

Technology, popular culture and everyday life: The electoral defeat of New Zealand Internet MANA

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Abstract. The development of the Internet and social platforms was expected to have a profound impact on citizens' ability to influence politics, transforming traditional methods of political communication. This article examines the digital campaign strategy of the Internet MANA alliance during the 2014 New Zealand General Election. Internet MANA adopted digital strategies that had proven successful overseas and had the potential to radically transform New Zealand politics. The campaign, however, culminated in a disastrous electoral defeat. The article argues that online media strategies alone cannot explain election outcomes. Instead, we need to explore the ways in which digital campaign strategies interact with the electoral system, mainstream media and political 'brands'. Going beyond the specifics of New Zealand politics, this article raises questions about the role of technology on political communication practices.

Keywords: Political communication, digital politics, democracy and technology, politics and popular culture, New Zealand politics

1. Introduction

In March 2014, Kim Dotcom, founder of the file sharing website Megaupload, wanted in the United States for copyright infringements, formed the Internet Party to fight the 2014 New Zealand General Election. The new party targeted young, disenfranchised voters [1], the voiceless 'internet generation', and ran on a manifesto that called for technological freedom and the development of an accountable and 'responsive' government. Unlikely to gain the necessary 5% of the vote in New Zealand's mixed member proportional representation (MMP) system, the Internet Party joined forces with MANA, an offshoot of the Māori Party,¹ in May 2014. MANA was an activist left-wing movement, which rejected mainstream politics to champion the rights of the underrepresented Māori and the poor [2].

Strategically, this alliance was fitting: four months before the General Election, polls indicated that MANA would fail to reach the 5% threshold needed to guarantee parliamentary representation. The Internet Party was projected at an even lower gain (1%) [3]. Individually, the parties would have no chance of being represented in the next Parliament. Yet, together, their prospect to gain parliamentary seats would be much greater. Secondly, the Internet-MANA alliance made financial sense. Dotcom had nearly

¹The separation had taken place in 2011, when the Māori Party had joined the National Party in a conservative government coalition.

£2 m (NZ\$3.5 m [4]) available to spend on the campaign, but, due to limits on party spending, it needed more candidates. MANA would supply these in exchange for a financial boost. Thirdly, Internet and MANA were united in their ideological incoherence.² They ran on a shared platform that valued civil liberties and opposed the governing National Party [5]. They campaigned for ‘an open, free, fair, connected and innovative society’, in ‘the spirit of the Internet’. They targeted the 42% of 18–24-year-olds, who had failed to turn out to vote in the last two elections [6]. Finally, they adopted a communicative strategy boosted by the relatively low cost, openness, ease of access and streamlined organisational hierarchies of the internet [7], which had traditionally benefitted new political entities, aspiring to dislodge the power of traditional politics.³

Using the Internet MANA alliance as a case study, this article investigates how new and unconventional online communication strategies were used to address low voter turnout and disrupt politics-as-usual in the 2014 New Zealand General Election. It does so by reflecting on the role that ideology, the New Zealand political system and traditional media played in offsetting these strategies. It finally evaluates whether online tools, communication and communities transformed political discourse in New Zealand.

2. Political discourse and technology

Political parties seeking to influence the political process rely on technology to deliver their message [8]. In recent years, the internet has been seen as an effective tool not only to deliver votes but also to change ‘politics as usual’ [9,10], especially in the U.S., where technology has been used in unconventional ways to rally supporters and raise funds for the presidential bid [11,12]. Scholars argue that technology creates a virtual public sphere [13], in which the traditional one-directional mode of communication is replaced by a more participatory and multidimensional flow of information between politicians and citizens. This dialectic process is seen as guaranteeing a more transparent [14] and accountable system, which facilitates a more direct, personal and intimate relationship between candidate and voter [15]. This, of course, does not mean that online communication from candidates and parties create more sophisticated forms of deliberative or even affective democracy [13]. It remains to be seen, for instance, whether this dialogue that the internet is seen to facilitate between politicians and voters translates to votes [16]. In other words, it is impossible to establish a direct and causal correlation between political communication and electoral results (see for instance [17–19]).

