

## **Norwegian Parties and Web 2.0:**

*Alpha-testing without a sandbox?*

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## Abstract

This paper analyses how Norwegian political parties handled the appearance of Web 2.0, focusing on the campaign for the local elections in September 2007.

During 2007 Facebook became the most popular website in Norway, with YouTube rising to number three. The political parties appeared bewildered by the phenomenon, indicating a similar stage at which they were some years earlier with Web 1.0. But as local elections were coming up in September 2007, most parties felt they had to do “something”. This paper analyses all seven parliamentary parties and four smaller parties outside parliament during “the long campaign”, focusing on Facebook, YouTube and blogging.

Central topics in the discussion:

1. Explaining variations in party strategies towards Web 2.0
2. Whether the use of Web 2.0 might:
  - a. Enhance participatory democracy by lowering the threshold for involvement of party grassroots and –sympathisers
  - b. Enhance the competitive aspects of democracy by increasing the visibility of parties that attract little attention from the mass media and lack the resources to advertise.

The data show that all parties were uncertain of the political potential of Web 2.0, but also great variations in their determination and ability to formulate and implement a strategy. Parties representing socialist or post materialist values were the most positive. Factors like party size, material resources, or (lack of) media attention did not appear to be systematically related with Web 2.0-strategy. Consequently, the effects related to enhancing participatory or competitive forms of democracy are also highly ambiguous. The fact that party politics on Web 2.0 still is a marginal activity and at an experimental stage, add to this ambiguity.

# 1. Introduction

The political impact of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has fascinated researchers for a long time. The introduction of the graphical web interface in the mid-1990s, through browsers such as Mosaic and Netscape, triggered the break-through of the Internet as a channel for political communication. During the subsequent years most political parties of the established democracies have established their presence on the internet, the party web site being a common standard. Margetts (2001) introduced the concept of "cyber parties" to describe the ICT-based party of the future. However, at the present time politics are still mainly conducted through more traditional places than "cyberspace".

As remarked by Tim Berners-Lee, the World Wide Web was intended as a platform for exchange of information and multilateral communication from the start. Amaya, the web browser developed by the W3 Consortium, provided an interface for viewing and editing hyperlinked documents accessible on the web. Furthermore, newsgroups, mailing lists, chat rooms, bulletin boards existed even before the WWW, Hence, the technological preconditions for multilateral communication, networking and user generated contents in general existed right from the start.

The Internet and the WWW therefore seemed the ideal forum to revitalize a liberal democracy which for several years had been diagnosed as "decaying", through professionalization, lack of participation and even cartelization in the party system. The most ambitious cyber democrats, with participative (or discursive) leaning predicted that the internet would lead to increased grassroots involvement in campaigning, public discussion and formulation of policies. A less ambitious, but still optimistic, version of cyber democracy would expect the internet to generate a more pluralist or competitive form of democracy. As public access to the internet broadened, it would become a cheap and effective platform to market meaningful political alternatives for voters.

A decade later interest and involvement in politics is lower than ever, even in the former East Bloc, according to the latest European Social Survey (200x). Half of the Norwegian respondents agreed to the statement «I have little or no interest in politics». During the same period Norwegian party politics on the web have been firmly established. Most of the political parties have their own website and most of the voters have daily access to the web. The web sites are professionalized in management and appearance, increasingly turning away from using the opportunities for participation inherent in the new interactive technologies. Interparty variation appears mainly in the degree of professionalization, which can be accounted for by variations in available resources, thus limiting the pluralizing effects on the party system. There is little room for interactivity and participation, visits to party web sites remain at a low level, and variation in hits seem to correlate with party size. In brief; neither the predictions of the participatory version nor the pluralist version of cyber democracy are corroborated by the development.

However, there was a parallel line of development on the web, which took many party strategists by surprise. For lack of better words, this line of development has been categorized under the heading "Web 2.0", in contrast to the old "Web 1.0". As observed by Berners-Lee, the technology has been there all the way, but Web 2.0

still may be useful shorthand for the recent and rapid growth in the implementation of the technology. During 2007 Facebook became the most popular website in Norway, with YouTube rising to number three. The political parties appeared bewildered by the phenomenon, indicating a similar stage at which they were some years earlier with Web 1.0. But as local elections were coming up in September 2007, most parties felt they had to do “something”. In short, they were forced to alpha-test an unfamiliar technology outside the safe surroundings of a sandbox.

This paper analyses all seven parliamentary parties and four smaller parties outside parliament during “the long campaign”, focusing on Facebook, YouTube and blogging. Central topics in the discussion is the 1) variations in party strategies towards Web 2.0, and 2) whether Web 2.0 might a) enhance participatory democracy by lowering the threshold for involvement of party grassroots and –sympathisers, and b) enhance the competitive aspects of democracy by increasing the visibility of parties that attract little attention from the mass media and lack the resources to advertise. In short, would the 2.0 version of the web succeed where the 1.0 version apparently failed in revitalizing democracy?

## **2. The political and party system: Units and context**

Norway is a parliamentary democracy, with general elections held every fourth year. The electoral system is based on the principle of proportional representation (PR). As a consequence of PR and the persistence of a relatively strong centre-periphery cleavage, the party system is close to what Sartori (1990) calls moderate pluralism; multiple parties but little presence of centrifugal forces. The level of political participation and interest has been relatively high, although in a downward trend, as in many established democracies.

Recent general elections of 1997, 2001 and 2005 have been contested by about 20 parties. But only seven parties have been consistent in winning seats in parliament. Local elections for assemblies at municipal and county level are held mid-term between general elections, most recently in 2007. Besides the national parties, these elections are contested by a number of ad-hoc or permanent local lists, representing particular local conflicts.

