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POLITE SUBVERSION IN E-DEMOCRACY

1. Study design

"The issue is no longer *whether* politics is online, but *in what forms and with what consequences*?" (Chadwick: 2006, 1). It is a fact that – at least, and not only, in the Western world – political communication is leaving the sites to which it had been traditionally assigned to go online. Among the technological, historical and socio-cultural reasons at the roots of this global phenomenon is the fact that the communicative potential of the Internet has been boosted by the extraordinary degree of interactivity allowed by its latest interface, called Web 2.0; that the 2003 Iraq war, which was also waged on the Internet, has deeply changed the world's media scenario; and that the greater turnout in the U.S. 2004 presidential election was related to the impact of online political communication on voters (Chadwick: 2006). On the one hand, it has become common practice for politicians to exploit online communication as a key strategy in their permanent campaigning, especially in the face of voters' alleged disaffection with mainstream politics[1]. On the other hand, advocacy groups and grassroots movements are increasingly resorting to the Net to obtain visibility and gather consensus, embodying new forms of political activism.

It is this broader background that this study ideally encompasses, while focusing on the formation of the practices of e-democracy as they are emblematised by an innovative British experiment that goes under the name of mySociety, a project that "builds websites which give people simple, tangible benefits in the civic and community as-

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[1] The N° 10 Downing Street website, Labour's now dismissed Big Conversation website and its new Let's Talk project as well as Webcameron, David Cameron's personal blog – just to provide a few notable examples – all stand out as varyingly successful attempts at identifying new communication strategies with citizens at large through the Internet.

pects of their lives" (http://www.mysociety.org). The founder is thirty-year-old Tom Steinberg, an Oxford University graduate in Politics, Philosophy and Economics, who previously worked at the Conservative think tank Institute of Economic Affairs for two years.

MySociety is a platform of different civic-engagement websites – TheyWorkForYou, with the loosely affiliated Public Whip, Write ToThem, NotApathetic, which boycotted voting in the 2005 general election and is now closed to new submissions, PledgeBank, Hear FromYourMP, FixMyStreet, and the recent Downing Street petition service – whose common aim is to "disintermediate" politics by turning direct e-democracy from a "cyberpunk fantasy" (*Guardian Unlimited*, Jan. 24, 2007) into reality. In different ways these websites claim to be non-partisan and to keep an eye on politicians, by allowing users to retrace the names of their elected representatives, check their activities and contact them through the net. On the one hand, in its attempt to envisage and shape a model citizen encouraged to be actively engaged in participatory forms of politics, mySociety is a full-fledged experiment in e-democracy. On the other hand, it is quite apparent that these websites intend to act as a sort of surveillance activity on local and national British politicians in a way that is being made possible by the tools of new technologies. It is from this interpretative hypothesis – that these websites represent an innovative experiment in policing politicians within the expectations of e-democracy – that the following study moves.

E-democracy enacts new modalities of political communication whose effectiveness is still to be gauged, but whose undeniable appeal is, at the same time, a phenomenon worth inspecting. Would it be possible, then, to identify a number of linguistic features that are transversal to the language of these websites and pin them down as instances of the still experimental communicative register of e-democracy? In what ways are the rules of e-democracy spelt out in the discursive interaction enacted by these websites? In other words, by what kind of discourse strategies is e-democracy shaped, as an ideology and social practice? Since the efficacy of the Internet in boosting two-way political communication is still a highly debated issue which needs to be backed by theories on political participation (Polat: 2005, 454), the answers provided in this paper are still exploratory. However, they may contribute to outlining the profile of the participatory citizen, a central project in e-democracy.

2. Methodology

From a theoretical viewpoint, this study is inspired by Foucault's theorisation of the notion of surveillance (1975), based on his reading of Bentham's *Panopticon* (1791). Foucault recasts Bentham's ideal prison – a watchtower surrounded with blocks whose indoor cells can be constantly inspected from above through the windows opening onto a central yard – as the icon of the constant state of invigilation and scrutiny to which the self is subjected by institutional power in modern states. The novelty of mySociety, however, is that it challenges this model, since the mission of the project is to establish a different power relationship in which citizens become the standing jury, so that the controlling gaze is now seen to proceed from the many to the few, i.e. from citizens to politicians. What this bottom-up form of control should achieve is, at least ideally, a greater degree of democracy by establishing dialogue with elected representatives as a current and legitimate political practice. Quite interestingly, the web-based RSS aggregator that stores all the mentions received by the mySociety websites on the net is called "mySocietyPanopticon".

