Only Joking?

Online Humour in the 2005 UK General Election

Limor Shifman, Stephen Coleman and Stephen Ward

Abstract
Humour has long been a part of election campaigns but rarely has election humour been subject to scholarly analysis. The increasing popularity of new forms of Internet-based humour has, however, raised questions about the significance of humour in campaigning and whether online humour can be used as means of stimulating political engagement. This article assesses online humour in the context of the 2005 UK election, exploring both the motivations of the different actors who distributed web-based political humour and the nature of the texts themselves. We find that whilst the official party campaigns use humour very cautiously, there has been an upsurge in humour based campaigns from net activists as well as more traditional broadcasters. Yet, overall, the way that humour is used is paradoxical, since it often attempts to encourage participation but portrays politics as a cynical game, leaving the rationale for political participation unclear.

Key words: Internet, humour, political participation, election campaigns, game-playing.

A thing is funny when – in some way that is not actually offensive or frightening – it upsets the established order. Every joke is a tiny revolution … Whatever destroys dignity, and brings down the mighty from their seats, preferably with a bump, is funny (Orwell 1968: 284).

…the political joke will change nothing. It is the relentless enemy of greed, injustice, cruelty and oppression – but it could never do without them. It is not a form of active resistance (Benton 1988: 54).

Introduction
Orwell’s observation that humour is inherently political, insofar as it potentially disrupts established interests, suggests a central theme of this paper: that the proliferation of online jokes, cartoons, spoofs and graffiti during the 2005 UK election...
campaign was more than a counter-cultural sideshow, but reflected particular uses of
humour as a means of political critique and contestation. Benton’s observation,
however, suggests another central theme – that this critique was in many cases
‘harmless’, ‘playful’ and not capable of generating real change.

Satirical and subversive humour has always been a feature of British election
campaigns. From Hogarth, Gillray and Rowlandson to That Was the Week That Was
and Spitting Image, the tradition of mordant flippancy has been integral to British
electoral culture. The transition of electioneering from an exclusive discussion
conducted between class peers to a universal campaign addressed to diverse social
strata has called for techniques of cultural translation. Popular humour has contributed
to this process. The latest version of this tradition has been the emergence of online
satire through humorous websites and viral email. Whilst online humour has been
prominent particularly in US presidential election campaigns from the late 1990s, the
2001 UK election also saw the growth of successful online humour genres (Coleman
2001). By the time the 2005 general election was called there was already an
expectation that the Internet would play a greater role than ever in the campaign and
that online humour would be a significant feature. There was a belief that the UK
would draw on the experience of the 2004 US Presidential elections which had seen
the widespread use of online humour both by satirists and the parties themselves. On
the eve of the election, the BBC’s reporter Brian Wheeler was predicting that ‘so-
called viral e-mails – often satirical or controversial messages that spread rapidly
across the web like word of mouth’ would be one of the livelier features of the
campaign. In the event, whilst most commentators agree that the Internet played a
limited role in the campaign itself (Bartle 2005; Ward 2005; Stanyer 2005), Wheeler
was partly right: viral emails and satirical websites proliferated in 2005 (Lusoli and
Ward 2005).

Nevertheless, despite the emergence of online election humour, it has been
generally overlooked by academic scholars. Our paper, therefore, represents a first
attempt to analyse a range of online humorous political genres in the UK. The central
research questions considered here are twofold: How was online humour used by
different actors in the 2005 UK election campaign? And, what were the specific
characteristics of online humour in this campaign?
The first part of the article sets out our theoretical framework for analyzing the relationship between humour, politics and the Internet, assessing modernist notions of political participation and postmodernist notions of game-playing. In the second part, we focus on the ‘senders’ of the online humorous messages and their motives. Finally, we concentrate on the humorous texts, comparing three genres that vary in their linkage to the Internet: games, cartoons and defaced/humorous posters.

**Online Humour: From Modernist Participation to Postmodernist Game Playing**

The relationship between humour, politics and the Internet can be analysed from two perspectives: Firstly, online political humour as a form of political participation. In its conventional, modernist interpretation, political participation is regarded as an instrumentalist activity. Online humour, in this sense, is a means to achieve rationally conceived outcomes such as persuading people to identify with a particular politician or ridiculing an opponent (Speier 1998; Yarwood 2001), and more recently, to make the activity of participation less burdensome. Secondly, online political humour in the context of game-playing. If participation is modernist and instrumental, game-playing can be regarded as postmodernist and playful, lacking the kind of transcendental objectives usually associated with political activity.