**Table 1. Votes (%) in the municipal elections 2007**

Party and ideological position	Percentage of votes			
	National aggregate		Municipality of Lillehammer	
	2007	Change from 2003	2007	Change from 2003
<b>Left:</b>				
Red Electoral Alliance	01.9	+0.3	03.5	+0.7
Socialist Left Party	06.2	-6.2	08.1	-7.2
Environmental Party / Greens	00.3	+0.1	-	-
Labour Party	29.6	+2.2	40.6	+1.7
<b>Centre:</b>			-	-
Centre Party	08.0	+0.0	06.6	-1.9
Christian People's Party	06.4	+0.0	03.7	-0.8
Liberal Party	05.9	+2.0	07.1	+1.5
Coast Party	00.2	+0.0	-	-
Pensioners' Party	00.9	-0.4	01.7	-0.5
<b>Right</b>				
Conservative Party	19.3	+1.1	11.7	-1.1
Progress Party	17.5	+1.1	11.9	+1.5
Democrats	00.2	+0.0	-	-
<b>Other parties and lists</b>				
Lillehammer Local List			05.1	+5.1

**Sources:**

National aggregate: <http://www.dagbladet.no/valg2007/resultater/?fk=K&fylke=&r=05&vis=2>  
 Lillehammer: <http://www.gd.no/nyheter/politikk/article2984475.ece?showDetails=true>

Local elections do not mobilize voters to the same extent as national elections. 61.2% of the voters took part in the 2007 election (59.3% in Lillehammer), and 77.4% took part in the 2005 national elections. While national parties and issues tend to dominate, there is considerable political space for local issues and personalities, besides variations in voting patterns stemming from local structural factors.

This study samples the Web 2.0-presence of all seven major national parties, which gained more than 5% of the national vote and are represented in the national parliament. Four of the five largest of the minor national parties – none of which have seats in the national parliament, are added to the study<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The Environmental Party – The Greens, was not included in the study. In addition to the national party organization, the local party organizations in the municipality of Lillehammer were sampled. Lillehammer is a small town municipality of about 25 000 inhabitants, located in the inner Eastern region of Norway. Quite typically for local elections a local list of candidates representing local issues took part in the election and got 5.1% of the votes, while many of the minor national parties were not able to put forward local candidates. Unfortunately, local data for Lillehammer are not yet incorporated into the analysis as presented in this paper.

### 3. Web 2.0 and gathering of data

Web 2.0 is a "much-abused ... term" (Nielsen 2007). Tim Berners-Lee does for instance not see any revolution and says "...Web 2.0 is a piece of jargon; nobody even knows what it means..." (Cited in Anderson 2006). Berners-Lee goes on to pinpoint the evolutionary aspect of it, as it all builds on existing techniques. The evolutionary aspects are contained within Tim O'Reilly's original definition of the Web 2.0 as "...a set of economic, social, and technological trends that collectively forms the basis for the next generation of the Internet - a more mature, distinctive medium characterized by user participation, openness and network effects" (O'Reilly 2007).

For our purposes Web 2.0 refers to new web-based services specifically designed for 1) open collaborative publishing and/or or 2) to form and participate in social networks on the internet through the interface offered by the WWW. "Social network sites" is defined by boyd and Ellison (2007) as "web-based services that allow individuals to 1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system".

The recent popularity of Web 2.0 is indicated by the prominent position of this type of sites in the top 25 of web sites accessed from Norway.

**Table x. Top 25 Web sites in Norway October 2007**

Rank	Web site	Url
01	Facebook	<a href="http://facebook.com/">http://facebook.com/</a>
03	YouTube	<a href="http://youtube.com/">http://youtube.com/</a>
04	Nettby.no	<a href="http://www.nettby.no/">http://www.nettby.no/</a>
13.	Wikipedia	<a href="http://wikipedia.org/">http://wikipedia.org/</a>
17.	Piczo.com	<a href="http://piczo.com/">http://piczo.com/</a>
19.	Biip.no	<a href="http://biip.no/">http://biip.no/</a>
21.	Blogger.com	<a href="http://blogger.com/">http://blogger.com/</a>
25.	MySpace	<a href="http://myspace.com/">http://myspace.com/</a>

**Source:**

[http://www.alex.com/site/ds/top\\_sites?cc=NO&ts\\_mode=country&lang=none](http://www.alex.com/site/ds/top_sites?cc=NO&ts_mode=country&lang=none),

Retrieved October 29th. 2007

As the data reported in the table are collected through Alexa, they represent just a sample of Norwegian web users, and only report those sites with a common URL as entrance to personal pages on top. However, they indicate the rise in popularity of Web 2.0, and the national peculiarities in the adoption of Web 2.0<sup>2</sup> Facebook's relative popularity in Norway is practically unrivalled on a global scale, while MySpace has never become as popular in Norway as in the USA.

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<sup>2</sup> Some nations may more or less invade some sites, possibly Brazilian users' invasion of Google's Orkut (<<http://orkut.com/>>) being the most prominent here.

