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Worth an Agora? 2003 E-lection Party Sites and Public Discourse

SAM LEHMAN-WILZIG

Democracy started over 2,500 years ago in Athens. As the form of government was largely one of *direct* democracy, the focus of deliberation was the '*agora*' – a forum in which Athens' citizenry debated and decided on public policy and law. Modern democracy, on the other hand, is *representative*, so that policymaking and legislation by definition occurs within the parliament and executive branch.

Nevertheless, the shift from public *agora* to governmental parliament need not in principle remove the populace from the deliberative process – certainly not when it is called upon to make the only formal decision within the system: election of the representatives. The fact that this generally does not occur in the modern age is less a function of political philosophy than of logistics – how do millions find each other, not to mention carry on some sort of rational discourse? They normally cannot. As a result, election campaigns have also been removed from the purview of the citizenry and given over to the candidates and especially to the *mass* media. Consequently, almost all political communications researchers have focused on top-to-bottom election discourse: candidates (and parties)-to-public, as well as media-to-public.

This traditional situation is now undergoing change for the first time in modern democratic history with the advent of a 'mass' medium – the internet – that renders bottom-to-bottom ('peer-to-peer') and bottom-to-top (citizen-to-party) communication as effortless as its more traditional counterpart: 'the media is [*sic*] still monologic and one-way – the great and the good speak and everyone else listens or turns off. There is a way out of that tradition: a "civic commons" in cyberspace . . . intelligent spaces for public deliberation about policy issues online'.¹

Of course, the internet not only empowers the citizenry, it can also be fruitfully exploited by the parties and the candidates for their own purposes – through top-to-bottom communication. However, as opposed to the public that has not had much opportunity to express itself during

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political campaigns (except for periodic public opinion polling, a macro-type of expression), the parties developed several channels over the previous decades (and even centuries): political assemblies, media advertising, posters and billboards, televised debates, photo-op events, etc. Thus, given this weight of political tradition, they might be less prone to seize a new technology than the general public. In a general sort of way, this study will also make such a comparison.

Research on party and candidate use of the internet during election campaigns has become quite extensive over the last few years.² Internet election forums for the general public, on the other hand, have been given somewhat less attention, although a few overseas researchers have studied internet discourse in general³ and internet election discourse in particular.⁴ Regarding Israel, though, the present article is the first attempt to delve into both phenomena.⁵ What can be gleaned from previous mention of internet use in prior campaigns is that the first appearance of party sites in Israel occurred in 1996, and that several candidates in the municipal elections of 1998 also set up campaign sites.⁶ The 1999 election campaign was witness to burgeoning internet use – four of the five prime ministerial candidates and several parties set up sites, mostly for one-way information delivery.⁷

However, as noted above, the potential revolutionary use of the internet is to be found more on the peer-to-peer (voter-to-voter) level than in traditional top-to-bottom communication – precisely because of the lack of other efficient channels at the public's disposal. The internet is but one more tool at the politicians' disposal,⁸ but it could well soon become the *central* tool of election communication and activism among and between the voting public. An indication of this revolutionary character can be seen in the 2003 election of South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun, which was largely a result of peer-to-peer networking by young supporters who mobilized their friends and acquaintances to snowball effect, through a massive e-mail-based, internet campaign that galvanized millions of young voters (Roh won the under-40 voters by almost two to one, while losing the over-40s by 61 per cent to 37 per cent!).⁹ Admittedly, this was more an example of 'viral marketing' than public discourse. Nevertheless, the ease and speed of internet interaction between people – dyadic, group and mass – means that such communication has the potential to bring back the *agora*, updated in contemporary, electronic guise, i.e. moving the fulcrum of campaign influence from the parties/candidates/mass media to the voters, with all that entails democratically and politically.

Unfortunately, as British e-government director Coleman has noted regarding internet election forums: 'We simply don't know enough about what people do – we either assume condescendingly that people aren't capable of being sensible or we feel that what they say doesn't matter so let them rant. There is a need to collect data about online debate and analyze it scientifically'.¹⁰ For all the above reasons, the present study will place most

of its focus on the election forums while secondarily surveying and analyzing the parties' internet sites. The hope is that this article will serve as the baseline for all future Israeli internet research dealing with top-down, bottom-up and peer-to-peer election campaigning.

BACKGROUND

Public political discourse has undergone profound change in the modern age. Modern 'democracy' started out in late medieval England through the evolutionary development of a parliament in which the aristocracy, and then the landed burghers, came together to 'advise' the monarch. However, this was 'public' discourse in the narrowest sense of the term, for almost none of it filtered down to the common man. Even in the seventeenth century, ending with the proto-democratic Glorious Revolution, parliament was reflective of – and answerable to – a very small percentage of the general population.

Two related phenomena changed this picture: the advent of newspapers and the expansion of voting rights. The former led to a 'public sphere'¹¹ in which an increasingly literate middle class would discuss political matters in coffeehouses and other public venues – thus exhibiting the capacity to make educated political decisions, i.e. to vote. Within this milieu, candidates for office began to appear publicly in front of their constituents, presenting their platform and answering audience questions.

However, such a public sphere underwent radical change in the twentieth century, despite – or perhaps because of – universal suffrage. Given the huge number of voters, the media – newspapers, radio and TV – took on an increasingly important role in presenting political information, opinion and propaganda to the masses. Indeed, these same media kept the audience indoors in the comfort of their homes, so that Habermas' public sphere ultimately disappeared to all intents and purposes.

The Israeli case followed the same pattern, albeit quite a bit later. While newspaper reading was widespread from the start, radio fare was relatively mono-dimensional and Israel's one-channel television certainly did not have the same attractive entertainment function found in commercial TV overseas. Thus, one could find real political discussion in Israeli cafes and the general public sphere – not to mention outdoor election assemblies – until well into the 1980s. However, with the radical expansion of Israeli mass media in the 1990s (commercial, satellite and cable TV; regional radio and pirate radio), the traditional public sphere contracted palpably not only generally, but especially during election campaigns.¹² While the streets were still festooned with posters, banners and stickers, this was hardly what could be called public 'discourse'.

Over time – and certainly increasingly over the past decade with multi-channel television and radio – Israeli election propaganda and discussion

has moved indoors. The citizens are no longer willing to attend public campaign events but rather demand that the campaign come to them in the comfort of their homes. Perhaps the longstanding system of officially allotted televised propaganda, offered over the campaign's final three weeks, had something to do with this; in any case, by the mid-1990s even this mode of electioneering began to lose its lustre, with ratings dropping precipitously.