**Humour, political participation and the role of the Internet**

The notion that popular humour might help to make politics more accessible and participatory has gained currency in recent years. While traditional political-science accounts of participation have conventionally focused upon measurable standard practices, such as voting, joining political organizations or contacting politicians (Barnes and Kaase 1979; Parry et al 1992), over the past two decades there has been an increasing recognition of a crisis of representative politics resulting from its disconnection from everyday culture. Public disengagement is seen to threaten the legitimacy of democratic institutions (Norris 2002; Seyd et al 2004; Pattie et al 2003). This has led to a debate about how to reinvigorate political participation and more widely about what constitutes participation.
Not surprisingly, against the backdrop of this apparent crisis of participation, some have heralded the rise of new ICTs [information and communication technologies] such as the Internet as providing a partial solution to the problems of political engagement. ICTs, such as email, the web, and SMS, have been seen as more convenient, more appealing and interactive ways to stimulate participatory activity, especially amongst younger citizens who are the least likely to participate in formal politics (Electoral Commission 2002; Howland and Bethall 2002).

In particular, new ICTs are often seen as fostering a new style of informal communication in which humour plays a central part. Thus, if political actors wished to engage the public they need to adapt to this new style of communication:

Politics is associated with mediated, distrusted images and Internet user who circulated dry political messages would rightly fear opprobrium. But jokes are exempt from this rule – it is accepted Internet behaviour to forward something that makes you laugh. (Cain et al 2001)

Aside from the practical focus on how to reinvigorate traditional political participation, wider questions have been raised about the definitions and measures of participation. Hence, some commentators have argued that the notion of a participatory crisis is misplaced and, although they concede that conventional acts of participation might be in decline, they consider the focus of participation to be too narrow and instrumental. (Norris 2002; Pattie et al 2003). Many point to new modes of political discussion and participation, particularly the rise of single issue politics, along with more individualized, expressive and consumerist forms of behaviour such as boycotting products or buying political merchandise (Richardson 1995; Whiteley 2003). Indeed, some have suggested that we need to reconsider the whole nature of what constitutes participation and so that many facets of everyday life, such as the use of humour, are seen as acts of participation in their own right.

Humour, politics and the internet as game-playing
The term ‘game’ incorporates at least two meanings in academic and popular discourse. Firstly, it refers to a concrete voluntary activity, such as football or Monopoly, which combines ends, means, rules, equipment and manipulative action (Eskelinen 2001) and is set in a certain time and space (Walter 2003). The second meaning ascribed to the term is metaphorical. According to Minnema (1998: 21), the
The twentieth century was characterized by a remarkable growth in the use of the terms ‘game’ and ‘play’ as metaphors for various aspects of social life. These terms seem to have captured some of the ways in which contemporary (post)modern culture perceives itself: ‘as a game without an overall aim, as a play without a transcendent destination but not without the practical necessity of rules agreed upon and of (inter)subjective imagination’.

The concept of the game is closely related to the term ‘play’, which refers not only to what people do during a game, but also to more open ended activities such as ‘make believe’. Play suggests an alternative to engagement with the real and consequential (Huizinga 1949/1998); to play is to pursue a tangential or ironic relationship to social reality based upon fantasy and ‘just for fun’ (Fry 1963). In one way or another, humour, politics and the Internet can all be regarded as examples of game-playing.

Linkage between humour and game-playing has been identified by scholars who are influenced by two meta-theories about the nature of humour: the superiority and incongruity theories. The superiority theory analyses laughter as generated by people’s feeling of superiority over others (Morreall 1987). Relying on this theory, Gruner (1997) argues that humour can be treated as a game since every humorous situation involves winners (in many cases – the joke tellers) and losers (the targets of humour). The incongruity theory of humour focuses on the humorous message rather than on the motives of the people laughing (Billig 2005). It analyses humour as deriving from an unexpected encounter between two incongruent components, such as a dog answering the telephone or a man wearing women’s clothes. Thus, humour and play are both based on multi-layered perception of social situations (Raskin 1985). Moreover, humour, like game-playing, is in many cases engaged for its own sake rather than to reach a goal (Morreall 2005).

As with humour, politics is often depicted as a game entailing symbolism and theatricality (Edelman 1964). Rhetorically, a distinction is commonly made between politics, in the sense of tactical maneuvering, and real issues of power and policy. To say of someone that ‘you’re just playing at politics’ is to suggest that they have disengaged from social reality in order to indulge in the rituals of a strategic and ideological charade. In popular culture, politics has been depicted as an elaborate game – an extension of schoolboy rivalries (Trollope 1876; Snow 1964). Political
scientists have reinforced this image by invoking the metaphor of the horserace in which politics in general, and elections in particular, are about winners and losers in a battle for popularity.

The game-playing perspective is also very relevant to the study of the Internet. Media, in their various incarnations, provide many opportunities for play as they engage audiences in a novel ‘as-if’ sphere (Silverstone 1999). This argument is highly relevant to the analysis of the Internet, which is often depicted as a ‘world’ of its own (Barlow 1996; Turkle 1997). The virtuality of cyberspace has led to it being regarded as a sphere in which activity lacks real-world consequences. As a site of play, the Internet allows its users to adopt more informal, whimsical and ironic stances. What might not be acceptable in a letter can be articulated freely in an email; what might not be appropriate to be transmitted by broadcasters via television or radio might slip through editorial control of their website. The Internet, partly because of its lack of regulation and anarchic ethos, is a space of saturnalian license.

