

## **NEW MEDIA AND NEW POLITICS**

### **Green Parties, Intra-party Democracy and the Potential of the Internet (an Anglo-Dutch Comparison)**

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#### **Introduction**

The emergence of new Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), such as the Internet, e-mail and world wide web (WWW), have given rise to a variety of claims about their potentially democratising impact on the political system. Some have argued that new ICTs will lead to a more direct style of democracy eroding the role of parties as participatory vehicles.<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, it has also been suggested that if political organisations adapt to the new technologies, they can help reinvigorate political engagement.<sup>2</sup> Parties could use the Internet to provide more opportunities for participation, mobilisation, and more information for ordinary members and closer contact between leaders and the party grassroots.<sup>3</sup>

Such claims are clearly of interest in relation to the Green parties, with their ideological commitment to participatory forms of democracy and their rhetorical emphasis on the importance of ordinary members and activists in internal party life. Internet based technology may therefore provide an increased opportunity for Green parties to put into practice grass roots democracy. This paper examines comparatively the extent to which three such parties, the Dutch GroenLinks (Green Left), De Groenen and the Green Party (England and Wales; E/W) have sought to adapt new ICTs for participative purposes. In doing so, we examine both public web-sites and internal computer communication systems (ICCS), such as e-mail lists or bulletin boards to assess their potential impact on internal party affairs. Whilst such a study may seem premature, it is worth remembering that most parties have now had web-sites for around four or five years and ICCS for longer. Moreover, the Internet using population has increased significantly over the past two years in Europe, reaching around 30% of the population in the UK and the Netherlands by 1999.<sup>4</sup> Hence, to identify party uses of the Internet now should provide a useful benchmark for judging future developments.

## **1. The Ideological, Organisational and Technological Context of The Greens, GroenLinks and De Groenen**

The following section provides a brief comparative introduction to the development, ideological and organisational background to the parties under consideration and in doing so sets the context for their attitudes towards use of new ICTs.

### **1.1 Origins and Development: Voters, Members and Resources**

The British party is one of the most well established Green parties in Europe, being founded as 'People' in 1973, before becoming the 'Ecology Party' in the mid 1970s, and finally renaming itself as the Green Party in 1985.<sup>5</sup> In the Netherlands, *De Groenen* (the Greens) were founded in 1983 as a traditional Green party, whereas *GroenLinks* (GreenLeft) emerged from an alliance for the parliamentary elections of 1989 by the Communist Party of the Netherlands, the Pacifist-Socialist Party, the Political Radical Party and the Evangelical People's Party. The party GroenLinks was then officially founded in November 1990.<sup>6</sup>

Of the three parties dealt with here, GroenLinks is electorally the most successful. Initially, at the 1989 national elections, however, the alliance scored a disappointing 4.1% of the vote (see table 1). It was not until 1998 that it achieved a significant electoral break-through, gaining 7.3% of the vote. Like most other Dutch parties in the 1990s, its membership declined gradually, from 16,000 in 1990 to 12,000 in 1998, providing a member/voter ratio of 2.1%. However, numbers had increased at the beginning of 2000 to nearly 14,000 members. Owing to its presence in (both houses of) parliament, GroenLinks could claim state subsidies - which contributed about 25% of its income. Membership fees contributed only 35% of the GroenLinks income, the remaining 40% was donated by representatives in parliament. This enabled the party to employ some 28 professionals.

By contrast, De Groenen has always been a relatively weak and marginal organisation. Membership in the 1980s fluctuated between 300 and 350, reaching a peak of around 500 in the late 1990s. Official data at the start of 2000 indicates that De Groenen had about 350 members. Electorally, the party led a marginal existence from its foundation. At national elections De Groenen's vote varied between 0.2% and 0.4%, not enough to win representation (see table 1). Yet De Groenen did win some seats at the provincial elections of 1995, which led in alliance with regionalist/provincial parties to a seat in the Senate. Because of this the party received some state subsidies and was no longer completely dependent on membership fees. The Greens employ only volunteers, but its research office (which it shared with the regionalist/provincial parties and which was funded to a large extent by the state) was able to hire a (part-time) employee.

Table 1. *Election Results of De Groenen, GroenLinks and Green Party for the European Parliament (EP) and the National Parliament (NP), 1983-1999*

Party	National Election		European Election	
	Year	% Vote	Year	% Vote
Groenen	1986	0.2	1984	1.3
	1989	0.4	1989	-
	1994	0.2	1994	2.4
	1998	0.2	1999	-
GroenLinks	1986	3.3	1984	5.6
	1989	4.1	1989	7.0
	1994	3.5	1994	3.7
	1998	7.3	1999	11.8
British Greens	1983	0.2	1984	-
	1987	1.3	1989	14.8
	1992	0.5	1994	3.1
	1997	0.5	1999	6.8

The performance of Greens in England and Wales falls somewhere between the two Dutch examples, although its electoral performance has been somewhat distinctive. Like De Groenen, at most general elections since formation it has scored less than 1% of the vote (most recently 0.5% in 1997). However, at second order elections its performance is noticeably better. It has increased its base at the local level over the last decade and currently has 37 local councillors in England. Like many Green parties its best performances have come at EU elections, notably in 1989 when it scored nearly 15% of the vote.<sup>7</sup> In the 1999 EU elections it scored 6.8% and for the first time gained representation in the European Parliament with 2 MEPs. Nevertheless, with exception of the period 1989-1990, the Greens have remained marginal to British politics. Membership has similarly fluctuated throughout its history.<sup>8</sup> Whilst on a rising curve in the 1980s, membership boomed following the 1989 European election success peaking at around 18,000, but within three to four years this had fallen back steeply to 2-3000. Currently, it is estimated that membership totals around 4000 in England and Wales, on whom the party is almost totally dependent for funds since there is no state funding for parties in the UK. The Greens do however employ a small number of full time staff in the national office, but in the main they are reliant on volunteer activists.