This study is therefore indebted to the methodological framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (Wodak: 1989; Fairclough – Wodak: 1997; Fairclough: 2003), as CDA is a critical perspective that brings to the forefront the ways in which discourse constructs, and is constructed by, social practices enmeshed in historically contingent power relationships. Since the dialogic dimension is central to the mySociety project, text analysis has especially investigated the linguistic forms through which the interpersonal function of discourse, playing a pivotal role between the involved interlocutors, is achieved.

It is the main argument of this study that these civic websites enact a form of control over politicians, but that they intend to do so without engaging in open confrontation. This is why politeness theory (Brown-Levinson: 1978/1987; Harris: 2001, 2003; Watts: 2003) has proved to be a useful analytical tool able to shed light on the actual strategies and goals of polite discourse. Of particular interest is the application of politeness theory to the domain of institutional discourse in power-laden contexts (Harris: 2001): some insights can be adjusted to the mySociety experiment if we interpret the project as an attempt at institutionalising citizens' advocacy. Though the entire platform has been object of analysis, special emphasis has been placed on three of the abovementioned websites – TheyWorkForYou, WriteToThem, HearFromYourMP – for which confrontational discourse in a context traditionally marked by power distance is more

evidently a constitutive feature.

The analysis has also embraced the multimodal dimension of websites, as semiotically syncretic texts in which meaning arises from the interaction of verbal and non-verbal codes (Lemke: 1999, Kress – van Leeuwen: 2001; Cosenza: 2004). Finally, contributions on political communication through the new media (Wright: 2002; Polat: 2005; Kahn – Kellner: 2005; Coleman: 2005, 2006; Lusoli *et al.*: 2006) have helped to frame the issues concerning the contested terrain of Internet politics, in which "novel forms of information and social interaction, reconstructed models of citizenship and new forms of political activism" (Kahn – Kellner: 2005, 77) are taking shape.

3. The websites

3.1. Visual features

The mySociety websites share a number of common textual, intertextual and paratextual features that characterise their visual/verbal organisation.

First, the name of all websites is placed in the top-left corner of the corresponding homepage, according to a conventional left-right orientational paradigm (Engebretsen: 2006), typical of linear texts, which positions known elements on the left and has them followed by new ones. The website masthead, on the left, is therefore a given element that works as a departing point for the exploration of the page.

All websites, moreover, contain the mySociety logo and/or are redirected to its homepage by means of a hyperlink. This constant hypertextual reference would seem to imply that the mySociety project is central to the encyclopaedia, or set of knowledge areas, in which these websites are embedded (Cosenza: 2004, 133).

The mySociety logo is characterised by the combination of two shades of green, a colour with clear implications of political "ecology".
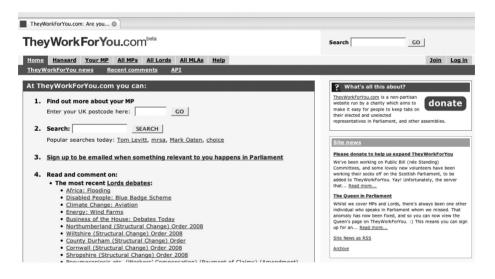

Quite interestingly, the shape of the letter "o", designed with a line of small dots in a contrasting shade of green, is fragmented and

open. The central symmetry of the circular letter (remindful of the circular and claustrophobic architecture of the Panopticon) is disrupted in favour of a visual organisation that would seem to imply multiplicity and freedom.

We can also see that all websites resort to a sober colour palette[2] and are not branded in easily recognisable party colours, such as red (Labour), blue (Conservatives), or yellow (LibDems). Such neutrality in employing the colour scheme as a semiotic resource (Kress – van Leeuwen: 2002) would seem consonant with the intended suppression of political animosity on the part of the project.

The main text (the homepage of TheyWorkForYou is here reproduced as an example) is usually placed in the central column against a lightly coloured background; the layout is very simple and user-friendly, providing clear verbal and visual clues.

By digitising their postcode, for example, users are directed to the name of the MP for their constituency. Besides, the possibilities of multimodality are kept to a minimum: there are very few pictures (with the exception of PledgeBank), video or audio files on the websites. No animation is present, nor explicit or latent forms of advertis-

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[2] Touches of red, shades of pink, pale green and dark green for TheyWorkForYou, beige and brown for WriteToThem, turquoise and pale blue for NotApathetic, light purple for PledgeBank, pale blue for HearFromYourMP, grey and pale blue for E-Petitions, light brown for FixMyStreet.

ing, a common way to generate revenues that mySociety can ignore, being a charity-supported project[3].