At the heart of any discussion about the role of the internet in election campaigns is a concern that democracy is in crisis and that especially young people are no longer engaged with the democratic process [20]. Digital media are seen as the tools that will resolve this crisis by facilitating discussion and participation in politics. The thought is that, thanks to digital media, citizens will have the power to affect the outcome of the political process by maximising their understanding of it. Digital media will remedy traditional divides by equalising access and reaching out to new sections of the population [21]. There

²The full manifesto for Internet MANA was posted on Facebook close to Election Day [117]: ‘if you want NZ to lead the world in green technologies, if you want the Internet to remain open and free, [...] object to mass surveillance by the government, [...] want to see child poverty eliminated, [...] think tertiary education should be free, [are] sick of hearing politicians lie, [...] agree that Maori language is part of our culture, [...] want sensible drug laws, [...] oppose the TPPA, [...] think New Zealand should set an awesome example for the world to follow, [vote Internet MANA]’.

³In the discussion of the 2014 New Zealand General Election campaign, I will refer to Internet MANA’s communication strategy as one, although the Internet Party was more sophisticated than MANA in its use of digital tools.

is no evidence to suggest that technology alone can resolve systemic problems, such as the democratic deficit. In fact, politics and technology exist in a dialectic relationship [22], in which technological developments in systems of political communication operate alongside structural rules of the polity [23]. In order to understand his complex relationship between democracy and technology, we need to take into consideration questions around electoral and party funding rules, how established parties are, guidelines around duration of campaigns, the tone of political advertising and so on. The case of Internet MANA's communication strategy during the 2014 New Zealand General Election well illustrates the need for a multi-layered approach to understand this multi-dimensional relationship.

3. Ideology and personality politics

The strategic and financially viable alliance between the Internet Party and MANA allowed the two groups to unite despite their ideological differences. Their message targeted the young and forgotten internet generation, which was to shape the party's ideological direction. As the party media advisor put it: 'that's a good reason not to plant ourselves right or left or whatever' [24]. Their policies were to follow the same logic. A few months before the election, Internet MANA set out their vision in a press release [25]: the 'tired and adversarial political system that has lost touch with [...] the Internet generation' was to become 'a young and smart government that works for us, not against us'. The objective of policy-making was to 'make New Zealand a better place for all'. The role of Internet MANA was 'to change the election outcome by changing what the election is about'. The populist slant of these statements was semantic more than ideological. In fact, the Alliance lacked a clear political identity. Internet MANA joined two distinct political groups and tried to exploit the differences between them to appeal to different constituencies. MANA was 'anti-neoliberal, against monopoly capitalism and against privatisation of the people's assets' [26]. The Internet Party's ethos was organised around its founder's ideas of individual rights and freedom and seemed to derive directly from his own experience as an internet-pioneer-turned-outlaw. Internet MANA's message combined ideological contradictions typical of lulz [27] and hacking culture [28] and the message of change, action and endless opportunity [29] of protest movements. Its articulation of policy concerns aimed at appealing to a larger pool of voters and therefore mattered in valence terms [30] more than ideological ones.

The struggle to articulate a specific ideological position was further complicated by the role that personality politics played in the dynamics of the alliance. Notionally, Laila Harré was Internet MANA's leader, Hone Harawira its co-founder and first candidate and Kim Dotcom the funder. Yet, this division of labour seemed to create leadership confusion in terms of decision-power. Harré acted as the Party's spokesperson, delivering speeches and illustrating policy, both online (especially on YouTube, the party website and 'the new policy incubator' on loomio [31]) and at political events. However, Harré's political authority was often overshadowed both by herself (by placing herself in a secondary position after Dotcom: 'Dotcom outlines his reasons for starting the Internet Party [...] to announce our new leader – Laila Harré' [32]) and by others. For instance, PM John Key reportedly called Dotcom Harre's 'sugar daddy' (for subsidising Internet MANA) [33]. The absence of clarity around Internet MANA's leader had the dual effect to discredit Harré's leadership and muddle the alliance's political standing.

