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**Has the Internet Transformed
the Style and Substance of Political Communication?
Evidence From German Online Campaigns
in the National Elections 2002-2009**

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Abstract

The normalization thesis postulates that e-campaigns replicate typical offline patterns of electioneering in terms of the formal style of political communication (functional normalization), the power relations between different political actors (relational normalization), and the argumentative strategies in online campaigning (discursive normalization). These dimensions have been tested so far only selectively in cross-sectional studies on web 1.0 politics. To extend past research, this paper (a) examines all components of the normalization paradigm in one study; (b) for both web 1.0 and web 2.0 features; (c) in a longitudinal design. It is based on a quantitative content and structural analysis of German party websites in the National Elections 2002-2009. The results show that the normalization thesis in all its dimensions holds true over time and in the web 2.0 era: Parties still focus on the top-down elements of information provision and delivery while interactive options are scarce. The digital divide between parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties has narrowed over time, but remains visible for all online functions in 2009. Moreover, the gap is wider in web 2.0 than in web 1.0. Finally, German e-campaigns increasingly reflect those traditional communication practices on the content level that have been held accountable for rising political alienation and civic apathy in the public, i.e. strategic news and extensive negativism.

Introduction

In 1998, David Resnick proposed one of the most influential theories of e-campaigning. In an article entitled, 'Politics on the Internet: The Normalization of Cyberspace', he challenged the assumption that the World Wide Web could improve the conditions of democratic competition. Rather, he argued, the Internet will replicate typical shortcomings and deficits of offline electioneering. In particular, he referred to the unaltered power relations between major and minor political actors in cyberspace (relational normalization). Later research has applied his normalization thesis also to the formal style of online political communication (functional normalization) and to the argumentative patterns of e-campaigning (discursive normalization).

All these dimensions have received empirical support in past studies on web 1.0 politics: In diverse cultures and varying electoral settings, party and candidate homepages were shown to underutilise the media-specific, interactive qualities of online communication and to favour a rigid top-down approach of controlled information delivery (e.g., Kluver et al., 2007). Moreover, researchers found persistent gaps between major and minor political actors on the Internet in terms of the overall scope and professionalism of their websites (e.g., Strandberg, 2008). Finally, studies proved that typical offline practices of electioneering, such as strategic news, negative campaigning, or personalisation, also prevail on the World Wide Web (e.g., Benoit, 2007; Wicks and Souley, 2003; Schweitzer, 2010). In total, these early findings underscored Resnick's claim and thus confirmed a functional, relational, and discursive normalization in online political communication.

Whether this pertains to today's e-campaigns as well, however, is unclear: Most studies on this topic were published in the pre-Obama era when social networking sites and other forms of online collaboration were hardly existent. These innovations might sway earlier trends of normalization due to their decentralised, non-hierarchical, and basically

participatory nature (cf. Kalnes, 2009). In addition, past enquiries were mainly cross-sectional and focused on single election periods that do not allow for generalisations over time. Also, past research has never tested all components of the normalization thesis simultaneously, but concentrated either on the functional, relational, or discursive aspect alone.

To address these research deficits, this paper examined German party websites in three National Elections (2002, 2005, 2009) by a longitudinal content and structural analysis. The study is guided by four hypotheses and two research questions that are deduced from a review of past findings on the functional, relational, and discursive dimensions of the normalization thesis.

Research on the Normalization Thesis

Functional Normalization. This dimension deals with the extent to which the media-specific qualities of online communication are actually realised in e-campaigning. Past studies have shown that the Internet activities of parties and candidates become more professionalised over time (e.g., Carlson and Strandberg, 2008; Gulati and Williams, 2007). They provide more informational and interactive features, improve the usability of their websites, and offer more multimedia content. This development mirrors and extends the professionalisation process that has been observed for offline campaigning (cf. Strömbäck, 2007). By this, parties and candidates seek to generate attention (also in the traditional mass media), to increase their competitiveness, to convey an image of modernity, and to meet users' rising expectations on a sophisticated web presence. This trend is intensified by the international co-orientation in e-campaigning, by the cooperation and worldwide exchange of political consultants, the simultaneous diffusion of technical innovations, and by the growing expertise

in the planning and implementation of political online tools (e.g., Foot et al., 2009). Hence for the present study, the first hypothesis is:

H1: From 2002 to 2009, German parties will increase the overall quality of their online campaigns.

The second hypothesis deals with ongoing functional disparities in the style of e-campaigning. International studies have found that while political websites become more professionalised over time, they continue to favour traditional top-down elements (e.g., press releases, offline paraphernalia, information about the candidates) over interactive bottom-up features such as blogs, chats, or wikis (e.g., Carlson and Strandberg, 2008; Gulati and Williams, 2007). This neglect of the media-specific qualities of online communication is due to strategic as well as logistical considerations: Strategically, parties and candidates fear to lose control over their political messages and their image-building if they open up free online discussions with Internet users. Such a kind of voter involvement is seen as a contradiction to the overall campaign centralisation in electioneering (Strömbäck, 2007: 54). Logistically, the utilisation of interactive features requires additional resources (such as staff, money, and time) that political actors often cannot afford. Hence, they refrain from this function and concentrate instead on the online provision of text-based materials. As a consequence, the disparities between top-down and bottom-up features continues over time. For the present study, the second hypothesis therefore reads:

H2: From 2002 to 2009, German e-campaigns will be marked by an ongoing functional gap between top-down and bottom-up elements.

Relational Normalization. Relational studies on the normalization thesis deal with the competition between major and minor political actors in cyberspace. The basic assumption is

that real-world differences in political influence and resources will translate into digital divides in e-campaigning between parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties. This assumption has been confirmed in several cross-sectional analyses in Germany and other countries (e.g., Schweitzer, 2008; Strandberg, 2008): Due to their privileged position, established political organizations adopt technical innovations more quickly than their competitors and provide Internet presences that are superior in all terms of comparison. For American and Finnish candidate websites (Gulati and Williams, 2007; Carlson and Strandberg, 2008), this imbalance has been found to continue over time, even though the total online performance has increased for both major and minor actors. To test whether this holds true for German party websites as well, the third hypothesis reads:

H3: Between 2002 and 2009, there is a persistent digital divide between German parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties.