Research Questions and Methods

In the context of participation and game playing, we firstly looked at the actors producing online humour and their motivations – were they using humour to encourage certain forms of participation, or were they using it mainly in a playful, postmodern way? Secondly, we examined the nature of online election humour – what were its specific characteristics? Who were the targets? Was there any difference between ‘offline’ and ‘online’ based humour genres in terms of participation and ‘game-playing’? In order to address these questions we adopted the following research methods:

(1) Website monitoring – During the campaign, we regularly monitored four types of UK sites: (a) 20 political party websites, including all the parliamentary parties and a range of non parliamentary parties; (b) Four ‘viral email’ websites dedicated to humour – These were large dynamic archives of material that had been circulated by ‘pass along’/‘viral’ emails; (c) A number of well established satire websites which dealt with news and current affairs (e.g. ‘deadbrain’, ‘the voice of reason’ and ‘the spoof’); (d) Finally, ad hoc sites and sections in mass media websites which were dedicated to the election (such as ‘spinon’ or the ‘Channel 4’ cartoon section).
(2) Interviews – ten interviews were conducted with website moderators/producers and party campaign officials mainly to understand what motivated them to use (or not use) Internet-based humour during the election.

(3) Content analysis – We analysed three genres of Internet humour – games, cartoons and posters. Content analysis was used to examine cartoons (n=95) and posters (n=53) (The number of online games was too small to be properly assessed by content analysis). The codebook comprised five variables: (a) Issues – Which issues from the ‘serious’ campaigns and manifestos were presented in the comic texts? (b) ‘Meta political comments’ – Which aspects of the ‘political game’ were highlighted in the comic texts? (c) Targets – Who were the butts, or targets, of the comic texts? (d) Scorned features – Which features were scorned in the texts? (e) Aggressiveness – were the texts promoting physical violence towards political actors and/or using aggressive language (including insults and swearing)? The comic texts were coded by two coders. The inter-coder reliability, based on a random sample of 30 texts, was between 0.84 and 0.895 (Cohen’s kappa).

The Senders: One Election – Three Campaigns

Our meta-analysis of website content, as well as our interviews, led us to differentiate between three campaigns: the ‘Vote for us’, ‘Don’t vote for them’ and ‘Just vote’ campaigns. The dramatic difference between these campaigns in their aims regarding voting behaviour and distribution of power resulted in dissimilar patterns of humorous behaviour.

The ‘Vote for us’ campaign

This category represents the traditional election campaign of the parties and those seeking the support of voters. Despite high expectations, the use of online humour by the parties was relatively limited. Only a minority of parties attempted to use any sort of humour via their websites and rarely was it a prominent campaign tool. Only six of the twenty parties we monitored explicitly used online humour.

Three parties had static website pages with humour content. Labour, the governing party, tried to cement the party’s message that Michael Howard [the Conservative Party leader] was a populist opportunist by encouraging visitors to email spoof Howard bandwagon campaign themes. The far right BNP [British National
Party] humour page was not specifically focused around the election but aimed more generally at the supposed political correctness restrictions imposed by the liberal left and demonstrating the character of the British people. Hence, the BNP humour page stated:

... We welcome all those politically incorrect emails that ‘do the rounds’, and all those jokes which some are too afraid to pass on... if anyone is offended - tough! The essence of comedy is to have fun at someone else's expense!
(http://www.bnp.org.uk/humour/humour_intro.htm)

The Democratic Unionist Party [DUP] maintained its longstanding cartoon page, again not specifically election focused but aimed at ridiculing its political opponents in the Northern Ireland peace process.

Three further parties attempted to exploit viral humour. The Liberal Democrats and the Greens used e-postcards on their websites. These both targeted Prime Minister Tony Blair – with the Greens e-card picturing Blair as chameleon whilst the Liberal Democrats e-cards were cartoons demonstrating their opposition to the Iraq war. The main opposition Conservative Party invited visitors to wipe the smile off Tony Blair’s face through an online game which involved hitting Labour politicians with Iraq war dossiers. The game was part of more integrated Conservative poster campaign to reinforce the image of Blair as smug and untrustworthy and to enhance the ‘stickiness’ of the website by bringing people back to the site for repeat visits (interview with party campaign official, 23 August, 2005).

