

Hungarian party websites and parliamentary elections



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ABSTRACT: Analysis of party websites was one of the popular research fields of political communication in the 1990s. It was an interesting question as to how politics and the Internet are becoming connected to one another. However, with the appearance of Web 2.0, these surveys have become pointless, since the emphasis has moved to websites supporting the emergence of online communities. Research of Hungarian party websites has not yet been completed. Adapting to this new trend, researchers have begun to turn their attention to a completely new field of investigation. This study makes an attempt to analyse the changes in the informative and interactive functions of Hungarian party websites on the basis of three different eras (the 1990s, the mid-2000s and the present). Finally, with an international comparison, it evaluates the situation of websites in 2010.

KEYWORDS: political communication, party websites, new ICTs, elections, communication interactivity



INTRODUCTION: PARTIES IN THE NEW MEDIA SPACE

Fifteen years ago, nobody would have insisted on parties and politicians having a party website as a channel of communication. Even before that time, politicians did not deny the importance of new media, but they found that world rather strange. The American ex-vice president, Al Gore, argued that from Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) “we will derive robust and sustainable economic progress, strong democracies, better solutions to global and local environmental challenges, improved health care, and — ultimately — a greater sense of shared stewardship of our small planet” (1995, p. 4). Gore did not waste his time, and on 13th October 1994 — during his vice-presidency — the [whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov) website was launched. This has become a symbolic act of the appearance of politics on the Internet.

After the first moments of enthusiasm, it became clear that the reformation of parties and politics was not as easy as was first thought. However, Jacob Groshek (2009), in his study of 152 countries proved that the Internet does have an effect on the democratization of society and on the stabilization of democracy, even though

& Davis, 2003, p. 49). Party websites have successfully faced this challenge in the past decade. The change is not a Hungarian speciality, but a global tendency in the 2000s, where they transformed from their early self-representation into quasi-news websites.

With the appearance of information and communication technologies, political communication has also gone through certain changes. “ICTs make enormous quantities of information available to the public. This change in quantity may result in a change in quality” (Vedel, 2003, p. 42). These changes include:

Table 1. The potential impact of ICT on political communication

Properties of ICTs	Potential benefits	Problems or issues
Low costs of producing, storing and especially, disseminating information	Easy access to the production of information Large amounts of information can be made available to the public	Information overload
Direct link between sender and receiver	Direct communication: media can be bypassed	Risks of propaganda Lack of mediators able to play a critical function
Selection of receivers	Targeted communication Closed group communication	Privacy
Speed of information	Possibility of constant updating Enhanced data gathering	Costs of maintaining systems Push-button decision-making
Interactive capabilities	Feedback from receivers Information can be customized to receiver's needs	Privacy
Decentralized architecture	Possibility of designing systems independent from geographical boundaries	Fragmentation of the public sphere Regulation is difficult
Global dimension	Diversification of sources	Cultural conflicts or homogenisation

Source: Vedel (2003, p. 42).

As can be seen in the table, the advantages of ICT tools provide useful possibilities both for voters and politics. Targeted communication or further developed data gathering techniques are important milestones of recent election campaigns. On the other hand, citizens — among the problems and questions — are more endangered than politics, especially parties. Overloading voters with information can result in counter-productivity, if the users decide to follow only one source of information, or none. In the first case, it is possible that the voter gets distorted information, if s/he tries to make general conclusions for the whole of society. In the second case, the effectiveness, therefore the advantages of ICTs are becoming

two previous, one-way features, the interactive feature emerges as well. Such channelling of the “voice of the people” was avoided by politicians in the past (see Kiss & Boda, 2005, p. 34–36). Today’s expectation is that citizens can contact their candidates or representatives on the parties’ websites. Initially, this desire was fulfilled on forums, but now “blog-style” comments have taken over this role, which means that logged-in users are able to write a comment on current news. Thus, parties narrowed the magnitude of the discussed issues, but in return, the public voice could appear in such sections that were previously published exclusively under the jurisdiction in the section of the party’s news. The forum is where there are only a few constraints, and everybody can change their opinion about almost anything and everything. Now, forums are slowly moving out from the official parties’ websites to one of the numerous online community sites. However, it should be noted that it is not a closed process. A rearrangement is also taking place today, in which the parties with less political power in parliament are more open than the stronger ones. The major parliamentary parties continue to be advocates of forums; they are reluctant to let their voters near the news, because there is the threat that under a positive piece of news, the voter could meet the negative opinion of the opposing group.