This study focuses on the activities of the political parties as organizations on Web 2.0, not the activities of individual politicians or political discussion in general. Therefore links from the official party web sites provided a first overview of relevant Web 2.0 sites, indicating what was officially approved by the party in question. The next step was a scan of the Web 2.0 sites in the (Alexa) Norwegian top 100 for party names, in abbreviated and full form. Facebook and YouTube stood out immediately as the most relevant sites to study. Party activity on the other sites was either marginal or totally absent<sup>3</sup>. In addition to Facebook and YouTube, the study includes a survey of the ambitious attempts of the leading Norwegian newspaper VG to establish common forums for blogging at VG-blog (<<http://www.vgb.no>>) and posting of videos from the parties at snutter.no (<<http://www.snutter.no>>). Although neither appeared in the top 100, they are of particular interest as the conscious initiative of the media to establish common forums. Samples of the parties' pages on Facebook, YouTube and VG-blog were taken at regular intervals before and after the election on September 10<sup>th</sup> 2007, using the Scrapbook plug-in of Firefox<sup>4</sup>, for cataloguing and annotation.

Further data was provided by 11 semi-structured interviews with key party personnel on the party's web strategy and presence. These were conducted during the period immediately before and after the elections<sup>5</sup>. The sample of Web 2.0 sites mentioned above appeared as representative from what the party informants stated in the interviews, although none of them pretended to have a full overview.

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<sup>3</sup> For instance only the youth organization of one of the parties appeared to have established themselves on MySpace (<http://www.myspace.com/fremskrittspartietsungdom>).

<sup>4</sup> See plugin homepage at <http://amb.vis.ne.jp/mozilla/scrapbook/>

<sup>5</sup> These interviews were conducted face-to-face or via telephone between mid-July 2007 and mid-October 2007. They lasted about one hour, using an interview guide with a battery of questions. Besides several questions on the web in general there was a direct question in the questionnaire guide asking "To what degree is the party aware of – and has started to use - what is known as Web 2.0 (blog, wikis, YouTube, MySpace etc.), The guide was sent to the interview subjects in advance and transcripts of the interviews were sent afterwards for comments and corrections.

## 4. E-readiness among voters and parties

E-readiness, in terms of daily internet use in the Norwegian population, is high, although a significant intergenerational "digital divide" persists between those that have reached retirement age and the rest. Furthermore, assuming that the persons with access in 2000 have continued to use the internet, they would by 2007 have gathered considerable experience and competence as users.

**Table x. Internet use in Norway**

	Used internet on a daily basis				
	Age groups (%)				
	All	16-24	25-44	45-66	67-79
2000	27	38	34	21	04
2007	66	83	77	59	21

Source:

Norsk mediebarometer 2007: Internett

(<<http://www.ssb.no/emner/07/02/30/medie/sa86/internett.pdf>>)

As the previous chapter showed, these internet users spent considerable time on sites associated with Web 2.0 – technologies.

In advance, new political trends from the 1980s onwards had made the parties more dependent on campaigning and communicating with voters through the media. Political dealignment (Dalton 1988) appeared in the established democracies several years before the advent of the World Wide Web, illustrated by the voters' tendency to shift party from election to election. The share of Norwegian voters who decided who to vote for during the campaign increased from around one fifth (21% in 1985) to almost half of the voters (47% in 2001) (Aardal 2003a: 13ff).

Hence, substantial parts of the electorate are now influenced by short term campaign activity communicated through the media, rather than long term partisanship. But the press are no longer closely affiliated with specific political parties or distinct ideologies, and for TV and radio, principles of commercial or public broadcasting assured there never were such affiliations in the first place (Aardal et al.:17ff, Allern 2001: 125ff, Bjørklund 1991). Presented with a new and relatively cheap technology for communicating directly with the voters, the choice appeared to be relatively simple for party strategists.

The process of establishment of party politics on the web was to take several years<sup>6</sup>. But according to the interviewed informants the internet had a high priority

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<sup>6</sup> Norwegian party web sites started to appear well before the general election of 1997 (interviews, Way Back Machine). By the 2001-election, 20 out of 22 registered parties had established their own website, although they had not developed any web strategy and there still was scepticism within the party organisations (Hestvik 2004:235ff). Things had improved by the next national election in 2005, and at least some of the parties developed

in all parties by the 2007 – campaign and the major parties allocated considerable resources to their presence on the web.

## 5. From a “mature” Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 “hype”

While the quality and size of web sites in the 2005 campaign varied among the parliamentary parties, the major digital divide appeared to be whether the party was represented in parliament or not. But by 2007 even the small parties seemed to be able to present themselves far more professionally on the web than their bigger competitors were only a few years earlier. Party websites may therefore be diagnosed as becoming more “mature”.

But this form of "maturity" appeared to be oriented towards professionalized unilateral delivery, rather than encouraging the interactivity inherent in the ideals "participatory democracy". Many parties had previously held such ambitions and established open discussion forums on their websites during the first phase. These forums were mostly closed down as early as before the 2001-election, due to low activity, harassments and lack of sufficient time to survey or participate (Hestvik 2004, Saglie 2006). Reviews of the web sites in 2005 and 2007 revealed that the variations had become sufficiently small to diagnose the development as convergence around unilateralism. My interviews of party informants indicate that this disillusionment persisted in 2007, although with slight variations. While some had regrets, others had concluded that party web sites should be reserved for information and marketing, while digital political participation should take place in other foras outside the party web site.

Hence, the paradox is that while Norway now has a near universal and highly competent population of internet users the average net surfer do not use the internet for political purposes (Saglie and Vabo's 2005:166ff, Karlsen 2008:xx) and only a minority actually visits party web sites at all<sup>7</sup>. In short, party websites have not become a success, if internet traffic or political participation is the yardstick for success. The interactive communication hoped for by early “cyber democrats” does not appear to be of high priority. As such, party web sites have evolved over time into the unilaterality now associated with Web 1.0, and do not utilize the interactive technologies.