The parties partially took onboard the blogging phenomenon with several parties running blogs or more accurately campaign diaries – since only one, the Liberal Democrats, allowed visitors to post comments. Such diaries tended to be lightweight and often mundane. On Labour’s website there were two diaries supposedly written by Blair and Deputy Leader John Prescott but in reality put together by campaign workers. Mainly, they concentrated on the details of whistle stop campaigns with the central message of conveying how successfully the campaign was being received. Whilst portraying the serious nature of campaigning, they occasionally attempted to lighten the tone with cautious self-deprecation. For example, in keeping with Prescott’s public image as a bluff, northern, working class man with a large appetite, there were several mentions of fish and chip suppers in the
Prescott ‘battle bus diary’. Whilst the Blair diary managed to combine references to celebrity pop culture and political spin:

I could tell the minute I arrived at our hotel in Birmingham yesterday that I was not exactly the star attraction. The autograph hunters were there for Kylie Minogue who is currently on tour in Britain. It meant I was struggling to get the best out of my team who kept wandering off to join the groupies hanging around for a glimpse of Kylie. My press team were all singing ‘I'm spinning around.’ Only they weren't. (http://www.labour.org.uk/index.php?Id=tonyblair2)

The diary which attracted the most attention, however, was that of Sandra Howard, (wife of the Conservative leader), which combined self-deprecation as well as some insight into the relentless nature of the campaign trail. The diary managed to gain press coverage although mainly for the so-called ‘battle of the haircuts’ with the Prime Minister’s wife rather than any substantive issues.

As well as websites, the parties all used email to communicate their messages to members and supporters. Again, however, few of these explicitly used humour as a campaign weapon. Mostly they were dry messages that repeated the daily party press releases. Labour, however, employed satirist, novelist and long time Labour activist John O’Farrell to pen a series of emails aimed at mobilizing members and sympathizers. His appeals used both attacks on opponents and self-deprecation of the Labour Party and himself. One such email appeal reportedly raised around £50,000 in just a few hours. Aside from pure fund raising, O’Farrell (6 May 2005) has suggested a wider message behind the emails: ‘That we have a sense of humour about ourselves, we are not uptight, we are human. I think a few jokes just made people feel a little better about being in the Labour Party’.

Overall, use of humour in the official online campaign remained relatively limited especially in terms of messages to the wider public, although as the O’Farrell case demonstrates, parties were less cautious when communicating with their own supporters. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly the mainstream parties were generally more active than those on the fringe. Whilst the main targets for humour were the main party leaders (Blair and Howard) and the underlying message was to bolster negative images about them.

Given the growth and relative success of online satire and humour, it’s worth considering why the parties were so cautious. Three sorts of barriers emerge:
(1) Humour as a risky campaign tool – For mainstream parties the targeting of jokes has to be extremely careful. Humour can often be deemed offensive. Consequently, in the era of catch-all campaigns, where parties are making generalized appeals to whole of the electorate (Katz and Mair 1994), most parties will not want to risk offending groups of potential voters within society. This means that the use of humour become relatively restricted – the safest is simply to use humour to mobilize core voters by targeting ones’ opponents. Ironically, this potentially promotes a trend towards negative campaigning which is often a turn-off for the wider electorate.

Aside from being potentially offensive, online humour is also not easy to control. Increasingly, election campaigns have become more about minimizing risks and trying to keep control of the political agenda (Farrell and Webb 2001). The problem with Internet campaigning from a party perspective is that messages are not as easily controlled as they are through traditional media formats. Once emails are sent, parties cannot control where they go or even the content of the message. This is even truer when it comes to humorous messages: As one party official put it: ‘humour is generally open to a greater range of interpretations or reactions than a policy document... you can’t control people’s range of response to jokes’ (interview, 24 August, 2005).

(2) Parties and the UK political system – There are also organizational barriers to the use of humour and innovation in online campaigns. Most of the larger parties have highly centralized and hierarchical command structures. Party officials, who are responsible to their party bosses, lack the same amount of freedom that loose decentralized network campaigns, social movements or independent bloggers have to experiment with the technology. One Conservative official noted: ‘Anyway, the best things are not done by parties….We’re the Conservative Party, we’re never going to be trendy... we’re not some guerilla marketing organization’ (interview, 15 August, 2005). Similarly, another party campaigner concluded: ‘jokes are well suited to the Internet but not political parties’ (interview, 23 August, 2005).

In addition, unlike the US, the British electoral system is still party, rather than candidate, centred. Arguably, it is more difficult to target parties and institutions than it is individuals and their character and personality traits. Hence, in the US, whilst both Kerry and Bush were prime targets for humour, the UK parties were more difficult to characterize.
The election campaign process – Electioneering is a serious business and in an election campaign, the stakes are high. For the main parties it is ultimately about winning power. Consequently, some would argue that making jokes about the election is undermining the serious nature of what is at stake. For minor parties the problem is slightly different. Although they can deploy humour against their mainstream opponents, the risk for them, especially if they are new parties seeking to establish a public profile, is that they are dubbed a joke party not to be taken seriously by the voters.

Finally, in this campaign, there was no defining event such as a media confrontation or a politician caught off-guard or going off-message. Previous election campaigns have often produced moments or events ripe for satirizing. This time, though, there was little memorable about the campaign itself that provided any material for satirists.

