.4%
2. Campaign commercials	40%	57.9%	8%	30%	5.8%
3. Negative campaigning	45.7%	94.7%	72%	70%	58.9%

access to information the other parties do not. At the other end of the scale the DUP has much less to offer the general public, and is essentially communicating with its members only.

The differences in the targeting of e-newsletters, and whether there is a separate e-newsletter for journalists, can be explained by access to resources. The two smallest parties lack the resources (in terms of numbers of dedicated staff) to offer alternative and targeted newsletters. As a result they are forced to provide a 'one-size fits all' approach to their e-newsletter. Despite significantly fewer resources than the two largest parties, the Liberal Democrats' e-newsletter strategy is much more sophisticated than that of the two smallest parties. There is a resource-based digital divide between the three largest and two smallest parties.

Resources do not appear relevant to self-promotion and puffery, rather these appear to be influenced by organisational culture. The two largest parties may view their e-newsletter as a one-way communication forum promoting their views. For example, Kate McCarthy points out that Labour eNews helped "build a group of people who were interested in receiving information from the Labour Party."<sup>3</sup> The DUP and Liberal Democrats, however, do not appear to view their e-newsletter in this way. Overall, this difference in approach probably reflects how each party views communications in general, and what they consider the specific purpose of their e-newsletter to be.

The term campaign commercials suggests that an e-newsletter focuses on a particular election campaign. Again this appears to reflect party culture and not resources. The two parties who are least likely to use puffery are also the least likely to use their e-newsletter for overt campaigning uses. However, it is arguable as to whether using their e-newsletter for campaign commercials is necessarily something parties should avoid. Although providing an e-newsletter is generally a long-term approach, it can offer some immediate tangible benefits, for example, encouraging volunteers to help at a by-election. Grant Thoms explains that parties do not necessarily advertise for campaigning help because they do not want their opponents to work out where they are focusing their efforts.<sup>4</sup> A pass-protected e-newsletter is a more secure mechanism for asking for help in election campaigns.

Negative campaigning again appears to reflect different cultural perspectives to communication. Labour's low reliance on negative campaigning can be explained by the fact that as the Governing party they are more likely to be the recipient, rather than the sender, of negative campaigning. The Conservative's high figure might be ex-

plained by the political situation they found themselves in at the time of the study. Their then leader Ian Duncan Smith was being widely criticised in the press, and negative campaigning might have been considered a necessary approach to respond to this. At the same time one of the Conservatives opponents, the Liberal Democrats, was publicly stating that they aimed to take over from them as the effective opposition.

### *The Use of Links to Your Website*

All five parties recognise the importance of linking to their Website as it helps drive traffic to their website. For example, the DUP use their e-newsletter to help improve their overall use of the Internet.<sup>5</sup> Where many subscribers sign up for an e-newsletter following a visit to a Website, the e-newsletter can help encourage repeat visits to a Website. For all five parties their website and e-newsletter appear to go hand in hand as part of a overall direct online communication strategy.

### *Grabs Readers' Attention*

A number of commentators (Steinert-Threlkeld 2001, Chaffey 2003, Mednick 2004) agree with the Congress Online Project that the headline is very important in deciding whether the receiver opens up the e-newsletter. According to this view, Table 4 suggests that only the DUP is maximising the chances of their e-mail being opened up, yet ironically this is the party with probably the fewest number of subscribers. This might be explained by the fact that the DUP's e-newsletter is the only

TABLE 4. Percentage of e-newsletters that use a specially crafted subject line.

Rule	Labour	Cons	Lib Dems	SNP	DUP
To Cover:					
1. Carefully crafted subject line	60%	0% (1)	0% (2)	0% (3)	100%
To Avoid:					
1. Attachments	0%	0%	0%	7.4% (4)	0%

- (1) All e-newsletters were headed 'News from the Conservatives.com' on the subject line  
 (2) All e-newsletters were headed 'Liberal Democrat E-news' on the subject line  
 (3) All e-newsletters were headed 'SNP Today' on the subject line  
 (4) This included pictures (5.8%) and a consultation document (1.6%) which was quickly and primarily sent out by e-mail not in a printed and posted format

one produced by an IT person, whereas the other four are produced by campaigners. At least three of the parties regularly use the same subject line for every e-newsletter, such as 'News from Conservatives.com,' rather than a subject line that is different each time as the means of encouraging an e-mail to be opened.