The Israeli public has clearly been losing interest in mediated election propaganda. However, this does not mean that there is no interest in the campaign, but rather that voters want to be part of the election discourse. An indication of the general trend is the ratings success of listener call-in shows – on national, regional and pirate radio stations. A clearer election-period manifestation of this is the growing popularity of *chugei bayit*, single candidate presentations in front of a few dozen neighbours and friends in someone's living room.

The internet obviously fits in perfectly with this general trend as it constitutes a mass medium of individual empowerment. This is true in at least two important ways. First, it enables each voter to selectively reach and actively choose information regarding only those parties of personal interest, and then to easily and precisely obtain the issue messages of specific interest to that voter – from the parties' sites among other venues. Conversely, the parties themselves can 'push' messages to selected voters through massive e-mailings and/or advertising their site and its general contents.

The second capability is to provide a new venue for public discourse. True, as will be seen below, approximately half the party sites offered a 'forum' for public discussion,¹³ but these were not heavily trafficked – and almost all discussants were members or potential supporters of the specific party, so that the discourse took on an air of 'preaching to the converted', as Norris describes it.¹⁴ Moreover, only two parties (Green Leaf and Meretz) enabled surfers to send an e-mail to specific candidates on the party list (most parties enabled general e-mail to the site/party as a whole), thus avoiding true, bottom-to-top communication.

However, neutral sites are available in Israel as elsewhere,¹⁵ developed for the specific purpose of engendering public discourse on any current events topic throughout the year. During the election campaign, of course, the vast majority of the topics discussed were election-oriented and, as we shall see, they also provided opportunities for true voter-to-candidate discourse.

Such virtual forums involve mainly asynchronous, textual communication. While discussants can respond to each other in real time if they happen to be online at the same time and wish to 'converse', most entries only appear after some time delay, mainly because each discussant responds when convenient. There are several advantages to such a virtual discourse: (1) there is more time to think before responding, and one's own

response can be edited before being sent off; (2) each discussant can review the whole history of the discussion ‘thread’, i.e. can easily take all previous comments by the others into account before responding; (3) many more people can get involved, as there are no logistical time constraints of gathering everyone together online at the same time. The only main disadvantage is a function of the forum’s ‘virtuality’: the participants cannot see each other – the elements of body language, especially facial expressions, are missing (see below).

Finally, there is one additional aspect that constitutes both a disadvantage and an advantage: *anonymity*. On the one hand, participants can ‘hide’ behind pseudonyms and even (in extreme cases) appear in several guises.¹⁶ Moreover, interested institutions can ‘plant’ participants in order to defend or advance a particular position. One party admitted to doing so in our case. As the Green Leaf’s internet campaign manager, Gal Mor, explained: ‘We decided to respond in news forums by dividing up the sites among our various activists and each periodically scanned the discussion for opportunities to react in real time’.¹⁷

However, this is also a major advantage for individuals who are considered to be of lower socio-economic status or are seen as an ‘other’ in real life – minorities, women, etc. Whereas many people relate to them in normal, verbal conversation, less for what they say and more for what they ‘are’/represent, in the visual anonymity of internet discussions it is substance that counts almost exclusively, so that this type of forum actually empowers the voice of those who suffer a social handicap in normal discourse.¹⁸

Seen in this light, internet election forums are perhaps the best type of venue for unadulterated and unmediated *inclusive* public discourse, for they allow *argument* and not *status* to carry the day.¹⁹ Indeed, as several Habermas researchers have noted, democratic discussion at its best has always been rooted in a *reading* public²⁰ through text-based media such as newspapers and books.²¹ Thus, from this perspective as well, the internet forum (and the internet as a whole) holds the promise of strengthening the traditional basis of public discourse. In short, the internet forum may be nothing less than a contemporary, ‘new media’ reincarnation of Habermas’ public sphere.

RESEARCH DESIGN

As noted, this study has two parts: party sites and public forums.

Regarding the former, first a search was done for all the parties, yielding 17 party sites (of the 27 parties running). Of these, four turned out to be very unsophisticated and/or the parties involved had little chance of garnering Knesset seats so they were dropped: Centre party, Ahavat Yisrael, DAAM (Arab) and ZAAM (Social Justice). The 13 party sites

surveyed here are: Likud, Labour, Shinui, Shas, NRP, National Union, Meretz, Am Echad, Hadash/Taal, Yisrael B'Aliya, Green Leaf (Alei Yarok), Tzomet and Tkuma. An attempt was also made to interview individuals involved in the internet campaign, and four parties agreed: National Union, Meretz, Green Leaf and Shas.²² We asked all of them some standard questions (purpose of site, future changes to be made, number of daily 'hits', etc.), and also some particular questions relevant to each party's site.

Five major categories, each with several variables, were scored for each site (plus another minor category: Daily Update) – 30 variables altogether – during 19 randomly selected days during the two-month election period.²³ Most of these variables were taken from previous party site studies elsewhere,²⁴ although some culling was necessary in order not to make this study too unwieldy. The categories/variables are:

- (1) *Information*: (a) *general information* (about the party); (b) *party news*; (c) *national news* (relevant to election issues on which the party has a stand); (d) *voter information* (how to check registration, etc.); (e) *donations* (fundraising for the party, where to send money); (f) *candidates* (on the Knesset list); (g) *candidate profiles* (detailed, personal information on each candidate); (h) *chairman profile* (number one on the list and/or the party's chairperson); (i) *archive* (previous site content stored); (j) *polls* (on the party or the overall campaign race).
- (2) *Interactivity*: (a) *forum* (asynchronous discussion); (b) *chat* (real time discussion); (c) *members' club* (special information or services for dues paying members); (d) *mail to site*; (e) *mail to politicians*.
- (3) *Languages*: (a) *Hebrew*; (b) *English*; (c) *Russian*; (d) *Arabic*; (e) *Amahari* (Ethiopian); (f) *Other* (Spanish, French).
- (4) *Multimedia*: (a) *audio*; (b) *video*; (c) *jingle* (campaign song).
- (5) *Design*: (a) *pictures*; (b) *graphs*; (c) *caricatures*; (d) *boxes* (modular look).
- (6) *Daily Update*: (a) design; (b) contents.

No attempt was made to score each variable by its intensity or magnitude (e.g. a little or a lot of voter information). The focus was on the very existence of each variable and how often it appeared on the site during the campaign. One indication of the parties' (lack of) focus on internet campaigning was that several parties only established an election site well into the campaign. The best example of this was Shas: its site went up only in January, but once built it turned out to be one of the more impressive sites.

In order to test how seriously the parties themselves viewed their own sites, the TV propaganda spots were surveyed over their entire three weeks, noting the number of times each party listed the address of its website.

For each party, this was technically a simple thing to do – merely placing a text graphic in a corner of the ad for a few seconds – and yet, as we shall see, the results were surprisingly meagre.