## 1.2 Organisation

The history and the ideological identity (see below) of the Green parties left its mark on their organisational structure. Their striving for grass roots democracy in society is also applied to their own party. Green parties attempt to practice 'New Politics', which essentially means that they are not organised 'top-down', but 'bottom up'. Party democracy and rank-and-file participation are cherished as goals in themselves.<sup>9</sup> Much weight is attached to participation and internal democracy within the green movement. In this respect, the three parties do not differ that much. Perhaps GroenLinks is the least 'basic democratic'. Its organisation was inspired by its left-libertarian predecessors. In 1993 an investigation committee, however, considered GroenLinks to be too bureaucratic. It defined democracy as a primary external and internal goal for GroenLinks. The party should encourage participation of members as well as non-members in the public debate and practice more direct democracy. The recommendation to replace the delegate-congress by a congress open to all members, however, was rejected by the party congress, although in practice any active member was allowed to register for the congress. The party congress would take all-important decisions: adopt party programmes and byelaws, elect the party executive and nominate candidates for parliament.<sup>10</sup> The party constitution also recognises 'categorical groups', which are allowed to propose motions and nominate candidates - functions similar to those of local branches. Seven such 'categories' organised themselves including, the Feminist Network, 'Pink Left' (gays and lesbians), immigrants (the Progressive Migrant Bloc), and the youth section.

The current structure of the Green Party (E/W) reflects the somewhat uneasy compromise of electoralists and decentralists within the party.<sup>11</sup> From the late 1980s to the mid 1990s the Greens expended considerable energy discussing internal organisational matters. Electoralists wished to reform the party organisation along the lines of a more mainstream party. Decentralists favoured maintaining the traditional grassroots style of direct democracy where power rested with individual members and activists. Whilst the party did streamline its organisation in 1992, it is far from resembling most party organisational hierarchies. The party has refused to select a party leader, preferring to elect two speakers for fixed three-year terms. The day to day decisions of the party rest with an elected executive committee, but party conference remains a major decision making body. Whilst Conference has become delegate based, in practice as Rudig notes 'the same activists who used to go before Green 2000 [1991/2 Reform Package] now again went to conference, this time as representatives'.<sup>12</sup> Equally, though some powers of the Regional Council were eroded, the party still remains heavily decentralised. Local branches have considerable freedom of action and the party maintains a strong regional level. In short, the internal party democracy is based on a hybrid of different models (direct democracy, representative democracy along with some delegated elements). However, the commitment to a participatory democratic style remains central to the party.

In the 1980s, the organisation of De Groenen was based upon a combination of

direct (national) and indirect (regional) membership. The federal Green Council, based on representation, took the important decisions. All the members had voting rights at the party congress, but this body was only consultative. Seemingly, the federal principle was considered more important than the complete implementation of direct democracy. This was changed in the 1990s, when the federal party organisation was completely overhauled. De Groenen adopted a national organisation, based on individual membership only. The autonomous provincial organisations were abolished. The party congress acquired a pivotal position within the new structure; it became the highest authority within the party and has more or less the same functions as in GroenLinks. Any member of De Groenen can attend party congress (and vote). Moreover, a membership vote was possible that could correct decisions of the party congress. Hence, currently De Groenen's organisation is clearly based on the principle of direct democracy.

### **1.3 Ideology**

Whilst Green parties may have common roots in new social movements and so called postmaterial values, ideologically, Green parties are not all the same. On a scale of deep-green (ecologism) to shallow-green (environmentalism),<sup>13</sup> the British Greens traditionally have been seen as the darkest. The British Green party has tended to see itself as beyond left and right and indeed unlike some other Green related parties (such as GroenLinks) is has no strong connections with the political left in the UK. Nor has it particularly drawn strength from new social movement organisations. This has led to a rather peculiar British version of Green party politics. In terms of the ideological dimension, they have supported radical ecocentric positions, using the language of deep ecology, and drawn on the spiritual and holistic dimensions present in green political thought.<sup>14</sup> The marginal nature of the Green Party in British party has arguably allowed the party to engage in considerable internal debate about both its identity and organisation. GroenLinks is to be found on the other end of the scale largely due to its roots. Socialist and environmentalist elements were mixed together at its foundation. The party programme, approved in 1991, was a compromise between 'ecoliberals' and 'ecosocialists'. The former defended the market economy and ecotaxes, the latter a more planned economy (providing planning procedures were democratic) and more regulation.<sup>15</sup> The programme defined democracy, respect for nature and environment, social (distributive) justice and international solidarity as central values.

Compared to GroenLinks more ecocentrist positions were advocated by De Groenen, but not to the same extent as their British namesakes. Their programme was holistic and ecologist: mankind, earth, and universe were considered one interdependent whole. It did not focus on environmental policy, but called for an integrated approach based on decentralisation, recycling, small-scale

organisations, grass roots democracy and basic income. Instead of economic growth the Greens have traditionally advocated economic shrink, although this is now less pronounced than in the past.

#### **1.4 Green Ideology and Technology**

Participation and activism are key elements within Green ideology and its ideal organisational model. One of the potential instruments to stimulate this, or to implement direct democracy, is the use of new ICTs. Yet within ecologism there is also an important barrier in this respect - the rather ambivalent Green attitude towards technology. This is derived from the ecologist's rejection of an anthropocentric vision of society - man mastering nature by reason and the application of science and technology. This sense of superiority led to a system in which materialist objectives such as economic growth were considered far more important than environmental ones as the preservation of nature. To ecologists, the use of 'clean' technology is not the panacea that will solve all major problems. It merely provides a short-term fix for avoiding central questions concerning economic and human activity. According to Dobson, 'Green politics explicitly seeks to decentre the human being, to question mechanistic science and its technological consequences, to refuse to believe that the world was made for human beings'.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Pickerill also identifies a certain green ambiguity towards new technology:

Within the environmental movement the use of alternative technologies has significant support. Alternative technology can be defined as including small-scale constructions within a local environment that can be produced largely by recyclable, recycled or cheaply and easily accessible parts. In contrast, high, hard, or advanced technology can refer to complex technology which requires expertise in construction and use. Environmentalists tend to disapprove of such technology, and thus the use of the Internet and e-mail fits uneasily. Computers have significant environmental consequences in their manufacture and use and are closer to the ideals of high technology than alternative technology.<sup>17</sup>

