

Project: **The Transformation of Political Mobilisation and Communication in European Public Spheres**

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Working paper **Internet – a new potential for European political communication?**

Case report: **United Kingdom**

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Introduction

This report sketches out the current state of internet communication in the UK¹. It looks at four aspects of internet provision in the UK as follows:

- Structure of the internet
- Internet usage by the UK public
- Internet strategies of media and collective actors
- UK government policies on access to and regulation of the internet

Ultimately the report outlines the possible implications of these areas of internet provision for the question of if and how the internet is providing new opportunities for political communication and mobilisation in the UK.

1. Structure of internet communications industry

This section deals with the internet market in the UK, looking first at which companies supply the internet to UK users (specifically, at the dominant internet service providers) and then going on to examine how internet communications are regulated.

1.1 Internet service providers [ISPs]

1.1.1 Number of ISPs in UK

Oftel, the UK regulator for the telecommunications industry, claimed in April 2000 that there are currently about 400 internet service providers offering access to British users. However, this figure includes many "virtual ISPs", which are only branded "interfaces" supported by the services of established ISPs, rather than ISPs in their own right. Many of the ISPs offer 'free' or subscription-free access to a number of well-established portal sites and open access to a wide range of Internet content and e-commerce sites.

The ISP end of the internet access market in the UK is extremely competitive and expanded rapidly in 1999/2000. This expansion has driven significant changes in internet access with the rise of a new generation of 'consumer-focused' ISPs offering increased choice for consumers. Oftel claims that the 'best known of these consumer ISPs and currently the largest in the UK is Freeserve, which popularised subscription-free access in 1998'. Many other ISPs have since pursued a similar pricing model. Freeserve had maintained its dominance in the UK market as of November 2000, with its share of home usage tracking the market at 29%, compared with 28% in August 2000². However its growth was less than expected and it faced increasing competition from AOL and BT Internet. NTL's subscriber base has increased by around 650,000 since August 2000 while its market share has risen by 1% to 9%. Its share was forecast by Enders Analysis to advance to 12% during 2001.

¹ While the report seeks to use data for the year 2000 where possible, the fast-changing nature of much information available on the internet means that in places the only data readily available was that applying to the year 2001.

² Data for Nov 2000 detailed in April 2001 report from Enders Analysis, at:
http://www.endersanalysis.com/reports/ukisps_0401.htm

Internet service provision has taken on a more flexible structure in recent years, with unlimited access now available in return for a flat fee per month. This has brought the cost of being online down substantially, and has made a range of packages available to suit the differing needs of light and heavy users. The share of paid-for (mainly AOL and BT Internet) rose from 23% to 27% in Q4 2000, which suggests that the paid-for market was expanding with roll-outs of unmetered access and broadband. Consolidation in the UK market seems likely to occur principally through a withering of secondary ISPs, as unmetered users drop secondary accounts. This trend is already apparent with the levelling-off of the number of ISPs per household.

Internet access is now possible via a wide range of technologies other than the PC, although the PC remains by far the most common form of access. This means that mobile telephone network operators such as Vodafone are now also ISPs to users of their WAP services, and the same applies to digital TV providers such as Sky who offer access to the internet via TV.

1.1.2 Access pricing – developments up to July 2001

According to data from Enders Analysis³, use of unmetered packages continues to grow strongly. As of November 2000, a third of UK homes claimed to have unmetered access. As access times have risen, unmetered access packages have increased their market share mainly at the cost of 'free' (local call charges only) services. Unmetered access (subscription-only) packages more than doubled market share to 35% of the online population in February 2001, compared to May 2000. Subscription (plus local calls) packages have maintained market share at 20%, while 'free' (calls-only) packages have declined from 66% market share to 45%. After a dip in 2000, subscription packages have the same market share as in early 1998.

The migration of access from 'free' services (local call) to subscriber packages, in particular unmetered, has raised the market share of the leading unmetered access providers, AOL, BT Internet and NTL, which together have increased their share to 16% overall. Freeserve, the leading 'free' service provider, continues to dominate the market, although its share has declined from 29% to 21% between Q2 2000 and Q1 2001. Due to the fast rising market for Internet services, Freeserve has still seen subscriber numbers rise. However, AOL, BTInternet and NTL are recruiting a disproportionately high number of first-time subscribers.

As regards access by businesses, business use is gradually migrating from dial-up connections to higher quality access technologies - 46% use dial-up connections, 32% use ISDN lines and 8% use broadband connections.

Regarding developments in access pricing, the major issue in the UK in 2001 was the rollout of broadband internet access. UK telecoms regulator Ofcom conducted its quarterly residential consumer survey in November 2001, and found that while 39% of homes connected to the internet were currently using unmetered packages, just 2% of 'internet homes' were using broadband. Just over half (55%) of narrowband users expressed interest in upgrading to broadband access⁴.

BT announced in February 2002 that it would slash its broadband internet charges in a bid to accelerate broadband access. The cuts should enable ISPs such as Freeserve, AOL and BT

³ <http://www.endersanalysis.com/reports/internetaccess.htm>

⁴ ISP Review, at <http://www.ispreview.co.uk/ispreviews/comments/1012298115,45103,.shtml>

Openworld to offer the service - which provides internet access that is up to ten times faster than normal - to consumers for about £25 a month⁵.

1.1.3 Market share

The table below shows which ISPs dominate the UK market.

Fig.1 ISP market shares in the UK, August 2001

Source: Oftel index (96/97=100)	
Freemove	19%
BT	18%
AOL	16%
ntl	9%
LineOne	4%
Virgin Net	3%
MSN	2%
Supanet	2%
Netscape	2%
Others	25%

Given that the source of these statistics is the telecommunications watchdog Oftel, they are likely to be reliable. However, varying claims exist as to the market shares of UK internet service providers; for example, *The Guardian* claimed in October 2001 that ‘AOL remains the number one choice, closely followed by Freemove’⁶. Whatever the market share hierarchy, though, it is clear that the dominant ISPs in the UK are Freemove, AOL, BT and ntl, since all other ISPs have 4% or less share in the market.

1.1.4 Ownership

Figure 2 overleaf gives information about the four major ISPs operating in the UK. It can be seen that just one of the four major ISPs (BT) is a UK national company. All of the major ISPs are involved heavily in other media and telecommunications sectors in addition to providing internet services.

Fig.2 Major ISPs operating in the UK

ISP	Ownership	National firm?	Other sectors covered
AOL	Part of multimedia giant company AOL Time Warner	No – US-based multinational	World’s largest multimedia and internet company
Freemove	First set up in 1998 by UK electronics retailer Dixons, but sold to France Telecom’s ISP	No - used to be UK firm, now French-owned	France’s leading media and online services company

⁵ Owen Gibson, ‘BT to slash broadband charges’, *Media Guardian* Tuesday Feb 26 2002

⁶ ‘Web crawl’, article in *Media Guardian*, Friday October 5 2001

	Wanadoo in December 2000. FTSE 100 company		
BT	UK subsidiary of BT Group plc, FTSE 100 company	Yes – UK national company. Has operations worldwide though intends to focus more on UK and Western Europe in future.	Telecommunications services provider – principal activities include local, long distance and international telecommunications services, internet and IT services
ntl	Holding company for NTL Incorporated	Operates in US and UK, though owns telecommunications concerns across Europe	Britain’s largest cable firm – deals in TV and radio broadcasting, cable TV, telephone and telecommunications systems

1.1.5 Portals

Media Guardian claims that the majority of home internet users still surf from within a portal or ISP. Four companies dominate their navigation – Microsoft, Yahoo, Aol and Lycos. ‘Microsoft’s MSN takes first and second place in the table of top portals, with almost 6m unique users in the UK. Trailing behind is Yahoo with 4m users, AOL with around 1.7m and Lycos with around 1.5m.’