Additionally, this study seeks to explore whether the digital divide between major and minor parties also exists for the so-called web 2.0: This term is commonly attributed to Tim O'Reilly who employed it to describe all freely accessible, collaborative, user-centred, and non-hierarchical online applications that enable an 'architecture of participation' (O'Reilly, 2005). This includes, for example, wikis, blogs, Twitter accounts, and social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, MySpace) as well as multimedia or file-sharing platforms (e.g., YouTube, Flickr) and information management services (e.g., web feeds or social bookmarking options). Because of their decentralised structure, their self-maintaining nature, and the low entry barriers for users, these applications seemed particularly suited to facilitate political participation. The so-called 'e-ruption thesis' (for an overview, see Kalnes, 2009) specified this idea for e-campaigning by formulating the hope that the implementation of web 2.0 could level the playing field between major and minor political actors. Initial analyses from the US and some European countries, however, cast doubt on this assumption (Gulati and Williams,

2010; Jackson and Lilleker, 2009; Kalnes, 2009). Their exploratory findings show that well-resourced parties and candidates also dominate in web 2.0: They draw more frequently on social networking sites, make more extensive and sophisticated use of Twitter, blogs, and YouTube videos, and update their profiles more regularly. For the present study, we therefore pose the following hypothesis:

H4: German parliamentary parties will dominate over non-parliamentary parties in web 2.0.

Discursive Normalization. The discursive dimension of the normalization thesis deals with the question of whether typical communication practices in offline campaigning are transferred to the Internet. This includes three indicators: (1) the extent to which the tactical and performance-related aspects of campaigning, such as parties' poll standings, their advertising, media relations, or canvassing tours (strategic news), are discussed on the websites in contrast to substantial policy issues (e.g., economy, foreign affairs, health care); (2) the degree to which the top candidates prevail on the homepages in comparison to other political actors (personalisation); and (3) the inclination of parties and candidates to attack their opponents online (negative campaigning). These patterns have regularly been found on an international level for both traditional campaign channels (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 2006) and offline election coverage (Kaid and Strömbäck, 2008). Moreover, there is evidence that – contingent on other factors – strategic news and negativity can contribute to political alienation and civic apathy in the public (e.g., de Vreese and Elenbaas, 2008; Jackson, 2011; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006; Schenck-Hamlin et al., 2000; Valentino et al., 2001). Studies on the discursive normalization in e-campaigning thus seek to explore whether these controversial communication practices continue on the Internet. To this end, political websites are content analysed on the issue, statement, and source level. Usually, the studies

concentrate on specific website sections, e.g. the daily news releases that are presented on the front pages. In comparison to the functional and relational dimensions of the normalization thesis, past evidence on this aspect is rather scarce and mixed: On the one hand, some few studies from the US and Germany show that negative campaigning has become a dominant strategy on the Internet with parties and candidates attacking the opponent to a similar degree as they do offline (e.g., Druckman et al., 2010; Schweitzer, 2010). This speaks in favour of a discursive normalization. On the other hand, there are contradictory results as regards the issues and actors on political websites: Due to the US electoral system, American e-campaigns are highly personalised with a strong focus on the character and competencies of the candidates (Benoit, 2007). Their portrayal, though, is often connected to substantial policy issues so that the strategic aspects of the campaign move into the background (Wicks & Souley, 2003). In Germany, e-campaigns remain party-centred with the candidates being hardly mentioned or cited on the websites (Schweitzer, 2008). On the issue level, however, parties concentrate in their self-presentation throughout on their campaign activities and tactics so that substantial policy debates are marginalised (ibid.). These results support the discursive normalization only in parts. Moreover, as regards the change over time, the empirical evidence is even sketchier: Those few longitudinal content analyses that exist so far deal almost exclusively with the development of negative campaigning on the Internet (e.g., Druckman et al., 2010). In the US, the results speak in favour of a continuous rise of attacks on political websites, while the only non-American study in this field reports a steady, yet high amount of assaults for the 2002 and 2005 German National Elections (Schweitzer, 2010). For the factors ‘strategic news’ and ‘personalisation’, there is so far no systematic long-term study on an international level. The preliminary results from past German races indicate an increase in strategic news and a parallel decrease of personalisation on parties’ websites on the issue, statement, and source level in the last two election cycles (Schweitzer,

2008). Again, these results support the discursive dimension of the normalization thesis only in parts. Due to these heterogeneous findings, the present study will explore two non-directional research questions on the content level:

RQ1: Which traditional communication strategies are used in German e-campaigning on the issue, statement, and source level between 2002 and 2009?

RQ2: Does the discursive convergence with the offline campaign become stronger or weaker over time?

Method

To trace the development of German e-campaigning, the study relied on a quantitative content and structural analysis of party websites in three National Elections from 2002 to 2009. This enquiry extends the series of past research done by the author (see Schweitzer, 2005, 2008). The homepages were saved in the last four weeks before Election Day and coded manually. In 2002, a pilot study was conducted that included only the websites of four parliamentary parties, i.e. CDU, SPD, FDP, and Greens (purposive sample; N=4). In 2005 and 2009, all parties were studied that stood in the respective election (census samples; 2005: N=32; 2009: N=28). The longitudinal comparison for the non-parliamentary parties is thus restricted to the 2005 and 2009 campaigns.

The structural analysis addressed the functional and relational dimension of the normalization thesis and concentrated on the formal design of all parliamentary (2005, 2009: N=6) and non-parliamentary websites (2005: N=26; 2009: N=22).¹ According to international standards, the enquiry checked for the presence or absence of 78 website elements (see Table A1 in the appendix) in web 1.0 (N=70) and web 2.0 (N=8) that were categorised into four functional groups, i.e.:

- information, containing all components that provide users with text-based background material on the political system, the party organization, or the campaign;
- mobilisation, encompassing those website elements that enable a one-way support of the party through symbolic or material resources (e.g., e-volunteering, donations, online membership, etc.);
- participation, including options that facilitate a two-way, interactive exchange between the party and citizens (e.g., via discussion forums, chats, or blogs); and
- presentation, covering all features that enhance the usability and formal style of the website (e.g., through sitemaps, search engines, audio/video streams, etc.).