The second part of this study involved the e-forums. To assess the quality and quantity of campaign e-discourse during the 2003 elections, the four largest non-party forum sites in Israel were chosen for intensive scrutiny: Hyde Park, Rotter Net, Nana and Tapuz.

Hyde Park is an ‘open’ system of forums enabling any person (after a simple registration process: username and password) to set up a forum where s/he is in absolute control as moderator. In addition, Hyde Park itself runs a steady forum on current events and news in which participants are asked to register once. Most of the participants in this forum can be placed on either the right or the left of the Israeli political spectrum, with few in the middle – engendering more heated debates than found on the other forum sites.

Rotter Net has three basic forum communities: computer lovers, general interest (education, sports and hobbies) and news/current events. The latter has become famous in Israel for its intellectually and stylistically high level of debate and for its generous amounts of inside information (even scoops). Indeed, the forum is frequented by many journalists and overall has a steady participating clientele. In general, its political slant tends to be right-wing.

Tapuz is a commercial portal (advertisements, e-commerce and auctions) that also includes Israel’s largest number of forums on sundry topics (670 as of May 2003, with 35,000 entries a day), each set up by portal owners based on surfer demand. The portal owner decides on the moderator(s), who try to keep the discussion somewhere within the bounds of (elastic, Israeli) propriety. Tapuz’s current events forum is also very large, with many one-timers joining the fray every so often. During the election period, the political affiliation of the participants ran from moderate left to far right.

Nana is also a commercial portal (Netvision, offering e-commerce, auctions and general internet solutions), open to all surfers. It has a huge forum system, with forums devoted to almost every conceivable subject – each moderated by the private person who convinced Nana of its general interest (a minimum amount of discussion ‘activity’ is the only condition for continuation). However, its current events forum is the smallest of the four studied, with a nuclear core of permanent discussants and far more occasional ‘visitors’. Nevertheless, for the election period, Nana stood out in the number of discussions held with invited candidates running for the Knesset, covering the entire political spectrum. On those occasions, the number of participants grew tremendously, with the ‘regulars’ almost disappearing. Overall, the tone of discussion was the most moderate of all, both in the regular forum debates and in the ‘meet-the-candidate’

events. The political spectrum was very similar to Tapuz: from the moderate left to the far right.

Eighteen randomly chosen dates (usually every three or four days) were surveyed and scored from 1 December 2002 to 28 January 2003 (election day), including 26 January and 28 January to get a better sense of what was happening close to, and on, election day itself. All topic entries that had only one participant were deleted, as that constituted a monologue, not a discussion. Thus, the actual, overall number of subjects raised and discussants participating was somewhat *higher* (about 20 per cent) than the totals listed below.

Six variables were scored, the first five similar to Wilhelm's typology,²⁵ and the last one a new category not studied heretofore within a political discourse context.²⁶

Quantitative Variables

- (1) How many *new topics* (in internet jargon: '*threads*') the participants brought up for discussion. This does not necessarily mean that each topic of discussion was completely different from any other over the two-month period, or even different from what was raised on the same day in another forum. Rather, this merely indicates how many threads were started and discussed until no more entries were registered on that subject. Impressionistically, however, it can be stated that exact repetition of the same topic was not widespread on any specific forum, and indeed constituted one of the main sources for 'aborted' threads, i.e. one-participant 'monologues' to which others did not respond.
- (2) How many *people participated* in the forum. To be sure, it is impossible to determine whether some participants used more than one name for each discussion, but there is little reason to think that this was prevalent. More important, given the very large number of participants in the whole study, no attempt was made to pare down those participants who used the same 'name' in different forum sites or in different threads. Thus, the actual number of discrete participants is undoubtedly a bit smaller than the totals listed below. On the other hand, it must be kept in mind that this study scored only 18 of the 59 days (30.5 per cent) in the 'campaign' (December–January), so that the totals listed below should be revised upwards by 70 per cent for the real, overall number of topics, participants and entries.
- (3) The number of specific *entries* ('*comments*'). Any reply or comment was scored. Some were extremely short while others were extremely long (mini-treatises), but most were a few sentences in length. Again, entries that engendered no reply were not counted.

- (4) The *time duration* of each discussion.²⁷ The minimum score was ten minutes (about five per cent of the total), whereas there was no maximum duration (the longest thread continued for several *days!*).

The results of these four variables were divided up either by the number of days scored or the total amount of items in order to derive an *average per day* or *overall campaign average* for each variable. It is assumed that these would have remained much the same if all 59 days had been analyzed.

Qualitative Variables

- (1) *Type of argumentation*. In order for real discourse to take place in a Habermas sense,²⁸ the discussion must be deliberative,²⁹ i.e. include (at least in part) rational argumentation.³⁰ While one cannot expect a public forum dealing with highly charged election issues to be conducted like a hyper-rational debate at the Oxford Debating Society, there is little civic utility (other than letting off steam) in argumentation that offers no rational argument. A five-indicator scale of 1 ('totally rational') to 5 ('totally emotional') was employed. Admittedly, there is a degree of subjectivity in scoring such a scale. Based on the scores (number in *italics*) given to the following examples, readers can judge for themselves the reliability of the scoring process.

- (a) Hyde Park (26 January): 'If he [Mitzna] shaves off his beard ... Tommy [Lapid] will give him a job!!!' (5) *Despite (or perhaps, because of) the black humour, this is a purely emotional comment. Off-the-cuff jokes, barbs, puns, etc., are an integral part of these discussions – much like political cartoons in newspapers.*
- (b) Hyde Park (13 December): 'Vote for whomever you want, just not the corrupt ones. From my side, I've prepared a suitcase in case I'm wrong [about the Likud losing]. I'm not willing to live in a country in which the government is bought with money. How did Prof. Har-Sgor put it: "I'm glad about what's going on; it returns me to the Middle Ages, the period of my expertise"'. (3) *There is an obvious, strongly emotional element here, but solidly based on alleged facts and even a pithy quote from an expert.*
- (c) Tapuz (12 December): 'Mitzna already advanced the cause by declaring Labor to be a centrist party. Everyone remembers his verbal blunders that placed him to the left of Meretz: "I'll talk to anyone who's ready to listen, including Arafat" and "complete pullback from Gaza and Judea and Samaria within a

year". With such comments, Labor would fall apart and the Likud would get forty seats'. (1) *This is a rational, fact-based argument. While said with obvious feeling, everything is grounded in reality (indeed, the Likud did almost get forty seats!)*.