1.2 Regulation of internet structure and content

The governmental Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) has pledged ‘to create a unified regulator responsible for the communications sector’, to be called OFCOM. This replaces the current regulatory structures as shown in the table in figure 3 overleaf.

Fig.3 Regulation of UK electronic communications sector

Current regulators of electronic communications sector (2001)	New regulators
Broadcasting Standards Commission Independent Television Commission OfTel Radio Authority Radio Communications Agency	OFCOM
BBC Board of Governors British Board of Film Classification Office of Fair Trading Sianel Pedwar Cymru (S4C)	BBC Board of Governors British Board of Film Classification Office of Fair Trading Sianel Pedwar Cymru (S4C)

At present internet communication is largely regulated by the Office of Telecommunications [OfTel], which is the regulator for the UK telecommunications industry, set up in 1984. Internet competition is regulated by OfTel and the Office of Fair Trading [OFT]. The new regulator OFCOM will be an independent regulator, acting at arm's length from the government but working closely with relevant governmental departments such as the DTI and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. It has been described as the 'Great Dane'⁷ of regulators, given its wide-ranging responsibilities for the regulation of electronic communication networks and services as well as the licensing of broadcasting services. It will also have concurrent powers with the OFT to exercise Competition Act powers for the communications sector. Its central regulatory objectives are likely to be protecting consumer interests, ensuring quality of broadcasting content and regulating internet content.

The government claims that the creation of OFCOM will 'simplify the regulatory framework while maintaining the ability to apply different types and levels of regulation to individual media for as long as necessary', and should also 'end the double jeopardy of the current system where the same issue could be examined in parallel by different regulators'⁸. Criticisms levelled at the proposals for OFCOM suggest that it will be simply too massive a regulatory body to work effectively. However, OFCOM will have more power to promote competition among monopolies, state-owned organisations and companies than OfTel, which faced criticism from some quarters of the telecommunications industry for being too 'soft' on British Telecom. As such the new regulatory structure is likely to have wide-ranging consequences for the structure of the UK electronic communications industry.

1.3 National competition law

Telecom and internet industries are obliged to operate under the UK Competition Act 1998. The Act is designed to make sure that businesses compete on a level footing by outlawing certain types of anti-competitive behaviour. The Office of Fair Trading has strong powers to investigate businesses suspected of breaching the Act and to impose tough penalties on those that do.

The Competition Commission is an independent public body established by the Competition Act 1998 & replaced the Monopolies and Mergers Commission on 1 April 1999. The Commission has two distinct functions: on its reporting side, to carrying out inquiries into matters referred to it by the other UK competition authorities concerning monopolies, mergers and the economic regulation of utility companies, and secondly, the newly established Appeal Tribunals hear appeals against decisions of the Director General of Fair Trading and the Regulators of utilities.

With respect to ISPs, the OFT's new Markets and Policy Initiatives Unit announced in October 2001 that it would be taking a more proactive look at the ISP market as a whole, to see how the markets are working for consumers, following indications that the practices and regulation of the home PC and ISP market are creating a huge amount of public concern.

⁷ Tim Richardson, 'Government announces creation of super comms regulator', *The Register* 12 December 2000, at <http://www.theregister.co.uk/content/5/15417.html>

⁸ Quoted from http://www.communicationswhitepaper.gov.uk/by_chapter/ex_summ/index.htm, discussion site for the Communications White Paper

2. Internet usage by the UK population

This section outlines the extent to which the internet is used in the UK as well as which social groups are more or less likely to use the internet (by age, social background and gender). There is a surfeit of statistics on internet usage, but many are unreliable or conducted according to vested interests. The wide variation in reported levels of usage reflects the difficulties currently inherent in gathering data about internet use; the rapid rate of change in levels of use works to make many surveys out of date before they are even published, and methods of data collection vary widely, with some surveys measuring use by household and others by individuals, some including use by children and others measuring use by adults only. Furthermore, it often proves difficult to distinguish between usage at home and usage at work, or to obtain reliable data on precisely what people use the internet for. National Statistics data have been used here where possible, with data also taken from other reputable research organisations such as Jupiter MMXI or NUA for comparison and where National Statistics lacks coverage.

2.1 General levels of access

The table below shows the growth in UK access to the internet over a 4-year period.

Fig.4 UK internet access by household

	1998	1999	2000	2001
% of households with Internet access from home PCs	9%	14%	26%	35%
% of households with access using all forms of access (PC, WAP, digital TV)	-	-	27%	38%
Source: Internet Access, 26/9/01 National Statistics, UK. Note: figures taken from April/June of each year.				

It can be seen that by mid-2000 over a quarter of UK households had home access to the internet. Internet access has increased year on year, with over a third of households able to access the internet by mid-2001.

As for access by individuals, NUA identify the following growth in usage for the UK:

Fig.5 UK internet access by individuals⁹

Date	% Pop	Source
June 2001	55.32	Jupiter MMXI
November 2000	33.58	Nielsen NetRatings
December 1999	23.65	Computer Industry Almanac
October 1998	16	CNET
June 1997	2.0	NOP Research

⁹ Where possible, NUA's figures represent both adults and children who have accessed the Internet at least once during the 3 months prior to being surveyed. Where these figures are not available, they use figures for users who have gone online in the past 6 months, past year, or ever.

		Group
Source: Nua - http://www.nua.ie/surveys/how_many_online/europe.html		

From these figures, it would seem that by late 2000 over a third of UK individuals had accessed the internet in the last 3 months, and that by mid-2001 this fraction had increased to over half of UK individuals. However, the National Statistics Omnibus Survey showed that between 34% and 37% of adults do not think they will access the Internet in the next year. This confirms the findings of the Consumer Association Which?, whose survey in 2000 predicted that approximately one quarter¹⁰ of the UK population will never use the internet, and that of those who do not currently use the net 52% maintain they will never go online.

The range of technology from which people can access the internet has widened over the last few years, and now includes several mobile technologies. However, figures from both National Statistics and Jupiter MMXI indicate that PCs remain as the most common method of access, despite the other options available.

Fig.6 Range of devices used to access the internet in the UK (2001)

Home PC	Work PC	Mobile Phone	Games console/other home devices	TV set top box	PDA [Personal Digital Assistant]
61%	32.2%	10.4%	9.3%	4.3%	1.6%
Source: Jupiter MMXI Online Market Landscape Q2 2001					

As for virtually all statistics regarding internet use, figures vary. For example, survey research conducted by the NOP Research Group in March 2001 gave the lower figure of 6% of British internet users accessing the internet via mobile phone, compared to 6% in France and 12% in Germany¹¹.

2.2 Variations in internet access and use by age, gender and social background

When statistics on those accessing the internet in the UK are examined, it quickly becomes clear that the presence of a 'digital divide' in the country is very real. While patterns of use change rapidly, it is still fair to say that age, gender and social and educational background are major factors influencing the likelihood of a UK citizen having access to the internet.

2.2.1 Age and gender

As the data from National Statistics below shows, internet access and use is far from consistent across the population. When usage is split by age, vast differences can be seen between levels of use among the young and the old; while the majority of people aged 16-24 have used the internet, use becomes less common as age increases.