HUNGARIAN PARLIAMENTARY PARTIES’ WEBSITES IN THE NINETIES

The advent of party website development and the (re-)evolution of the Hungarian party system almost coincided. The difference is not significant in terms of political communication. This coincidence could be interpreted as part of the democratization process of the country. To understand the parties’ attitude towards the publicity of the Internet, we should take a look at the contemporary homepages.

Hungarian parties — in line with international trends — very soon discovered the benefits of the Internet. The Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) and the Alliance of Young Democrats (at this time Fidesz — The Hungarian Civic Party, from 2003 Fidesz — Hungarian Civic Union) also had its own website. For the 1998 parliamentary elections the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) and other relevant parties also prepared their own website. What these websites had in common was the minimum use of design elements and the sense of wonderment at the cyber world. For example, the small number of Hungarian Internet users could read such a greeting text on Fidesz’s website: “Leaving aside the epic praise of the information superhighway, we merely want only to express our joy due to contact with you” (fidesz.hu, 1996). The Hungarian Democratic Forum site welcomed visitors with: “We cordially welcome you on the occasion to meet you on the information superhighway” (mdf.hu, 1998). Other parties greeted visitors with similar words, but this process did not end in the nineties. The Independent Smallholders, Agrarian Workers and Civic Party (FKgP) had the next greeting text in 2001: “...first of all I would like to greet those whose lives in-

HUNGARIAN PARLIAMENTARY PARTIES' WEBSITES, 2002–2006

After initial hesitation, parties' attitude towards the Internet changed at the beginning of the new millennium. It could be expected that websites were becoming more and more interactive during those times. Party websites had a much more important role in the 2002 parliamentary elections. Endre Dányi has dated the appearance of postmodern campaign techniques of Hungarian politics to this election year (Dányi, 2002, p. 23). His claims are true. From 144 registered parties, 23 had an official homepage in 2002. This data does not differ significantly from the ratio of Western European countries. Parties who got into the Parliament (MSZP, Fidesz, MDF, SZDSZ) all had official websites, and these sites were more similar to each other than their versions four or six years earlier. The informative nature of these sites is strengthened and on the opening pages the greeting texts were replaced with news or with press releases. The parties paid attention to the design as well. At this time websites became pleasing to the eye, and the visitor could identify the party behind the site without even taking a look at the party logo. Between the links, the dedicatory of unofficial party websites also shows up, which is the most visible part of the MDF's website (mdf.hu, 2002). Among the individual characteristics, the site of Free Democrats should be mentioned. The formation called NetPárt (Net-Party) received a prominent place on their website, where voters could join the party online, discuss the party program or direction of party politics and they could play the game Poligocsi (Poligotchi),³ as well. Poligocsi was similar to a tamagotchi, but here, instead of a pet the player had to raise a politician (szdsz.hu, 2002). A few contemporary web portals would have envied the opening page of MSZP and Fidesz, since a lot of news items were featured on their sites (mszp.hu, 2002; fidesz.hu, 2002). Otherwise, parties considered their websites as a "third way" information source for voters, since television and national rallies were more important to politicians than the Internet, the sites did not have the intention of gaining new voters (Dányi & Sükösd, 2002). This confirms that much of the news from the websites responded to what was said at some campaign event or in the media.

Standard classification is necessary to compare the websites of the era, and to identify which party considered interactive or informative function to be more important. The comparison is based on Pippa Norris' (2001) function of electoral party websites analysis, which Endre Dányi had amended in relation to Hungarian parties (Dányi, 2002). The analysis overviews the communication interactivity and information transparency functions of the party websites. Each function examines a ten-element and for every existing feature, the party receives one point. Thus for one function the maximum score is ten points, twenty being the total. Norris does not deal with the symbolic function; the assumption is that the web presence fulfils the symbolic function in itself.

³ The NetParty also existed /exists after 2002, but over time it was removed from the official site.

Some of the elements in the table may seem a bit obsolete now (e.g. forums, chat-room or e-mailing option to the webmaster), while the elements of Web 2.0 are missing (e.g. RSS feeds, blogs or links to official party microsites), but for the sake of comparison in the future, I decided not to change the table items (appendix 1).