In this sense Web 2.0 is shorthand for reintroduction of interactive elements, most visibly as "blogging", "Wikis", "My Space", "You Tube", "pod casting", RSS and most recently "Facebook". As noted, websites related to Web 2.0 rapidly became very popular in Norway. Before the local elections of 2007 the political parties appear somewhat bewildered by the phenomenon of "Web 2.0", indicating a similar stage at which they were around 1997. Most parties could be expected to present themselves as unitary parties, along the lines they had eventually succeeded with on Web 1.0. On the other hand, with the technology freely available for local parties, activists and

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what might be classified as a serious ICT-strategy and integrated ICT and the web as a "normal" part of the party's organisation (Saglie 2006:xx).

<sup>7</sup> The main exception occurs ahead of elections when pupils and students are given assignments on political parties. According to party informants the web sites have taken a considerable workload off party staff.

sympathizers, Web 2.0 represented a considerable challenge. While some of the party informants were highly enthusiastic, the majority expressed ambivalence (“... opportunity AND nightmare...”) or scepticism. Web 2.0 was described as a “media hype”, something that “will pass”, and a place where “people don't go for the politics”.

Anyhow, they were also aware that they could not control the development. Established branding and copyright over domain names, party names and even logos did not help much. Web 2.0 was “a new deal”. Individuals and groups were able to establish a presence using the name - and even logos - of the parties, without the party's knowledge or consent<sup>8</sup>. As observed by one informant:

*Until two years ago we thought it would suffice to own the domain ([www.partyname.no](http://www.partyname.no)), but now new places appear every day, using our name and even our logo. A lot of the people behind this are probably (party) members with good intentions, but the result is that we have no control.*

As noted, the parties or individuals acting on their behalf (with or without their knowledge or approval) focused their establishment on a few national and transnational sites. The next chapter reports on their activity in the blogosphere, on Facebook and YouTube.

## 6. Samples of Web 2.0 activity

### 6.1. Blogging

A weblog is a webpage with one or several authors, ideally with frequent updates, the newest on top, and open for comment. As many politicians have discovered, blogging is a demanding genre, frequently ending in up in what is stigmatized in the media as “blog flops”. In the fall of 2004 the leader of the Socialist left party, Kristin Halvorsen started a personal weblog, under much media attention. Six months later she was heavily criticised for not being active enough and more or less gave up<sup>9</sup>. Since then political parties have mostly been hesitant towards systematically embracing blogging, especially within the confines of their own web site.

The personal nature of political blogging makes gathering of systematic data a demanding task. What is reported here on individual blogs builds upon information given by party informants in interviews, blogs linked to through party web sites, as well as reviews in the press. In addition it reports from VG-Blog, which was the most ambitious attempt to mobilize systematic blogging from all parties on a single site during the 2005 and 2007 campaigns.

By the start of the campaign 2007, the parties lacked a coherent strategy towards the use of blogging. The one exception was the Liberal party, who built up and integrated individual blogs for politicians and individual members within their web site. According to the party informant this was due to a combination of the

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<sup>8</sup> When party informants were asked about activity on web 2.0. “... as far as I know” was a frequent addition to their statements.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance Dagbladets judgments (<<http://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/2005/06/11/434408.html>>)

liberal ideology providing individual members great freedom of expression, as well as making a clear and visible distinction between the party as an institution and its policies on the one hand and the private opinions of individual politicians and members in general. Furthermore, an integrated blog function gave the party an opportunity to monitor discussions, although with no editing or censorship. By summer 2007 the party informant reported that this had worked very well.

Some of the other parties, like the Labour party, the Centre Party and the Red Electoral Alliance had incorporated blog functions on their web site, but not implemented them. The Conservatives, The Christian People's Party and the Progress Party had decided they did not want a system where all politicians could blog within the confines of the party web site. While there was awareness of the value of the direct and personal communication via blogging, the stigma of highly visible blogs with little or no activity made them hesitate.

Of course, those who wanted to blog had plenty of opportunities elsewhere outside the party web site and there was some top politicians' blogs scattered around the internet, especially from those in the younger cohorts (Aftenposten Morgen - 19.02.2007). As remarked by a leading young Social Left Party parliamentarian it provided a different type of channel:

*I think blogging is a good opportunity to communicate with people and get responses from all camps. It is a very nice way to express and test opinions in a simple and less formal manner. It is less formal than for instance go through the newspapers ... Usually it is the last thing I do before I go to bed ... Its themes are politics, Brann<sup>10</sup> and the world.*

(Heikki Holmås quoted in Aftenposten 19.02.2007, my translation).

These blogs tended to be personal, in the sense that they were maintained by the politicians themselves and the contents reflected whatever they were preoccupied with at the time, politics or something else<sup>11</sup>. But to my knowledge, only one party leader blogged on a permanent basis; Erna Solberg, the leader of the Conservatives<sup>12</sup>. While the parties did not have a full overview of the blogosphere, they recognized this as legitimate and did not wish to exercise any form of censorship. In some instances they implemented harvesting strategies, through highly visible linking to successful blogs. The Socialist Left Party, the Christian People's Party and the Labour Party put prominent links on their front pages directly to the blogs of people in the party leadership. Furthermore, the Democrats and the Liberals linked to a second page containing annotated links to several politicians'

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<sup>10</sup> Brann is the local soccer team from Holmås' home town of Bergen

<sup>11</sup> See for instance Heikki Holmås and Audun Lysbakken of the Socialist Left Party at <http://www.heikki.no> and <http://rettvenstre.no>, Torbjørn Røe Isaksen of the Conservatives at <http://torbjorn.ungehoyre.no>, the Liberals' Lars-Henrik Michelsen at <http://michelsen.blogs.com> and Ingrid Baltzersen of The Red Electoral Alliance at <http://baltzersen.wordpress.com>

<sup>12</sup> Erna Solberg blogs once a month on the NA24, which is a business news website, at <http://ernasolberg.nettblogg.no/>. The party also established a web diary for Solberg (<<http://www.erna.no/>>), but were very reluctant to call this a blog, as readers could not post comments directly into the diary.

blogs. As noted above, the Liberals' blogs were contained within the main web site and offered the most extensive list.

