Reviewing political websites:
the six most common mistakes

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During my time running the internet presence of the Liberal Democrats, including through the two general election campaigns of 2001 and 2005, I frequently saw the work of myself and of colleagues subjected to outside reviews. Whether it was from the media or academics, a review would appear comparing some aspect of our work (most frequently the party's national website) against that of other parties.

Overall we came out of the reviews well, especially considering the much smaller resources we had compared to the Labour Party and the Conservative Party. However, my regular reaction to the reviews was not so much one of pleasure at these results as frustration at the assumptions and approaches taken. The same mistakes in carrying out such reviews cropped up time and time again.

Because they were so frequent I have set out the six most common below. Whether you are going to comment yourself on how parties and politicians use the internet, or you want to judge the commentary of others – or even that you want to make comparisons of your own in order to assess different suppliers – avoid the six mistakes below and you should end up doing much better than most.

1. More features = better site

It sounds obvious: the more features it has, the better a site is. But is a Swiss Army penknife a better eating implement than knife and fork just because it also has tweezers and a nail file? Would you say of a piece of direct mail, 'Oooooh, this one has a slogan on the outside, and a return envelope, and a pen, and free postcard, and a scratch'n'sniff section and an elastic band thrown in too. It must be the best direct mail ever.'

Yes, having the right range of features matters – but more doesn't mean better. More can mean a site is clogged up with unnecessary features that cost money to provide and get in the way of what site visitors actually want to do.

It is very tempting to create a tick list of features and think that more ticks equals a better website. Resist that temptation.

2. Usage rates don't matter

Closely allied to this mistake is the oft-made assumption that you can judge a website without knowing what the statistics for it look like.

An email sign up box may look lovely to you, but is it working? The choice of stories may look wrong, but are they right for its audience?

You need either hard numbers or a moderately open discussion with the person / team behind a site in order to avoid make bad misjudgements.

Many times I have seen reviews praise a feature on the websites of one of the main parties when the reality revealed by usage figures is that the feature was actually a failure.

3. Websites are for floating voters and the young

Actually, no. Plenty of political websites aim at different audiences — such as at their own supporters or journalists. There are often very good reasons for this — particularly the repeated experience that your own supporters are much more likely to be interested in finding out more about you via the web than floating voters.
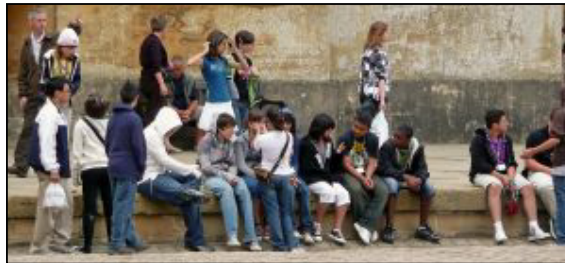
Perhaps that decision is the right one for a site; perhaps it is the wrong one. But don't assume that just because a site doesn't appear to appeal to floating voters that it's therefore a bad site.

4. I like/hate the design – and so must everyone else

I've seen feedback from people who hate even the most highly appreciated sites and from people who love sites the vast majority think are unutterably ugly. Preferences vary hugely, so don't ignore your own views – but neither think that you can make a robust judgement based on just your own views.

5. If you've not got lots of user-generated content, you're a Luddite

The rise of web content provided by users (e.g. Wikipedia, where any visitor can amend and add to the site) has brought huge benefits in many areas. But whisper it quietly: it's very rare for a UK political site to produce much user-generated content and even rarer for it to be of decent quality. Some zealots assume that therefore everyone in UK politics must be a dolt when it comes to the internet. Personally, I think if something is so rarely successful, then it is foolish for everyone to attempt to do it and expect it to be successful.

6. There is no need to talk

During my time at the Liberal Democrats, I regularly read reviews of one or other of our sites that completely missed what the site was trying to achieve, which bits were most successful or how and why its approach differed from that of other parties' sites.

These are easy mistakes to make if you assume you can work out what a site is about, whether it is doing it well and indeed whether it is trying to do the right thing — all without asking anyone behind the site.

Don't gamble on being a psychic — ask instead.

Conclusion

These points may seem obvious now you have read them, but look at most political website reviews and you will see them sneak in. So next time you need to think about sites, dust them off and prosper.