In practice, although some activists in the wider Green movement have questioned dependence on ICTs, none of the parties under consideration here demonstrate explicit technophobia. In its electoral platform of 1998, the shallow-green GroenLinks had no problems at all with environmentally benign means of technology, although it acknowledged that the effects of cleaner technologies could be nullified by the increase of mobility or production. The more ecologist De Groenen and the Green Party (E/W) did not differ substantially from their environmentalist rival. In their programmes they were generally not distrustful of technology. All the parties regard ICTs as valuable but nevertheless, have not

advocated clearly the use of ICT in order to democratise the political system. For example, whilst there are sections in the basic programme of the Green Party (E/W) relating to science and technology and also to democratising the political system, neither make mention of the use of new ICTs.<sup>18</sup> As yet therefore, none of the parties have clearly set out a policy for developing the use of ICTs within society.

## **2. Participation, Internal Democracy and the Potential Impact of ICTs: Conceptual Framework and Questions<sup>19</sup>**

### **2.1 The WWW as a New Medium**

In order to begin to understand parties' uses of the WWW for political communication, it is important to establish its essential properties as a media. Along with other forms of digital communication, the principal innovation of the WWW lies in its greatly increased carrying capacity or bandwidth. Compared with traditional forms of electronic communication (TV and radio) that rely on analogue signals, the space for messages in a digital medium is far greater. In addition, the WWW offers a graphical and auditory interface to digital communication, that makes it a particularly 'user-friendly' and appealing mode of accessing the Internet, or 'information superhighway'. These features of the web, it is argued, expand the nature of communication in five crucial ways, compared with traditional media:

1. *Volume*. Far larger quantities of information can be sent compared with previous modes of media communication.
2. *Speed*. Compression of data and more space for communication, decrease the amount of time it takes to send a message.
3. *Format*. The style of the message sent is changed as the combination of print and electronic communication allows information to be sent in audio, video and text form. Thus in-depth, and also dynamic and visually stimulating communication are possible, simultaneously.
4. *Direction*. The possibilities for two-way and truly interactive or synchronous communication are greatly expanded on the web, given the greater space and speed for information transmission. In addition, horizontal or lateral communication between groups and individuals is also dramatically enhanced due to the immediacy of hypertext linkage between sites.
5. *Individual Control*. Given the opening up of control over the direction in the sending and receiving of messages, power is decentralised to the individual consumer who has the choice of what to view, and also perhaps more significantly, what to publish.

In addition to these five intrinsic properties of web-based communication, two

related, but more externally 'market' driven characteristics should also be considered to differentiate it from other ICTs: *low cost* and *global reach*. While the current monetary cost of web access is higher than for television if one is starting from scratch, viewed as a 'point-to-mass' publishing medium, the web provides an undeniably cheaper way to reach an increasingly mass audience. Overall, therefore, it is argued that the potential changes to communication affected by web-based technology are to make it a more in-depth, immediate, dynamic, interactive and unedited process.

## **2.2 Parties, Participation and New ICTs**

Given these supposedly new properties of new ICTs outlined above, we can derive a number of possible potential impacts of the new media on participation within parties. In general terms, it has been claimed that participation could be increased by use of Internet based technologies and if parties harness the technology they could be reinvigorated by new forms of communication. Such claims tend to rest on two theoretical explanations of participation:<sup>20</sup>

(1) the rational choice perspective: Use of new ICTs will lower the costs of participating within parties. They can make gathering information, joining and contacting parties much quicker and easier. Thus for those who found traditional participation in parties difficult, (the housebound, elderly, single parents, those in rural areas) new ICTs may offer an alternative channel.<sup>21</sup> In this context, the Internet could widen the numbers engaged in party politics.

(2) The recruitment network model also suggests a potential increase in participation via ICTs. This model stresses the importance of interpersonal or organisational/citizen to citizen mobilisation, rather than socio economic characteristics as the key to organisational participation. Political organizations mobilising strategies are therefore of prime importance. Parties could use ICTs to target and mobilise supporters by e-mail pyramids/lists, or offer on-line interactive dialogue for members or try to reach new supporters through glossy web-sites.<sup>22</sup>

Such claims could of course apply to all parties, however, one might reasonably suppose that such a prospect would appeal in particular to Green parties for two reasons. From an ideological perspective, because of their attachment to participation and membership activism, but also, secondly, from a practical perspective, because they have a comparatively larger potential on-line target audience available for mobilisation. Currently, the Internet is still a minority medium, however, the traditional bastions of Green support (universities, teaching and public sector professionals) tend to be the very people with most access to the technology.<sup>23</sup> Hence, it would make rational sense for the Greens to pursue a strong ICT participation strategy. Our expectation on beginning this study was therefore, that the Greens would be more likely show a greater interest than other parties in ICT based activity and that their on-line activities would

reflect their participatory culture.

Although the potential of new ICTs to widen those participating in politics is in itself interesting, perhaps a more important question is what impact this is likely to have on party organisation and behaviour. Does electronic participation actually make any difference? Does it deepen the quality of participatory politics? Here then it may be useful to consider the potential impact of new ICTs on intra-party democracy in two areas.

The first area is vertical (top-down/bottom up) power distribution - relating to the relationships between the party hierarchies, central organisations and the grassroots members. Here the establishment of an ICCS could enhance individual members' abilities to inform the leadership's decisions and hold leaders accountable. The greater volume and speed of information flow offered via computer mediated communication combined with its interactivity and decentralisation into people's homes means members could have more frequent and direct access to party elites to communicate their opinions on policy matters, and organisational structure. Such developments would also provide party members with more information on what their leaders are doing, more quickly, and thus promote the accountability of elite level decision-making.