The ‘Don’t vote for them’ campaign

The mirror image of the formal campaign was found in anti-candidate/party websites. In these sites, the purpose was not positive (‘Vote for us’), but negative (‘Don’t vote for them/him’). Another difference between the two campaigns was connected to the distribution of power. The implicit goal of these sites – mainly operated by ‘concerned citizens’ – was not only to effect the distribution of power between parties, but also to change the distribution of power between politicians and ‘ordinary people’ in favour of the latter. Whereas in the formal campaign the use of humour was scarce and very cautious, the second campaign used humour extensively, as a viscous weapon to attack political targets.

Two websites, ‘Toryscum’ and ‘Backing Blair’, with different political aims demonstrate some of these claims. ‘Toryscum’ (http://toryscum.com), was launched in March 2005, and operated by a group of allegedly politically unaligned but ‘concerned’ citizens. The site’s main aim was to undermine the election campaign of the Conservative Party.

One of the prominent characteristics of ‘Toryscum’ was extensive use of interactive features. For instance, the visitor was invited to operate the ‘Tory policy generator’, which generated random Conservative party policy: ‘Just one click will take you to neo-con nirvana. Sometimes it’ll make sense, sometimes it won’t – just
like Michael Howard’. Another interactive component in the site was the ‘sleazy lover’ quiz, in which the visitor was asked to match five Tory MP’s to five ‘sex shames’.

The most salient interactive component in ‘Toryscum’ was its involvement in the corruption, or ‘re-designing’ of Tory posters. As early as April 4th (a day before the official campaign was launched) ‘Toryscum’ presented photographs of defaced Tory billboards. Five days afterwards the site publishes a section instructing people how to deface billboards. To those reluctant to deface Tory billboards in ‘real life’, ‘Toryscum’ offered an online version that enabled people to create computerized mock posters.

‘BackingBlair’ (http://www.backingblair.co.uk), was launched two months prior to the elections. In ironic opposition to its name, the sites’ aim was to ‘register a highly visible and damaging protest vote against Tony Blair’. Most of the site consisted of serious messages such as calls for action and requests for donations. However, it also included five flash video clips about the election campaign and Blair, of which three contained humorous elements. The videos used mainly two humorous mechanisms – irony and obscenity. For instance, the irony in one of the clips (‘Vote Blair’) derived from an incongruity between the verbal and visual levels. Whereas the verbal messages, parodying political traditional broadcasts, were ‘sickly’ positive (using lyrics such as ‘we’re gonna do it’ and dramatic slogans such as ‘Freedom’ and ‘Democracy’), the images conveyed a contradicting message, depicting Blair as serving Bush’s interests, thus destroying British freedom and democracy. The tone and language used in the two other clips (‘The Iraq war in 30 seconds’ and ‘Debate’) was much more aggressive. In ‘The Iraq war in 30 seconds’ Blair was also presented as homosexual – Naked Blair was hugged by Bush which covered him with a US flag, to the sound of ‘if you want to be my lover’.

The analysis of ‘Tory scum’ and ‘Backing Blair’ thus reveals that the ‘Don’t vote for them’ sites tend to use an aggressive, destructive approach, which might be seen as undermining its humour.

The ‘Just vote’ campaign
Some of the humour sites we examined were concerned neither to support nor attack specific candidates, but to promote the idea of participation by mediating between the
highbrow world of official politics and the informal sphere of participation as ‘fun’. Rather than asking people to ‘Vote for us’ or ‘Don’t vote for them’, the collective motto of these sites seemed to be ‘Just vote’, or at least participate. They were indifferent about how power was to be distributed between the political parties, but simply wanted ‘ordinary people’ – and particularly the young – to be more active in its distribution. In this sense, these sites employed humour in the service of an implicit civic ethos.

The use of humour in these sites was driven by the belief that ‘Multimedia carnival humour on the web may appeal to potential voters who would otherwise be disengaged in the electoral process…’ (Foot and Schneider 2002: 239). From our interviews with the producers of these sites, it was clear that their intentions were motivational. Oliver Doward, a producer in Channel 4’s website (www.channel4.com) which included humorous content from ‘ordinary British citizens’, stated:

> What I wanted is for people to be more engaged with the news, to feel that they are not just turning on the news to be told what’s happening in the world. … That was what was so wonderful about coming up with the cartoon idea… I think humour is the only way to involve people, particularly the younger generation, with politics. I think humour is absolutely vital. (interview, 20 May 2005)

Most of the interviewees regarded humour as a means to an end – a way of softening up citizens for engagement. Robin Brant from ‘BBC Radio One’ observed that:

> Humour… is a very good way to get – to be frank about it – people who aren’t interested onto the website, involved in the website, and once we’ve got them there we kind of pushed them towards other content which provides loads of the more serious, more worthy stuff that they might not be overly keen on seeing (interview, 15 June 2005).