Harawira's fraught leadership added to the ideological inconsistency of the alliance. He had struggled with credibility as a leader since splitting from the Maori Party by failing to appeal to a more left-leaning Māori vote and only managing 1% of the vote in the previous election [34]. The alliance with the Internet Party had made matters worse: it had been seen as a 'marriage of convenience' [35] that had brought in cash, but had further confused its younger, more radical, voter's base [36].

Kim Dotcom, unable to stand for election as non-naturalised, filled this leadership vacuum at least online. He presented himself as the face of the Internet Party and the saviour of politics-as-we-know-it. For instance, in the YouTube video *Project: Manifesto* [37] he ridicules the short-sightedness of John Key and Barack Obama for thinking that Internet Party policies are untenable. In the video, the cameo characters naively ask ‘if this works, we won’t even need the military? [...] We won’t need oil anymore?’. At every stage of the short film, Dotcom contemptuously looks down on the seasoned politicians shaking his head, offering his political know-how as the only logical alternative. Similarly, during the *Moment of Truth* (a public meeting, organised five days before the General Election) Dotcom, Glenn Greenwald⁴ and Harri were joined via video conference by Edward Snowden and Julian Assange to unequivocally uncover New Zealand’s involvement in and support for the mass surveillance carried out by the American NSA. The event was however so entangled with details of Dotcom’s personal life and struggle against extradition to the United States that it became the subject of national contempt and ridicule. As one National Minister put it: ‘what we had on screen was a group of people, mostly from overseas, brought in [...] to tell New Zealanders how they should vote in five days’ time. They were there to reveal to New Zealanders they had been apparently duped by the governing party. [...] It had overtones of the dumb locals being lectured by international types who knew best’ [38].⁵

This judgement of Dotcom’s persona was not isolated. It was the focus of both media attention and personal attacks from all sides. By pushing his own personal agenda he became viewed as ‘an outsider and an “underdog” [...] fighting the “Establishment”’ [39]. Ultimately, the Dotcom brand became tainted by an over-emphasis on personality, which played out in the New Zealand political arena as it would in a soap opera [40]. Dotcom, however, failed to appear ‘like us’. Instead, by offering himself as the face of the party and heart of the campaign, Dotcom offered priceless political fuel to negative campaigning and became peripheral: a distraction from what ‘ordinary Kiwis’⁶ really need and care about. Technology alone was seen as able to neutralise this portrayal of Dotcom as self-interested and of the alliance as ideologically incoherent [41]. This techno-utopian solution [42] offered by Internet MANA aimed at resolving the democratic deficit brought about by citizens’ mistrust of politicians. By facilitating transparency, technology would empower ‘the people’ to rise against an unaccountable government and change the status quo.

The next sections explore this digital strategy. The data collected for this study includes Internet Party tweets (excluding RTs and replies), Facebook and YouTube posts and website entries⁷ from the launch of the party (27/03/2014: the unofficial start of the campaign), to the day of the General Election (20/09/2014). Choosing multiple platforms served the purpose to capture distinctive communicative styles aimed at different target voters [43]. Tweets were collected through Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet v6.1 [44] by searching for the @InternetPartyNZ account each week. Given the less restrictive policies of other platforms, all remaining data was collected and archived through an Excel spreadsheet throughout the campaign. The data was then coded for three variables: information, engagement and participation as measures of campaign efficacy. Since online media had proven to be useful tools for raising awareness, mobilising voters and facilitating political action elsewhere (see for instance [45]), interrogating this data for these variables would provide a comparable data set for New Zealand. The

⁴The American journalist and constitutional lawyer.

⁵In 2014, Steven Joyce was part of the National Government and Minister for Economic Development, Regulatory Reform, Science and Innovation, Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment.

⁶John Key famously described himself as ‘an ordinary Kiwi bloke’.

⁷The Internet Party also used Meetup and Loomio. These platforms were not as far-reaching in New Zealand during the 2014 General Election campaign. This data is therefore not included.

patterns that emerge from the analysis of this data tell a story that is both specific to New Zealand and sheds light on the role that digital platforms play in democratic practices.