The selection and categorisation of these elements happened both inductively through a prior review of the research material and deductively based on existing coding schemes in the international literature (e.g., Gibson & Ward, 2000). For the data analysis, a quantitative index value was computed for each functional group. This resulted from dividing all present elements in one class through the total number of codeable items in that category. The index value thus ranged from 0 (no element in that group present) to 1 (all elements present). In addition, rates of growth, diffusion, and usage as well as mean values were computed for the website features to allow for cross-party and time comparisons.

While the structural analysis dealt with the formal and functional design of the websites, the content analysis focused on the news releases that were published on the homepages of all parliamentary parties (CDU, CSU, SPD, FDP, Greens, Left) in the last four weeks before Election Day. These were saved on a daily basis and coded on the article and statement level.² Aside from several stylistic characteristics (such as author, format, word length, etc.), the enquiry concentrated on the main topics discussed in these releases (i.e., strategic news vs. substantial policy issues) as well as on their statements and sources. For each text-based article a maximum of eight statements could be coded together with their

respective originators. The statements were classified into positive comments that explicitly praised the own party or candidate (self-promotion) and in negative comments that questioned or attacked the opponent (negative campaigning). All statements were further categorised according to the image dimension that they addressed, i.e. (1) the political competence of the competitors in terms of their qualifications, past records, or future plans; (2) their leadership abilities as regards their assertiveness and management skills; (3) their integrity as represented by their ethics, honesty, and social responsibility; (4) their empathy as demonstrated by their sensitivity, warm-heartedness, and responsiveness; and (5) their charisma in terms of their popularity, outward appearance, and rhetorical performance. In the international literature on party and candidate evaluations, these aspects are the most common image dimensions used to characterise and compare political actors (Hellweg et al., 1989).

Results of the Structural Analysis

Functional Normalization: Top-down Orientation Despite Formal Professionalisation

The functional dimension of the normalization thesis deals with the formal arrangement of the websites. According to past findings, we expect a formal professionalisation of the homepages over time (H1) and a persistent functional gap between top-down and bottom-up elements (H2). Both assumptions can be confirmed for German e-campaigning (see Figure 1). Between 2002 and 2009, the technical performance of the websites increased continually. This applied to all functional groups and to all parties, irrespective of their parliamentary status or ideological orientation. Specifically, the average index value for all competing political organizations rose from 0.33 in 2005 to 0.44 in 2009 (parliamentary parties: 0.71; non-parliamentary parties: 0.36). This corresponds to a growth rate of 33%. In detail, 29 website elements (= 37.2% of all coded items) were more often used than before. As to that,

the total gains in diffusion varied between +14.3% (e.g., party news, information about the candidates) and +71.4% (YouTube channel) (for the frequencies of all website elements in the 2005 and 2009 National Elections see percentages in Table A1). The largest growth rates appeared for the implementation of several web 2.0 options (YouTube [see above], Twitter [+42.9%], social networks [+39.3%], web feeds [+38.3%], social bookmarking [+28.6%], and external picture galleries [+28.6%]) as well as for informational features on the party structure (+41.5%), the private policy section on the homepages (+46.9%), the use of search engines (+37.5%), video streams (+35.3%), and the solicitation of online donations (+29%). In total, there was thus a clear trend towards a professionalisation in German e-campaigning (H1) that corresponds to international developments in computer-mediated political communication (see above).

The extent of this professionalisation, however, varies across actors and website functions: the growth rates between 2005 and 2009 were higher for the non-parliamentary (+44.8%) than for the parliamentary parties (+7.5%). That was true in total as well as for all individual website functions. In the case of CDU, SPD, FDP, and Greens, the growth rates are even flattening over the course of the last three election cycles (from +21.1% between 2002 and 2005 to +7.5% between 2005 and 2009; see also Figure 1). This presumably results from a ceiling effect in the formal professionalisation of online campaigning: As far back as in the 2002 election, these parties were already using more than half of all coded elements on their websites. Hence, they had only minimal options to improve their already sophisticated web presences. On the contrary, the online performances of the non-parliamentary groups were below the averages of the parliamentary organizations from the outset which provided them with more alternatives to technically enhance their e-campaigns. In 2009, this has led to a somewhat more levelled playing field between major and minor actors on the Internet, even

though the initial gap between both groups has not subsided (see also the results on Relational Normalization).

Apart from these differences, there is also evidence of a functional divergence in parties' online professionalisation between 2005 and 2009. The growth rates for participation (+55.8%) and presentation (+39.5%) are well above the respective increases for information (+26%) and mobilisation (+21.2%). This applies to parliamentary parties (participation: +42.9%; presentation: +13.9%; information: -2.8%; mobilisation: 0%) as well as to non-parliamentary organizations (participation: +57.0%; presentation: +50.2%; information: +38.6%; mobilisation: +29.4%). This focus on participatory and presentational website elements can be explained by the integration of web 2.0 applications that were mainly assigned to these categories (see Table A1). In 2009, the social web became prominent in the German public after the success of the Obama campaign one year before. National parties had observed the American presidential elections closely and tried to learn from this experience by including social networking sites, Twitter accounts, and video-sharing platforms in their own e-campaigns. This rise of participatory and presentational elements can be interpreted as part of a 'domino fashion' (Zielmann and Röttger, 2009: 70) with which parties sought to follow the American benchmark in order to establish a modern image and to enhance their competitiveness on the Internet (*ibid.*). In contrast, informational or mobilising elements were marked by another ceiling effect: most of these traditional components in online political communication were already used on websites in the early National Elections. Improvements thus remained marginal and were usually restricted to the non-parliamentary parties that had to compensate for past deficits in these areas.