The second area of concern is spatial (cross-party) power distribution. This relates to the ability of internal party groups to communicate their views independently from the central or official party line, frequently and effectively to a broad audience, including the public, party members, and other intra-party groups. Again arguably, new ICTs could foster such activity. The independent adoption by internal party groups or prominent individuals of the new media in its external or more public face (i.e. the WWW) potentially allows them to communicate their views to a local, national, and global audience more frequently and effectively. The current lack of central control over the Internet means that party elites would not be in a position to prevent the widespread dissemination of internal party views, and possible dissent, if they chose to publish them in this manner. In essence, whilst use of ICTs might enhance local parties, intra party groups, it might make parties more difficult to manage and may also result in attempts by party hierarchies to control on-line outputs.

In the context of Green parties both the above scenarios might again be of more significance, given the extensive battles between fundamentalists and realists over intra-party democracy.<sup>24</sup> Our expectation was again that Green parties would be using electronic channels to improve intra-party democracy and further, that activists would be enthusiastically engaging with the technologies. This is not least because anecdotally there was existing evidence that the Green movement has been one of the most active in using the Internet for mobilisation and campaigning purposes.<sup>25</sup>

Underlying these scenarios are two comparative broad elements: The cross-national dimension – what difference does country context make? Do political, cultural, and technological factors shape usage with Green parties. Secondly, the

party dimension - the paper seeks to compare directly the three parties. This is important given the differences in organisation, ideology and size between our three parties. It is important to consider what impact this has on their ICT strategies. Our initial expectation here was that the Greens (E/W) and the Dutch De Groenen being smaller and arguably more committed to grassroots democracy would be more likely to use the technologies for participatory purposes than GroenLinks.

### **3. Data and Methods**

These scenarios were examined using four types of data: brief content analysis of both the national and intra-party groups' web-sites and party e-mail lists; a mail survey of senior communication officers at the party headquarters focusing on internal computer communication systems; and a brief e-mail questionnaire to intra-party webmasters.

#### **3.1 Operationalisation**

The content analysis of both the national and sub national party web-sites sought to examine the potential for openness and interactivity. Such information was also underscored by the e-mail questionnaire data. Overall such methods assessed:

- the opportunities for dialogue (e-mail contacts, e-mail lists, bulletin boards chat rooms);
- the level of intra-party activity on-line: the number of local parties with a presence on-line;
- the target audience of the sites: were they aimed primarily at party members or the electorate more generally?
- the level of intra-party dissent on-line. Were there sites devoted to critique of the national party strategy?

Data from a national party survey was used to assess the Greens use of ICCS, how far they are being used to promote member participation and how comparable green parties are with other parties. Specifically, the items of interest dealt with here were:

- who the users and potential users of the ICCS were and who the most frequent users;
- what the functions of the ICCS are or will be: is it predominantly a tool of downward or upward communication of information;
- what type of feedback takes place on the ICCS: mass - elite, or elite - elite;
- what impact does the feedback through the ICCS have upon party activity: does it generally prompt action and decisions or is it largely a 'talking shop', offering opportunities for expression but with no follow through.

## 4. Survey Results: Greens Online

### 4.1 Greens and National Web-sites

#### *Origins*

GroenLinks started a web-site in January 1994, a few months before the national elections. It was the first party represented in parliament that created a presence on the WWW.<sup>26</sup> However, the GroenLinks site fell victim to the law of the dialectics of progress, the sites which were established later by other parties were more modern and eye-catching. From September 1995 until early 1998 the site only attracted some 25,000 visitors. The site was subsequently relaunched on two occasions first in spring 1998 in readiness for the forthcoming national elections and then again more recently in February 2000.

The Greens (E/W) were also amongst the forerunners of party web activity, launching their site in September 1995 ahead of some of the UK parliamentary parties.<sup>27</sup> The site has also been restyled on two occasions, (early 1997 and early 1999), with elections being the prime motivation for overhauling the site. During the 1999 European elections the site was seen as competing relatively well with the major UK party sites in terms of both content and design sophistication.<sup>28</sup>

De Groenen came on the WWW in the same period same time. In 1995 one of the party members created a text only site with no interactive features. Only later was an e-mail address added. An official site was eventually created in the lead-up to the national elections of 1998 with the support of a non-profit foundation that assisted idealistic organisations on the Internet. This site was also hardly interactive. There was no electronic space for debate, although visitors could make remarks or put questions.

#### *Participative and interactive content*

The content of three party sites were reviewed for participatory elements. Of the three, GroenLinks' newly revised site, is the most interactive and compared to its predecessors tries to foster more on-line participation. New interactive outlets were introduced, such as a guestbook; a loosely moderated political debate concerning statements put forward by one of the leading party politicians; on-line opinion polls in which site visitors could vote; and the occasional on-line chat-sessions with party leaders and national representatives. However, few people were making use of these new facilities. On average only one message a day was posted to the guestbook and debate and three votes cast in the opinion polls.

To a limited extent the site was also used for mobilisation and recruitment. Visitors could apply on-line for party membership and there were calls for attendance at party events and meetings. There were also a few links to environmental organisations like *Milieudefensie* (Friends of the Earth Netherlands), but not to smaller, more active radical protest groups.

The Greens (E/W) site had none of the more advanced interactive features of GroenLinks. Indeed, overall the site was fairly basic, although this assisted with the navigability of the site. However, the Greens site had three noticeable features: First, its relative openness. There are 42 different e-mail addresses available, including nearly all of the national officials (7 of the 9 executive party members e-mail addresses are listed and the main committees all have e-mail contact points). This compares favourably to the major UK parties where party leaders and politicians e-mail addresses are often not publicised.<sup>29</sup> Second, the prominence of facilities for members only including access to series of e-mail lists for party members (see section 4.2 below) and a supposedly closed members resource page with briefings and web graphics material for those setting up their own site (neither GroenLinks nor De Groenen had a closed membership section on their sites).<sup>30</sup> Recruitment and mobilisation appeals are also prominent on the site, with on-line membership form available and details on party spring conference and a calendar of party events.