4. Technology and democracy

Internet MANA's online presence during the 2014 campaign cycle was one of the highest among all parties [46]. All Internet Party candidates had a Twitter account, which they used to provide snappy shortcuts to lengthier pieces posted on both the Internet Party website and YouTube. MANA had a stronger presence on Facebook, which cross-linked to other platforms. The next three sections investigate the content of this communication. They are organised around their apparent purpose: to deliver information, to engage voters by addressing their concerns and to create a sense of community to facilitate collective action. These patterns are both consistent with traditional models of political communication [47,48] and include unconventional political messages with affective communicative qualities [49,50]. The analysis of this content engages with the complexities of online communicative strategies [51] by exploring the multi-layered dynamics typical of the New Zealand polity and the affordances of the platforms used for this communication.

4.1. Delivering information

An informed citizenry is a key component of democratic societies. Parties rely on the visibility that the news media afford them to reach voters. Pluralism of voices is hence one of the most important element of a democratic system. Whereas well-established parties rely on media teams to disseminate the party message, smaller and newer parties struggle to reach the same visibility and, ultimately, credibility. MMP systems exacerbate this situation: candidates seeking election need both party and individual votes. This makes the availability of reliable and unbiased information about candidates and their policies as important as actual exposure [52].

During the 2014 election campaign, Internet MANA were newsworthy and, as such, were given extensive coverage. However, news stories about them were often driven by 'dramatic, controversial or conflict' ridden narratives [53] both in mainstream media and the blogosphere. Blogs play a core part in New Zealand's highly commercialised and privately-owned media landscape. They provide additional news [54], albeit from openly partisan perspectives [55]. By the end of the election cycle, there were 269 blogs [56], which attracted varying levels of public interest.⁸ *The Daily Blog* (associated with Internet MANA), the third most-accessed blog, had approximately seven times less public views, compared to *Whale Oil* and *Kiwiblog*,⁹ open allies of the right-wing *National Party*. Additionally, politicians from all sides of the political spectrum worked to discredit Internet MANA through negative campaigning, a pervasive practice in this election [57]. The alliance was labelled a 'circus' [58], a 'con job' [59], 'the [...] dirtiest deal in New Zealand political history' [60]. MANA had 'sold out' and become 'the political plaything' of Dotcom: 'a discredited German' [61], who was 'pulling [all] the strings' [62].

Internet MANA took to the blogosphere to denounce this overtly negative scrutiny (see for instance [63,64]) and party leader, Laila Harré, fronted an alternative YouTube news bulletin, 'Not the Six O'Clock News' to create a counter-narrative. These platforms were used by Internet MANA as

⁸Measured in page views/month.

⁹On 1 October 2014, *The Daily Blog* views per month were 813,779; *Whale Oil*: 5,309,045; *Kiwiblog*: 1,093,806 [56].

sources of information in their own right: they would both raise awareness about the perceived wrongful treatment of the party by the news media and inform potential supporters about the alliance, what they stood for and their vision for the future. For instance, they provided daily updates on membership ('Since 6 pm tonight, we've had 15 new members join #InternetParty' [65]), institutional status ('This morning #InternetParty applied to officially register as a political party' [66]), mission statement ('This blog post sums up why we started the #InternetParty' [67]), policies and manifesto ('Yesterday, we launched the first of many draft policies. We will incorporate your feedback, ideas and comments before forming our final manifesto' [68,69]).

Social media became ideal platforms to spell out simplified versions of policy plans. From equality ('[we] will work to close the digital divide' [70]; 'We will support all measures to end discrimination' [71]), to technological innovation (#NetNeutrality, #OpenSourceGovt), to defending individual freedoms ('It's time to take back our privacy' [72]), to advocating national sovereignty ('New Zealand currently ranks #1 in the Social Progress Index, above the US. Why should they dictate our laws?' [73]). In line with its unconventional approach to politics, Internet MANA transformed complex policy concerns into messages that were emoticon-filled, hashtagged, liked, shared, cross-referenced, storified, shortened to 140-character and accessible on a smartphone.