In 2002 the parties' websites stressed the informative elements more than the interactive elements. From this perspective the MDF's site can be considered as the most balanced, where both desired elements are present. The table breaks the general assumption that small parties (like SZDSZ or MDF) use the new ICTs in a cleverer and more courageous way. At least, this assumption is not correct with regard to party websites. The SZDSZ and the MDF gained 6 points in the field of communication interactivity. This result of the two small parliamentary parties is only enough to the mid-range. The two subsequent governing parties (MSZP and SZDSZ) achieved 9 points in information transparency. Only the English version of their websites was missing, but this requirement was not compiled on any of the sites. Fidesz's website shows surprisingly weak interactivity. The party did not offer further interactivity beside the publication of e-mail addresses and the newsletter. Generally, the Socialist party did significantly well in this comparison. Hundreds of activists had access to the website, so the final shape of the homepage bore their signature.

The 2006 elections to the National Assembly did not make a groundbreaking change in the power ranking of the sites, therefore I do not analyse the function of electoral party websites. During the election campaign the official sites not belonging to the parties' websites suppressed the official homepages. Blogs, social networking sites and politicians' independent websites came into view for voters and researchers. The whole process was part of a worldwide tendency, since in the 2004 US presidential election the Democratic candidate, John Kerry, wrote a campaign blog and the voters started to use social networks like MySpace (Chadwick, 2007, p. 287–289; Flanagin, Stohl & Bimber, 2006). During parliamentary elections these items are also used in several European countries. However, it should be noted that it is not clear whether these campaign techniques are really helpful, because Kerry lost the presidential election against the technophobe George W. Bush. The wave of Web 2.0 driven campaigns arrived in Hungary in 2006. The new form of campaign techniques is used by politicians who are open to the use of the Internet and the new ICT's (see Kalnes, 2009, p. 63–64). Anyhow, party websites had not become more interactive.

WEBSITES OF PARTIES SETTING UP A NATIONAL LIST IN THE 2010 HUNGARIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

The party websites made for the 2010 parliamentary elections can be divided into two groups. On one side, there are the political parties which have been members of the parliament for several years, and have established relatively well structured

websites (Fidesz⁴, MSZP, MDF). On the other side, there are parties, which were new players in the Hungarian political spectrum. Previously they had not, or had not alone participated in parliamentary elections. In relation to other party websites, these parties had innovative webpages; they used the new campaign techniques in a much more courageous way (Jobbik — Movement for a Better Hungary, LMP — Politics Can Be Different, CM — Civil Movement).

As the table shows in appendix 2, the Fidesz has worked most on its website in the last 4-8 years. As for the communication interactivity function, the former tail-ender is now the first one. It is also striking that two of the newcomers, the Jobbik and the LMP are at the same level, and they achieved a good result compared to the other parties. They are just behind the Socialist Party, which brings unchanged results compared to 2002. The English version of the homepage appeared at the Fidesz's, the Jobbik's and also at the LMP's website, too. The weakest results were achieved by the Civil Movement's website in the 2010 Hungarian parliamentary elections. The CM fulfilled really only the most basic demands; they paid much more attention to the symbolic function as for the information transparency or the communication interactivity. This is indicated by the fact that the movement operated its newsletter sooner than the site itself.

Innovation was the possibility of financial support in 2010. Such creative realization of fundraising is not listed in the table; however we cannot ignore this new form of interactivity. Hungarians could donate money online to every party listed in the table except the Socialist Party. Most often it meant bank transfer, but the Jobbik also offered the option of PayPal payment. The possibility of party donation was known previously, but it was not posted on their homepage. The recruitment of party activists at the websites was also an innovation in 2010 and it also does not appear in the table. The three new parties (Jobbik, LMP and CM) lived with this new opportunity and this option was also available at the other parties' website, but it was not emphasised on the opening pages.

It can be stated that the Hungarian party websites' function of communication interactivity underwent a transformation in the spring of 2010. In contrast to quasi-activities (voting, games), real and in some cases measurable activities came forward (donations, joining the campaign). Taking into account the processes of 2010, the future growth of interactivity is expected, and by the end of this process, the party websites will be no longer "news portals", but they will also encourage new forms of political activity, which is expected in political campaigns and political communication in the era of the post 2008 US presidential election (Dessewffy & Ravasz, 2009; Merkovity, 2009). However, Hungarian party websites have to develop a lot to reach this level.