During the election campaign "personal blogs" took on a quasi-institutional and ad-hoc character, as the parties were more or less willingly pushed to take part in temporary blogging foras set up by the media. The most ambitious was a special election blog section in the web edition of the leading newspaper VG, both in the 2005 and 2007 election. The responses of most of the party informants indicate that the parties were highly ambivalent about this. On the one hand, VG offered a blogging platform to all parties, even for local party branches<sup>13</sup>; on the other hand they felt VG's ambitions were unrealistic. But it gave party leaders the opportunity for high-profile and short term or ad-hoc blogging, in the sense that they were not expected to continue after the election. It should be noted that the leaders of the three of the smaller parties in the sample, the Democrats, the Pensioners' Party and the Coast Party, did not have their own blog on VG-blogs<sup>14</sup>.

**Table xxx. VG Blog - Campaign Activity 1. August - 10. September 2007. Postings and comments on party leader's blog**

PARTY	POSTINGS	COMMENTS*	RATIO
Conservatives	18	121	6,7
Progress Party	04	032	8,0
Socialist Left Party	24	608	25,3
Labour Party	09	171	19,0
Liberals	19	385	20,3
Christian People's Party	14	281	20,1
Centre Party	05	10	2,0
Red Electoral Alliance	10	191	19,1
Average	12,9	224,9	17,5

**Source:**

VG-Blog at <http://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/valg-2007/>

Comments on comments are not included

The table reveals that there was no relation between party size and activity in terms of postings or comments VG-Blog. The Socialist Left Party and the Liberals had the highest activity on both accounts, indicating a higher e-readiness in both party and target groups. At the other end, there is remarkably low activity from the Centre Party and the Progress Party.

<sup>13</sup> See the invitation at <http://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/valg-2007/artikkel.php?artid=194804>

<sup>14</sup> The leader of the Coast Party did, however, blog on the local VG-blog for the Oslo Party. This appeared more or less to double as a national page. Some scattered local activity on VG-blog was also found for The Democrats.

## 6.2. Facebook

This subchapter focuses on the particular place Facebook established over a few months in the election year of 2007<sup>15</sup>. The material on Facebook was gathered from May to December 2007 and gives a rough snapshot of the explosive and chaotic development of Norwegian party politics on Facebook in the campaign period.

Founded in February 2004, Facebook has grown to 67 million active users 4 years later (<<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>>). Since January 2007 it grew with an average of 250 000 new registrations per day, reaching the 20 million mark as recently as April 2007. Its unique popularity in Norway is reflected in the fact that this tiny country with a population of 4.5 million is a global number 8, in terms of active users.

Its unprecedented growth took the Norwegian parties by surprise, and its character as a commercial networking site for individual users gave them a particular challenge<sup>16</sup>. However, Facebook allowed individuals to set up special pages for particular groups and events, "to support or criticize another individual or entity". Parties could therefore establish themselves as groups on Facebook, and they appeared to be protected by the passage in the user terms stating that "You may not set up a Facebook Page on behalf of another individual or entity unless you are authorized to do so". On the other hand, it is also stated that Facebook do not take any responsibility in this matter.

Another challenge is that Facebook as a platform for political networking may not be as appropriate for the Norwegian political landscape as the American landscape. While use of the Norwegian language in postings etc. is possible and adhered to in most instances, the user interface is American-English, which may be intimidating for some. But perhaps the most visible indicator is found within the options on "political views" in the user profile. The range offered here are classical American ranging from Libertarian to Very Liberal, via Conservative and Moderate. Social democrat, socialist, Marxist anarchist or similar categories which are vital in the European (and Norwegian) political landscape are simply not offered. Furthermore, those belonging to these political views may be put off by the kind of targeted ads that have become more visible. Still, Norwegian users more or less invaded Facebook in early 2007, and the parties soon followed.

During spring and summer 2007 enthusiasts established mostly unofficial groups for their local party, for local candidates, and even for the national party. This led to a jungle of groups, most of them using the party logo and linking to the party, but very few with any indicators whether they were the party's "official group" or not<sup>17</sup>. On the other hand party strategists knew Facebook was important for people

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<sup>15</sup> At the national level there are several networking sites, most of which are more specialised than Facebook. For instance, Gaysir (<<http://www.gaysir.no/>>), is vital for networking within the gay community. Several activists and party members are established here.

<sup>16</sup> It is clearly stated in its terms of use (<<http://www.facebook.com/terms.php>>) that one cannot "register for more than one User account, register for a User account on behalf of an individual other than yourself, or register for a User account on behalf of any group or entity;"

<sup>17</sup> As two following exchange between three contributors to the Wall of one of the groups imply:

belonging to the younger cohorts of voters, as well as -activists. But the efficiency of Facebook regarding political networking they knew little about.

A search on profiles of party leaders (and vice-leaders) on Facebook indicate that top politicians were absent from Facebook<sup>18</sup>. Several groups for the national party organizations were established nonetheless. However, only a few were pure “official groups”, indicated by linking from the main party web site. The majority was “semi-official”, in the sense that they were established by local officers, candidates or representatives. In addition, there were groups I choose to classify as unofficial, as there were no or weak formal connections to the party. They were simply the largest or only group dedicated to the party in question.