This sophisticated and sustained use of social media as a campaigning tool to share information about the party reflected Internet MANA's goal to attract a younger, disenfranchised generation of first-time and non-voters: 'many #InternetParty voters aren't who the polling companies call' [74]. Popular online platforms were not the only way Internet MANA targeted these voters. They also spoke their language ('Our policy forum is rocking along – with heaps of great ideas and observations rolling in from you' [75]) and shared their interests ('We need to educate for the digital future [...] and we love #Minecraft' [70]). Its candidates included a hip-hop star and a former musician. In *X-Factor* and *Pop Idol*-style auditions, aspirant politicians were asked to debate issues ranging from 'education, surveillance and internet freedom' [76] to the colour of the All Blacks jersey [77]. This is of course nothing new. The reality TV type selection process, aimed at popularising politics [78] and the use of celebrities to speak on behalf of 'the people' [79] are personalised politics techniques adopted elsewhere before [80]. It nonetheless marked an attempt to connect to a section of voters traditionally deaf to the language of conventional politics through the tools of popular culture.

Sharing both vernacular and cultural pursuits provided Internet MANA with a launch pad for discussing ideological concerns: 'Can #TwitchPlaysPokemon inform our thinking about democracy?' [81]; 'Do we already live in the world of "Her"?'¹⁰ [82]. The ideological stance encapsulated in these posts was however superseded by Internet MANA's attempt to attract voters from a diverse ideological background: 'We're hosting a series of a-political policy development events' [83]. Popular and digital culture were thus used to create a sense of possibility. According to this narrative, freedom, democracy and individual rights should not be seen as abstract concepts. Instead, they became achievable aims that we can all aspire to in our everyday lives: '[...] We believe New Zealanders who want to watch the latest season of [...] shows like *Games of Thrones* shouldn't be forced to jump through hoops to access what should be legally and easily available online' [84]. In this logic, technology that is free from the hand of a 'paternalistic' state [85] opens up cyberlibertarian possibilities [86] that extend from radical politics to the freedom to download a television programme.

Information sharing was key in Internet MANA's campaign strategy during this election. The focus on technology (to address systemic issues) and the language of popular culture (of those traditionally

¹⁰Spike Jonze's film, 2014.

put off by politics) marked the alliance' attempt to bring politics back to the people and set it apart from existing parties. One of the ways in which technology is seen as enhancing democracy is measured by the extent to which it can be used to raise awareness of political structures and processes. Internet MANA used digital platforms to counter the negative narratives created by mainstream media and other parties. So, not only was the information distributed through these platforms necessary to raise awareness about the alliance' and what it stood for. It was also presented as an alternative voice that made New Zealand media a more pluralistic place and Internet MANA a reliable alternative.

4.2. *Engaging ordinary people*

Digital media was also used to engage potential voters in meaningful political discussion and debate by urging them to respond to initiatives, post comments and provide feedback. Internet MANA encouraged political engagement in three ways: by rallying supporters, encouraging feedback and inviting policy discussion. Technology was once again not simply used as a tool. In the strategy of Internet MANA, it became the very essence of engagement: asking potential voters to use technology equalled their political engagement. In March 2014, the Electoral Commission approved a phone app that allowed Internet MANA supporters to join the party for £0.70 (NZ\$1.29). The day after, the party had 500 registered members: the number they needed to stand at the Election [87]. Technology, as well as voters' registration, granted legitimacy to the party. Asking voters to use technology then became synonym for politically engaging with the democratic process. '7 hours. 500 #InternetParty members. Thanks for the support and keep it coming!' [88] was used as the call-to-arms for the internet generation to become involved in the political process. 'Following', 'liking' and 'retweeting' Internet MANA's activities became tools for political engagement and action: 'Come along and meet your local candidate and help take action to get the word out about Internet MANA' [89]. The thought was that technology would give power back to the people. According to this logic, contributing to a Wikipedia entry ('Anything you want to add? #CrowdSourcing #PowerToThePeople' [90]) would be a low-cost [91,92] crowdsourcing endeavour and the payoffs could be substantial in political terms. So, engagement with online platforms and tools became a shortcut for reinventing offline democratic practices.