The verbal/visual organisation of the websites is therefore not intimidating, pedagogically constructing potential users as endowed with the indispensable notions of computer literacy, but able to interact. Though the Internet is somehow stripped of its most alluring features, users' interactivity is firmly placed at the centre of the mySociety project, thus putting technology at the service of the citizens and emphasising the core potential of the Web for coupling "local discourse events to social systems in which their consequences can be greatly magnified" (Lemke: 1999, 23).

3.2. Verbal features

As has been seen, the kind of political communication enacted on the mySociety websites is shaped by the aim to bridge the power differential existing between citizens and their institutional representatives so as to invent more participatory forms of debate. If civic participation is to be fostered, appropriate means have to be identified and applied, among which correct linguistic behaviour is uppermost.

Plain language is preferred to potentially obscure or misleading political jargon:

> **Britishness – what's that then?**
> Posted by Linda Riordan, MP for Halifax
> I think the notion of 'Britishness' is something of a red herring – the recent call for a "National British Day" is pointless window dressing, but if it stirs a debate then that's good and fine.
> For me Britishiness can be summed up by us all living and working alongside each other in mutual respect, understanding and tolerance – and dare I say affection! (HearFromYourMP)

Honorifics are kept to a minimum and even MPs may be referred to by their first name:

> **Nadine Shows Her Support For British Tourism**
> Posted by Nadine Dorries, MP for Mid Bedfordshire (HearFromYourMP)

Topics are introduced following a bottom-up procedure rather

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[3] The name of the charity is UK Citizen Online Democracy (http://www.ukcod.org.uk/UK_Citizens_On line_Democracy).

than a top-down, expert-led approach, as the first move in the exchange is initiated by single citizens or a small number among them, and not by large pressure groups, on issues of their choice. Quite exemplary in this regard is PledgeBank, whose motto could legitimately sound "small is good":

> PledgeBank is free and easy to use. Once you've thought of something you'd like to do, just create a pledge which says "I'll do this, but only if 5 other people will do the same".

> Top tips for successful pledges
> Keep your ambitions modest – why ask for 50 people to do something when 5 would be enough? Every extra person makes your pledge harder to meet. Only 7% of pledges asking for more than 100 people succeed.

> I, Hannah L, will sign the avaaz.org petition calling for real peace talks in the Middle East and tell two friends about it but only if 15 other people will do the same. Target met, pledge closed (PledgeBank).

This fragmentation of civic and political issues is a clear manifestation of what has been defined the "narrowcasting potential of the Internet" (Polat: 2005, 440). "Narrowcasting", as opposed to "broadcasting", describes the circulation of messages addressed to a restricted audience. The practice has been boosted by the use of the Internet which has multiplied atomised online communities. It has been claimed that narrowcasting may carry with it the risk of overpromoting minority groups and disintegrating inclusive mobilisation and shared political agendas, but this is nevertheless the stance encouraged by the mySociety project.

As for the involved interlocutors and the kind of interpersonal relationship that is being created between them, the most noticeable feature is that the exchange is informed by a triangular model of communication, as can be elicited by the use of indexicals. This triangular model involves citizens, who are referred to as "you", their political representatives ("they") and the mySociety team ("we").

> For your use and enjoyment we've added Hansard for the House of Lords (their debates, written questions and ministerial statements, just like the Commons), and a page on each of the members of the House of Lords (TheyWorkForYou).

> Spamming lots of representatives with near-identical messages is definitely bad behaviour in our book. […] We will let all the people who sent identi-kit messages know that their messages have been blocked, and we will tell them that it is because you broke our terms and conditions (WriteToThem).

> If you enter your details, we'll add you to a queue of other people in your constituency. […] To leave your thoughts, you just enter your text and hit enter. There's no tiresome login – you can just start talking about what they've said (HearFromYourMP).

The mySociety team cast themselves as mediators, whose role is to minimise power distance. The interpersonal function of discourse is emphasised over the ideational one, while the digital flow of messages imitates the colloquial register and the turns of an informal conversation in which honest answers strive to eliminate information gaps that may hinder democratic participation.

> mySociety.org – What's it all about then, eh? (mySociety)

> What will you do with the personal information used by this site?
> This is our privacy policy (sorry it is so long, but it is quite precise) (WriteToThem).