**Table xx. National party groups established on Facebook 2007**

Party	Group ID*	Established**	Members by December 12th
<b>Official groups</b>			
• Conservatives	2431161089	May 23rd	732
• Labour Party	2421715973	June 4th	836
• Centre Party	2256306844	April 9th	324
<b>Semi-official groups</b>			
• Socialist Left Party	2339364073	April 12th	453
• Liberals	2313487265	May 10th	461
• Christian People's Party	2313178170	April 25th	138
• Coast Party	2327542198	May 20th	32
<b>Unofficial groups</b>			
• Progress Party	2258940488	March 21st	2209
• Red Electoral Alliance	2271450493	April 6th	532
• Democrats	2413195852	May 7th	50

\* Group ID refers to the unique number at the end of the group’s url, preceded by <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=>

\*\* The date of establishment is not always stated in the group and is estimated from the date of the first posting in the group.

It should be noted that only two groups were established as “official”, as the Centre Party group was first semi-official, and then sanctioned through a link on the party web site later. Therefore 8 out of 10 groups “representing” the national party were established from below, with or without the party organization’s knowledge or consent.

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First contributor: "To everyone as unattentive as myself, who has joined the Facebook-group <party acronym>; this is not serious. Get out (not from this group - but the "fake" one)."

Second contributor: "The other <party acronym>-group almost appeared a bit sick..."

Third contributor: "I think it's better to talk with people rather than just run. Of course problematic that anyone can establish Facebook-groups and appear to be established by <party acronym>, but they do not seem to have any bad intentions. ..."

<sup>18</sup> Only a profile for one of the vice-leaders of Red Electoral Alliance and the leader of the Centre Party was found.

The Progress Party group is a case of particular interest, being the by far largest group, but established by persons who could not be identified among local candidates, representatives or party officers presented on the party website. Neither was there any mention of the group on the web site. The founders of two other “unofficial” groups of the Red Electoral Alliance and the Democrats could at least be identified with the party through in their youth organizations. Furthermore, the party informants were aware of these groups and approved of their existence.

In general Facebook was a party political anarchy at the time of the election campaign in 2007, as there were myriads of groups over which the national parties felt they had little oversight or control. Several parties discovered that a person already had established groups using the party name, the party logo etc. and henceforth appeared to an official group, but was not. On the other hand, local and activist initiatives were appreciated, although several of the informants expressed scepticism towards what they felt was Facebook-hype.

As indicated by table xx, all the groups were established in the period late March to early June 2007, leaving just one party - The Pensioners' Party - unrepresented at the national level on Facebook. But none of the groups had more than 1000 members, except for the highly unofficial Progress party group. Whether this is a large membership or not is debatable. A group for a local Norwegian soccer team generates for instance a level of activity on Facebook on par with the largest Norwegian party<sup>19</sup>.

### 6.3. YouTube

YouTube was officially launched in December 2005, and rapidly established itself as "the leader in online video", where individuals easily could watch and share original streaming videos through a Web browser (<[http://www.youtube.com/t/fact\\_sheet](http://www.youtube.com/t/fact_sheet)>). Through "the embeddable player", videos posted on YouTube can easily be integrated within another web site, for instance that of a political party. YouTube can therefore be a free and simple way to store and deliver video content. To upload videos and establish a "Channel", a personal user account is necessary, although a public personal profile is not necessary.

The breakthrough of YouTube happened as part of the 2007-election campaign. Although the political parties to some extent regarded this as part of the same “hype” as Facebook, five of the national parties in the sample decided to use the opportunity to established channels on YouTube before the election. The table below gives an overview of these parties:

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<sup>19</sup> The biggest supporter group on Facebook for the soccer team Brann (<<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2263527402>>), who won the Norwegian series last year, had 738 members in the Norway network and 84 wall posts.

**Table xx. Norwegian national party channels on YouTube in 2007**

PARTY AND URL	JOINED	VIDEOS	VIEWS	SUBS-CRIBERS
Conservatives <a href="http://www.youtube.com/hoyre">http://www.youtube.com/hoyre</a>	April 26th	26	286	1
Labour Party <a href="http://www.youtube.com/arbeiderpartiet">http://www.youtube.com/arbeiderpartiet</a>	April 14th	110	87675	17
Liberals <a href="http://www.youtube.com/Venstreshoved.org">http://www.youtube.com/Venstreshoved.org</a>	April 11th	114	1827	17
Centre Party <a href="http://www.youtube.com/Senterpartiet">http://www.youtube.com/Senterpartiet</a>	April 25th	8	858	3
Red Electoral Alliance <a href="http://www.youtube.com/RAUDTVAL07">http://www.youtube.com/RAUDTVAL07</a>	July 9th	10	838	15

**Source:**

Party channels on YouTube December 12<sup>th</sup> 2007

In addition to these official national party channels, there were a number of channels established by local parties and local activists. But it all appeared to be less chaotic than what the party organizations experienced on Facebook. The channel of the Oslo party branch of the Socialist left Party, for instance, included videos that were embedded into the national party web site. An unofficial channel was run by a party member of the Red Electoral Alliance (<<http://www.youtube.comomicronline>>), but was well regarded by the party informant, as it provided a source for videos that could be embedded on the party web site.

The party name appeared to have little protection on YouTube as well, as experienced by the Liberals. When they were to establish their party channel on YouTube, they discovered that the party name was already taken. The Conservatives also stated that one important reason for establishing a channel on YouTube was quite simply to get the name for themselves.