- (2) *Tone of debate*: Internet discourse has been analyzed by others,³¹ with the phenomenon of 'flaming' (abusive replies) well documented.³² Thus, *civic* discourse need not necessarily entail *civil* discussion; quite the opposite. If this proved to be true in the case of Israeli elections, then that would also seriously undermine the utility of such forum discussions as true public sphere *agora* where topics could be argued on the merits of the case and not based on personal innuendo. To assess this, a similar scale was employed here: 1 ('very civil') to 5 ('highly aggressive'). Again, the following examples, with accompanying explanation, illustrate the actual scoring.³³

- (a) *Tapuz* (8 January): 'You come across [Mr. Green] as a power-hungry person; you even have an aura of lack of seriousness, something reminiscent of Avigdor Liberman. In what do you differ from him?' (3) *This was an aggressive question but it was asked in straightforward fashion, without any curses or personal innuendo.*
- (b) *Hyde Park* (26 January): '[Ariel] Sharon is really not worried about Israeli soldiers getting killed; he has sent them to die from the time he entered the army, while he's safe in the background!' (5) *While no actual profanity is used, these are extremely harsh accusations.*
- (c) *Hyde Park* (15 January): 'Sharon expressed astonishment when he found out that many among his camp will be interrogated, and he added that he won't be able to continue in office if that happens – but in any case, if he decides to resign he'll do it only after he's led the Likud to victory and forms the next government'. (1) *While seemingly without factual basis, this 'rumour' was expressed in a calm fashion without aspersions made on Sharon himself.*

One final comment: as noted above, the vast majority of these forum discussions were citizen-initiated, but there were 13 cases scored where the moderators of the forums brought in a candidate for Knesset who then fielded questions and engendered discussion that was not only top-down but also peer-to-peer.³⁴ These have been included in the overall numbers, slightly skewing the average number of participants and specific entries upwards (naturally attracting a larger audience), as well as somewhat decreasing the discussion duration (they usually lasted only an hour or two). There was no reason, however, to remove them from this study, as they are certainly what election discourse is all about – give and take

between voters and candidates. Indeed, interestingly, the number of participants/entries registered when less well-known or less powerful politicians appeared was equal to that of the more famous. This is another indication that these forums were used by the participants to accumulate information and not simply to vent their frustrations or feelings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We start with an analysis of the party election sites. The most immediate and striking thing is that there is a great deal of similarity between the various sites regarding the inclusion (or non-inclusion) of most variables. This is probably a result of a common source: overseas party sites that are easily accessed by webmasters. This is not to suggest that these sites were employed efficiently, but rather that at least a common denominator of 'mandatory' elements was strived for by most parties. Such format conservatism and mimicry can also be seen in the fact that very few parties attempted to update/change their site's basic design (see *Daily Update: design*, below). On the other hand, all the parties understood that the internet means constant content updating, so that from a substantive perspective there was a real attempt at offering an internet *campaign*.

More interesting than what most parties included is what they by and large disregarded. First, other than the Likud, none of the parties listed public opinion polls. This may have been due to the (probably correct) assumption that their visitors had seen the polls in the press and electronic media, so that there was little to add here. The Likud, of course, led the race throughout so that displaying the polls could not hurt it. But other up-and-coming parties such as Shinui did not bother – leading to the tentative conclusion that the parties viewed the internet as a medium for *supplementing* other media, i.e. as a channel for presenting material that the voter could not receive from other media sources. This would also explain the fact that only five sites included national news, something widely available in the more traditional media.

Unfortunately, many parties did not fully understand the internet's full supplementary utility. For instance, whereas fundraising through the party/candidate site has become rather sophisticated and widespread overseas,³⁵ only eight Israeli parties enabled supporters to donate money through their sites (and for most of them, not all the time). Perhaps even more flagrant is the 'chat' result: whereas eight of 13 sites enabled asynchronous forum discussions (and of these, only National Union and Shinui were very active), only one (!) enabled its visitors to discuss topics in real time. While chat is a bit more technically complex than forums, this is still a serious under-utilization of the internet's unique capabilities.³⁶

Even more surprising (on first thought) is the lack of opportunity offered by most party sites for the voter to e-mail the Knesset candidates.

While all the sites enabled e-mailing the party *generally*, only two (Meretz and Green Leaf, arguably two of the most ‘grassroots’ of Israeli parties), enabled e-mail to *specific* candidates. This is an indication of the corporate (party list) nature of Israeli politics – citizens are asked to vote for a party and (other than party primary participation) have little say as to which candidates get into the Knesset.

Finally, the language(s) employed on each site are an excellent indication of each party’s target audience. In this regard, the general rule is (with an exception or two): the smaller the party, the more languages it employed. While the Likud used only Hebrew and Russian, and Shas just Hebrew, smaller parties used far more: National Union (6), Am Echad (5), Meretz (5), Yisrael B’Aliya (4), Green Leaf (4), etc. As the National Union interviewee explained: ‘By using the language gimmick, we were able to better promote the party in the other media . . . We received an enthusiastic review on Israeli Army Radio and in *Ma’ariv Online* as well as *Ynet*’. In other words, the use of multiple languages by the smaller party sites was not only a means to address a wider audience, but was also a lever to get ‘free PR’ from other media.

This does not mean that Norris’ argument regarding the greater utility of internet campaigning for smaller parties was completely borne out by the Israeli 2003 elections.³⁷ For each party the size of Green Leaf that attempted many things on its site, we find a party such as Am Echad whose site was ‘minimal’, to say the least. Among other things, there seems to be an age-related and education-related factor at work here: Green Leaf’s potential voter was certainly young and many were college-educated;³⁸ Am Echad (a workers’ party) had a much older voter base that was obviously less educated. Such an age/education ‘divide’ is suggestive of what lies in store in the future – a point to be expanded in the concluding section below.

Returning to the language strategy, only Labour deviated from the correlation noted above (it was a large party yet it had four languages). However, this also suggests another rule: the worse the party was doing in the polls (relative to its previous strength) the more languages it employed (except for Shas). The National Union party had hoped to garner far more than it did, Meretz was being decimated in the polls, Am Echad and Yisrael B’Aliya were losing support, and Green Leaf was continually on the borderline for passing the minimal threshold.

To sum up the party site analysis: one can discern a pattern of internet use matching the various parties’ electoral situation. Overall, however, the sites displayed only the beginnings of an understanding of the real power and utility of internet campaigning. Buttressing this conclusion are the results of the analysis of internet site addresses on party TV propaganda. Only five parties deigned to advertise their internet sites: Likud (57 times), Shas (29), NRP (16), Green Leaf (12), and National Union (2). None were displayed on the TV ads of Labour (!), Shinui, Meretz, Yisrael B’Aliya, Am

Echad, the Arab lists, etc. When asked about this, the National Union and Meretz interviewees claimed that this was the mistake of the TV ad producers, who were obviously not attuned to the new medium.