¹⁰ Which? Online survey. Figure quoted was 15 million people. Mid 2000 population estimates from National Statistics estimate the UK population at 59, 755, 700. http://www.statistics.gov.uk/popest_mid00.asp

¹¹ 'Mobile internet: Germans well ahead of British', survey 30 March 2001, at <http://www.nop.co.uk/>

Fig.7 Characteristics of adults who have accessed the Internet at some time

	July 2000 %	July 2001 %
All adults	45	51
<i>Age in years</i>		
16-24	69	88
25-44	60	69
45-54	49	59
55-64	33	38
65 and above	9	11
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	52	56
Female	39	47
Source: National Statistics Omnibus Survey – July 2001		

When usage is broken down by gender, the figures show that whereas in previous years the internet was used more by men than by women in the UK, use is gradually becoming more evenly distributed among the sexes. National Statistics' findings are borne out by the results of Jupiter MMXI's 'UK at Home' survey in 2001 which found that 58% of internet users were male and 42% female.

2.2.2 Social background and income

Data on the social background and income of internet users support James Stewart's claim that among the poorest groups in society 'the uptake of any new technologies is very low'¹². Regarding the social backgrounds of internet users and non-users in the UK, research conducted by Research Surveys of Great Britain¹³ in January 2001 shows that usage of information and communications technologies (excluding mobile phones) is relatively low for lone parents, people who have difficulties with basic skills and disabled groups. Compared to the average of 44%, use of the Internet among these groups is low at 36%, 32% and 28% respectively. The study also found that those people living in ACORN categories "Council Estates, Greatest Hardship" and "Council Estates, High Unemployment" are unlikely to have ever used the Internet (34% and 25% respectively). This compares to 61% among "Prosperous professionals", 60% among "White collar workers" and 59% among "Affluent Executives".

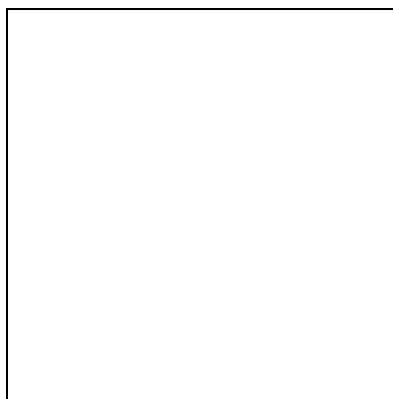
As for income and internet use, National Statistics figures show that 'at the extreme, there is a greater than 60% difference in the adoption rate between the lowest and highest income deciles'. The governmental Office of the e-Envoy admits that 'there is little evidence to suggest that the market will close this gap; in fact, if anything, the evidence over the past three years is that the gap is widening'¹⁴. Fig.6 below charts internet use by income as recorded in June 2001.

¹² James Stewart, 'The Digital Divide in the UK: A Review of Quantitative Indicators and Public Policies', Research Centre for Social Sciences at the University of Edinburgh, UK, p.2

¹³ Neil Russell and Nick Drew, 'ICT Access and Use: Report on the Benchmark Survey', study conducted for the UK government Department of Education and Employment in January 2001

¹⁴ UK Online annual report 2001, at <http://www.e-envoy.gov.uk/ukonline/progress/anrep2001/03.htm>

Fig.8 The digital divide in the UK by income, Office for National Statistics (ONS), June 2001



2.2.3 Other factors in the diffusion of the internet

It has been argued that education ‘is a major factor in the diffusion of the internet’¹⁵, with a Fletcher Research survey conducted in March 2000 indicating that 40% of internet users have a degree compared to the national average of 12%. Internet access also varies strikingly by geographical region; National Statistics data for the first quarter of 2000 shows that 25% of homes in London had internet access, compared with just 11% of homes in Northern Ireland.

The opportunity for UK children to access the internet through school is now widespread; according to figures from the RMG7 report 2000¹⁶, nearly 100% of all secondary schools and nearly 80% of primary schools had access to the Internet in 2000. This should mean that a point of internet access is provided to virtually all children of school age in the UK, a factor suggesting that increasing growth in internet access among the younger sections of the population is likely in coming years.

The figure below shows reasons gives further indications of the reasons why people do not use the Internet. The table shows the reasons given by UK adults who have never accessed the internet for not doing so.

Fig.5 Reasons for not using the internet (among adults who have never accessed the internet)

Reasons	July 2001 %
Lack of interest	42
No need	16
Lack of confidence/skills	16
No computer or access	26
Cannot afford it	7
Feels too old	9
No time	4

¹⁵ Stewart, *ibid.*

¹⁶ Quoted by the government department, Office of the e-Envoy, at http://www.e-envoy.gov.uk/estatmap/individual/readiness_schools_Internet_connected.htm

Do not want to use it	11
Have not got round to it yet	6
Poor opinion of the Internet	3
Health problems make it difficult	1
Other reasons	2
Source: National Statistics Omnibus Survey – July 2001	
Note: respondents may give more than one answer.	

2.3 What UK citizens use the internet for

Several surveys are available that break internet use down into very general categories. National Statistics data on personal use of websites is shown in figure 9 overleaf. Looking at the data for 2000, it is clear that UK internet users claimed to use the internet mainly for finding information about goods or services (70% of users), email (69% of users) or general surfing (64% of users).

Fig.9 What UK citizens use the internet for (personal use)

Activities	July 2000 % of respondents	July 2001 % of respondents
Finding information about good/services	70	74
Using email	69	71
General browsing or surfing	64	57
Finding information related to education	34	35
Buying or ordering tickets/goods/services	28	35
Personal banking/financial/investment activities	21	27
Looking for work	18	21
Downloading software, including games	17	23
Using chat rooms or sites	17	18
Playing or downloading music	16	19
Using or access government/official services	15	19
Other things	11	4
Source: National Statistics Omnibus Survey – July 2001		
Note: respondents may give more than one answer.		

It is significant for the government's target of getting all government services online by 2005 that 15% of internet users claimed to use the internet for accessing government or official services in 2000, and that this figure had increased slightly to 19% by mid-2001. National Statistics' figures relate to what people claim to use the internet for, which may account for the disparity between

their figures and those in a recent Eurobarometer survey. The Eurobarometer survey found that in February 2001, approximately 50% of British internet users visited a government site, which seems improbably high. Of those, 40% used the site for finding and downloading information, 30% used it to make enquiries via email and under 10% submitted a form via the Internet¹⁷.

3. Internet strategies of media and political actors

Few studies have been done on how media and political actors in the UK use the internet, and those that have been carried out often suffer from a lack of empirical data. The areas that are particularly under-researched are use of ICTs in political communication and mobilisation by UK NGOs and use of the internet by UK media actors. Elite political campaigning using ICTs (by government or political parties) has received the most attention, although it remains a new and emerging area of study.

It should be noted that alliances exist between UK political actors in the area of harnessing ICTs to improve the UK public's access to the internet. For example, the UK government have sought to involve a wide spectrum of political actors in their drive to get internet access to everyone in the UK who wants it by 2005. The recently created UK Online is a nationwide partnership that brings together government, industry, the voluntary sector, trade unions and consumer groups 'to help make the UK one of the world's leading knowledge economies'. Through UK Online centres the government hopes to reach out to those who currently see no value to them in the Internet by providing opportunities at local level for training and access to information and communication technologies¹⁸. The UK Online initiative along with government policy on provision of government services online is discussed in section 4 of this report.

3.1 Government and political parties

While many general papers and articles have been written about e-democracy, few seek to specify exactly how political parties and government in the UK use the internet or why they might choose certain internet strategies over others. Numerous UK-based websites devoted to e-democracy exist, prominent examples being Voxpolitics, a campaign sponsored by the parliamentary Stationery Office to explain how new technology changes politics, Citizens Online, and e-democracy¹⁹, 'a charitable organisation committed to promoting education and understanding of electronic democracy'. However, this section of the report will concern itself with how established political parties are using the internet rather than with the new internet 'e-democratic' organisations that continue to spring up in the UK.