The second way in which Internet MANA engaged its supporters was by soliciting feedback. Technology and popular culture were at the heart of this strategy; they would translate complex political matters into a language that was more accessible to a new generation of voters. The logic suggested that, by popularising politics, Internet MANA would change traditional policy-making practices and non-voters would become more interested in it: 'Just finished S1 of House of Cards. [...] More or less brutal than real life politics in election year?' [93]; 'Tired of political cuts? [...] "Political Cuts" is a pop up salon offering cheap coffee and free haircuts for young people keen to engage in political discussion' [94]. By situating the campaign both online and offline Internet MANA attempted to make engaging with politics less encumbering; more pleasurable. Supporters were invited to a free 'Party Party', to celebrate Dotcom's 40th birthday and hear about the party strategy: 'The best way to get the message across – the importance of exercising your democratic right – is to celebrate with an entertaining night of [...] musical action' [95].¹¹ The idea was that, popular culture would make politics more relevant to ordinary people [96,97]. Those who wanted to change the status quo could do so at the '#InternetParty Members Only Picnic at the @kimdotcom Mansion' [98]. The suggestion was that entertainment and politics are

¹¹The free event would offer food and drinks to the registered 25,000. The Electoral Commission saw it as an attempt to buy votes and therefore in breach Electoral Law. The event was eventually cancelled [118].

interconnected it would therefore be misguided to judge the act of coming together to listen to music and talk to each other, whether on- or off-line, as a form of slacktivism irrelevant to the political process [99]. Instead, in Internet MANA's communicative strategy, these acts should be seen as a solution to low turn-out and a path towards a more deliberative model of democracy. For instance, online deliberation around policy-making was encouraged: 'Our video team [...] hit the streets of Wellington to find out if online privacy was important to people' [69]. Policy, in this perspective, was not to be imposed from above. Instead, 'we want you to be involved every step of the way. [...] our policy development websites [...] will allow you to discuss, debate and shape our policies [...]. Lets [sic] work together' [100].

By having a manifesto drawn up by 'the people', Internet MANA aimed at distinguishing itself from the disconnect created by politics-as-usual. The claim was that the alliance spoke on behalf of citizens, by taking into account their needs and concerns. Technology was treated as key, both strategically and rhetorically: hashtags were to create a sense of belonging and mobilise supporters [101]. They were to virtually translate politics into a language that young, technologically savvy voters would understand. #thisisgoingtobeawesome, #InstallChange and other hashtags would be a shortcut to the complex world of political rights and responsibilities. Through technology politicians would be held accountable; failure to represent their constituents should be seen as a breach of their remit: 'Govts are not put in place to represent their own best interests, they are voted in to lead & represent us. Abuses of power must be exposed' [102]. Technology was to resolve citizen's mistrust in politics: 'Govt departments should have their own apps to improve their relationships with citizens' [103]; 'The govt is listening to you, but the #InternetParty hears you. We will incorporate your comments and ideas into our final #Privacy policy' [104]. In this logic, 'you' 'can help change the course of New Zealand history [and] empower people to make a difference by urging them to vote on [...] election day. [...] Voting is modern day protest'. In this logic, technology empowers the voter and allows new parties, like Internet MANA, untouched by the failure of traditional politics, to facilitate this process: 'please click on 'Support with Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr' to add your influence' [105].

4.3. Facilitating political participation

Political participation is a contested term, especially when it comes to evaluating the role of online tools. In traditional political science, citizens participate in the political sphere when their actions aim at changing decision-making practices within existing political organisations [106]. The collective actions encouraged through digital tools are often seen as distractions from 'real' political commitment, rather than means to express political preferences based on traditional loyalties. Internet MANA aimed at encouraging participation and single-issue protest by using online media. Action and change were to take place simultaneously online and offline. Online media were to facilitate political efficacy by giving the voiceless and the disengaged a voice to drive change, rather than endure it.