This professionalisation, though, has not led German parties to generally abandon their overall top-down approach on the Internet (H2). Despite the diffusion of web 2.0 applications, the index values for information (0.53) and presentation (0.46) continued to be

well above the respective coefficients for the mobilising (0.41) and participatory elements (0.28). In this way, the spectrum of features used on the homepages has widened, yet the original focus on non-interactive options has remained. In fact, among the 25 most frequent website elements that were employed by more than half of all parties in 2009, 20 items (= 80%) were top-down in nature (see also Table A1 in the appendix). Besides photos (96.4%), graphics (100%), newsletters (57.1%), and press releases (60.7%) this also included text archives (60.7%), information on the party history (57.1%), or contact addresses (100%). In comparison, guest books (7.1%), wikis (3.6%), chat rooms (3.6%), or online opinion polls (10.7%) were hardly offered. This functional normalization can be seen for parliamentary parties and non-parliamentary groups, irrespective of their ideological orientation. In the individual party comparison, there were only three exceptions to this rule (see Figure 2): For the Greens, FDP, and the Pirate Party, it appeared that the usage rates in mobilisation and participation were well above the respective coefficients for information and presentation. Hence, these parties broke up with the classical top-down orientation and made more efforts than their competitors to open their websites for genuine interaction. This finding could be explained by their organizational characteristics (Römmele, 2003), i.e. the high Internet affinity among their respective members, their commitment to Internet politics, the fairly decentralised party structures and their strong internal party democracy (particularly in the case of the Greens and the Pirate Party). In the international literature on computer-mediated political communication, these factors are known to foster an interactive campaign style (cf. Ward and Gibson, 2009). The examples of the Greens, FDP, and the Pirate Party thus illustrate that e-campaigns can indeed overcome established patterns of offline electioneering. So far, however, this happens only in isolated cases with most of the parties adhering to a traditional top-down approach. With regard to the previously reported findings on the

technical evolution of German party websites, these results thus confirm the normalization thesis in its functional dimension.

Relational Normalization:

Digital Divides Between Major and Minor Parties in Web 1.0 and Web 2.0

The relational dimension of the normalization thesis expects functional differences between parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties in the quality of their websites. The present study tested whether this digital divide continues over time (H3) and whether it pertains to the web 2.0 arena as well (H4). For both hypotheses, the results indicate a strong relational normalization in German e-campaigning.

Even though the average website performance of the non-parliamentary parties increased more strongly than that of the parliamentary ones between 2005 and 2009 (cf. Figure 1), the original digital divide stayed in effect in total as well as for all individual homepage functions (see Figure 2). In detail, the respective usage rates for 64 out of 78 website elements were higher among the parliamentary than among the non-parliamentary organizations (= 82.1%). As to that, the greatest disparities between both groups emerged in the fields of mobilisation (index values: 0.68 vs. 0.34) and presentation (0.75 vs. 0.38), e.g. in the use of an online shop for merchandising (percentages in both groups: 100% vs. 18.2%), in the reliance on intranets (100% vs. 68.2%), in the registration options for e-volunteers (83.3% vs. 22.7%), in the deployment of picture galleries (100% vs. 13.6%), and in the provision of video streams and newsletters (100% vs. 45.5%, respectively). Hence, despite the fact that German e-campaigns underwent a formal professionalisation over time, minor parties still underutilised the media-specific qualities of online political communication. The only exception was the Pirate Party, an Internet savvy, civic movement founded in Germany in 2006, that closed the gap to the parliamentary parties in all areas of the website comparison

(see Figure 2). Specifically, they employed almost all available interactive options in their campaign (e.g., chat room, discussion forums, weblogs, wikis) to foster an immediate exchange with their supporters and to coordinate their offline campaign. This example demonstrates that the Internet indeed offers opportunities for minor political associations to compensate for their offline disadvantages (e.g., lack of publicity, missing financial and human resources) and to compete with major organizations on equal grounds. In German e-campaigning, though, this remains an exception. The general digital divide between major and minor actors has not subsided (H3).

In addition, and contrary to the expectations of the ‘e-ruption thesis’, there is evidence of an ongoing functional gap between parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties in web 2.0 (H4). This difference is even larger than the one found for web 1.0 (see Figure 3): CDU, CSU, SPD, FDP, the Greens, and the Left adopted almost all new technical innovations in the 2009 National Election, while the non-parliamentary parties integrated these features only selectively. For the main part, they offered a video channel on YouTube to display their regular TV spots or to broadcast short speeches and records from their canvassing tours (parliamentary parties: 100%; non-parliamentary parties: 63.6%). Other, more sophisticated web 2.0 tools that require regular updating or support, though, were only sporadically used among the minor parties, such as Twitter (27.3%), blogs (9.1%), social networking sites (22.7%), social bookmarking services (18.2%), or web feeds (45.5%). The only exception was again the Pirate Party that even surpassed the parliamentary groups in their use of the social web. Apart from this special case, however, the findings support the relational dimension of the normalization thesis for German e-campaigns.

Results of the Content Analysis

The content analysis addressed the discursive dimension of the normalization thesis. Here, the study tested for the presence (RQ1) and development (RQ2) of three indicators, i.e. strategic news, personalisation, and negative campaigning. These were applied to the online messages that were published in the hot campaign phase on the websites of the German parliamentary parties. For two indicators (strategic news and negative campaigning) the findings indicate a strong and lasting discursive normalization (see Figure 4).

Formal Characteristics. In the 2009 National Election, 370 online releases were coded on the websites of CDU, CSU, SPD, FDP, Greens, and the Left (in detail: 337 text articles = 91.1%; 33 videos = 8.9%). As in 2002, most of the messages stemmed from the FDP (N=95; 25.7%), while the Greens published the fewest articles (N=16; 4.3%). The latter reduced their output substantially compared to previous years (2002: 81=23.1%; 2005: 70=15.5%). Moreover, and similar to the CDU (N=29; 36.7% of all party messages), they offered online videos for the first time (N=4; 25% of all party messages). In total, the number of published articles on parties' websites has dropped dramatically between 2005 and 2009 (2005: 451 articles; -18%). In addition, the news releases were less frequently updated than in previous years: The average persistence on the homepage rose from about 3 days in 2002 to 5 days in 2009. As to that, the CSU changed its online releases the most often (on average 2 days), whereas the SPD did so the least often (on average 10 days). On the other hand, the website reports became more diversified in their style: While the journalistic news report still dominates as the most common format in which parties present their messages (N=229, 61.9%; 2005: 66.7%; 2002: 77%), other text genres like interviews (N=19, 5.1%) or commentaries (N=89, 24.1%) gained importance. Moreover, parties provided more multimedia materials in their news releases, such as photos (+45.5%), hyperlinks (+8.4%), or embedded video (+6.3%) and

audio streams (+2.5%). This corresponds to the formal professionalisation in German e-campaigning that has already been observed for the functional dimension of the normalization thesis.