The site of De Groenen contained predominantly basic information and was not interactive. There were only a few e-mail contacts and the site did not explicitly solicit feedback. On the site there was one e-mail option which could be used to become member, to comment on party policy or provide comments on the site. Beside that, there was the opportunity to contact the party's representative in the Senate. Nor did De Groenen use their site for mobilisation. The calendar of events was very brief, and there were no links to other environmental organisations or networks. In fact, the site had only one link, to one of the party branches.

#### *Site function and role*

Despite the increased degree of interactivity of the new GroenLinks site and the relative openness of the Greens (E/W) site, they are still predominantly text-oriented. They all contain election platforms, press releases, explanations of political views, brochures, etc. In this respect, the parties are not out of line with their larger counterparts, as was indicated by earlier questionnaires.<sup>31</sup> Bottom-up, interactive communication was generally considered of secondary importance, by the webmasters of all the parties and the response of the voters of more importance than reactions of party members. Though the webmaster of the Greens (E/W) did note the growing importance of the web-site for recruitment, commenting that 'it [the web-site] is making a difference already. We have at least 80-90 inquiries per month from the joining page of the web-site. That's quite impressive given we're a party of only 4000 members'.<sup>32</sup>

Although the present site of GroenLinks is more interactive than its earlier ones, one might ask if the party - *nota bene* the Internet pioneer in Dutch politics - has a clear, well-considered strategy concerning the use of ICT's to promote participation of the rank-and-file. In the past, GroenLinks, like most other Dutch parties, regarded a web-site as a necessary means of communication in the

national election campaign. It is questionable whether the party saw this digital medium as being functional and useful in itself or whether it also felt that it should not lag behind their rivals. At the national elections of May 1998, for instance, campaign leader Lagendijk did not have great expectations of the GroenLinks' site, but believed that his party had to participate because other parties also had a site.<sup>33</sup>

## 4.2 National Party ICCS Survey

### *Origins and general comparisons*

Of the three parties examined here only the Greens (E/W) possess an ICCS. This has been running since 1995 in the form of a national e-mail list system. Currently, they have 8 national lists<sup>34</sup> plus 3 regional ones for members only. The system is run on a voluntary basis, free of charge and managed by Green Party activists. The lists have a few hundred subscribers representing less 10% of membership. Comparatively within the UK, the Greens are relatively advanced in their use of technology for communication between members. Only seven of the sixteen surveyed UK parties and three of the nine Dutch ones have an ICCS and the British Greens were among the earliest innovators in this area. Indeed, they have made considerably more use of e-mail lists for members than the main UK parties. For example, it was only in late 1998 that the Labour Party experimented with ICCS in certain regional areas.<sup>35</sup>

Although, GroenLinks does not have an ICCS it has an open mailing list (see 4.3 below), although the party executive itself is in no way responsible for it. The list was set up at the initiative of an individual member at the end of 1994 and is still run by volunteers. However, GroenLinks facilitates the list by announcing it on the party web-site and visitors could subscribe on the site.<sup>36</sup> It is described as 'an electronic medium for people who are interested in GroenLinks politics. You can informally and without committing yourself discuss all kinds of themes that are relevant to GroenLinks'.<sup>37</sup>

De Groenen has no electronic debating mechanisms open or otherwise. As their webmaster notes, the party was 'too small' for such a system, 'there are only a couple of hundred members and a few branches where something is happening'. The daily executive of the party, however, uses e-mail in order to avoid having meetings. Members of the general executive are also informed by e-mail, but those who are not on-line are informed later and less extensively. These electronic procedures were prompted not for democratic reasons or saving money but as a means of saving time. According to the interim party chairman, it is simply far more efficient to use e-mail.

### *Target ICCS audience and function*

In the survey of party officials, the Greens (E/W) responses found to be not dissimilar to other parties. The main users of the ICCS were claimed to be central

staff and constituency/ branch officials, which again was comparable to the main parties. Nevertheless, the Greens are one of only four UK parties to allow ordinary members access to their ICCS and members were said to be third most common category of user of the systems.

When asked to assign scores to the importance of potential ICCS functions, the Greens leant slightly more towards information dissemination and campaigning than the participatory elements (feedback from members and communication between members). Again this was a common pattern amongst most UK parties (see table 2). ICCS were generally seen as tools for information dissemination, often top down, rather than channels for feedback bottom-up or promoting the voice of members within party debates. Nevertheless, overall, the Greens did rate feedback and communication amongst members more highly than other parties. Similarly, when asked about the type of feedback the Greens scored upward flows of feedback higher than most of the other UK parties.

*Table 2. Function of ICCS (UK Parties)*

Party	Greens Eng/Wales	UK Parties (mean)
Information Dissemination	4	4.25
Campagning	5	3.88
Comunication between members	4	2.62
Feedback (member/constit)	3	2.22

5 = most important function 0 = of no importance

*Impact of ICCS debate*

Parties with an ICCS were also asked about the impact such communication had on party decisions. Officials were asked to classify the feedback in terms of how far it prompts action or decision making within the party. Three categories of effectiveness were offered:

- the least effective category was debative – feedback involved an exchange of opinion with no follow up necessary;
- mid level effectiveness was captured by the term consultative – opinions solicited with the goal of reaching decisions;
- the most effective category of feedback was listed as decisive – opinions communicated lead to direct action by the party.

Four of the seven UK parties using ICCS saw them as more than just debative including the Greens who categorised theirs as a consultative forum, indicating that such arenas are not simply 'electronic talking shops' but do sometimes inform party decision making.

In short therefore, whilst the Green (E/W) responses followed the general pattern of the other surveyed parties, there was noticeably more emphasis on the importance of members and participatory feedback functions were seen as more valuable.

### **4.3 Discussion Lists in Action: the Green Party and GroenLinks**

To underscore the results from the general survey of web-masters the main closed discussion list of the British Green party lists was monitored for period of 10 days in February 2000 and GroenLinks open mail list was broadly analysed from the its beginnings at the end of 1994. This was possible because all the postings are kept in an on-line archive. Although not directly comparable, the aim here was to check the volume of participation, the type of debate that was being held and the nature of the participants.