Thus, while it would be unfair to say that the internet campaign was a mere afterthought for most parties, clearly it had not become an integrated part of the overall campaign strategy for most, if not all, of the parties. This is not surprising as it mimics non-innovative internet campaigning during the initial years elsewhere, e.g. Great Britain.³⁹ As with almost everything else in Israel, one can expect the five- to ten-year time lag relative to other advanced Western democracies to be also made up here in the near future.

We now turn to the results of our forum discussion site analysis.

First, the number of topics raised in all four sites was quite large: 430. On average, this came to 24 tabulated each day. It should be noted that the last two days that were scored (26 January and 28 January, election day) showed a significant increase to 43 new topics each day, so that as the election became more salient to the electorate, the number of subjects discussed markedly increased.

What were the issues raised? They ran the entire gamut – not only regarding the specific topics but also in types of subject matter. The following were the main categories of discussion, each followed by an example or two:

- *Party ideology* (e.g. is Shinui really anti-religious or is this a campaign tactic?)
- *Voter influence* (e.g. do not abstain – a small number of voters can shift a Knesset seat from one party to another; voters should not vote if they do not like any party).
- *Electoral reform* (e.g. raising the voter threshold for a party to enter the Knesset).
- *Previous government's record* (e.g. showing how the number of terror deaths of Israelis has increased under Sharon's leadership).
- *Party and campaign corruption* (e.g. the Likud does not deserve to be elected; Labour and Mitzna are just as corrupt).
- *Role of the judicial branch* (e.g. the leaks from the Justice Ministry on the Sharon case; whether Justice Cheshin – chairman of the Election Committee – acted correctly in stifling Sharon's TV speech).
- *Government policy* (e.g. whether the settlements hinder the peace process).
- *Campaign strategy* (e.g. Sharon wants to heat up the conflict so he can be re-elected as the 'stronger' leader; did Mitzna err in proclaiming that he would not join a national unity government?).
- *Media's role in the campaign* (e.g. whether the media are out 'to get' Sharon).
- *Horse-race speculations* (e.g. how is Shinui really doing? Will Shas really lose that many seats? Does Labour have a chance at all?).

- *Post-election possibilities* (e.g. fragile coalition and elections again within the year).

From this list one can see that the array of topics runs from the trivial to the very substantive, from tactical considerations to the core of the election process, from instrumental factors to philosophical considerations, etc. In other words, it is a reflection of society at large – both in the concerns expressed and in the intellectual seriousness (and occasional frivolity) regarding the issues. Indeed, these forums are truly ‘other worlds’ – a parallel universe to the one found on the op-ed pages of Israel’s newspapers during the election campaign.

The overall number of participants was also not insubstantial: 2,369 (if pro-rated over the full two months, that would work out to over 7,500 ‘participants’). More noteworthy is the fact that on average (again, excluding the one participant monologues), there were 5.5 participants to each discussion – these are definitely not simple, two-person, dyadic dialogues. Moreover, there were 4,797 entries (close to 15,000 pro-rated over all 59 days) – in essence, each discussion topic elicited on average more than 11 entries. This means that for every discussion, each participant spoke twice on average (of course, there was usually a natural imbalance here, with certain participants responding frequently and others sufficing with one entry). This is another indication of true give-and-take and not just one-time sorties to make a point and leave. It therefore comes as no surprise that the final quantitative variable (duration) indicates that these were not ‘quickie’ discussions – on average each discussion lasted close to 19 hours, leaving plenty of time for thought in responding to what came before.

The biggest surprise, however, came in the qualitative categories. As noted above, internet discussions can be highly ‘flammable’. Without face-to-face communication, the usual norms of civilized behaviour tend to weaken so that internet discussions are prone to cursing, mudslinging and ‘flaming’. Moreover, Israelis are notorious for their ‘*dugri*’ style of speech: loud, uninhibited and at times overly forthright. Thus, it is quite significant that both the tone of debate (civil/aggressive: 3.30) and the type of argumentation (rational/emotional: 3.28) were only slightly above the median. Put simply, such forum discussions combined a measure of rational and emotional argument and tended to be direct but not highly aggressive. And this was especially true when a member of a party list was hosted – both qualitative scores decreased somewhat (to approximately 2.0), i.e. the discussion tended to be even more rational and well tempered when the forum was given the opportunity to query a candidate for office.

Overall, are these middle-of-the-scale scores a case of the cup being half full or half empty? Regarding the rational/emotional scale, the real answer is ‘more than half full’. The most up-to-date research in neuro-psychology

posits that the *optimal* state of mental activity *combines* emotions with rational thought,⁴⁰ i.e. rational thought is seriously deficient *without* an emotional basis. Part of the explanation of this is that the emotions bring ‘depth of feeling’ to the cognitive process, what political scientists would call ‘salience’. A purely rational being would be akin to a robot – all thought without any motivation. Thus, scores of 2, 3 or 4 on our scale – the vast majority – indicated that the participants felt strongly about the issues and were not just ‘killing [virtual] time’, but also that their discourse was ‘thought out’ and not just spontaneously letting off emotional steam.⁴¹

One caveat should be noted, however. It is possible that the overall moderate civil-aggressive average was somewhat influenced by the presence – and even proactive censorship – of the moderators.⁴² However, as there were quite a number of entries that received a score of 5 (highly aggressive), there does not seem to have been very much censorship in these forums.

An interesting methodological finding relates to the two qualitative categories taken together: while the tone and the type of argument tended to move somewhat in tandem, in approximately one of every six discussions one variable scored at least two grades higher/lower than the other, i.e. either those discussions had a high level of emotional content but were conducted very civilly, or were quite rational in content but relatively aggressive in tone. Thus, using *both* qualitative variables seems to be justified, as they do not move in lockstep or even in markedly parallel fashion in a significant number of instances.

Finally, it must be noted that the medium of the internet enabled these forum participants to embellish and reinforce their rational or emotional arguments with material other than text. Several added graphs, tables and lists to their entries in order to buttress their positions factually. On the other side, a not inconsiderable number added pictures and caricatures to their entries to strengthen the emotional impact of what they wished to convey. This is an important point, for it indicates that in the future, when broadband becomes standard, these will become not only textual forums for discussion but also multi-sensory (aural and visual) virtual venues that mimic the ‘real’ *agora* in everything but smell and touch.

To sum up, we seem to be witnessing here a nascent ‘virtual, electoral public sphere’: these forums were real ‘Athenian *agora*’, where arguments were put forward and real intellectual give and take occurred – even if some of it was heated, as one should expect in a charged and critical election campaign. In lieu of any other real venues for *public* discussion, the internet forums provided a clear ‘place’ for thrashing out the issues of the campaign, far more than has been found in recent elections on Israeli television or even in the press, which generally tend to emphasize the ‘horse-race’ aspects (who’s up and who’s down?) at the expense of substance.