Strategic News. Past studies on election coverage in Germany and other countries have shown a growing tendency of journalists to concentrate more on the tactical and performance-related aspects of campaigning and less on substantial policy issues (cf. Esser and Hemmer, 2008; Kaid and Strömbäck, 2008). This pattern has also been observed for traditional campaign channels in Germany, such as televised political spots (Holtz-Bacha, 2000). In e-campaigning, this trend is reflected: Over time, the amount of strategic news on parties' websites has continuously increased from 49% in 2002 to 59.8% in 2009. Substantial policy debates, on the other hand, moved to the background (see Figure 4). This is true for all parties, irrespective of their ideological orientation or their campaign status (incumbent vs. challenger), and applies to all weeks of the field period. In fact, the extent of strategic news even rose during the hot campaign phase in 2009 to a maximum share of 77.3% in the last week before Election Day (2005: 64.9%). As to that, the reports dealt primarily with the pre-election promises of the parliamentary parties (11.5% of all campaign articles; 6.2% of all articles), the media appearances of various party representatives (8.5%; 4.6%), and their canvassing tours (8%; 4.3%). The online campaign itself, however, was hardly mentioned on parties' websites (2.5%; 2005: 3.3% of all articles). In contrast, other matters that could have moved to the forefront in 2009 due to the economic and financial crisis or Germany's military presence in Afghanistan, gained hardly importance (economic policy: 8.9%; 2005: 4.9%; foreign policy: 5.9%; 2005: 8.4%). This was again true for all parties and all weeks of the field period. Hence, the enormous presence and growth of strategic news in German e-

campaigning mirrors the patterns found in offline politics. This supports a discursive normalization.

Personalisation. As in previous elections, the website news in 2009 concentrated primarily on the respective parties as collective entities, while the top candidates were hardly mentioned (see Figure 4). In fact, the degree of personalisation in German e-campaigning has continuously decreased since 2002 on all levels of analysis and across all parties: In the last election, the political leaders were mentioned in only one third of all messages (34.3%; 2005: 38.4%) and featured in only about one quarter of all photos that accompanied the articles (24.9%; 2005: 31.6%). In addition, the candidates were the main issues in little more than 10 releases in 2009 (1.1% of all messages; 2005: 3.3%; 2002: 3.9%) and references to their private lives, i.e. to their families, their homes, or their personal interests, were almost non-existent (only in 2.7% of the articles). Furthermore, these politicians were addressed in less than one fifth of the statements in 2009 (N=169, 15.8%; 2005: 18.9%; 2002: 24%) and were cited as main sources in even fewer instances (16%; 2005: 28.3%; 2002: 26.7%). In contrast, statements by other party members (82.1%) have dramatically increased since 2002 (55.5%; in 2005: 64.1%). These address other parties – specifically SPD (N=263; 29.3%) and CDU (N=194; 21.6%) – as a whole (N=898, 84.2%; 2005: 75.7%; 2002: 76%) and seldom target individual candidates (see also results on negative campaigning). This trend stands in significant contrast to the intense personalisation that has been observed in German offline coverage since the end of the 1990s (Esser and Hemmer, 2008). A reason for this divergence might be the growing diversification of e-campaigning: Today, other platforms, such as personal homepages or profiles on social networking sites, offer more comprehensive and effective means for candidates to present themselves to the public. Their image campaign can thus be outsourced to those special formats in order to unburden the party websites. These, in

turn, focus more on the pluralistic interests of the organization and thus pose a countertrend to the personalisation patterns that have been found in the traditional media. A discursive normalization is therefore not supported for this aspect.

Negative Campaigning. This indicator sheds light on the extent, the targets, sources, and subject areas of those attacks that were launched on parties' homepages in the hot campaign phase. In comparison to past offline findings, the results show that German e-campaigns replicate the very same patterns of negativity that have been observed for traditional campaign channels (e.g., Procter & Schenck-Hamlin, 1996; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010): In all elections, negative campaigning dominates on the statement level over positive self-promotion (see Table 1). In this way, parties seek to damage the competitor's image and to gain media attention. In comparison to 2002 and 2005 (both 56.6%), though, the total amount of attacks slightly decreased (2009: N=544; 51%). This decline in negativism has also been observed for other campaign channels in the 2009 National Election (cf. Holtz-Bacha, 2010). It is attributed to the exceptional grand coalition of CDU/CSU and SPD in the legislative period that made it difficult for both parties to attack each other on their common political record (cf. also Blätte, 2010). Nevertheless, assaults were still more prevalent on the Internet than acclaims. Moreover, challengers were more likely to go negative on the web than incumbents (57.7% vs. 50.2%) which reflects the differential usage of assaults that has been found for offline campaigning (e.g., Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010). In the same way, attacks were usually launched by other party members (71.9%) or third sources (such as cited journalists or scientists; 7.6%) to protect the image of the candidate. In Germany, the assaults are also targeted at political organizations as collective entities (75.9%). In addition, they focus on political dimensions, such as the opponent's competence or leadership abilities, while personal attacks on the candidates' empathy or charisma remain scarce (see Table 1).

This corresponds to the party-centeredness of the political system and fosters another discursive convergence with the offline campaign. Hence, two out of three indicators (RQ1) point to a lasting normalization on the content level (RQ2). This resonates with the previous findings on the functional and relational dimension.