The vast majority of the research that has been carried out on UK political parties' use of the internet relates to the 2001 general election campaigns. This is unsurprising given that political events such as elections provide profitable testing ground for parties' use of new media in campaigning (Stephen Coleman argues that the next significant ground for party internet campaigning will come 'if and when Britain holds a referendum on the euro'²⁰). An example of

¹⁷ Eurobarometer February 2001

¹⁸ More information available at <http://www.citizenonline.org.uk/links.shtml>

¹⁹ Web addresses are www.voxpolitics.com, www.citizens-online.org.uk and www.democracy.org.uk respectively

²⁰ Stephen Coleman, 'The 2001 election online and the future of e-politics', July 2001, at www.hansardsociety.org.uk

research on UK political parties and the internet is Ward and Gibson's (2001) paper on candidate websites in the 2001 general election²¹. They point out that there was considerable speculation that the 2001 election would be the first real internet election, with one of the expected spin-off benefits of using ICTs touted as the new technologies' ability to mobilise voters. Potential attractions for parties of using ICTs in political campaigns are identified as:

- Delivering information unmediated to voters
- Mobilising and targeting voters more effectively
- Creating an ongoing dialogue with voters
- Decentralising political campaigning, thus potentially providing a useful platform for local candidates and parties to present their viewpoints to a wider audience, away from the rigid messages of national campaigns

The first is borne out by Coleman's analysis of the role of the internet in the 2001 election, which finds that the main advantage of the internet to parties was that 'it offered them a chance to address themselves directly to the electorate, without the intervention or interpretation of the media'. The actual internet strategies that parties used, however, tended to be fairly unimaginative. Coleman concludes that the parties:

'knew that the net was important, but few knew how to use it inventively. Old forms of publicity were replicated within a new medium: parties and candidates set up websites that looked rather like printed brochures...'

As such the internet was primarily used by the parties for the online delivery of previously offline marketing material. In general, claims Coleman, there was 'a lack of connection with the voters', with interactivity limited to ineffective email feedback channels and tentative attempts to create personalised content. As such, while parties did take advantage of the 'unmediated' nature of the internet to communicate with voters during the run-up to the 2001 election, they failed to exploit the net's interactivity or its ability to personalise and 'narrowcast' content by targeting certain sectors of the electorate.

In line with this, Ward and Gibson record that parties' actual internet strategies were generally 'greeted with scorn' by journalists and think tanks. They were criticised for failing to engage with the technology as well as for failing to use the technology imaginatively. Parties and candidates were charged with simply engaging in online propaganda with boring content and largely ignoring interactivity, as the following comment from Ian Kearns of the Institute of Public Policy Research illustrates:

'The Internet as a medium is woefully under-utilised by political parties with most having web-sites with no real feedback mechanisms, no discussion groups and no noticeboards.'

Ward and Gibson conclude that the internet ultimately 'had marginal impact on the election campaign'. However, they point out that the internet 'is being integrated into the parties' campaign toolbox more quickly than previous technologies' and argue that the quality of what is offered online by UK political parties is likely to increase rapidly.

²¹ Stephen Ward and Rachel Gibson, 'Online and On Message? Candidate Websites in the 2001 General Election', paper presented to PSA/BSA Media Group Conference, 10 September 2001, at <http://www.esri.salford.ac.uk/ESRCResearchproject/mpgpaper.htm>

In another article, Ward and Gibson review recent developments in the use of ICTs by UK political parties, concluding that so far ‘the internet has been more an administrative device for parties than a tool for democracy and participation’²². The spread of internet politics has been fastest at national level, but local-level internet communications by UK political parties remain erratic. As regards internet strategy, initially most parties had no coherent strategy for their internet activities, the majority setting up sites in response to rival parties’ online presence. The vast majority of party sites have used the web primarily as ‘a top-down information tool’. Ward and Gibson point out that the major British parties ‘tend to follow a consistent model, with policy documents, organisational information and press releases making up the bulk of most sites, reflecting the needs of their major audience (journalists, students and researchers)’. Little interactivity is evident in the major parties’ websites, which are without open discussion areas. Significantly for claims that the internet can play an important role in the democratic process by facilitating citizen feedback, the major parties’ websites usually contain general encouragement to contact the party with views, but there is little that suggests what happens to citizen opinions once they are expressed and little organised structure (such as surveys) to the feedback such websites solicit.

Minor parties (particularly those from the extreme right, such as the BNP) have been quick to take advantage of the web’s possibilities for unmediated political communication and ‘have repeatedly stated that the web is one of the few means they have of delivering their message to voters’. As such it seems likely that the internet ‘can enhance the presence of small parties, not least because they are easier to find than in the traditional media’²³.

As for general internet strategies of government websites outside election campaigning, a study by Politics Online and the Amsterdam-Maastricht Summer University in October 2001 places the quality of British government websites second only to Ireland in the EU²⁴, claiming that this reflects UK efforts to have fully digitised government by 2005. Nonetheless, the websites of political elites in Britain remain little researched to date other than within the framework of major political events such as election campaigns.

3.2 *Trade unions*

UK trade unions have recently begun to wake up to the possibilities of using ICTs for organising and campaigning. The TUC [Trades Union Congress] held a two-day conference in May 2001 on ‘Unions on the internet’, and their subsequent annual conference in September 2001 ‘recommended the more systematic use of web-based services to boost union recruitment’²⁵. The primary impetus given in the unions’ literature for desiring to harness ICTs is that new methods of dealing with current recruitment, retention and participation problems are required. The new technologies are seen by the TUC as likely to benefit unions in four main areas: recruitment (boosting declining recruitment levels), democracy (increasing union accountability and representativeness), participation (providing more rapid and frequent communication between

²² Stephen Ward and Rachel Gibson (2001) ‘The Politics of the Future? UK Parties and the Internet’, in Stephen Coleman (ed) *Elections in the age of the Internet: Lessons from the United States* (London: Hansard Society, 29-36)

²³ Ward and Gibson 2001b, *ibid*.

²⁴ Report can be found at <http://www.politicsonline.com/specialreports/010803/eusurvey2001.asp>

²⁵ ‘Unions and the internet: prospects for renewal?’ Feature by European Industrial Relations Observatory Online, at <http://www.eiro.eurofound.ie/2001/10/Feature/UK0110108F.html>

unions and members) and global links (forming alliances with labour movements and other campaigning actors operating beyond UK borders).

Regarding the current state of play of internet use by trade unions, a briefing document issued to participants at the May 2001 TUC conference argues that while most national UK unions have websites, these 'vary hugely in quality and ease of access'²⁶. Most union websites have basic information about the different sections of the union, an online subscription facility, and information for members and activists. Internally, most unions have e-mail access, and some such as Connect [union for communications professionals] and AUT [Association of University Teachers] have e-mail discussion groups for members in a particular company or group. Others such as NATFHE [the University and College Lecturers' Union] have regular e-mail up-date facilities. Unions have also perceived ICTs as offering new ways of delivering trade union activist and vocational education, enabling increased participation for those who are unable to attend physically. For example, the TUC has launched the Learnonline programme and many trade unions have already developed web-based courses. Online 'toolkits' and information about using ICTs for organising and campaigning are available to unions via the web organisation Labournet, which exists to 'promote computer communications as a medium for strengthening and building organised labour'. Originally a US organisation, Labournet now has around 7 other national networks as well; see <http://www.labournet.net> for further details.