As mentioned, one attractive feature of YouTube is the capability for embedding of videos into other web pages. For the political parties the implication was that a YouTube channel was not a competitor to the party web site. Visitors to the web site could watch the videos without leaving the site, almost seamlessly integrated along with other material.

As the Labour Party, the Conservatives and the Centre Party already had invested in WebTV before the appearance of YouTube, there was certain ambivalence. Especially the Conservatives and the Centre Party downplayed the visibility of YouTube, by not linking to their own channels on YouTube. As shown in the table above, these two parties were also the parties with the lowest activity on YouTube. Hence, previous investments in video technology may actually put investments on YouTube on hold. The strategy of the Progress party not to establish any channel on YouTube at all, and rely completely on their own FrpTV may be

regarded along the same lines. YouTube might therefore become more important for parties and party branches with fewer resources, as soon as they get to produce their own videos. But some scepticism was expressed by some of the party informants towards putting up amateurish videos actually might be more harmful than no videos.

## 7. A (very) preliminary discussion

As illustrated by the parties' experiences in establishing themselves on Web 2.0, introduction of new technologies implies a steep, and not necessarily rational, learning curve. The hype cycle hypothesis (Fenn and Linden 2005, Gartner Group 2007) describes the introduction and development of a new ICT in 5 phases<sup>20</sup>.

- Technology Trigger: The technology becomes available, although still underdeveloped
- Peak of Inflated Expectations: High media visibility ("hype") and the start of investments
- Trough of Disillusionment: A collapse in media attention as the technology fails to deliver according to the hype
- Slope of Enlightenment: Learning to take advantage of - and further develop - the technology
- The Plateau of Productivity: The technology is "mature"

While the hype cycle is a hypothesis of non-rational behaviour in the first phases, gradually giving way to rationality in later phases, the concepts of "institutionalised standards" and "isomorphism" imply a different approach (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, Røvik 1998). They refer to the tendency for certain organisational solutions to be established as "best practice" within a field, leading to organisational homogeneity or convergence over time. The advent of the technologies baptized as "Web 2.0" got a lot of attention in the media from 2004 onwards – and the parties clearly were unsure how to implement and take advantage of these technologies. Both concepts may provide partial answers, as far as parties felt pushed into using the new technologies because of the media hype and as far as they apparently did much the same on Web 2.0.

But parties also embody variations in norms and values, established routines and relations, which may make them more or less resistant to any change or reform. As Panebianco (1988) has reminded us of, most parties are institutionalised actors, acting in the shadow of their traditions and history, values and coalitions of divergent interests. Still, one should be careful not to simply assume that the Web 2.0 is a revolutionary devices breaking down "old" institutions. The effect may be differences in the form of implementation of Web 2.0 technology.

Compared to other established democracies, it is remarkable how most of the major Norwegian parties have stuck with the "mass party" model identified by

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<sup>20</sup> This may well be applicable to political parties on the web, although never applied by the Gartner Group themselves, to this author's knowledge.

Maurice Duverger (1954, Heidar and Saglie (2003b). Norwegian parties stand out as stronger membership organizations than those in most other countries (Mair and van Biezen 2001: 9, 12). Among the larger parties, Socialist Left Party and the Progress Party appear to be the major deviations from the mass party model, belonging to "New Left" and "New Right". Institutionalised parties similar to Duverger's "mass party"-model (1954) could be expected to reproduce themselves on Web 2.0 as "cyber mass parties", rather than deinstitutionalised "cyber parties", along the Margetts (2001/2006) model. How well this actually works within the context of a technology that is based on individual initiative and horizontal networking is an empirical question.

Parties of other "types" than the "mass party" may have a better fit to the technology model of Web 2.0. The "new politics"-parties on the left and right can be expected to have the best fit with the Web 2.0-model. One primary reason is that these parties mostly are "new" as organizations. A relatively short history in itself implies a lower degree of institutionalization, as well as the implication that these parties were formed within a different socio-political context than "mass parties". Furthermore, these parties tend towards stronger emphasis of individualism. According to Kitschelt (1990), participation as a value in itself is vital for a left-libertarian party type, emphasising internal democracy and participation, but much looser and less closed off than the mass party.

The new right parties are a disparate and changing entity. Ignazi (1996) observes that the parties on the right did not exhibit anything similar to the new left, rather what he called a "caesaristic profile", referring to the charismatic entrepreneurs and "owners" of these parties. What they have in common is less weight upon party apparatus, members or social classes and more upon communicating with citizens/voters in general. As such, new right parties therefore may be more comfortable with the unilaterality of what is now associated with Web 1.0 rather than Web 2.0.

The internet has also been regarded as providing opportunities to increase visibility and mobilize citizens/voters for parties representing new or marginal groups or values (Norris 2003:43). Katz and Mair (1995) claimed to observe a tendency towards increasing cartelisation of the party system in some West European countries, Norway included. The established parties controlled and shared public privileges which are essential for open party competition, such as financial support and access to the mass media. Competition from new or small parties outside such a cartel was therefore effectively kept to a minimum. So the question is whether Web 2.0-technologies may provide smaller and newer parties with the means to become more visible

The data indicate that to explain the "volume of the activity" on Web 2.0, party resources appear to be decisive, either in terms of party organization resources or the resources of a large pool of activists and sympathizers. If neither is present there is little activity. To explain the "form of activity", the institutional factor – or party type – appears to be important. "Mass parties" tend to go for an institutional approach, while left-libertarian parties are more inclined to leave the initiative to individual members and sympathizers. Broadly speaking, this would result in three different types of approaches.