Summary and Conclusion

David Resnick formulated the normalization thesis at the end of 1990s when cyber campaigns were still in their infancies and web 2.0 tools were virtually non-existent. To test whether his proposition holds true more than ten years later, this study examined German party websites in the National Elections 2002-2009 through a longitudinal content and structural analysis. The results show that the normalization thesis continues to apply to German e-campaigns in all its dimensions: Between 2002 and 2009, parties' websites became more professionalised in their functional organization (H1), even though they maintained their original top-down focus on informational and presentational elements (H2) (functional normalization). The digital divide between parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties has narrowed over time, but is still visible for all website functions in 2009 (H3). Moreover, the gap between major and minor actors is even larger in web 2.0 than in web 1.0 which suggests that the latest technical innovations have exacerbated rather than diminished existing power relations in electoral competitions (H4) (relational normalization). Finally, German parliamentary parties continue to adhere in their website content to traditional practices, such as strategic news and negativity, which have been held accountable for rising political alienation and civic apathy in the public (RQ1). With the exception of personalisation, these patterns remain on a high level (negativity) or even increase over time (strategic news) (RQ2). This reinforces the convergence with the offline campaign (discursive normalization).

In total, these findings defy the numerous public and scientific hopes that have been placed on the democratic potentials of the Internet (for an overview, see Schweitzer, 2008). The growing experience in the conduct of e-campaigning, the diffusion of new online tools, the Obama example, and the rising Internet usage among voters have not led German parties to give up the ‘tried-and-true real world campaign techniques’ in cyberspace (Resnick, 1998: 64). Rather, their offline standing still determines their style of e-electioneering in 2009. In this way, the normalization thesis remains a valid concept to describe and analyse the nature of today’s e-campaigns.

Footnotes

- 1 A complete list of all parties and their homepages can be obtained from the author.
- 2 To check for intracoder reliability, the author recoded a random sample of 5% of the research material in each election. The respective coefficients varied between .81 and 1.00 according to Holsti.

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Figure 1. Functional Development of German Party Websites, 2002-2009