The Congress Online Project (2003) considers attachments undesirable, presumably because their effectiveness depends on the software in the PC of the receiver. Not all subscribers can open an attachment. However, in certain circumstances the SNP found their use helpful. After the 2003 Scottish Parliament election the SNP's hierarchy wanted to find out quickly what party members and activists thought. Therefore they decided to send out a consultation document by e-mail as the quickest method of getting it to party members.<sup>6</sup> Although attachments need not always be unwelcome, if a subscriber cannot open them, or they contain a virus it could harm the relationship between party and subscriber. Sending an attachment is, therefore, a calculated risk.

### *Timely and Relevant Content*

A number of commentators have suggested that perhaps the most important aspect of any e-newsletter is its content (Klein 2002, Chaffey 2003, Miller 2003, Weil 2004). In other words content is considered 'king,' being the single most important factor to consider in producing an e-newsletter. If content is indeed the most vital component then Table 5 suggests that four of the parties have a serious problem. This is probably explained by the fact that Labour as the Government has access to information before its rivals. The fact that the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and SNP have a similar score suggests that resources are not a significant factor. That the DUP are further behind could be due to the fact that they send many more e-newsletters than their rivals, so many e-mails may actually contain little of interest to the subscriber. Whilst content may be appropriate for party members, four of the par-

TABLE 5. Percentage of e-newsletters that provide either timely or relevant content.

Rule	Labour	Cons	Lib Dem	SNP	DUP
To Cover:					
1. Provides fresh information that addresses topical issues	97.1%	57.9%	54%	60%	25.9%

ties are not close to maximising their use of e-newsletters to non-members.

### *Have Something to Say*

There is little point in sending out an e-newsletter just for the sake of sending it out regularly. It is important to have something to say, otherwise receivers will unsubscribe. Table 6 suggests that for the five parties the positive reasons outweigh the negatives. All five parties are committed to sending out an e-newsletter at regular intervals for which four options are available: ad hoc, monthly, weekly or daily editions of their e-newsletter. Both Labour and the Conservatives send out a weekly e-newsletter, therefore, all the current news stories and party press releases are edited and written specifically for each e-newsletter. For example, Sheridan Westlake points out that with a weekly e-newsletter the Conservatives can be “more focused on the key political message of the week.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the Labour Party has found that a weekly e-newsletter best meets the subscribers’ needs as few people unsubscribe.<sup>8</sup> Lacking the resources to send out a weekly edited e-newsletter the three other parties all take a ‘daily’ approach sending out an e-newsletter that is effectively a digest of their party press releases.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, such e-newsletters are not tailored to the needs or language of the audience receiving it.

The sheer number of e-newsletters sent out by the minor parties may adversely affect the number of subscribers. If a respondent considers that they are receiving an e-newsletter too frequently they may unsubscribe. The evidence suggests that this is indeed the case. The Party with the fewest number of e-newsletters, the Conservatives, loses<sup>10</sup> 0.5% of subscribers.<sup>11</sup> Whereas, the DUP with the most frequent e-newsletter, loses 5% of subscribers.<sup>12</sup> On face value this suggests that

TABLE 6. Content of e-newsletters.

Rule	Labour	Cons	Lib Dem	SNP	DUP
To Cover:					
1. Sent at regular intervals	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2. Respond to major events	85.7%	84.2%	60%	30.8%	50.1%
To Avoid:					
1. Sending it too often	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
2. Sending it too infrequently	No	No	No	No	No

the availability of resources significantly affects the sophistication of e-newsletters, which in turn may influence its impact. In fact, all parties record increases in new subscribers significantly above any loss rate. With a positive 'churn rate' and the number of subscribers increasing, consequently the impact of an e-newsletter should be greater.

Responding to major events helps focus the content and provide topicality for the reader. The two best resourced parties, Labour and Conservative, are the most likely to be able to respond to major events, with the two smallest parties the least likely. This can in part be explained by the frequency of e-newsletters. The two smaller parties send out so many that it is almost impossible for a high percentage of their e-newsletters to reflect current news. The DUP response rate is possibly higher than the SNP's because they might be responding to highly controversial issues in Northern Ireland.

