Book Review

Net gain – or net pain?
Political parties and the Internet

R. Gibson, **P. Nixon and S. Ward**, eds, *Net Gain? Political Parties and the Internet*, London: Routledge, 2003. ISBN 0 415 28274 8. pp. 250, £19.99.

The cover image of the remarkable collection "Net Gain – Political Parties and the Internet" edited by Rachel Gibson, Paul Nixon and Stephen Ward, shows a manipulated computer keyboard with an oversized "X" right on the key that commonly holds the letter "O". A really nice visualization, as it is always hard to find adequate pictures for illustrating the vague, disembodied, fluent sphere of online communication – but what does it stand for? While browsing the 250 pages "grand tour" through the global landscape of political systems the question still remains in place. Is the "X" perhaps an allusion to the somehow opaque sphere of politics or could it be the materialization of the so-called "e-vote"? Anyway, readers may expect an interesting portfolio of political innovations induced by digital interactive media.

Without providing an elaborated partitioning the book provides twelve articles on contemporary developments of internet-based communication by the most prominent among political actors – under examination is the online performance of political parties throughout the world. The authors do not focus from a single perspective on their common research object but choose from a variety of starting points for their studies. For instance, Margolis et al. address the struggle between major and minor parties (USA), Bowers-Brown examines political marketing efforts (UK) while Cunha et al. explore the southern hemisphere of party systems in Europe (Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain), Copsey discusses the online activities of right-wing-extremists and Badescu et al. describe the potential for party modernisation and democratisation in eastern Europe (Romania). Thus the book offers a broad range of access points to the discussion on the influence of new media on politics – and this is already its first achievement: presenting a dozen articles with each addressing different research questions proves that the story of political online communication definitely is not a stylish or limited field of research.

The editors define efforts in concentrating on key developments of modern party systems more precisely in their opening chapter, overlooking current discussions on the situation of political parties and trying to establish a link to "the more general literature on political parties" (p. 11). By exploring the vast empirical basis of party communication online Ward, Gibson and Nixon draw a distinction between administrative, campaign-related and organisational use of websites. Along this characterization they unfold a triplet of research areas connected to current scientific debates on the influence of new media on party politics: party competition and campaigning, internal party democracy and the role of parties within democracies. By far, the digitalisation of campaigns and elections dominates the scientific activity around the globe, but still is aiming too much on surface phenomena: the editors state that most of the research results "yet have to be linked to the theoretical campaign communication literature" (p. 17). Moreover,

questions on participation and intra party democracy as well as a profound theoretical connection of party-related online efforts into the debates on issues of representation and competition within modern "media democracies" are identified to be "more intriguing" (p. 21). Yet remains the question why most of the chapters of the book still use election campaigns as main empirical background for their case studies – although more basic questions (minor vs. major parties, party evolution, democratisation) are on the research agenda.

Also, there is a widely homogenous set of methods and instruments in use when researching political online communication. Almost every chapter is based on the combination of website analysis and interview- and survey-elements, methods which are more or less derived from a theoretical framework narrowing the spectrum. A closer look on the enclosed coding schemes can be quite insightful and reveals the common problems in modelling functional categories to properly assess the online performance of political parties – i.e. Cunha et al. are working with the category of "freshness" (on a scale from minus 5 to plus 10) to measure the frequency of website updates, while the Gibson/Ward-scale offers grades from 0 to 6 and Badescu et al. only report whether there is any "news" on a website or not. It should be recognized as an earning of the book that there were no formal limitations for book contributions to research methods used, so that a broad variety is on display. Thus for instance the idea of Hague and Uhm to use a factor called "direction of communication" to categorize the flow of data between website builders and users is everything but inadequate – *vice versa*, because of a renouncement of "hard" classifications their chapter brings to light some kind of "interactivity paradox": although the professionally equipped Korean party websites offer more interactive elements to establish a two-way or upward communication, their citizen-driven counterparts seem to be more trustworthy (p. 210). The common formula that two-way communication is a must for political discussion and invigorates the position of citizens seems not to be working in any social or cultural context – or at least, it brings about different results.

Hague and Uhms still somewhat awkwardly attempt not to use statistic correlations but describe data flows and communication in a qualitative way. This methodological preference hints at another problem of social scientists exploring the impact of new media: there are no established disciplinary definitions or models of the crucial empirical category of "interactivity" (i.e. provided by classical media or communication studies) and an inter-disciplinary model is not under development, too. Of course, this must lead to problems in terms of comparability, especially within such broad collections of case studies.

In sum, the articles on peripheral political systems prove to be more inspiring, as more complex problems of the general development of party structures are reflected. The essays based on rich data sets of highly "wired" political systems such as the US or UK cover well-known experiences in using the Internet as a tool for political marketing and E-Campaigning. Although presenting solid surveys on usage and impact of new media during the election campaigns since the mid-nineties, most of the findings are already "common good" among the scientific community. Additionally, in 2004, digital campaign efforts have been updated by Howard Deans "collaborative campaigning" with the help of his weblog (www.blogforamerica.com) or the massive incorporation of community communication sites such as meetup.org.

Despite the huge variety of new and interesting information on political online communication the book reveals some gaps when depicting this particular internet landscape: the absence of a case study on the developments in Germany – with its traditionally strong party organisations – has to be considered as a major omission. Already in the mid-nineties German party organisations adopted online communication and – even more important – started to develop several forms of "virtual party branches",

some of them legally integrated into the established party structure. The German party system also has been used as a "test-bed" for the conduction of "virtual party conventions", carefully connected to the complex mechanisms of internal decision-making. Its role as a predecessor in party communication online is sharply contrasted with the overall poor performance of German parties as traditional member organizations – the rapidly declining number of memberships throughout the entire spectrum is by far not reduced or even stopped by the usage of new media.

Following not only this example the book provides rich material for a discussion about the general future of parties within the political process. While new media often are considered to be a juvenation machine for slowly draining political actors, the chapters of the book do not support this popular hypothesis. The authors mostly are favouring more sceptical, calm and far-from-hype positions assessing the politico-technical developments. Yet there are no radical ideas to present a scenario of a party future that combines the rather limited changes of party politics by new media and the partly horrible future unfolding for the institution of the mass or member party. What if party membership continues to reach record lows? What if party elites continue their aging process rapidly? What if voters continue to ignore the offers on the political market when it comes to elections? What if new social movements are not able to fill in the gap declining party structures are about to open up?

Although the editors sum up their collection with an array of conclusions, the outcome seems to be rather limited. The scientific community already has a strong notion that "the Internet has not proved to be the saviour of party systems experiencing declining public interest and participation" or that it "may eventually help alter the style of party politics but have a less radical effect on party competition" (p. 242). After presenting various facets of party reality in many insightful articles, a somewhat more precise commentary on the current situation of political parties within the power structures of political systems might have been helpful.

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