Later in the same interview, he explained:

> Our listeners are more apathetic and we need to get at them much more blatantly with a hook. And we know from past experience that something humorous – quote ‘fun’ – is the way to do it.

The type of humour used in most of the ‘Just Vote’ sites seemed to fit these ‘engaging aspirations’. Most of the humorous texts presented in these sites were mild and amusing. Brutal and highly aggressive humour, which might have turned away certain groups of people, was rarely presented.
The aim of engaging everyone into politics – whatever their political views may be – was also apparent in the political neutrality of the sites. The sites mocked all major candidates and parties. Political neutrality, or, neutral appearance, we learned from the interviewees, was an important factor in the construction of the sites. Chris Quigley of ‘Spinon’ (www.spinon.co.uk) told us that:

… because it was our remit to engage people in a balanced way, we weren’t out there to spread a specific message. We … simply wanted to have a more balanced view. It kind of organically balanced itself … it was more anti-everybody or support everybody (interview, 20 May 2005).

This ‘neutrality’ in mockery might have had some problematic implications. Warnick (2002) claims that an emphasis on the misdeeds of the American presidential candidates in parody websites played into the public’s cynical approach towards politicians. However, Warnick deals with websites that focus on just one candidate (thus leaving his political rivals ‘untouched’ by humorous critique), whereas the ‘Just Vote’ sites targeted all candidates, leaving even less room for positive political alternatives.

Overall, the message of these sites was a moral injunction to ‘play the game’, regardless of its political consequences. ‘We know it’s an awful joke,’ they seemed to be saying, ‘perhaps at your expense, but you have an obligation to join in the fun, just as your parents and grandparents before you’. The political rationale for doing so was not, however, clearly articulated.

**The Texts: Online Genres, Offline Genres and the Political Game**

This section consists of a close examination of three genres: (a) games – a new genre facilitated by digital technology; (b) political cartoons – an old and well established genre, in which the Internet functions mainly as a new arena for pre-existing content; (c) the third genre is divided into two sub-categories: computer-based/online spoof posters and offline street graffiti.

**Games**

The election campaign produced a relatively small number of online humorous games. The political meaning of such games is closely linked to the role that the ‘citizen’ is invited to play in them. Games usually require a high level of involvement – players
cannot stay passive in a game – they are always asked to perform certain acts. In contemporary thinking about democracy – this seems as a major advantage. Since ‘active citizens’ are supposed to be ‘better’ than passive citizens – ‘active genres’ such as games, might be seen as cures to disengagement and passivity. Yet the main question that should be addressed is what is the nature of the involvement required from the player in these games?

The 2005 election games tended to be of two types\textsuperscript{4} – those featuring violence and those featuring sex. Violent games included ‘Election snowball’ (a game which was produced by the commercial company ‘Evian’) and ‘Mudslinging’ (produced by ‘BBC Radio One’). Both games were based on a very simple set of rules: the player throws an imaginary object (snow or mud) on political candidates from various parties. The more politicians ‘hurt’ – the higher the score. Hitting politicians was also the main theme in ‘Punch a Celeb’ – a site that encouraged the visitor to ‘punch’ not only politicians but also celebrities from the music, sports and film industries.

Games featuring sex included two originally produced by dating/sex sites which then appeared later in humour websites. The first was ‘Political shag-match’, in which a player chose a male and a female politicians and then pressed a button to watch them having sex. The politicians’ faces were pasted on unattractive naked bodies. They were bending on their knees in a ‘doggy-style’ position, while the parliament served as their background. The second game was ‘Erections’, which invited the players to choose the party leader with whom they would like to have sex. Each candidate was ‘gratified’ with a sexual profile, e.g. for Tony Blair: ‘Turn-ons: my winning smile. Turn-offs: Weapons of (m)ass destruction’. Both games presented politicians in a very humiliating way, as being animal-like sexual creatures.

These humorous games can be analysed according to Freud’s (1976) influential theory, which described humour as a socially accepted outlet for repressed violent and sexual urges. Freud and his followers would have therefore explained these games as a sublimation of the aggressive urges towards politicians, as well as an expression of repressed sexual urges. However, the games may also be seen as taking part in the legitimization of such dangerous urges towards politicians, as they portray ‘hitting’ politicians as a ‘cool’ and ‘attractive’ ways of entertainment.

These negative messages were not directed towards a specific politician: The party leaders’ faces did appear in the games, but seemed to play a generic role of
‘homo-politicos’ which can be easily replaced by other politicians. The message conveyed by this kind of political presentation undermined the ethos of choice in democratic elections. Whereas elections are ideally based on choosing the most competent party/leader, the games conveyed the message that all politicians are alike and therefore it doesn’t really matter who you vote for.

Cartoons
A few days after the election campaign was launched, Channel 4 introduced a cartoon competition, in which people were invited to send political cartoons about the elections. More than 500 were sent in, from which 98 were selected to appear on the Channel 4 website. Using content analysis, 95 of these cartoons (three were unclear) were assessed according to the variables of ‘issues’, ‘meta political comments’, ‘targets’ and ‘scorned features’. The analysis led us to divide the cartoons to two types – issue-oriented and process-oriented.