### *Ask for Something*

Effective e-newsletters do not just have something to say that might be of interest to the subscriber, but they also ask them to do something with that information. Table 7 shows that three of the parties, Labour, Conservative and SNP have a deliberate policy of encouraging a response or action from subscribers. The least sophisticated is the SNP who in every e-newsletter ask receivers to contact them with questions and to provide constituency party member e-mail addresses. Very occasionally (5% or less) they ask for volunteers to help in campaigns, attend events and respond to consultation documents. Labour and the Conservatives offer subscribers a much wider range of activities.

The Labour Party has by far the widest range of things subscribers can do, with up to 24 different activities. This includes visiting the Website of the week, passing Labour e-News to friends, watching a

TABLE 7. Percentage of e-newsletters that ask the receiver to do something.

Rule	Labour	Cons	Lib Dem	SNP	DUP
To Cover:					
1. Give readers the chance to do something	100%	100%	0%	100%	0.6%
To Avoid:					
1. Suggest meaningless or unachievable things to do	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Party Electoral Broadcast, commenting on policy documents or even applying for a job vacancy. This has led to a number of tangible benefits, for example, Kate McCarthy points out, “We find that the Site of the Week drives traffic up through the roof for those sites chosen.”<sup>13</sup> The e-newsletter is clearly part of an overall strategy of building relationships with members and non-members.

The Conservative Party has a slightly less wide range, with up to 14 different responses available. This includes buying products from their online shop, helping out at election campaigns, consulting on policy documents, providing opinion on Conference speeches, visiting the Website of the week and passing the details of the e-newsletter on to a friend. This has also resulted in clear benefits, for example, as Sheridan Westlake comments that there is “A clear relationship between promoting something on ‘News from Conservatives.com’ and the response we receive.”<sup>14</sup>

Although Labour and the Conservatives appear to benefit from feedback on their policies, this two-way dialogue does not appear as an explicit part of the Congress Online Project’s model. Yet Mark Pack for the Liberal Democrats has pointed out that “Sending out an email is a standing invitation for the receiver to comment.”<sup>15</sup> E-newsletters can provide instant feedback.

### ***Consider E-Mail Etiquette***

All parties recognise the importance of this by making it easy to subscribe and to unsubscribe. For example, every newsletter for all five parties has a link at the bottom of each enabling the receiver to unsubscribe. In addition, the SNP e-mail a monthly reminder that the receiver can unsubscribe if they so wish.

### ***Provide a Privacy Statement***

All parties have a privacy statement or policy concerning the use of information provided by subscribers. All offer this statement when a subscriber first signs up, but at least three have a reminder of this on each e-newsletter they send out.

### ***Summation***

For the Congress Online Project model best practice is based on how many of the ‘rules’ are covered, and how many of the pitfalls are



TABLE 8. E-newsletter effectiveness based on Congress Online Project model.

	Labour	Cons	Lib Dem	SNP	DUP
Areas to cover	17	15	14	10	12
Areas to avoid	2	4	2	5	4
Total	+15	+11	+12	+5	+8

avoided. Subtracting the number of pitfalls that a party falls into from the number of areas to cover which it addresses provides a total score. Table 8 shows Labour's e-newsletter can be considered the one which most closely meets best practice, and the SNP's the least. Although the Conservatives record more areas to cover than the Liberal Democrats, they are slightly less effective than the latter because of their greater number of areas to avoid. Irrespective of the slightly different scores between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats overall there is a clear digital divide in e-newsletter effectiveness between the three largest parties and the two smallest.

### ***THE ROLE OF E-NEWSLETTERS***

The actual use and benefits of e-newsletters does not suggest that they have transformed political communication. Potentially, e-newsletters can significantly enhance the ability of a party to communicate with both internal audiences, such as members, and external audiences, such as the general public. The evidence from the five e-campaigners suggests that the potential of e-newsletters have not yet been fully met. Of the five possible benefits that an e-newsletter offers a political party, only two could be assessed as being met, whereas the other three have had, so far, a limited impact. Parties have tended to focus their efforts on communicating directly with members and supporters.

The first benefit of an e-newsletter is to enable parties to communicate directly with people. Four parties make the point explicitly that an e-newsletter allows them to reach people directly. Mark Pack<sup>16</sup> points out that the e-newsletter allows the Liberal Democrats to reach people who might not have a strong local party to contact them. Moreover, there does not appear to be a binary divide with respondents from both large and small parties referring to the ability to

bypass the gatekeepers of the media. Party members and supporters can see directly what a party is saying on their behalf without having to rely on the media.