Facilitating the strategic alliance between the Internet Party and MANA would be the starting point: '[...] an exciting opportunity to help change the government in this election. [...] We need to register it with the Electoral Commission' [107]. Next was to be a stripped-down, bottom-up approach to representatives' selection: 'Meet the team that will #InstallChange this election. [...] our list of candidates, selected based on member feedback, as well as intensive interviews' [108]. Allowing party members to choose candidates meant empowering them to have a say in whom would speak on their behalf.

Technology was also used to enable political efficacy by harnessing the power of the many to change the status quo: 'Let's fix NZ #privacy #education #jobs #housing #health #digitalrights #innovation #transparency [sic]' [109]; 'Time to switch democracy back' [68]. The active verbs used in these tweets

encouraged supporters to take action against an unaccountable government and reclaim ‘our’ democratic rights. Explicitly advocating offline action in conjunction with online activity, Internet MANA aimed at reversing a trend: it claimed that change will happen if ‘you’ vote for the party that fulfils its promises of a better society (‘We like #RegimeChange! Good practice for September 20 #bringdowntheking; [110]) and protesting against policies that threaten New Zealand’s right to self-govern (‘Lets stand up for an #IndependentNZ in the capital’ [103]).

In Internet MANA’s communication strategy, online and offline worlds were closely tied together: in order to reinvigorate democracy, political parties need to reach out to the many in unconventional ways. This is how the traditionally disengaged will come together in collective action and reverse the crisis of democracy that affects western democracies. The use of different digital platforms reflected this understanding of the relationship between politics and technology: Twitter provided small political-bites to more comprehensive explanations on Facebook, YouTube and the Internet Party website. Where Facebook made available a virtual map to events through visual-aids, YouTube constructed a narrative through videos, games and popular culture. In the rhetoric of Internet MANA, online activities can have real impact on civic life, as long as citizens possess accurate information about all the available options and are given both a voice and the tools to engage in the public sphere and participate in collective action.

5. Conclusion

Despite the electoral defeat of Internet MANA, it would be misguided to dismiss its communication strategy as inconsequential. The Alliance’s use of multiple digital platforms to share an alternative point of view with its potential voters, to encourage public debate about the state of New Zealand affairs and policy-making practices and to empower different sections of voters to participate in collective action had the potential to be a paradigmatic one. This article argued that Internet MANA’s innovative online strategy was insufficient to drive electoral change because of other dynamics at play both at structural level (such as allocations of resources, the electoral system and plurality of voices [111]) and at the level of personality politics. Going beyond the specifics of New Zealand politics, this is a significant finding: it points to the thought that technology may be able to transform the modes of political communication (in terms of how political communication is distributed, its content and reach), but it cannot alone be used to explain election results.

Despite the considerable sums available and spent on the campaign, Internet MANA did not gain any seats.¹² This may have been due to the fact that, in the 2014 General Election, traditional news media (such as television advertising and billboards [112]), as well as negative campaigning, played a more significant role than digital media in setting the agenda [113]. There is no academic evidence to suggest that negative campaigning has an effect on elections outcomes, especially in multi-party systems [114]. However, a combination of MMP electoral system (which encourages strategic voting and had historically been less favourable to smaller parties¹³) and a lack of plurality of voices may have hindered the efforts of Internet MANA’s digital strategy. Additionally, ideological incoherence and personality politics played a significant role in the alliance’s perceived lack of legitimacy. On election

¹²In 1994, Act, a newly-formed libertarian party, spent more than any other party and modernised its communication system [119]. The result was a 6.1% gain (8 seats) [39].

¹³After MMP was introduced in New Zealand in 1996, smaller parties consistently lost out to more established parties: from 39% of the overall vote in 1996 [120] to 21%, in 2008 [121].

night, Dotcom stated: 'I take full responsibility for this loss tonight, because the brand Kim Dotcom was poison for what we were trying to achieve' [115]. This *mea culpa* well summarised the tension at the core of Internet MANA: a personal project of his self-appointed narcissistic [116] figurehead vis-a-vis a party that adopted unconventional affective strategies to engage the internet generation and recalibrate the power imbalance in New Zealand politics.

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