#### *Green (E/W) closed list*

Over the 10 day period 79 messages were received which appears rather a low volume for a main discussion list. However, it is worth remembering that Greens run a number of national lists along with more local and regional ones, so the overall volume of electronic communication is perhaps greater than is first apparent.

In terms of content, the list was fairly eclectic with general discussions of internal party issues (notably electoral strategy), international events (opposition to the Austrian Freedom Party moves into government), party policy, as well as circulation of useful information concerning environmental and civil rights issues (particularly genetically modified foods). There was also publicity for rallies and a variety of mobilisation calls from letter writing campaigns to government (prosecution of General Pinochet), to support for non-violent direct action tactics. Overall, the list saw a predominance of genuine exchanges of opinion and debate, rather than simply static posting of messages. In other words, contributors were responding to one another.

Superficially, there appeared to be a diversity of contributors, with 31 different people sending e-mails to the list. However, closer analysis revealed a much more restricted clientele. Nearly two thirds of the messages (50) were sent by just nine people. Perhaps more pertinently, from a participation perspective, over a third of the contributors (11) held national positions within the party. Mainly, they were either on national policy committees, the executive committee, or held some

elected/appointed post. Furthermore, they were also responsible for over 50% of the messages. Of the remaining contributors, most tended to be local or regional party officials. One final, striking feature about the characteristics of list participants was the fact that they were almost exclusively male. Despite the Greens concern for gender politics, there was only one woman participant who made a single contribution. This would seem to add weight to the general stereotypical picture of Internet communication being predominantly a male preserve.<sup>38</sup>

#### *GroenLinks open e-mail list*

Access to the mailing list of GroenLinks was free. One did not have to be a party member. The list started with 40 subscribers in November 1994 and peaked in the spring of 1999 at more than 270 partly because of the Kosovo crisis, which led to a significant increase in postings. Currently, however, the number of subscribers has fallen back to around 180 members. As with the Greens closed lists the subscribers are mostly male. According to data from the initial period only 15% were female, and this percentage seems not to have changed dramatically over the past five years.

The popularity of list has grown rapidly in line with the expansion of Internet based technology. In 1995, the first year of the list, there were some 315 postings which increased rapidly to 1,600 by 1998. In the space of year the number of message doubled 3,100 messages in 1999. Not all the subscribers are participating in the debate. On the contrary, according to the list-manager there is a hard-core of some 20-30 members who are active, most of the others are (national representatives of the party seldom react, unlike some of their colleagues from the European Parliament). Not surprisingly, overwhelmingly discussions are dominated by men, on average less than 5% of the participants are female. The dominance of this incrowd may be a barrier for other subscribers to participate. Moreover, the tone of the debate is not always inviting, with contributors not seriously debating issues but launching personal attacks. Indeed, occasionally participants are excluded from the list for breaking list etiquette.

The content of the list shows more or less the same pattern as the British one. Debate on the internal affairs of GroenLinks and its strategy and major international events (like the wars in former Yugoslavia). Occasionally participants try to influence party policy, for instance by mobilising on-line support to promote specific views at party congresses or by criticizing the party leadership. During the Kosovo-war the parliamentary group was heavy under attack because of its approval of NATO-air raids. The list is also used for mobilisation outside the party. People post appeals for demonstrations against for instance the extension of Schiphol airport, or against extreme right wing parties.

In terms of quantity, the GroenLinks mailing list is rather successful. The number of subscribers and postings have increased substantially. With regard to the quality of debate, the picture is less clear. The debate was sometimes spoiled by

inflammatory language, or by simply ignoring the arguments of one's opponent. Overall, the list suffers from lack of official commitment. GroenLinks are not responsible for the list and can simply ignore debates.

From this admittedly limited evidence, one could not suggest that electronic channels were extending participation to new types of members or indeed ordinary grassroots members. Moreover, in the British case it would appear that the lists have become largely another useful means for communication amongst a small group of the most active and also most senior members of the party. With a restricted base, if the e-mail lists do become more important channels of communication, there is the danger of such lists becoming more exclusionary. In the Dutch case it is more or less the other way around, since the list is not particularly exclusive i.e. the party elite is not really engaged, it might be less attractive to participate. This highlights the central dilemma for parties - using closed lists may improve the quality of debate, but in doing so, they may also become much more exclusionary.

Nevertheless, one should not simply dismiss the role of electronic channels. Electronic communication can add to traditional forms of communication. Firstly, they can allow for ongoing, permanent debate and discussion and provide for much more regular contact between party activists than previously was the case. In the long term, electronic networks and regular contact with the party may well be useful for maintaining activists and member solidarity. Secondly, the debate is potentially more transparent than traditional meetings, members can subscribe and see what is going on, even if they themselves do not actually participate. This aided by the fact that participation is in the form of written contributions. Thirdly, the speed of electronic communication means that it is particularly useful for quickly rallying and mobilising activists for meetings, demonstrations and rallies. Fourthly, when (some of) the lists are moderated and formally integrated within the party organisation, the outcomes could be used to inform the decision making process within the party.

#### **4.4 Sub-national Green Activity On-line**

##### *Scale of activity*

The survey of sub-national activity in England and Wales located a total of 31 local or regional parties on-line. Of these, 12 covered more than one constituency, being either regional or city sites, rather than single electoral constituencies. Perhaps not surprisingly, the sites tend to be clustered in areas where local green parties are more prominent (Brighton and Oxford). However, the overall figure provides an exaggerated picture of on-line activity. Six sites addresses failed to work, a further six were either under construction or contained very minimal information and two had not been updated since the 1997 general election. This left a grand total 17 live sites that we were able to survey, covering somewhere between 2-5% of parliamentary constituencies. Even here it appeared that many

of the sites had not been updated in the past month. Whilst this activity appears minimal, it is comparable to the main parties Labour and Conservative.<sup>39</sup>

GroenLinks in the Netherlands showed up somewhat better. In March 2000, around 45 local and regional party sites were accessible through its national site, of which 41 (the amount in January 2000) have been surveyed.<sup>40</sup> Nearly 20% of the 250 local branches of GroenLinks were on-line. The municipal elections of March 1998 were an important stimulus to start a site. In the six months up to the elections the number of sites seems to have been doubled. Especially the larger branches (in the university towns, for instance) had sites. Unlike the British Greens, most of these sites were functioning, although in general they are all rather basic. The Dutch Groenen present a totally different picture: only 3 of its 17 local branches had a site. As a result they are not included in the analysis below.