CONCLUSIONS

In the 2003 Israeli elections, the internet became a 'presence'. However, from the general public's standpoint the cup was less than half full. Regarding top-to-bottom political communication, about half the parties running (almost all the significant ones) had a bona fide internet site – but most of these were little more than 'electronic billboards' for conveying information, vastly under-utilizing the interactive and dynamic capabilities of this new medium. The Meretz internet site manager provided a representative explanation: 'For us the internet complements the TV and newspaper campaign ... sending messages and guidelines to headquarter staff, field coordinators, and volunteers, as well as providing information to surfers (platform, etc.)'.

The public, however, was eager to use the medium. Notwithstanding some possible exaggeration, when asked how many surfers entered their respective sites, the interviewees' answers were: '10,000 daily' (Meretz); 'a few thousand per day' (Green Leaf); '700 hits a day' (National Union); (Shas had no idea).

A similar picture of nascent enthusiasm for using the internet to participate in the campaign can be gleaned from the data on the four public forums. Here, too, the numbers are a matter of perspective. Although over the full two-month period there were roughly 5,000 forum discussants (at best) and 15,000 entries (points argued) – quite a substantial number for such a recently emerging medium – this certainly is not a significant number in terms of election influence. Thus, we could well ask two contradictory questions: Why so 'many'? Why so few?

There are several possible reasons for the relatively large virtual turnout of discussants. First, as noted earlier, while the party sites offered forums, they were not places for true give-and-take, as each party forum attracted supporters almost exclusively – a well-known phenomenon and problem on the internet.⁴³ Anyone searching for the whole picture – pro and con – was certainly not going to find it on the respective party sites.⁴⁴ Also, the traditional media themselves tended to focus on the 'horse-race' aspects, with substantive elements not dealt with much in depth. Finally, as there was no public debate between the contenders, many Israeli citizens might have felt the need to fill the void by themselves.

On the other hand, how is one to explain the overall minor role of the internet during these elections? 'Fear of new technology' is *not* a reason – after all, Israelis took to cell phones much faster than did Americans. There are four probable complementary explanations.

First of all, the overall media campaign was somewhat paradoxical. While most of the political parties poured significant resources into their internet sites, most did not use the mainstream media to advertise their sites' existence. Second, as there are no personal elections (district or even

prime minister), individual internet-sophisticated politicians have no incentive to lead the way with a personal site. 'Collective' party action still rules the day – not very fitting for a medium still considered to glorify *individual* choice. This compares unfavourably with America and Britain, where individual candidates have experimented and (some) successfully explored the many possibilities of websites and other internet means of candidate-to-voter communication.⁴⁵

Third, Israelis are a very oral people (*ergo*, the country's cell phone mania), as well as indulging in personal, physical contact. For the older generation especially, the internet is too 'virtual' and not aural-visual enough. An indication of such a generation gap can be seen in the very sophisticated sites set up by the Green Leaf, Shinui and even Shas⁴⁶ parties – both with heavy young adult support – as opposed to the more standard sites of Labour and Meretz, which were more dependent on older voters.

Fourth, as a rule Israelis are far more politically knowledgeable⁴⁷ than almost any other democratic public – for obvious 'existential' reasons. Thus, their use of *any* medium to get electoral information is going to be low – precisely because they really do 'know it all'. The problem, then, is not that Israelis do not trust the internet or other media, but that they do not need it – or any other medium for that matter (indeed, as noted earlier, TV propaganda viewing has become very sparse).

When will things change? First, if and when peace arrives and the peace process issue is no longer overwhelmingly dominant – thus freeing Israelis to concentrate on domestic issues where policy nuances are important. The internet is designed to provide large amounts of information, tailored precisely to each surfer's interests and cognitive needs. Television (and print to a lesser extent) is better at affective messages on collective life-and-death issues, which is where Israel still finds itself existentially.

Second, and probably of greatest importance, change will arrive 'naturally' – when the younger internet generation comes of age.⁴⁸ As we have noted above, there are already indications that parties catering to younger voters placed heavier emphasis on internet campaigning. The same is almost certainly true of the electorate, for when the present adolescent internet generation comes of adult age, they will naturally gravitate to party (and perhaps also to politically non-partisan) websites for their campaign information – not to mention continuing to use the same forums that they frequent between elections, for debate with their peers. The Green Leaf campaign manager already sees the writing on the screen: 'In the future, the campaign as we ran it on our internet site will lead the campaign as a whole, and not the television ads'. Indeed, if even such a traditionalist party as Shas invested heavily in its excellent site, one can say that the future campaign path is clear.

Are we to expect, then, that the internet will serve as a real Athenian *agora*? The evidence from the present study suggests that the answer is

'yes', but in a very specific way. As noted earlier, participation in the forums tended to increase dramatically when a guest candidate appeared to field questions. This is similar to one element of the original *agora*: appearance of the leaders to explain and argue their policy in front of, and with, the citizenry. While discussion between citizens will increase in future virtual forum debates as they become more comfortable with this new medium as a whole, it seems that the ability to confront the candidates and receive unmediated responses from them is what the public wants most out of a campaign in general and the forums specifically. Moreover, when on-line, streaming video becomes possible with universal broadband, the surfers will be able to *see* and *hear* the guest candidate, thereby transforming the 'confrontation' into something very close to face-to-face debate. One can expect that just as masses of voters used to attend election assemblies in order to get a glimpse of the candidate in a 'real life' situation – albeit from a distance – the 'close-up' view of virtual forums will be even more popular, just as they were in the original *agora* thousands of years ago.

Thus, for generational reasons (today's internet-savvy youth coming of voting age) and technical ones (wide-scale use of broadband), one can expect that by 2011 (two Israeli election campaigns hence) the internet will move front and centre. Until then, we can say that 2003 saw at least the start of some real internet campaigning and discourse – minor and non-influential as it may have been.