1. The institutional approach
2. The individual activist approach
3. Passive approach

The institutionalist approach is where the party as an organization establishes itself officially on Web 2.0, allocating the necessary resources. While the second category refers to parties where the initiative is left to activists, with or without the party organization's knowledge or consent. A passive approach occurs where there is little or no activity, from both party organization and activists/sympathizers. In this category we would expect to find parties with little resources.

The best case for the institutionalist approach is the Labour party. In a remarkable leap during a few months in the spring of 2007, the party became the only party that had an official national presence on the most popular sites of Web 2.0. Visitors to the official party web site during the 2007 campaign were directed to Facebook, Flickr, You Tube and VG-Blog, through clearly visible graphic links on the front page. Furthermore, it was the only national party on the most popular site for photos Flickr (<<http://www.flickr.com/photos/8767358@N08/>>).

In a famous passage the Labour party was characterised as "the eagle among Norwegian parties" (Seip 196x:..). This referred to the internal coherence and strength of the organization, its strong position among wage earners and its will and ability to hold government power. As such it was the mass party per excellence. The party has maintained much of its strength, and has the resources and internal coherence to face and embrace new communication opportunities like no other parties. It has also been remarkably open to use these opportunities. According to the party informant, some individuals in the party leadership had taken a great interest in the new forms of web 2.0.

While not as pure a case as the Labour Party, the Liberal party can also be classified in the institutionalist category. But there was one significant difference. While Labour did not pay much attention to "official" blogging outside VG-Blog, the Liberals pioneered the incorporation of blogging technology inside the confines of the party web site itself, as early as 2005. Unlike Labour the Liberals had an ideological dilemma attached to their approach, given their high ideological profile of individualism and local autonomy. So while the party showed an institutional approach there was considerable individual activism on Web 2.0, with or without the party's official approval and knowledge. This is not surprising, as the party frequently has been classified along the Socialist Left Party as a representative of new politics values of participative democracy. The individualist activist approach seemed to sit well with The Socialist Left Party. While they appreciated Web 2.0 as opening up for new ways of communication, the party relied on "harvesting", through linking to a selection of individual blogs, local branches initiating Facebook groups and embedding of YouTube-videos made by local party branches. However, the level of activity is a bit too low to fully support the left-libertarian activist approach.

Furthermore, the behaviour of the Conservative party seems to escape escapes any simple explanation. The Conservatives have taken pride in being at the technological forefront, as an institution. But the party appeared to be sceptical to

enter Web 2.0, as ambitions were focused on having a professional party website delivering relevant information on the party. Although Web 2.0 was partly regarded as hype, another reason was that the party did not want to interfere in political activity here. Given the multitude of channels that opened for political discussions the party did not see the necessity to establish foras on its own. Furthermore, the party informant felt that if the party established its own foras top-down users would shy away. Networking is an individual and voluntary grassroots activity, unfit for an institutional top-down approach. In this sense, there were clear ideological differences between Labour and the Conservatives. The party regarded individual and local activity as very positive, but did not want to interfere as an organization. Our study also shows considerable individual activism on Web 2.0.

The Progress Party was the only parliamentary party that had no official pages on Web 2.0 at all<sup>21</sup>, but otherwise resembled the Conservatives in approach. For the party as an organization, the web was primarily regarded as a platform for marketing and distributing information. This might indicate a distinct right-wing pattern, where the party organizations shy away from Web 2.0 technologies, as these technologies are based on individuality and horizontal networking, and the party organization is focused on professional marketing of the party.

As for the other parties resources appeared to be the main barrier, even for the Centre Party and the Christian People's Party. These parties, and of course the small parties outside parliament even more, felt that they had to focus on Web 1.0 (i.e. the party web site) in a situation with scarce resources. But almost all of the smaller parties had managed some local or unofficial presence established by activists and sympathisers. The Red Electoral Alliance had the highest activity, as could be expected from being the largest and most established of the small parties, as well as from its leftist activist ideology. The one exception with no recorded activity at all was the Pensioners' party, whose target groups also belonged to the most disconnected age groups. At the moment, it appears that Web 2.0 do not have any pluralising effect on party visibility, networking and activism demands resources in the form of a number of activists. Maintaining web sites on Web 1.0 may be a less demanding task.

The question whether Web 2.0 did enhance participatory democracy by lowering the threshold for involvement of party grassroots and –sympathisers during the 2007 campaign cannot be given any final answer here. But as the party organization, at least temporarily, lost some control to local and individual initiatives it might appear so, although the number of people involved might be too small to call it a catalyst of digital participatory democracy.

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<sup>21</sup> Although they represent an interesting deviant case, as their youth organisation apparently was the only party political organizations established on MySpace (<<http://www.myspace.com/fremskrittspartietsungdom>>).

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### **Interviews with part informants**

Ingrid Sagranden, web editor Labour Party, Oslo July 12th 2007

Frorde Fjeldstad, information advicer and web editor, Liberals, Oslo July 12th 2007

Jan Kenrick Glad Jackson, web editor Red (Red Electoral Alliance), Oslo July 12th 2007

Sunniva Flakstad Ihle, web editor Conservatives, Oslo August 9th 2007

Ole Martin Nicolaisen, editor of party paper Fremskritt and news editor of party web site, Oslo August 9th 2007

Arun Gosh, information advicer Socialist Left Party, Oslo September 18th 2007.

Ragnar Kvåle, information advicer Center party, Oslo September 18th 2007

Christen Krogvig, web editor Democrats, Oslo September 28th 2007

John Herfindal, web editor Christian People's Party, Oslo October 4th 2007

Mona Berg Brustad, web editor Pensioners' party, telephone October 9th 2007

Kjell Ivar Vestå, web editor Coast Party, telephone September 26th 2007