⁴ One could proceed in two directions from the homepage of fidesz.hu, towards the Election 2010 or to the news portal pages. Since at the other websites I have viewed the news portal pages, I chose the same at fidesz.hu, as well.

crats' NetParty, which, despite its popularity among young voters, has not developed into a true community site over the years.

On the basis of function of electoral party websites analysis, the final result is dual; Hungarian parties have reached or soon will catch up with the level of British political parties' websites. This way, they fulfil the hypothesis raised at the beginning of the paper, namely that citizens have become more open, and they are able to gather information on the parties more easily. However, the methods applied in this study could not give an answer to the question whether this openness has an effect on democracies becoming more deliberate.

At the same time, this result is misleading, since it summarises only the quantitative variables. However, UK party websites indicate that qualitative analysis is not enough. The content of websites is also worth investigating in order to get more exact results. In terms of qualitative variables, Hungarian sites perform quite poorly. Nevertheless, it should not discourage Hungarian parties; both informative and interactive features are present on the party websites. Now, the task is to fill the websites with some quality content.

THE FUTURE OF QUALITATIVE INTERACTIVITY

Through the function analysis index the study has proved that nowadays there have not been any real differences between parties' websites. They are uniform, as regards the informative and interactive functions, at least. One reason for this could be the fact that during the examined period, they have independently managed to realize Norris' (and Dányi's) general expectations, which has been a long way for all of them.

Hungarian party websites have grown up to their task since the nineties. This can be seen, if we compare them not only to each other, but to the parties of a stable democracy. However, the process does not come to an end at this point. New forms of interactivity appear in the social media system and the parties need to respond to these challenges. We have seen the reaction of UK party websites to these challenges; they integrated social networking web pages in their sites to build their own online communities. The role of party websites is enhanced by the fact that there are more and more campaign tools appearing on them. One such example is collecting donations online, which was a new form of interactivity of the Hungarian election campaigns in 2010. The average Hungarian citizen thinks that party funding is carried out by the state, although it is done from the citizen's tax. Another example is that instead of opening new forums for related party website news, citizens had the opportunity to write their comments below the news. Both examples expect from the users to register on the website, to participate in the life of the party, and overall, they promote the quality of interactivity.

On their way towards interactive websites with quality content, Hungarian political parties have much to do. They should firstly give up the news portal type sites

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Information transparency	Fidesz	MSZP	MDF	SZDSZ
Collection of links	1	1	1	1
Website available in English	—	—	—	—
Reports of party congresses, conferences, meetings	1	1	1	1
Multimedia, downloadable audio and video	1	1	—	1
Total:	9	8	7	9

APPENDIX 2

Table 3. The function of electoral party websites analysis of the party websites in the 2010 Hungarian parliamentary elections (In the parentheses next to the results of Fidesz, MSZP and MDF are the differences from eight years ago)⁶

Communication interactivity	Fidesz	MSZP	MDF	Jobbik	LMP	CM
E-mailing options to party officials	1	1	1	1	0.5*	1
E-mailing option to the webmaster	1	1	—	1	1	1
E-mailing option to the party leader	1	1	1	1	—	—
Subscribe to newsletter	1	1	1	1	1	1
Joining the party	1	—	1	1	1	1
Forums, chat-room	1	1	—	0.5**	1	—
Support of online shopping	1	—	—	—	—	—
Search options	1	1	1	1	1	1
Games	—	—	1	—	1	—
Voting	—	1	—	—	—	—
Total:	8 (+5)	7 (0)	6 (0)	6.5	6.5	5

* The party does not operate in the traditional party chairman system, therefore I gave only half a point.

** Although it is not a forum, comments can be written in the articles. Since these comments are not visible, I gave only half a point.

Information transparency	Fidesz	MSZP	MDF	Jobbik	LMP	CM
Information about party officials, CVs, portrait gallery	1	1	1	1	1	—
Party components, programme	1	1	1	1	1	1
Description of the party organisation	1	1	1	1	1	1

⁶ The websites were viewed before the first round of elections on 8–9 April, 2010.

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Information transparency	Labour Party	Conservative Party	Liberal Democrats
Party history	1	1	—
News, information	1	1	1
Press releases, media coverage	1	1	1
Collection of links	1	1	1
Website available in English*	1	1	1
Reports of party congresses, conferences, meetings	1	1	1
Multimedia, downloadable audio and video	1	1	1
Total:	10	10	9

* Since the English version of the website is not a relevant requirement in case of Great Britain, I take this point for granted.