NOTES

1. Dan Jellinek, 'The Problems of Open Debate Online', July 13, 2001. Downloaded from www.voxpolitics.com/news/voxpath/story278.shtml.
2. Rachel K. Gibson and Stephen J. Ward, 'U.K. Political Parties and the Internet: "Politics as Usual" in the New Media?' *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, Vol.3, No.3 (1998), pp.14–38; Rachel K. Gibson, James L. Newell and Stephen J. Ward, 'New Parties, New Media: Italian Party Politics and the Internet', *South European Society & Politics*, Vol.5, No.1 (2000), pp.123–42; Don Lewicki and Tim Ziakus, 'The Digital Leaves of Election 2000: The Internet and the Future of Presidential Politics', *First Monday: Peer-Reviewed Journal on the Internet*, Vol.5 (12: December 2000). Downloaded from http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue5_12/lewicki/index.html; Pippa Norris, 'Preaching to the Converted? Pluralism, Participation and Party Websites', *Party Politics*, Vol.9, No.1 (2003), pp.21–45; Tkach-Kawasaki, 'Party Competition on the Internet in Japan', *Party Politics*, Vol.9, No.1 (2003), pp.105–23.
3. Lincoln Dahlberg, 'Computer-Mediated Communication and the Public Sphere: A Critical Analysis', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol.7, No.1 (October 2001). Downloaded from www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol7/issue1/dahlberg.html.
4. Nicholas Jankowski and Renee van Os, 'Internet-based Political Discourse: A Case Study of Electronic Democracy in the City of Hoogeveen', paper presented at the Euricom Colloquium: Electronic Networks & Democracy, 9–12 October 2002, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.
5. Eytan Gilboa and Yaron Katz, 'The Media Campaign: The Shift to Alternative Media', *Israel Affairs*, Vol.7, Nos.2–3 (2001), pp.223–44. Gilboa and Katz devote less than one page (p.240) to the internet during the 1999 campaign.

6. Shalom Rosenfeld, 'Ha'akbbar Me'itzig et Ha'muamadim La'bekhirot' ('The Mouse Presents Election Candidates'), *Otot*, No.222 (February 1999), pp.8, 10 and 55 (Hebrew).
7. Gilboa and Katz, 'The Media Campaign: The Shift to Alternative Media', p.240.
8. Norris, 'Preaching to the Converted? Pluralism, Participation and Party Websites', p.26. However, one should distinguish between large, established parties and smaller and/or new parties. For the latter, the internet could be very significant, as Norris argues: 'The Internet is likely to provide a more hospitable environment for competition by minor and fringe parties because, unlike free [but limited] party broadcasts, there is no central authority regulating, allocating and limiting political websites'.
9. Mark L. Clifford and Moon Ihlwan, 'The Web Site that Elected a President', *Business Week*, 24 February 2003, pp.30–31.
10. Jellinek, 'The Problems of Open Debate Online'.
11. Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989.
12. Tamar Liebes, 'Talk Shows: Ha'merkhav Ha'tzibburi He'khadash?' ('Talk Shows: The New Public Sphere?'), in Dan Caspi (ed.), *Tikshoret ve'Demokratiab be'Yisrael* (Communication and Democracy in Israel), Tel Aviv: Van Leer Institute and Kibbutz Ha'meukhad, 1997, pp.141–52 (Hebrew). Indeed, the one place where some sort of public discourse could be found in the mass media – political talk shows on Israeli TV – were barred by law from hosting any candidate running for office during the last weeks of the campaign!
13. Likud, Labour, NRP, National Union, Shinui, Green Leaf, Meretz and Tzomet.
14. Norris, 'Preaching to the Converted? Pluralism, Participation and Party Websites'.
15. For a lengthy list of such Usenet forum sites, see Anthony G. Wilhelm, 'Virtual Sounding Boards: How Deliberative is Online Political Discussion?' in Barry N. Hague and Brian D. Loader (eds.), *Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision Making in the Information Age*, London: Routledge, 1999.
16. Judith S. Donath, 'Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community', in M.A. Smith and P. Kollock (eds.), *Communities in Cyberspace*, London: Routledge, 1999, pp.29–59.
17. Gili Drov-Heistein, 'Kolot May'Hayitziyah' ('Voices from the Stands'), *Ha'ayin Ha'shvi'it*, No.43 (March 2003), p.28 (Hebrew – author's translation).
18. Vitaly J. Dubrovsky, Sara Kiesler and Beheruz N. Sethna, 'The Equalization Phenomenon: Status Effects in Computer-mediated and Face-to-face Decision-making Groups', *Human Computer Interaction*, Vol.6, No.2 (1991), pp.119–46. It also empowers those with verbal disabilities or handicaps: overly shy people, those who stutter or have other types of speech impediments. On the other hand, it hurts people who have text-based problems – dyslexics, etc. – although given the relatively loose rules of internet spelling and grammar, this is less of a handicap than it might seem at first glance.
19. Craig Calhoun, 'Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere', in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992, pp.1–50; Dror Werman, 'Ha'merkhav Ha'tzibburi shel Habermas: Nisui Makbshavti o Ni'sayon Histori?' ('Habermas's Public Sphere: Intellectual Experiment or Historical Experience?'), *Dvorim Akhadim*, Vol.1 (Fall 1997), pp.34–45 (Hebrew).
20. Elizabeth Eisenstein, 'The Rise of the Reading Public', in David Crowley and Paul Heyer (eds.), *Communication in History: Technology, Culture, Society*, New York: Longman Publishing Group, 1991, pp.94–102.
21. Douglas Kellner, 'Intellectuals and New Technologies', *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol.3 (1995), pp.427–48.
22. Despite repeated requests, neither the Likud nor Labour was willing to talk about the internet campaign. The four interviews were conducted with Tomer Preize (National Union), Roni Einav (Meretz), Rehavia Berman (Green Leaf) and Ro'i Lachmanovitz (Shas).
23. See below in the forum methodology for an explanation of how the days were selected. The number here is 19 as opposed to 18 with the forums because of data overload in January for the forums, necessitating skipping a day that we had originally planned to study. Scoring the sites was a much easier task.
24. Gibson and Ward, 'U.K. Political Parties and the Internet: "Politics as Usual" in the New Media?'; Tkach-Kawasaki, 'Party Competition on the Internet in Japan'; Gibson *et al.*, 'New Parties, New Media: Italian Party Politics and the Internet'; Lewicki and Ziakus, 'The Digital Leaves of Election 2000: The Internet and the Future of Presidential Politics';