The first, small, group of cartoons (n=35), focused on issues that were debated in the elections. The vast majority of these were about Iraq (21 cartoons). Their ‘butt’ was mainly Tony Blair, who was depicted as both too dependent on the US and as dishonest (see box 1). Aside from Iraq, no other single issue was prominent in the cartoons and none of the other candidates was targeted extensively.

The vast majority of cartoons (n=60), which we termed ‘process-oriented’, did not focus on issues and reflected a more cynical ‘game-based’ approach to politics. In many cases, these cartoons were aimed against politicians in general rather than a specific politician, mocking either all three main parties (n=20), Blair and Howard (n=6) or politicians in general (n=5). The most prominent scorned feature in this kind of cartoons was what we entitled as ‘lack of ideology’/‘anything for a vote’ (n=16), in which politicians were portrayed as cynical actors who are motivated only by their desire to win the elections.

The ‘process-oriented’ cartoons were framed by two types of metaphor. The first described politics in terms of a show (e.g. rock show, circus or puppet show) conveying the message that politics is all about performance and impressions. Politicians appeal to audiences by saying the right ‘line’, yet there is nothing real behind their words. The second type of metaphor described politics as a game: an Olympic sport, boxing ring or snakes and ladders. These cartoons conveyed the
message that politics is all about winning and losing, with real issues far from the politicians’ minds.

Overall, the message conveyed by the cartoons can be read as the following – ‘We know that contemporary UK politics is just a game – and we criticize it’. Therefore, they might be read as an indirect reaction to the ‘Just Vote’ campaign. Whereas the aim of the Channel 4 cartoon competition was to convince people to engage in politics, the cartoons that portrayed all the candidates as cynical players ‘explained’ why it might prove worthless (see box 2).

Posters
The subverted adverts in the campaign came in two forms – computer-based online spoof posters and offline street graffiti (which was then photographed and presented online). Both forms incorporated tension between ‘reality’ and ‘game’, ‘formal’ and ‘informal’, ‘serious’ and ‘humorous’. However, a closer look, based on the analysis of 53 posters from various websites, revealed salient differences between them.

The 26 computer-based posters were created both by site moderators (‘Spinon’ and ‘Deadbrain’) and by contributors from the public (Channel 4). The posters varied in their targets: 14 targeted Conservatives/Howard, nine Labour/Blair and only one the Liberal-Democrats. Again, most of the online posters did not address the core issues of the campaign, with two exceptions of Iraq (n=5) and immigration (n=3). However, unlike the cartoons, the satirical tone of the posters was mild. For instance, one mock poster asked: ‘I mean – how hard it is to write in a grownup font?’ referring to the handwriting style of the Tory posters (see box 3). Another poster positioned the pictures of Blair and Howard under the title – ‘Who do you want to ruin (instead of ‘run’) the country?’ These posters were very mild not only in their content but also in their form – the ‘manipulation’ of the original poster was done in an elegant, computerized way.

In contrast to new ‘computer-based’ posters, graffiti has a long history. In many modern countries, including the UK, graffiti is illegal and therefore created anonymously and surreptitiously. At the same time, it is designed to attract attention to the message that it conveys, which is in many cases controversial and, unlikely to appear in mass media. Graffiti can thus be regarded as a form of communication that allows people and groups to express controversial content publicly (Hanauer 2004).
This tendency towards the controversial was apparent in the ‘street graffiti posters’ which were created during the campaign. The 27 posters that we analysed differed from the ‘computer-posters’ in three features:

(1) All of the defaced posters were Conservative. A partial explanation for this dominance might be ascribed to the form and content of the Tory poster campaign that resembled graffiti: the posters were in handwriting, the slogan (‘Are you thinking what we are thinking?’) was phrased as a question ‘awaiting’ for a quick reply, and the content touched upon basic urges and fears (‘How would you feel if a bloke on early release attacked your daughter?’). This campaign design might have aimed to attract young and disengaged voters, which traditionally link to graffiti, yet it generated a counter-reaction using the ‘same’ means.\(^5\)

(2) The ‘street’ posters tended to deal more than the ‘computerized’ posters with the issues related to the campaign – especially with immigration. 13 out of 27 posters criticized the Tory immigration policy, usually referring to it as racist. (see box 4).

(3) A third distinction between ‘street’ and ‘computer’ posters is related to their level of aggressiveness, or violence. Whereas the computer posters were usually humorous, playful, and benign, the street posters were much more aggressive both in content/language and form. Of the 27 posters analysed, six used strong, offensive language (e.g. ‘you Tory shit’), and 17 aggressively violated the form of the posters (e.g. erasing and adding words in red spray).