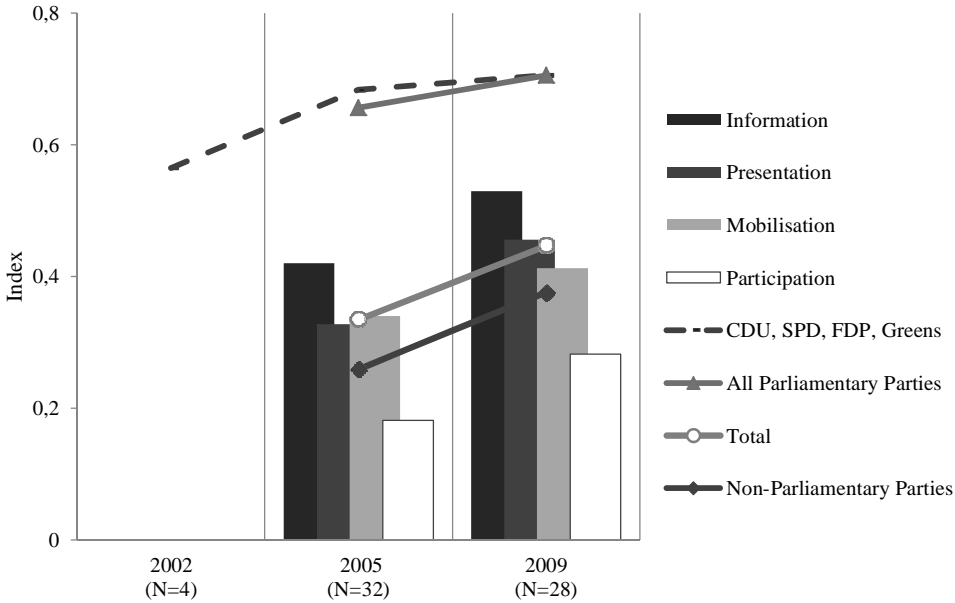


Figure 2. Website Functions in 2009 in Party Comparison

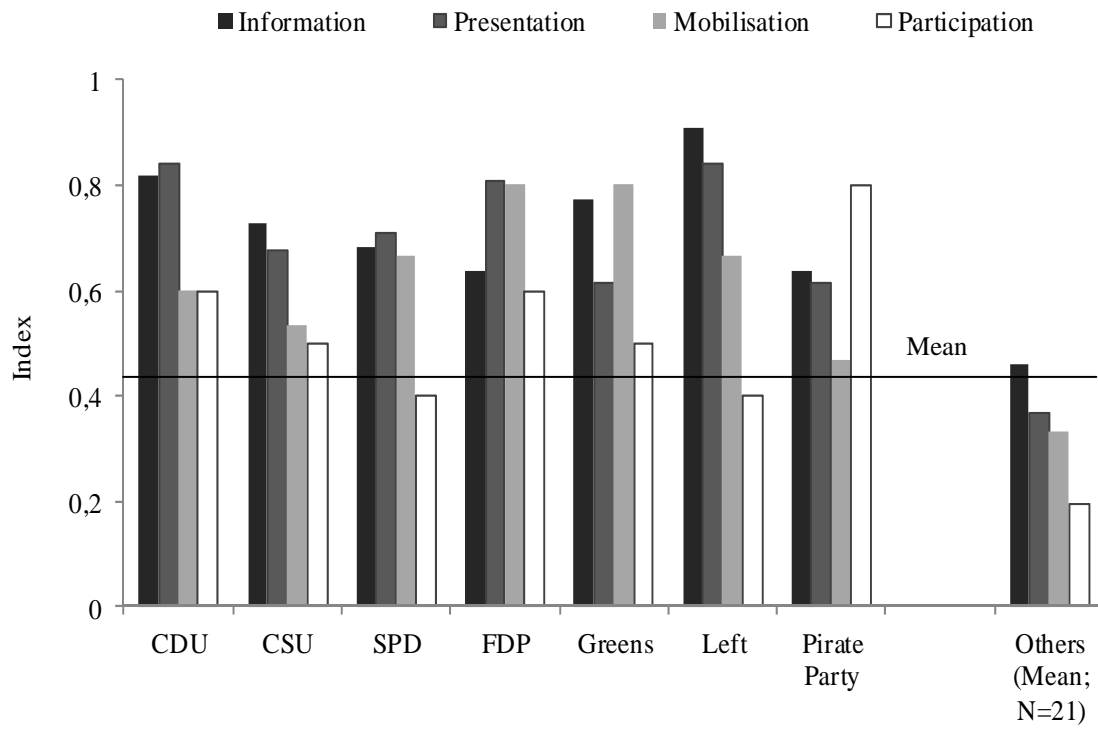


Figure 3. Parliamentary vs. Non-Parliamentary Parties in 2009

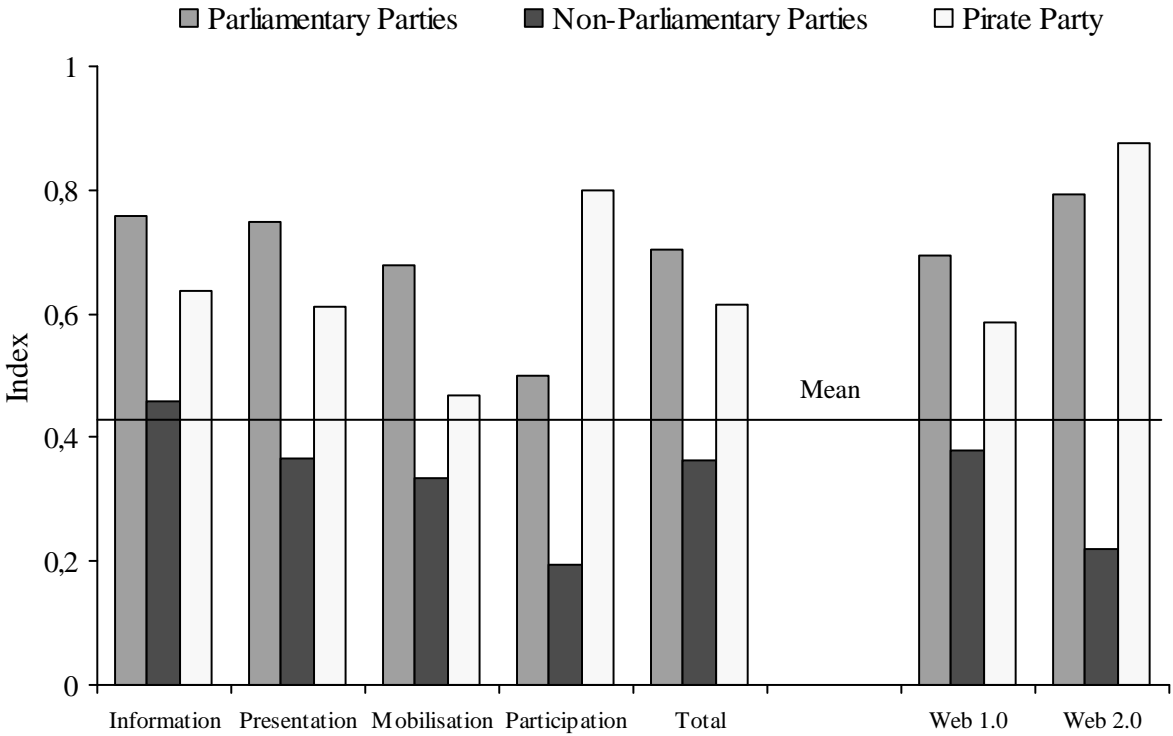


Figure 4. Discursive Patterns in German E-Campaigning, 2002-2009

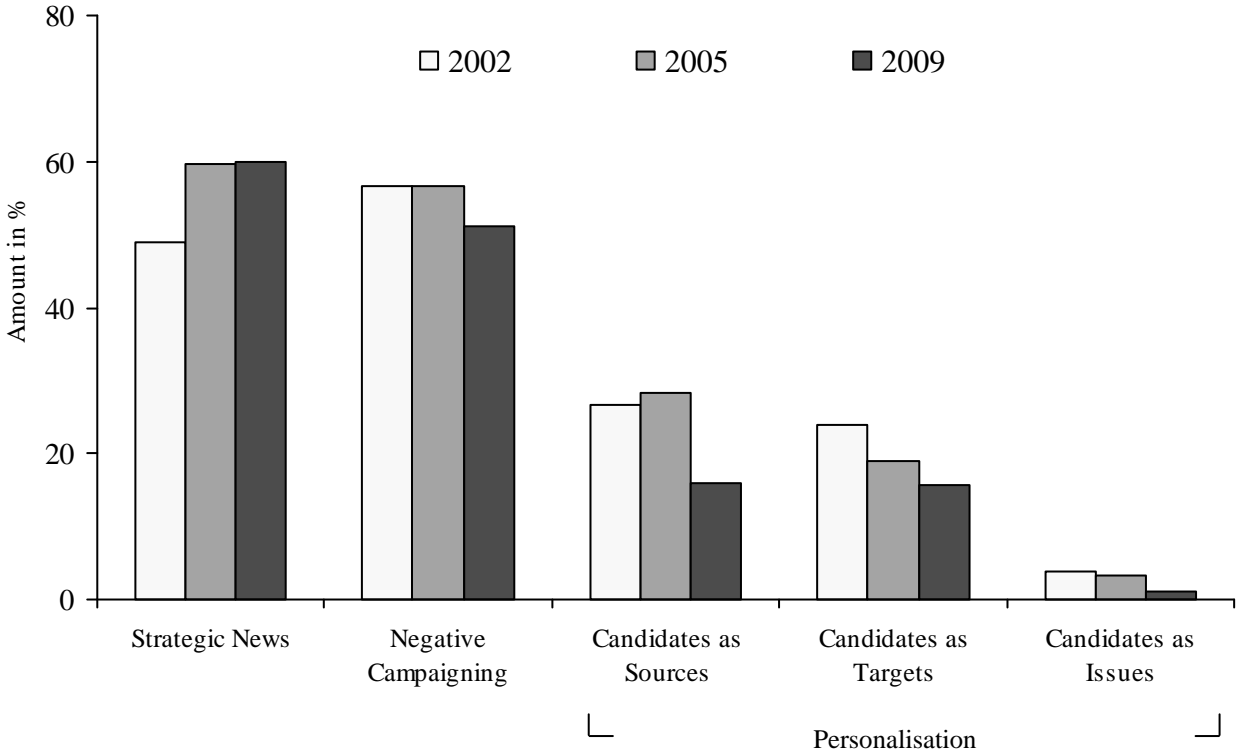


Table 1. Negative Campaigning on German Party Websites, 2002-2009

	National Elections			Total	
	2002	2005	2009		
Parties Examined (N)	4	6	6	16	
News Releases (N)	350	451	370	1,171	
Statements (N)	689	1,289	1,067	3,045	
<i>Extent:</i>					
Attacks (N)	390	729	544	1,663	
(%)	56.6	56.6	51.0	54.6	
*Challengers	61.9	52.5	59.0	57.7	
*Incumbents	45.2	63.6	41.0	50.2	
<i>Sources (in %):</i>					
Candidates	21.8	22.8	16.7	20.6	
Party Members	60.8	58.3	81.4	71.9	
Other	17.4	18.9	2.0	7.6	
<i>Targets (in %):</i>					
Candidates	30.8	21.1	14.7	21.3	
Parties	69.2	72.4	85.3	75.9	
Other	0	6.4	0	2.8	
<i>Subject Areas (in %):</i>					
<i>Political</i>	Competence	52.3	39.1	25.2	37.6
	Leadership	20.0	13.3	34.0	21.6
	Integrity	26.2	18.5	22.6	21.6
<i>Non-Political</i>	Empathy	1.5	28.9	14.3	17.7
	Charisma	0	0.1	3.9	1.3

* Based on the total number of statements by challengers/incumbents, respectively.

Note. Differences to 100% are due to rounding errors.

Appendix

Table A1. Categorisation and Distribution of Structural Website Elements Coded in the Study

Note. Bold items denote elements of web 2.0. Percentages indicate the respective distribution in the 2009 and 2005 National Elections.

Information (N=22)	Mobilisation (N=15)	Participation (N=10)	Presentation (N=31)
<p>Civic Information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - political system (3.6%; 0%) - electoral procedures (25%; 25%) <p>Organizational Information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - party history (57.1%; 59.4%) - party hierarchy (82.1%; 40.6%) - party leadership (89.3%; 78.1%) - conventions (35.7%; 12.5%) - junior party groups (10.7%; 15.6%) - foundations/projects (39.3%; 21.9%) - target groups (14.3%; 6.3%) - party documents (92.9%; 78.1%) - party news (89.3%; 75%) - issue section (82.1%; 62.5%) - press review (42.9%; 25%) - event calendar (64.3%; 59.4%) - imprint (100%; 84.4%) - private policy (75%; 28.1%) <p>Campaign Information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - election manifesto (100%; 90.6%) - canvassing tour (32.1%; 25%) - media appearances (17.9%; 15.6%) - local candidates (64.3%; 50%) - airtimes of TV spots (32.1%; 43.8%) - campaign strategy & organization (25%; 21.9%) 	<p>Resource Generation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - vacancies (10.7%; 9.4%) - online donations (82.1%; 53.1%) - online membership (89.3%; 81.3%) - e-volunteering (35.7%; 25%) <p>Mobilising Political Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - friendraising (14.3%; 6.3%) - online petitions (17.9%; 6.3%) - e-cards (10.7%; 12.5%) <p>Provision of Campaign Material</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - posters (57.1%; 46.9%) - TV spots (82.1%; 59.4%) - logos, banners, wallpapers (42.9%; 56.3%) - flyers, brochures (82.1%; 78.1%) - e-shop (35.7%; 31.3%) <p>Internal Mobilisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intranet (46.4%; 34.4%) <p>Entertainment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - political: simulations, quizzes (10.7%; 3.1%) - non-political: games, gimmicks (3.6%; 6.3%) 	<p>Asynchronous, one-to-one</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - e-mail contact (100%; 100%) - feedback on articles (21.4%; 3.1%) <p>Asynchronous, one-to-many</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - online opinion polls (10.7%; 9.4%) <p>Asynchronous, many-to-many</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - discussion forums (35.7%; 37.5%) - guest book (7.1%; 12.5%) - wiki (3.6%; 0%) - weblog (21.4%; 15.6%) - Twitter (42.9%; 0%) - social networking sites (39.3%; 0%) <p>Synchronous, many-to-many</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - chat room (3.6%; 3.1%) 	<p>Multimedia Content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - audio streams (without spots) (42.9%; 28.1%) - video streams (without spots) (57.1%; 21.8%) - animated icons/banner (35.7%; 37.5%) - graphics (100%; 96.9%) - photos (96.4%; 87.5%) <p>Navigation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - upward icon (35.7%; 46.9%) - backward icon (28.6%; 43.8%) - menu bar (100%; 90.6%) - homepage icon (100%; 81.3%) - search engine (75%; 37.5%) - FAQ/help (21.4%; 12.5%) - sitemap/index (39.3%; 18.8%) - download articles (17.9%; 0%) - print articles (46.4%; 21.9%) - e-mail articles (39.3%; 12.5%) - text version of website (3.6%; 15.6%) - English version (21.4%; 18.8%) - additional software (14.3%; 18.8%) <p>Service</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - newsletter (57.1%; 40.6%) - web feeds (57.1%; 18.8%) - social bookmarking (28.6%; 0%) - SMS, mobile services (10.7%; 6.3%) - hotline (92.3%; 100%) - press releases (60.7%; 59.4%) - press accrediting (14.3%; 12.5%) - text archive (60.7%; 59.4%) - picture archive (on site) (32.1%; 15.6%) - external gallery (e.g., Flickr, Picasa) (28.6%; 0%) - video archive (on site) (14.3%; 6.3%) - audio archive (on site) (10.7%; 6.3%) - YouTube channel (71.4%; 0%)