#### *Opportunities for interactivity/participation/mobilisation*

The content of the sites were reviewed to assess the extent to which they encouraged recruitment, mobilisation or participation via e-mail, networking links and appeals for joining. Whilst 93% of sub-national sites (E/W Greens 88% and GroenLinks 95%) had e-mail links, none actively sought feedback. In only 24% of English/Welsh sites and 13% of the Dutch cases could you actually join on-line. Whilst a few gave details of postal addresses for joining, many failed to mention membership at all. Consequently, there is no strong evidence that local parties in either country are actively using the Internet as means of recruitment.

Although most of the sites had hypertext links to other sites, these were generally links to other Green parties, in particular the national site. Only five had external links to green campaigns or environmental groups (FoE and Greenpeace plus a couple of links to the voluntary sector). Despite the British press highlighting green use of the net for mobilisation and protest, to campaign against local road or industrial developments, there was virtually no evidence of local green party sites engaging in this activity in either Britain or the Netherlands. The content of the majority of sites was either basic information on 'who we are', local or EU election campaign information (candidate information and election platform) or an assorted information on a range of issues not necessarily local, notably in the British case, genetically modified foods again.

#### *Site function and role*

To assist our of the function of sites, a short e-mail questionnaire was then sent to the 15 sites of the Greens (E/W) with e-mail of which just 8 replied; and to 41 of the GroenLinks' sites of which 24 replied. Whilst the numbers of especially the Greens (E/W) are too small to draw any definitive conclusions, they provide a fairly clear picture of the function of such sites and largely confirm the review of web-site content (see table 3) The respondents of both parties gave the highest

ratings to information provision directed at the local electorate in general. It is evident from the information gathered that the sites are not primarily designed for party members, or for participatory purposes. Feedback from both public and members received the lowest ratings of the British webmasters, particularly that from members (a miserly average 1.4). Their Dutch colleagues were more interested in reactions of the rank-and-file (3.4).

*Table 3. Function of Local Web-sites*

Party and Number	Informing of		Feedback from		Recruiting voters of other parties	Recruitment of members
	Voters	Members	Voters	Members		
Greens Eng/Wal (8)	5	N/A	2	1.4	N/A	3.4
Groen-Links (24)	4.6	4.1	3.4	3.4	2.9	2.6
Total (32)	4.7	N/A	3.1	2.9	N/A	2.8

Local web-masters were asked to assign scores to appropriate functions where 1 = not important and 5 = very important

One contradiction from the overview of site content, was that the British respondents here appear to give more weight to recruitment. (The Dutch local webmasters did not expect much from membership recruitment via their sites, probably because in GroenLinks members are enrolled by the national party organisation.) Although this maybe somewhat hypothetical, since none of the British parties had kept records/details of on-line membership enquiries or knew if members had joined via their sites. Moreover, few knew how many visitors they received each week (in most instances less than 20 visitors/week) – probably a good indicator of how seriously such web-sites are viewed.

#### *On-line dissent*

The final area we were interested in was dissent from party policy. Unlike many of larger established parties in both countries, the Greens and GroenLinks are not required to inform or seek permission from their regional or national party in launching web-sites, potentially providing the freedom to air their own local views. In the content no obvious forms of internal dissent from the national party line was found on any the public sites – either British or the Dutch. Whilst nearly

all of the webmasters who responded to the e-mail survey suggested that in theory they would have no problem with dissenting publicly on-line, none had yet felt the need to do so.

#### **4.5 Explaining the Lack of On-line Activity**

What explains this lack of local activity on-line? A number of suggestions can be provided. First, national party organisations have generally not developed a clear ICT-strategy of their own. For the most part, until recently, they have not seriously assisted local organisations, even if they have the means, like GroenLinks. As a result, local parties and branches are left to their own devices. This relates to the second factor - resources - to manage a web-site and keep it up to date, particularly one which would aim to have some degree of interactivity, is costly in terms of time. Most local parties are run by a few volunteers who lack the necessary time, support and money. Hence, in relatively small parties such as the British Greens, GroenLinks and the Dutch Groenen, a local web-site can be launched and well-maintained for short sustained periods such as electoral campaigns, but a consistent all year round effort seems to be out of reach for most of the local sites. Thirdly, therefore, the lack of activity probably indicates more about the state of activism within these parties, than it tells us about the potential of new ICTs for participatory purposes. In many cases, there are simply not enough activists to sustain local activities on or off-line.

### **5. Overall Analysis**

Returning to the three dimensions we outlined earlier (vertical, spatial and comparative) the following analysis can be made:

#### *Vertical dimension (members vs party elites)*

There is some limited evidence that new ICTs have the potential to make the elites more accountable. E-mail discussions can make debates more transparent and party hierarchies more contactable. The Greens (E/W) are relatively innovative in using mail lists, as are GroenLinks experiments with on-line discussion with party leaders. Nevertheless, any accountability is likely to be weakened by two factors: from the evidence gathered here, it seems that the elite activists are likely to make the most use of the technology. Secondly, the level of accountability is dependent on who controls the agenda for using ICTs for discussion purposes (who frames the questions and debate).

#### *Spatial dimension*

There was little evidence from our survey that sub-national groups like local parties would benefit disproportionately from the new ICTs. The level of intra-group activity was relatively low, although will undoubtedly increase in the near

future. Again two factors are likely to limit any beneficial impact: Lack of resources at lower levels means that they cannot take advantage of all of the potential benefits of ICTs. Thus whilst all levels of political parties may derive certain gains from adopting new ICTs, those best placed to use the technology are generally the party headquarters or party elites. Moreover, in practice, if current initial trends continue, web-sites are unlikely to be used for interactive participation, but more for short-term election campaigning and information provision aimed at the electorate not party members.