- Sonia Puopolo, 'The Web and U.S. Senatorial Campaigns, 2000', *The American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol.44, No.12 (2001), pp.2030–47.
25. Wilhelm, 'Virtual Sounding Boards: How Deliberative is Online Political Discussion?', p.167.
 26. The sixth category here – type of argumentation – is less fully fleshed out than Wilhelm's typology, which went more into depth on several aspects of the discussion: 'providing information', 'seeking information', 'seeding a discussion', 'incorporating ideas from others', 'replying to another message', 'homogeneity relative to dominant public agenda', and 'content that can be logically validated'. On the other hand, the present study surveyed almost *ten* times the number of entries that he did (4,797 vs. 500).
 27. James S. Fishkin, *The Dialogue of Justice: Toward a Self-Reflective Society*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992. As Fishkin notes, two time-related aspects are crucial: exchanging political messages of substance at length, and the opportunity for reflecting on these messages, as well as for ongoing debate.
 28. Simone Chambers, *Reasonable Democracy: Jurgen Habermas and the Politics of Discourse*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.
 29. Wilhelm, 'Virtual Sounding Boards: How Deliberative is Online Political Discussion?'
 30. James Bohman and William Rehg (eds.), *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997.
 31. Joan Korenman and Nancy Wyatt, 'Group Dynamics in an E-mail Forum', in Susan C. Herring (ed.), *Computer-mediated Communication: Linguistics, Social and Cross-cultural Perspectives*, Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, 1996, pp.225–42; Tom Postmes, Russell Spears and Martin Lea, 'Breaching or Building Social Boundaries: SIDE-Effects of Computer-mediated Communication', *Communication Research*, Vol.25, No.6 (1998), pp.689–715.
 32. Patrick B. O'Sullivan and Andrew J. Flanagin, 'Reconceptualizing "Flaming" and Other Problematic Messages', *New Media & Society*, Vol.5, No.1 (2003), pp.69–94; Joseph M. Kayany, 'Contexts of Uninhibited Online Behavior: Flaming in Social Newsgroups on Usenet', *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, Vol.49, No.12 (1998), pp.1135–41; Mark Dery, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994.
 33. O'Sullivan and Flanagin, 'Reconceptualizing "Flaming" and Other Problematic Messages', p.73. Admittedly, there are several methodological problems involved here, so that no claim is made for highly precise accuracy on the scores obtained; rather, they should be viewed as a *general* tendency in one direction or another. One problem among others, what may seem to be a serious case of mutual cursing and recrimination to an outside observer, might actually be a 'marker of relationship closeness' between friends and a sign of mutual respect (e.g. two Afro-Americans calling each other 'nigger'). Thus, the coder of such forum discussions needs a high level of semantic 'intuition' to differentiate actual flaming from something quite the opposite!
 34. Interestingly, such 'meet-the-candidate' forums occurred only on the two institutional-commercial sites. For those days scored, these were the dates, guest's name, party affiliation, as well as the number of entries and participants in that order: *Nana*: 29/12 – Tommy Lapid, *Shimui* (67 + 29); 2/1 – Yossi Sarid, *Meretz* (56 + 21); 5/1 – Yuval Steinitz, *Likud* (56 + 24); 12/1 – Gideon Saar, *Likud* (103 + 29); 13/1 – Natan Sharansky, *Yisrael B'Aliya* (83 + 23); 19/1 – Michael Kleiner, *Herut* (113 + 48); 22/1 – Yossi Beilin, *Meretz* (58 + 19); 26/1 – Moshe Green, *New Tzomet* (70 + 35). *Tapuz*: 5/12 – Yulii Edelstein, *Israel B'Aliya* (54 + 26); 29/12 – Roni Bart, *Tikva Le'Yisrael* (non-party social movement) (31 + 15); 29/12 – Zvulun Orlev, *National Religious Party* (69 + 30); 8/1 – Moshe Green, *New Tzomet* (71 + 26); 8/1 – David Magen, *Centre*(51 + 30).
 35. David A. Dulio, Donald L. Goff and James A. Thurber, 'Untangled Web: Internet Use during the 1998 Election', *PS* (March 1999), pp.53–9.
 36. To be sure, the parties may not have enabled real debate on purpose. As Jellinek suggests (Jellinek, 'The Problems of Open Debate Online'), parties are not obliged to provide a service that could expose them to attack within their own 'home'(page)!
 37. Norris, 'Preaching to the Converted? Pluralism, Participation and Party Websites', p.26.
 38. As the Green Leaf campaign manager noted: 'We are internet people living in an internet generation'.
 39. Stephen J. Ward and Rachel K. Gibson, 'The First Internet Election? UK Political Parties and Campaigning in Cyberspace', in Ivor Crewe, Brian Gottschalk and John Bartle (eds.), *Political*

Communications: Why Labour Won the General Election of 1997, London: Frank Cass, 1998, pp.101–2.

40. Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1997, p.370.
41. While the scale used here is more nuanced than the simple dichotomous 'yes/no' score of Wilhelm regarding arguments that can be validated, it is interesting to note that whereas about 75 per cent of the forum entries he studied included an argument that could be validated, the proportion of entries scoring four or lower on our scale (i.e. had some measure of rational argumentation) was closer to 85 per cent. In other words, our Israeli discussants certainly were not less rational than their American counterparts during the 1996 presidential election campaign.
42. For Tapuz netiquette rules, for example, see www.tapuz.co.il/TapuzForum/main/rules.asp. As with most forums, they glorify freedom of expression but have a comprehensive list of prohibited behaviour, including insulting others in the forum, libel and hate speech, as well as not sticking to the general topic at hand.
43. Cass Sunstein, *republic.com*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
44. Indeed, a cursory analysis of the discussions on the party sites' forums reinforces Sunstein's argument about 'group polarization', i.e. such sites tend to attract like-minded people who then proceed not only to reinforce their own positions but also actually distance the group's position from other groups (in this case, parties). Future studies of this sort might do well to more thoroughly investigate the differences between discourse on party forums compared to the public forums that are the focus of the present article.
45. Pam Fielding and Nicole Duritz (n.d.), 'Net Savvy Challengers Win Online and at the Ballot Box', in Stephen Coleman (ed.), *Elections in the Age of the Internet*. Downloaded from www.hansardsociety.org.uk/ElectionsInTheAgeofInternet.pdf. A very recent example is that of Howard Dean, who has used the internet to great effect in his run for the Democratic Party nomination for the US presidency.
46. Of course, there are also older Shas supporters. However, given the much higher birthrate among the ultra-Orthodox and a somewhat higher rate among Jews from Arab countries, the preponderance of potential voters for Shas comes from the younger generation.
47. 'Political knowledgeability' is obviously an amorphous term, hard to prove empirically. However, Israelis consistently rank high internationally in print news readership and radio news listening, not to mention voter turnout (excluding the Arab-Israeli sector, many of whom boycott elections for political reasons, and Israelis residing outside Israel, who are barred from casting a ballot overseas, voting participation rates reach 90 per cent and even above that).
48. Kim Jung Min, 'Caught in a Political Net', *Far Eastern Economic Review* (November 2001), pp.49–50. An indication of such a trend can be seen in the 2001 British elections. A MORI poll found that whereas only six per cent of the overall voting public with internet/e-mail access said that it had a 'very or fairly important' influence on their vote, the proportion almost tripled (17 per cent) among the 18–24 year-olds. Stephen Coleman, 'Online Campaigning', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol.54, No.4 (2001), pp.679–88.