However, there was little evidence in 2001 to suggest that unions were using new technology to any significant extent in organising campaigns. The briefing ascribes this to the fact that most trade union campaign organising currently involves groups of workers who do not have access to ICT at work and who may well not be able to use (or do not feel comfortable using) ICT at home. As such a clear relationship would seem to exist between the ability of trade unions to use new technologies in campaigning and the ability of their members to access the internet. In practice so far, the use of new technology in any extended way has been limited to those unions organising in sectors that are computer literate and which are predominantly white-collar. Examples of successful campaigning using ICTs to mobilise include that carried out by the AUT to organise fixed-term contract workers. Since academic staff are almost certain to use the internet, it was possible for the AUT campaign to rely heavily on ICTs.

Obstacles to use of ICTs by UK unions have become apparent. A particular stumbling block is online participation in union activity; a Poptel survey carried out for the TUC in early 2001 found that there was still a strong preference among union members for traditional, face-to-face forms of participation within the UK union movement. Research also indicates issues with union training on the internet, in that many online training courses offered by the unions are facing teething problems. In addition, many union representatives at the May 2001 TUC conference voiced concerns about the misrepresentation of unions' campaigning messages on the internet, pointing out that a decentralised communication forum could easily become the setting for 'incoherence of message'. Some felt that a central body was needed which would oversee the web presence and web activities of the UK trade union movement. As such a measure of concern exists within UK trade unions as to their own possible lack of control over use of ICTs in campaigning and organising.

²⁶ Mel Sims, 'Using New Technology to Organise 'New' Groups of Workers', briefing document issued to TUC conference 23 May 2001

For a comprehensive review of UK trade union use of the internet, see the feature ‘Unions and the internet: prospects for renewal?’ by European Industrial Relations Observatory Online, available online (see footnote 20 above for web address).

3.3 *Non-governmental organisations*

‘Non-governmental organisations’ is an umbrella term classifying many vastly different organisations together: charities, voluntary organisations, churches, humanitarian aid organisations, and campaigning groups ranging from huge and transnational (e.g. Amnesty International) to tiny or local-level. While some NGOs such as Oxfam have considerable resources at their disposal, the majority are resource-poor and financially stretched. As such it might be expected that use of ICTs would vary widely between NGOs, depending very much on the size, resources and constituency of the organisation. However, few if any systematic studies have been carried out of how UK non-governmental organisations use ICTs, making this an important avenue for future research.

The transnational nature of many non-governmental organisations is reflected to some extent in the ways in which NGOs appear to be using the internet. For example, since NGOs are often small, underfunded and generally resource-poor, joint internet strategies exist to allow them to use the internet collectively. Prominent organisations of this kind include the internet server *OneWorld* and ‘cooperative platform’ *Euforic*. Furthermore, plenty of material is available on the internet to train NGOs in internet strategies; see for example the APC [Association for Progressive Communications] website²⁷, which has an entire section for NGOs on the Internet. However, while such resources provide plenty of suggested strategies, the information contained there is of little help in identifying how UK NGOs are actually using the internet for political communication and organisation.

In the charity sector, it seems that UK-based charities in general do not feel they do well at offering online services to the public. A study from the Future Foundation²⁸ found that only a third of charities thought they were making the most of the internet, and just over half had a strategic plan for making use of the web. However, this again seems to vary widely; for example, services for homeless people have been forging ahead online in joint initiatives between charities and the government²⁹.

In summary, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence available on how NGOs use the internet, but little of this is UK-specific or in any way systematic. For example, it has been argued that when the internet is used for mobilisation, ‘some campaigns ... begin to adopt more interactive techniques’, such as the coordination of British NGOs’ efforts to lobby European policies on various subjects during the last UK presidency of the EU. However, it remains to be seen whether such internet techniques might also be used by NGOs working in the 6 policy fields covered by the Europub project.

3.4 *Media actors*

All major UK media outlets have websites, but these are of varying quality and offer differing opportunities for online participation. Media use of the internet in the UK is an under-researched

²⁷ <http://www.apc.org/english/ngos/index.htm>

²⁸ <http://www.future-foundation.net>

²⁹ Sarah Left, ‘Public Services Online’, *Society Guardian*, Tuesday July 17 2001

area which would benefit from systematic analyses of how and why different media incorporate the internet into their business strategy and the societal implications of so doing. From what little information exists, it is clear that increasing use of the internet as an output medium by different sectors of the media has caused the traditionally clear distinctions between different media formats to become blurred. For example, many radio websites resemble magazines and now provide opportunities for listener interaction that were not possible through the traditional radio interface. Also, newspapers are able to update news content on a minute-by-minute basis, a development which in effect shifts their news provision role closer to that of radio and television.

Media actors' internet strategies are largely employed in order to provide a value-added service. They include:

- Maximising content via search facilities, archives, and specialist/in depth reports; this facility encourages professionals to incorporate the news site into their work tasks
- Ability to provide up to date content not constrained by print schedules or broadcasting schedules
- Interactivity & potential for reader participation through discussion fora, notice boards, and emailing (the *Guardian* newspaper site has even created a virtual community that encourages people to contact each other through an interactivity feature in its bookselling service)
- Access to the news production process through the opportunity to submit news stories; some news sites, for instance *The Sun*, encourage users to submit potential news stories through the site.

Further examples of these strategies can be found in a report by the government Department for Culture, Media and Sport available on their website³⁰.

When internet activities are broken down by media sector, the following patterns emerge:

- *Regional newspapers*
The DTI-funded Sector Challenge programme carried out a detailed study of UK regional newspapers' non-print activities. Of the sample, which represented a third of UK regional and local newspapers, 83% already had a website and remaining 17% aimed to have a web presence within the next three years³¹. The report pointed out that regional newspapers recognised the urgent need to develop their own websites due to the threat of losing up to 75% of their classified advertising revenue to other newspapers with a web presence.
- *National newspapers*
The UK's national newspapers all have some level of web presence. Their strategies for generating revenue from online editions are based on advertising, sponsorship and electronic commerce rather than 'cover prices'.
- *Radio*

³⁰ <http://www.culture.gov.uk/creative>

³¹ Quoted in 'Internet Inquiry' document published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in February 2000 –<http://www.culture.gov.uk/creative/newspaper.html> Accessed 23/01/02

The strategy of many radio broadcasters has been to develop multimedia sites that encourage an interactive experience and promote participation rather than passive listening.

- *TV*
Each of the UK's major television news providers (BBC, ITN, Channel 4, Sky) has developed a comprehensive website. The BBC site provides access to both radio and television news, and allows users to listen or watch live online. The site also provides a host of additional resources to compliment the BBC's standard programming, ranging from educational resources through to in-depth reports to online discussion forums and opportunities to chat with guests from TV & radio programmes after transmission. The ITN site was originally established to deliver a website for the 1997 UK General Election, and claims to have one of the worlds largest on line archives of news items.

The available information on UK media internet strategies is limited, particularly as regards the media's role in political communication. Some investigation has been carried out into media actors' internet coverage of the 2001 election. Coleman (2001) argues that this was 'the first UK election in which traditional media coverage moved online'³². While in the 1997 election no national newspaper or broadcaster ran an online election service of any sophistication, by 2001 every major broadcaster and broadsheet newspaper had an online presence. Interestingly, the UK tabloids 'remained resolutely offline' as regards election service, although all have now developed some kind of limited web presence. The online election sites from the media were highly successful, particularly the BBC's *Vote 2001* service and the *Guardian* Politics presence, with the former site clocking up an average of half a million page views on each day of the campaign. Coleman concludes that none of the sites constituted attempts to replace traditional broadcast media or press, but all 'supplanted the old media in ways that helped to make the election more direct, accessible and meaningful for significant numbers of people'.

Clearly understanding of the internet strategies that media actors employ in the UK public sphere is limited at present. Later empirical findings from the Europub project should provide opportunities to develop greater understanding of exactly how the UK media are coming to use the internet and why.