#### *Comparative dimension*

Relative to other parties, Greens at least rhetorically show more interest in the use of new ICTs for participative purposes and they have been amongst the earlier innovators with the technology. However, in practice their use of technology is not radically different from most other parties, nor have they been as innovative as some Green protest networks.

There was not significant national differences between our parties, except in the use of e-mail lists and the scale of local party activity. However, rather than national or ideological factors, size appears to be the most important variable in terms of adapting to new ICTs. However, it is not a simple equation of largest parties with the most resources making the most use of new ICTs. From our three parties, clearly De Groenen is too small to make extensive use of the technology since it lacks both activists and resources. Although, it would seem that small parties with geographically widespread membership, (like the UK Greens), have the greatest incentive to make use of the technology for the practical purpose of networking because it negates the problems of distance. For larger parties (GroenLinks) the incentive maybe less if they have concentrated support and already possess well established off-line participative structures. Indeed, national mail lists debates with a large volume of contributors would become unwieldy and relatively worthless.

#### **Conclusions**

There is nothing inherently democratic or decentralist about new ICTs. Whether parties use them for participative purposes depends on the incentives and resources parties have to adapt them in such a manner. Even amongst Green parties, the main focus of web usage so far has been information provision and short term election campaigning aimed at the voters rather than members. As such web-sites often resemble little more than evolving electronic billboards. Whilst use of other web based technology (e-mail lists, chat forums etc.) may eventually enhance party democracy, if current trends are maintained then it is unlikely to extend participation within parties, although it may deepen the quality of participation for the already active (thus cementing the divide between activists and passive members). However, overall, for small-medium sized parties like the

Greens, the greatest gains from adopting the new media are more likely to be administrative (saving resources) and campaign based (establishing a profile), rather than participative. As the webmaster for the Greens (E/W) concluded: 'it's simply a faster and more efficient way of doing things, things we've always done'.

#### notes

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16. A. Dobson, *Green Political Thought. An Introduction*, London, 1990, 9.

17. J. Pickerill, 'Environmentalists and the Net: Pressure Groups, New Social Movements and New ICTs', in: R. Gibson and S. Ward (eds), *Reinvigorating Government? British Politics and the Internet*, Aldershot, forthcoming, 241.

18. For details of the programme see the policies section of the Green Party website at <[www.greenparty.org.uk](http://www.greenparty.org.uk)>.

19. This section draws heavily on two previous articles: R. Gibson and S. Ward, 'Party Democracy On-line: UK Parties and New ICTs', in: *Information Communication and Society*, 2 (1999), 340-367; and idem, 'A Proposed Methodology for Studying the Function and Form of Party and Candidate Websites', in: *Social Science Computer Review*, 18 (2000), nr. 4 (forthcoming).

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21. J. Percy-Smith, *Digital Democracy: Information and Communication Technologies in Local Politics*, CLD Research Report No. 14, Commission for Local Democracy, London, 1995; B. Barber, K. Mattson and John Peterson, *The State of Electronically Enhanced Democracy: A Survey of the Internet*. A report for the Markle Foundation, Walt Whitman Center for Culture and Politics of Democracy, New Brunswick, NJ, 1997; B. Bimber, 'Toward an Empirical Map of Political Participation on the Internet'. Paper presented at the American Political Science Association Conference, 3-6 September 1998, Boston, MA.

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23. P. Lucardie, W.H. van Schuur and G. Voerman, *Verloren illusie, geslaagde fusie? GroenLinks in historisch en politicologisch perspectief*, Leiden, 1999.

24. Doherty, *op.cit.*
25. Pickerill, *op.cit.* There has been considerable media interest in the UK in the green movement's use of the Internet for mobilisation purposes. See for example, John Vidal in *the Guardian*, 24 January 2000.
26. G. Voerman and J.D. de Graaf, 'De web-sites van de Nederlandse politieke partijen, 1994-1998', in: *Jaarboek 1997 Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Politieke Partijen*, Groningen, 1998, 238-269.
27. R. Gibson and S. Ward, 'New Media, Same Impact? British Party Activity in Cyberspace', in: Gibson and Ward (eds), *Reinvigorating Government?*
28. R. Gibson and S. Ward, 'An Outsider's Medium? The European Elections and UK Party Competition on the Internet', in: Ph. Cowley et al (eds), *British Parties and Elections Review Vol. 10*, London, forthcoming.
29. A recent review of the Labour Party site found only 27 e-mail addresses – none of which were for politicians or leading decision makers within the party; see Gibson and Ward, 'A Proposed Methodology'.
30. The resource page although supposedly password protected was in fact open to all visitors.
31. R. Gibson and S. Ward, 'UK Political Parties and the Internet: Politics as Usual in the New Media?', in: *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 3 (1998), 14-38; idem, 'Party Democracy On-line'; G. Voerman, 'Dutch Political Parties on the Internet', in: *ECPR-News*, 10 (1998), nr. 1, 8-9; Voerman and De Graaf, *op.cit.*
32. Interview with Green webmaster 2 August 1999.
33. Interview with J. Lagendijk, campaign leader of GroenLinks, 20 April 1998.
34. These cover general discussion, notices and information, strategy, policy, resources for media work, animal policy, regional council and one for the web team. The regional lists are for London, the North east and Yorkshire
35. Gibson and Ward, 'Party Democracy On-line'.
36. Only recently (at the beginning of April 2000) did GroenLinks start an ICCS, which the webmaster had not mentioned before in the survey. It is therefore not taken into account here.
37. The website address of GroenLinks is: <www.groenlinks.nl>.
38. Bimber, *op.cit.*; Gibson and Ward, 'Political Participation and the Internet in Europe'.
39. An earlier survey of the two main parties found Labour had around 4% of constituencies on-line and the Conservatives 8%; see Gibson and Ward, 'Party Democracy On-line'.
40. Included in this number are a few provincial sites. Also, a few sites accommodated several local branches.