Conclusions

The central aim of this article has been to explore the relationship between humour, politics and the Internet through a case study of online humour in the 2005 UK election campaign. Two closely related yet competing concepts framed our discussion of these relationships – modern, instrumental, ‘participation’ and postmodern, ‘consequence-free’ ‘game-playing’. We used these concepts to address two main questions: How was online humour used by different actors in the 2005 UK election campaign and what were the specific characteristics of online humour in this campaign?

Referring to the first question, we identified three campaigns that took place in the election: ‘Vote for us,’ ‘Don't vote for them’ and ‘Just vote/participate’. All three
have used humour instrumentally, as a means to an end, yet their different objectives led to dissimilar patterns of humour usage. The parties’ official ‘Vote for us’ campaign used online humour very rarely. This stemmed both from a perception of humour as being a risky and uncontrolled form of communication, and from the hierarchically-centralized nature of the British party system. In contrast, the ‘Don’t vote for them’ campaign, represented in sites which attacked specific candidates/parties, used humour extensively, as a vicious, highly aggressive political weapon. One conclusion from this comparison is that humour is likely to be a more efficient tool in negative political campaigns than in positive ones.

The third campaign (‘Just vote’) was conducted neither to support nor attack specific candidates, but to promote political participation per se. This campaign, we argued, was motivated by concerns about the decline of traditional participation in the UK and the perception of the Internet in general, and online humor in particular, may serve as partial solutions for it. The type of humour which was used in these sites ‘Just vote’ fitted their ‘engaging aspirations’: most of it was mild and amusing, and political neutrality was maintained by balanced mocking of parties and candidates. In order to achieve the modernist goal of participation, the ‘Just vote’ sites adopted a postmodernist, metaphoric framework of game-playing. This metaphor, we argue, might have functioned as a double-edged sword: On the one hand it conveyed the message that politics can be as ‘cool’ as a humorous game. On the other hand, politics was framed by this metaphor as a cynical game in which all players are similarly corrupt. Therefore, the rationale for participation remained unclear.

This dual message was reinforced in the second part of our analysis, which focused on the characteristics of online humour during the campaign. We analysed humorous texts from three genres that vary in their linkage to the Internet: games, cartoons and defaced ‘online’ and ‘offline’ posters. Most of the texts that we examined conveyed the idea that politics is a cynical game and nothing more. They rarely dealt with key election issues (with the one exception of Iraq) and tended to focus on the ‘horse race’ attributes of the campaign. Yet the genres differed in their points of view about this ‘game’. Whereas many of the cartoons represented an external, highly critical, point of view about the political world and its rules, most of the games and posters seemed to blend in one way or another into ‘the political game’. In general, the offline based genres (cartoons and street graffiti) tended to convey
stronger negative attitudes towards the existing political culture then the online genres (games and online posters).

Finally, although our central concern here was with senders of humorous texts, it is worth highlighting one final problem about the potential audience for online humour. If a main reason for deploying humour is to make people more politically engaged, then online humour is likely to have a relatively limited role. It may well be a useful tool for mobilizing the already politically committed, as the O’Farrell initiative indicates, but in its current format it is unlikely to reach much beyond this. Even where it does, it may simply reinforce the (negative) stereotypical views of politicians and the political process. Clearly, further research is still required to address the reception and interpretation of the humorous sites particularly amongst their intended audiences of young and disengaged voters. However, our tentative conclusion is that far from igniting Orwell’s ‘tiny revolution’, or toppling ‘the mighty from their seats’, online election humour served to soften people up for ‘politics as usual’.

Acknowledgements
We are grateful for the support of the Economic and Social Research Council, Award no RES 000-22-1284, for funding part of this research. We would also like to thank Ralph Schroeder for his helpful comments.

Notes

1 We found only three papers that dealt directly with this theme – all of them based on US experiences (Warnick 1998, 2002; Foot and Schneider 2002).

2 For a recent review of the literature on political participation and ICTs see Rabia (2005). For more empirical evidence on ICTs and participation in the UK see, Gibson et al., (2005) and Curtice and Norris (2004).

3 For example, in 1992, Labour leader Neil Kinnock’s shriek at the Sheffield campaign rally; The 1997 campaign saw a televised but unplanned confrontation between scandal ridden Conservative incumbent Neil Hamilton, his wife and his opponent Martin Bell (an independent candidate and former high profile BBC
At the 2001 election, John Prescott, (Deputy Labour Party leader), was caught on camera punching a protester who had thrown an egg at him.

Only two games couldn’t be classified as belonging to one of these categories - Spinon’s WMD hunting and the May 5 election, in which people were invited to vote for Jamie Oliver (celebrity TV chef), Kylie Minogue (popstar) or Wayne Rooney (footballer) as the representatives of the people.

The irony that a mainstream Conservative party was using (a type of) graffiti to attract voters requires further research which was outside the scope of this study.

References


Box 1

Box 2

Box 3

Box 4