4. Internet governance in the UK

It has been argued that public provision of technology services 'has always been key to their availability and diffusion' and that public policy and government subsidy have 'often played an important role'³³. This section deals with the policies and institutional structures which have been put in place by the UK government in order to co-ordinate and shape the working and use of the Internet. The government has been extremely active on 'information age' policy, and has set numerous ambitious targets, such as universal citizen access to the internet by 2005, the UK to be the best environment in the world for e-commerce by 2002, all government services to be provided online by 2005, and the UK to have the most competitive and extensive broadband

³² Coleman 2001, *ibid.*

³³ Stewart, *ibid.*, p.2

market in the G7 by 2005. Whether it can realise such targets remains to be seen, but in the meanwhile a report published by the centre-left thinktank the Institute for Public Policy Research in November 2000 argued that the UK government 'is ahead of most in responding to the challenges of online media'³⁴.

These developments beg the question of why the government has promoted information and communication technologies [ICTs] with such enthusiasm. Reasons given in government communications usually relate to strengthening democracy, combating social exclusion and fostering economic growth. The first is crucial for the current government given the electoral apathy among the UK population, particularly among voters under 40, that was evident in the 2001 election results. Representing the Cabinet Office at a Global Forum in Naples in 2001, Minister Graham Stringer expressed the view that 'we must open up new democratic channels, through which government can relate to its citizens'³⁵. Stringer also stressed the importance of bridging the 'digital divide', contending that 'if we are to develop the Internet into a new democratic tool, Government must ensure that everyone - irrespective of age, gender, profession or geographical location - has access to it and the skills to use it'. The government also sees ICTs as a key factor in Britain's future economic growth, as Tony Blair's argument that 'countries that wholeheartedly embrace e-commerce will benefit from improved national economic performance'³⁶ suggests. This combination of opportunities presented by new technologies for increasing citizen engagement in the political process, making inroads into problems of social exclusion, and generating higher economic growth points to why the UK government has been so keen to engage with and advocate ICTs.

4.1 Governmental actors responsible for internet policy

The Labour administration elected to office in May 1997 has been highly proactive in the area of internet policy. This is an issue that cuts across government departments; responsibilities lie with the Department of Trade and Industry (e-commerce), the Department of Education and Employment (access, communities and social inclusion), the Cabinet Office (e-democracy) and the Home Office (internet surveillance and security) among others. Since September 1999 there has also been a governmental office dedicated purely to generating and delivering internet-related initiatives, the Office of the E-Envoy. The office was created following a recommendation of the government's Performance and Innovation Unit's report on e-commerce, and is currently headed by Andrew Pinder, who was appointed e-Envoy in January 2001.

The prime movers in government internet policy are Pinder and Trade and Industry Secretary Patricia Hewitt, Labour's 'e-minister'. Hewitt's role is to advocate the government's internet agenda at Cabinet level, provide the Prime Minister with monthly progress reports, and take overall responsibility for governmental internet strategy. At a political level, she is supported by a network of colleagues across Whitehall, known as 'e-Ministers'. Furthermore, at an official level, the e-Minister and e-Envoy are supported by a group of 'e-Champions', a group of senior officials from each government department. As this indicates, responsibilities for internet policy across government are clearly structured.

³⁴ Report in conjunction with NGO Citizens Online, at <http://www.citizensonline.org.uk/pdf/universal.pdf>

³⁵ Cabinet Office press release CAB 074/01, 'UK Minister leads call for e-democracy at Global Forum', 15 March 2001

³⁶ Tony Blair, foreword to e-commerce@its.best.uk, report of the Performance and Innovation Unit, September 1999, at http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/innovation/1999/ecommerce/ec_body.pdf

In addition to the Office of the e-Envoy, the government has also sought to involve significant sectors of UK society in achieving progress towards its internet policy goals, primarily via the creation of the organisation UK Online, a partnership between government, industry, the voluntary sector, trade unions and consumer groups. The organisation's 'citizen portal', www.ukonline.gov.uk, is intended to evolve into a place where citizens can interact and transact with government online, which may in time lead to extensive policy consultations³⁷.

4.2 UK Online Strategy

The central plank of the UK government's internet agenda is the UK Online Strategy, which it describes as 'the government's programme to ensure that the UK is a world-leader in the new knowledge economy'. The strategy's stated mission runs as follows:

*"Electronic commerce and the Internet are transforming economies and societies across the world. The Government is committed to giving every individual, business and community in the UK the opportunity to participate fully in the benefits flowing from these changes - in short, to getting the UK online."*³⁸

The strategy was first published as part of the e-Minister and e-Envoy's first Annual Report in September 2000, in order to drive forward progress in the areas of electronic commerce and the internet. It sets out a range of recommendations for action, and the e-Minister and e-Envoy report to Tony Blair monthly on progress towards the strategy's aims. Its three central goals are:

- To ensure that everyone who wants it has access to the Internet by 2005
- To make the UK the best environment in the world for e-commerce by 2002
- To make all public services available electronically by 2005

The three targets are clearly ambitious, particularly the first aim of ensuring universal access to the internet in the UK by 2005. The government maintains that good progress is being made, pointing to evidence such as the UK being ranked second among the G7 countries by the Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU's) e-readiness rankings in May 2000. However, many are sceptical about the government's ability to deliver on the three targets; research conducted by MORI in November 2001 showed that most IT journalists in the UK 'do not believe that their government will succeed in its plans for widespread Internet access'.

4.3 Access for all? Government policy on ICTs and social exclusion

James Stewart notes that 'some of the poorest and most 'excluded' in the country are also the most important consumers of government service (the retired, the disabled, the unemployed, those living in economically depressed areas)'³⁹. Some of the government's targets, such as the delivery of government services on the internet, are conditional on socially excluded groups actually having access to the internet in the first place. A Policy Action Team on ICTs and social exclusion [PAT 15] was set up by the government's Social Exclusion Unit and reported in February 2000. Its report blamed the cost of internet access and lack of a clear government policy for putting people in the poorest parts of the UK at the risk of digital exclusion. It

³⁷ Cabinet Office press release CAB 074/01, *ibid.*

³⁸ E-Minister and E-Envoy Annual Report 2000, at <http://www.e-envoy.gov.uk/ukonline/progress/anrep1/default.htm>

³⁹ Stewart, *ibid.*, p.29

identified clear links between social exclusion and digital exclusion, concluding that ‘lack of access to ICTs leads to or reinforces disadvantage’ and that ‘people who live in deprived neighbourhoods are less likely to be able to use the most common methods of training or points of access to ICTs’. The report argued that since gaining and using ICT skills can lead to opportunities to participate fully in the local and national economy, ‘the arguments for social inclusion and for economic development in the Information Age are mutually re-enforcing’. It identified barriers to citizen involvement with ICTs and set out a number of recommendations to ensure that government actions ‘to promote the use of ICTs and e-commerce are coherent and reduce social exclusion’.

Stewart also argues that social exclusion ‘is a major focus of government policy, and the promotion of ICT literacy and use is seen as a way of dealing with ‘social exclusion’ in deprived areas’. Following the PAT 15 report, by the end of 2000 the measures taken by the government to combat the ‘digital divide’ included the following:

- Creation of public access centres for learning and use of ICTs and the internet. For example, around 700 government-funded ICT Learning Centres have been set up across England, particularly targeted at disadvantaged communities, while public libraries have been encouraged to install internet terminals. One of the key measures through which the government is trying to ensure universal access is the creation of UK online centres - walk-in high street locations where the internet can be used - which are being set up across the country at the time of writing.
- University for Industry initiative, which aims to provide training resources to industry which are supported by the use of computers and the internet. This involved the setting-up of almost 1000 ‘Learn Direct’ centres by 2001.
- Purchasing of computers for low-income families. ‘In October 1999 the government announced money to buy computers for 100,000 low income families, recognising the limitations of public access centres for use of the internet’⁴⁰.
- A number of initiatives to support disabled access to computers and the internet.