The benefit that the five parties report the strongest link is to facilitate closer relations with members and supporters. Indeed, for all parties the prime audience is party members and not the wider public. For example, Grant Thoms<sup>17</sup> states that an e-newsletter “helps us to explain and promote a message to internal audiences.” Given that three of the parties have pass-protected e-newsletters it might appear strange that members are the key target audience of their publicly available e-newsletter. This can be explained by the fact that there are clearly different levels of support for the parties. The pass-protected e-newsletters are mainly aimed at activists and candidates whose level of contact with a party is likely to be much higher. A pass-protected e-newsletter allows a party to communicate securely with key activists, and so offers an effective means of providing ready to use training and promotional materials, or appeal for volunteers and money to fight campaigns. The DUP and SNP are at a disadvantage in that they do not have a secure online means of communicating with key members.

Although all five e-newsletters are available to the general public, floating voters are at best a secondary audience. All five e-campaigners want to attract non-members, but Mark Pack explained why they were a lower priority when he pointed out that e-newsletters were “not so good at reaching the Holy Grail of floating voters.”<sup>18</sup> There is a general sense from the five respondents that reaching the general public is a bonus, but at the same time a general scepticism exists of what effect this has. As a consequence e-newsletters are not enhancing the relationship between parties and undecided voters.

The publicly available e-newsletter is not being used as a means of targeting messages to segmented audiences by four of the parties. Only the Labour Party collects detailed information such as gender, trade union affiliation and the areas of policy a subscriber is interested in.<sup>19</sup> As a result of collecting this data the Labour Party does send tailored policy messages. Sheridan Westlake explains the contrary position of not collecting data to target messages when he states that collecting such detailed information “would reduce the sign up rate and cause data protection and e-marketing regulations issues.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, there is a question mark as to whether a publicly available e-newsletter is the best medium to target a message. The three parties that offer a pass-protected e-newsletter have separate e-newsletters,

for example, for journalists, party activists and donors. There is, therefore, a division between the approach of the Labour Party and the other four, and, then a further division between the three larger and the two smaller parties.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is clear from the content analysis of their e-newsletters that all five parties are aware of the basic format required for an effective e-newsletter such as permission, size and importance of content. However, there is a clear digital divide in terms of e-newsletter effectiveness between the three largest parties and the two smallest. The clear differentiating factor is resources, with Labour and the Conservatives providing the most sophisticated e-newsletters. With greater access to staffing Labour and the Conservatives are more likely to segment the target audience, tailor the message and develop greater interaction with subscribers. With far fewer staff the SNP and DUP have to use existing materials from, primarily, their press officers to send out daily a 'one size fits all' e-newsletter. Although the Liberal Democrats' limited resources necessitate what they refer to as a daily approach, their e-newsletter is sophisticated enough to be classified with the two largest parties.

Whilst availability of resources might determine the overall sophistication and effectiveness of a party's e-newsletter, it is not the only factor that explains differences in approach between the parties. Clearly, the communication culture of each party plays a key role in determining the exact format, purpose and style of an e-newsletter. There appears to be a difference between whether an e-newsletter is viewed as primarily a one-way communication tool from sender to receiver or a two-way communication tool. The high score of the SNP, Conservatives and Labour on self-promotion and puffery and campaign commercials suggest that these three parties primarily view their e-newsletter as a means of promoting their views. Conversely, the Liberal Democrats and DUP are less inclined to view their e-newsletter as the equivalent of an electronic brochure 'pushing' their messages.

The Internet has the potential to increase the involvement of political parties with both their own members and the wider public. So far this potential has not been fully met by e-newsletters. Clearly, e-newsletters are making a contribution in helping parties communicate directly with members. However, they do not yet seem to help parties build a closer link with floating voters. This can be explained by the fairly conservative use that

parties make of their e-newsletters. In order to be effective parties need to assess the impact of e-newsletters from the perspective of subscribers. Why do people subscribe, how do they use them and with what effect? Parties themselves can make a start in answering these questions by finding out what subscribers think is important, and then tailoring their messages to address the concerns and interests of subscribers.