The government has also sought to combat rural exclusion from internet technologies, via projects such as the Highlands and Islands University, which enables students in geographically isolated areas of Scotland to have home access to electronically supported further and higher education. Since 2000 further wide-reaching initiatives have been introduced to combat social exclusion from new technology, such as the Department for Education and Employment’s ‘Wired Up Communities’ programme. The initiative, aimed at preventing the emergence of a ‘digital underclass’, is to provide internet and digital access to 12,000 homes in six deprived communities across England from 2001 onwards⁴¹.

The government has shown evident commitment to closing the ‘digital divide’ but has not gone uncriticised. Some have pointed out that improved web access does not automatically improve social exclusion; indeed, recent research has shown that internet-connected kiosks put in libraries and shopping centres were being used more by those already online than by the ‘digitally

⁴⁰ Stewart, *ibid.*, p.35

⁴¹ Matt Weaver, ‘Internet Revolution for Deprived Areas’, *Society Guardian*, Friday March 16 2001

excluded⁴². While this finding is perhaps unsurprising, it does point to the difficulties inherent in combating the digital divide for any government.

4.4 *Government policy on internet technology*

The government has been vocal in promoting broadband (high-speed) internet access. *UK online: the broadband future*, an action plan to facilitate the roll out of broadband and higher bandwidth services across the UK, was published on 13th February 2001 by the e-Minister Patricia Hewitt and the e-Envoy Andrew Pinder. The strategy sets out a new goal for the UK to have the most competitive and extensive broadband market in the G7 by 2005. However, broadband is rolling out more slowly than was touted, leading to mounting criticism of the government's policy in 2001, with surveys suggesting the UK was falling behind the rest of the world in its rollout of broadband services⁴³. Since BT owns the majority of telephone lines into homes, it is seen as crucial to enabling UK-wide access to broadband services. However, the company's record on broadband to date is poor; while T-Online has connected 2.6 million customers to ADSL services, BT has managed just 45,000. Since formerly public British Telecom was privatised in 1984, the government has little control over telecommunications infrastructure, while many other countries are able to roll out infrastructure in a uniform way because it is publicly owned.

Contrary to the government's hopes, research from Jupiter MMXI has predicted that only 30% of online households in the UK will have a broadband connection by 2005, just 15 percent of all homes. Such findings have significant repercussions for the government's efforts to close the digital divide. Since ADSL and cable are confined largely to towns, the 'very real danger' of no broadband access in rural Britain calls the government's digital divide policy into question.

⁴² Report from Virtual Society Research Project, University of Oxford, <http://virtualsociety.sbs.ox.ac.uk>, reported by Mark Ward, 'Internet divides society', for BBC Online News Tuesday 23 May 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/sci/tech/newsid_760000/760867.stm

⁴³ Jane Wakefield, 'E-minister: Britain will be broadband leader', Tuesday 24 April 2001, at ZDNet UK, <http://news.zdnet.co.uk/story/0,,t269-s2085802,00.html>

4.5 Government policy on e-commerce

Another government goal is to make the UK the ‘best place in the world for e-commerce’⁴⁴ by 2002. By the end of 2000 81% of all UK businesses were connected to the internet, up from 63% in 1999. The most marked progress was within small and medium sized enterprises [SMEs], where government target of getting 1.5 million SMEs wired up to the internet by 2002 had already been exceeded by 2000. The UK has 27% of businesses trading online, ahead of all other countries benchmarked in the UK Online for Business 2000 study⁴⁵. The Department of Trade and Industry claims that the current level of e-commerce activity is relatively strong in the UK (second only to Sweden in the study), with 70% of businesses currently claiming to use e-commerce alongside conventional business methods. Barriers to e-commerce adoption remain, however, in that businesses still perceive a risk to confidentiality and security.

4.6 Public services and the internet

The government’s ‘e-government’ target requires that all government services be available online by 2005. At present government websites are mainly geared up to information provision rather than actual provision of government services online, as *The Guardian*’s recent claim that ‘the most useful thing the websites offer is the ability to print out forms you would previously have to send away for’⁴⁶ suggests. Some departments, such as the Inland Revenue, do offer transactional services online, and one local council’s website offers local residents a wide range of services, from the chance to check their council tax status to the possibility of paying parking fines online. However, such fully functioning government websites are currently the exception rather than the rule.

Possible glitches in getting government online include both technological and political issues. For example, in order that government services are provided securely, many transactional services will require the technology to deliver a digital signature so that citizens can put their names on forms or request official documents, and it remains doubtful that the government can deliver that by 2005. Political problems so far include the need for much greater central coordination by the government; as a recent report by the New Local Government Network pointed out, the ambitious target is unlikely to be met by 2005 if Whitehall continue to leave individual councils to find their own ways of putting the central government’s ICT goals into practice⁴⁷. Surveys have also shown that local authorities often have ‘patchy or poor’ understanding of Whitehall’s plans to deliver government services online, which may lead to problems with implementation at local level⁴⁸. Use of government services online in the UK is currently slightly lower than the EU average⁴⁹.

In addition to getting government online, the Labour administration has also pledged to drive forward use of ICTs in other public sector bodies such as the National Health Service. In early 2001 the government launched a 4-year strategy to ‘wire up the NHS to the internet revolution’, promising a ‘vibrant, networked NHS’ by 2005⁵⁰.

⁴⁴ http://www.dti.gov.uk/cii/ecommerce/ukecommercestrategy/ecommerce_at_its_best.shtml

⁴⁵ These were France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, the US, Canada and Japan.

⁴⁶ Sarah Left, ‘Public Services Online’, *Society Guardian*, Tuesday July 17 2001

⁴⁷ Simon Parker, ‘E-targets will be missed without Whitehall help, says report’, *Society Guardian*, Thursday July 5 2001

⁴⁸ Simon Parker, ‘Councils ignorant of e-government target’, *Society Guardian*, Monday December 4 2000

⁴⁹ Relevant statistics can be found at http://www.e-envoy.gov.uk/estatmap/government/use_web_site_usage.htm

⁵⁰ Patrick Butler, ‘£500m plan to plug NHS into internet revolution’, *Society Guardian*, Monday January 15 2001

4.7 *Government policy on state surveillance of internet communications*

Parallel to the UK online aims of developing ICTs in Britain runs another agenda, that of state regulation and control of internet activity. This policy agenda has been developed through the Home Office, whose activities have focused on three areas: interception of communications, internet crime and internet security. Following September 11 these activities seem set to be strengthened further with regard to intercepting and combating any use of the internet by terrorist networks; as Richard Sarson argues, the ‘debate has been re-opened by the activities of Osama bin Laden’⁵¹. The policies relating to interception of communications increase the ability of the state to monitor UK internet activity. Especially controversial has been the Regulation of Investigatory Powers [RIP] Act 2000, which provides the state with powers to monitor domestic communications⁵². Despite fierce opposition from many MPs, the Act was passed by Parliament in the course of 2000.

Considerable concern has been voiced in the UK about the RIP Act. It has variously been described as ‘disgraceful’, ‘draconian’ and ‘the most pernicious invasion of privacy ever imposed by a democratic state’ by those campaigning against it, who include the Foundation for Internet Policy Research and the Campaign Against Censorship of the Internet in Britain⁵³. Concerns have mainly centred around citizen rights to privacy, freedom of expression and freedom of communication, and although the RIP Act claims its main purpose is to ‘ensure that the relevant investigatory powers are used in accordance with human rights’, no such framework of citizen rights currently exists in the UK explicitly in relation to new media.

Other internet surveillance measures have followed the RIP Act. For instance, it was revealed in December 2000 that the UK government, through the security services, was developing a system to monitor communications data for all UK voice and data communications⁵⁴. In addition, consumer concerns such as making the internet safer for children, online codes of practice on internet trading and reducing the scope for online fraud are being addressed by the Home Office in partnership with industry watchdogs such as the Internet Watch Foundation.

The regulatory and legislative measures currently in place for ISPs are due to change under the new regulatory body OFCOM. The Internet Service Providers association (ISPA) is a voluntary self-regulatory trade association founded in 1995. It seeks to actively represent and promote the interests of businesses involved in all aspects of the UK Internet industry. It has a code of practice and works with the government to implement legislation such as the RIP Act. The ISPA helped to establish the Internet Watch Foundation and requires its members to provide a 24 hour point of contact to the IWFG in order that they can receive notification of illegal material which must then be immediately removed from their servers.

4.8 *E-democracy*

The concept of e-democracy is associated with efforts to broaden political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their representatives via new information

⁵¹ Richard Sarson, ‘The Politics of IT: Does IT Lead to Utopia or Dystopia?’ at <http://www.sourceuk.net/articles/f02043.html>

⁵² Paul Mobbs, November 2000, ‘Internet Rights Country Report - UK’, full text at <http://www.apc.org/english/rights/europe/uk/uk.htm>

⁵³ Websites at www.fipr.org.uk and <http://www.liberty.org.uk/cacib> respectively

⁵⁴ Mobbs, *ibid*.

and communication technologies⁵⁵. Hague and Loader set out the ideal of e-democracy as follows:

“Strong democracy’ requires strong and interactive links between the state and civil society, between government and the governed ... we have the prospect of national and local governments interacting with citizens via web sites, e-mail addresses and public information kiosks. We also have experiments with electronic voting, electronic voter guides, citizen juries and the like.’⁵⁶

E-democracy is being taken increasingly seriously at the top of the Labour administration, with a Cabinet committee being set up to discuss e-democracy in November 2001. Since then, Labour Leader of the Commons Robin Cook has argued that greater use of the internet in UK politics may prove a means of engaging those sectors of UK society who tend not to vote at present, such as the under-40s, in the democratic process⁵⁷. His proposals include ‘enfranchising’ citizens by ensuring that Britain becomes the first country in the world to use the internet for voting, and using the web for daily citizen feedback to parliament on policy choices facing MPs. Pilot schemes for local elections begin in the spring, with an outside chance that voting by internet could be in place for the next general election. Cook has expressed strong concern over the ‘digital divide’ and argued that Parliament needs to guard against UK citizens’ increasing disenchantment with the political process by showing that it is ‘not just a cockpit for party political sparring’⁵⁸.

5. Internet: new potential for political communication in the UK?

This report has given an overview of a number of areas relevant to dealing with the question of whether the internet is providing new avenues for political communication in the UK, or can do so in the future. Salient issues include:

- *Structure of the internet communications industry in the UK*
 - The majority of market share is currently concentrated in the hands of four internet service providers, only one of which has its headquarters in the UK.
 - Privatised telecommunications company BT owns the majority of telephone lines into UK homes and is thus seen as crucial in rolling out high-speed broadband internet access across the country, a development likely to encourage more UK citizens to use the internet.
 - Responsibility for internet regulation was largely in the hands of Oftel during 2000 and 2001, but is soon to be transferred to a new communications regulator OFCOM.

- *The UK public online*

⁵⁵ See Hansard Society website at <http://www.hansard-society.org.uk/eDemocracy.htm> for further details

⁵⁶ Barry Hague and Brian Loader (eds), *Digital democracy: discourse and decision-making in the information age* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1999), p.13

⁵⁷ Jackie Ashley, ‘Cook plans to make UK first to vote on Internet’, *Society Guardian*, Monday January 7 2002

⁵⁸ Quoted in Cabinet Office press release CAB 199/01, 10 December 2001, at http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/2001/news/011210_modparl.htm

- Levels of internet use among the UK population are currently growing year on year. By mid-2000, over a quarter of UK households (26%) had internet access, while by the end of 2000 surveys show that a third of UK individuals (34%) had accessed the internet at some point. Both proportions continued to increase during 2001 and seem set to continue doing so in 2002. However, surveys have predicted that around one quarter of the UK population will never use the internet. In addition, of those who do not currently use the net just over half maintain they will never go online.
 - A ‘digital divide’ evidently exists in the UK at present, with older people and people of lower social grade less likely to use the internet. This is likely to have repercussions for political participation and access to political communication among those sectors of the UK population that suffer the most from social exclusion.
 - By mid-2001 almost a fifth of the UK population surveyed by National Statistics claimed to have used the internet for accessing government or official services, a finding with implications for the Labour government’s efforts to harness the potential of the internet to engage citizens in the democratic process.
- *Internet strategies of UK media and political actors*
 - The majority of analyses of UK political parties’ internet strategies relate to the 2001 general election campaigns. To date party websites have largely focused on information provision (‘top-down information tools’) rather than offering new opportunities for democracy and participation.
 - In the 2001 election campaigns, parties did take advantage of the ‘unmediated’ nature of the internet to communicate with voters during the run-up to the 2001 election. However, the internet was primarily used by the parties for the online delivery of previously offline marketing material. There was little exploitation of the net’s interactivity or its ability to personalise and ‘narrowcast’ content by targeting certain sectors of the electorate.
 - Minor parties, particularly extreme right groups such as the BNP, have been quick to take advantage of the web’s possibilities for unmediated political communication.
 - UK trade unions have implemented internet communication measures ranging from basic information for members and activists through to online training courses and email discussion fora. However, unions have not used new technology to any significant extent in organising campaigns, and the present inability of many union members to access the internet may be an inhibiting factor in the take-up of new technologies in trade union campaigning.
 - Little information exists on how UK-based NGOs use the internet for political communication and mobilisation; as such this constitutes an avenue for future research.
 - All major UK media outlets have websites, but these are of varying quality and offer differing opportunities for online participation. The available information on UK media internet strategies is limited, although some investigation has been carried out into media actors’ internet coverage of the 2001 election, which has been described as ‘the first UK election in which traditional media coverage moved online’.

- *UK government policy on internet communications*
 - The UK government has set a number of ambitious targets for the development of the internet in Britain, which include universal citizen access to the internet by 2005, the UK to be the best environment in the world for e-commerce by 2002, all government services to be provided online by 2005, and the UK to have the most competitive and extensive broadband market in the G7 by 2005.
 - Reasons given by the government for its active promotion of new technologies usually relate to the potential of the internet for strengthening democracy, combating social exclusion and fostering economic growth.
 - E-democracy is being taken increasingly seriously at the top of the Labour administration, with Labour Leader of the Commons Robin Cook having recently outlined a range of proposals for ‘enfranchising’ citizens. These include ensuring that Britain becomes the first country in the world to use the internet for voting, and using the web for daily citizen feedback to parliament on policy choices facing MPs.

It is clear that government, political and media actors in the UK are taking the internet’s potential for political communication and mobilisation extremely seriously. While the internet strategies of UK political actors are often limited to information provision at present, they are clearly evolving fast. Political campaigning on the internet in particular is likely to become more sophisticated and offer more opportunities for interactivity and participation by the time of the next general election, or a referendum on joining the single currency. Nonetheless, the existence of a ‘digital divide’ in the UK at present has severe implications for the ability of many UK citizens to engage in political communication on the internet in any way.