The Congress Online Project's focus on content, format, netiquette and asking for respondents to do something all clearly helps our understanding of UK parties' e-newsletters. However, the model has a key weakness for our study in that it could easily apply to any commercial operation's e-newsletter. For example, Rule 2 advises avoiding campaign commercials, and Rule 4 stresses the importance of a carefully crafted subject line, yet neither automatically applies to a political e-newsletter. The model is not tailored enough to the specific requirements of political communication. It is possible that this is in part because the political process in the U.S. is more akin to the business model where fundraising has greater primacy than in the UK.

The business of political parties is to govern effectively, win elections and represent voters, supporters and members. Therefore, political parties do not just seek to persuade the electorate but also to represent them. Table 9 suggests an alternative model for understanding e-newsletters based on four criteria. First, structure reflects many of the concerns of the Congress Online Project's model and includes a range of areas that need to be addressed to make it easier for the subscriber to use the e-newsletter. The only addition from the Congress Online Project's model is the existence of an evaluation model. If parties do not know who is subscribing, why and to what impact how can any e-newsletter be judged effective? Second, content draws on the Congress Online Project's model (and indeed any business model) to examine what is contained in the e-newsletter. Third, campaigning is much more explicitly linked to the political world. The importance of the 'ask' draws on from the Congress Online project's model, but the addition of an assessment of the message, campaign promotion and whether the e-newsletter is targeted suggest that an e-newsletter is much more tailored to the needs of winning elections. Fourth, the existence of two-way communications addresses whether an e-newsletter is not just a campaigning tool but also fulfils a representative function. This requires that the sender of the message expects and welcomes feedback from the receiver. Criteria 1 and 2 are heavily influenced by the Congress Online Project, but Criteria 3 and 4 add to our understanding by considering the campaigning and representative use of e-newsletters.

TABLE 9. Best practice model for using e-newsletters.

Category	Measurement
<b>1. Structure</b> Short and to the point Link to Website Privacy statement Easy to subscribe Easy to unsubscribe Provide summaries Evaluation mechanism	Less than 3 screens Yes/No Yes/No Yes/No Yes/No Yes/No Yes/No Who subscribes, why and to what effect?
<b>2. Content</b> Topical Interests the subscriber by adding information not easily available elsewhere	Responds to major news stories Yes/No
<b>3. Campaigning</b> Ask who subscribers are and what their interests are Ask subscribers to do something Promote campaigns The message Targeted e-newsletter	Yes/No Yes/No Yes/No Does the message inform, persuade or change the attitude or behaviour of the subscriber? Yes/No
<b>4. Two-way communication</b> Seek feedback Level of interactivity Changes in message	Yes/No Extent to which receiver can interact with the sender Yes/No

The content analysis of the five e-newsletters suggests that at present e-newsletters are primarily one-way in nature, promoting only the views of the sender to the subscriber. Post-modern campaigning requires two-way communication, yet currently the interactivity elements of e-newsletters are not being sufficiently utilised by the parties. For their e-newsletters to reflect post-modern campaigning the parties will need to ensure two key changes to their e-newsletters. First, develop a communication culture that endorses two-way communication through an enhanced facility for feedback. Second, at the same time provide the resources required to process, assess and respond to that feedback. E-newsletters so far have led only to a partial, one-way return to direct communication.

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## NOTES

1. According to the Electoral Commission Register of Political Parties April 2003 online at <http://www.electoralcommission.gov.uk/regulatory-issues/partylinks.cfm>
2. G, Thoms, personal communication, 2/2/04
3. K, McCarthy, personal communication, 10/2/04
4. G, Thoms, personal communication, 2/2/04
5. J, Robinson, personal communication, 2/2/04
6. G, Thoms, personal communication, 2/2/04
7. S, Westlake, personal communication 2/2/04
8. K, McCarthy, personal communication 10/2/04
9. Though in reality the Liberal Democrats do not necessarily send out e-mails daily (interview with Mark Pack, 10/2/04).
10. Two types of losses can be recorded, those who deliberately unsubscribe and those where an e-mail 'bounces' back.
11. S, Westlake, personal communication 18/10/04
12. J, Robinson, personal communication 13/10/04
13. K, McCarthy, personal communication 10/2/04
14. S, Westlake, personal communication 2/2/04
15. M, Pack, personal communication, 10/2/04
16. M, Pack, personal communication, 10/2/04
17. G, Thoms, personal communication, 2/2/04
18. M, Pack, personal communication, 10/2/04
19. K, McCarthy, personal communication 10/2/04
20. S, Westlake, personal communication 2/2/04

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