> "So, the voting is over. The politicians vanish to Westminster, and everything carries on as before, right?"
> Wrong. Between elections the Internet is really starting to challenge politics as usual. As part of this change, we'd like to put you in touch with your MP (HearFromYourMP).

On the other hand, this mediating role is counterbalanced by a gatekeeping function, clearly stated in the house rules published on the websites:

> **Read this before writing your message**
> - Please be polite, concise and to the point.
> - By abusing your MP you devalue the service for all users.
> - Use your own words. MPs will ignore copied and pasted 'identikit' messages.
> - It's a waste of time writing to MPs other than your own. If this isn't your MP, your message will be ignored.
> - Read this to learn when a MP can help you – and when they can't.
> - Find out more about Dawn Primarolo (new window) on TheyWork ForYou.com (WriteToThem).

> **Do you remove silly or illegal content?**
> We reserve the right to remove any problems or updates which we consider to be inappropriate (FixMyStreet).

House rules defend the norms presiding over interpersonal communication in order to deflate potentially conflictive and problematic

aspects: "contributions should be constructive and polite" (They WorkForYou). At the same time, they do not intend to exaggerate the policing role of the mySociety team, as this would probably unsettle the deliberate downplaying of power asymmetry. Nevertheless, electronic ethos is not only recommended but also enforced, which means, among other things, that spamming and flaming – the use of invective and verbal aggressiveness – are regarded as unacceptable bad behaviour. An appropriate linguistic register is presented as a requirement which is even prior to the actual mastery of political issues. Consequently, that politeness strategies should play a very significant role in this kind of exchange comes as no surprise: polite language aims at reducing face-threatening acts to a minimum in the interest of participants, a strategy which is particularly valuable in a context in which the direct, though genuine, requests that characterise the mySociety conversational floor may sound intimidating.

Though the theatrical world of politics is often characterised by "politically" impolite behaviour and language (Harris: 2001), symbolic interaction on the mySociety websites relies, instead, on the presupposition that politeness is not only desirable, but also achievable behaviour that can promote more democratic discursive practices.

> If you enter your details, we'll add you to a queue of other people in your constituency. When enough have signed up, your MP will get sent an email. It'll say "25 of your constituents would like to hear what you're up to. Hit reply to let them know". If they don't reply, nothing will happen, until your MP gets a further email which says there are now 50, then 75, 100, 150 – until it is nonsensical not to reply and start talking (HearFrom YourMP).

It has been observed that

> linguistic structures do not in themselves denote politeness, but rather that they lend themselves to individual interpretation as "polite" in instances of ongoing verbal interaction (Watts: 2003, 168).

In the context of the online conversation taking place on the mySociety website, we can nevertheless try to identify the most salient linguistic features (Watts: 2003) that can be pragmatically interpreted as polite, as they tend to avoid negative face and enhance positive face. We often find:

• the politeness marker "please"

Please be nice to each other. Please respect MPs and Peers.

<u>Please</u> be patient.
<u>Please</u> bear with us if we're slow to get back to you (House Rules, They
WorkForYou)

- hedges, understaters, downtoners

For all its faults and foibles, our democracy is a profound gift from previous
generations (TheyWorkForYou).

Perhaps the main aim of this site is to let you respond to politicians and
journalists.
As far as we know, nobody at mySociety is actually against voting (NotApa-
thetic).

There is little wrong with Parliament that a healthy mixture of transparency
and public engagement won't fix (TheyWorkForYou).

To leave your thoughts, you just enter your text and hit enter. There's no
tiresome login – you can just start talking about what they've said (Hear
FromYourMP).

- agent avoiders, i.e. linguistic structures whereby the agent is
  suppressed, impersonalised or generalised to delete explicit
  criticism, any hints of it, or reduce the impact of enforced ad-
  vice:

Councils across the UK do an excellent job of fixing local problems when
they're reported <u>by citizens</u> (mySociety).

Yet <u>most people</u> don't know the name of their MP (TheyWorkForYou).

As an elected representative, <u>it's important that</u> those constituents who
want to follow your actions and efforts on their behalf are able to. <u>It's also
useful for you</u> to be able to receive direct feedback from them (Hear
FromYourMP).

- intensifiers

TheyWorkForYou was set up <u>almost entirely</u> by a dozen or so volunteers
who thought it should be <u>really easy</u> for people to keep tabs on their elected
MPs, and their unelected Peers, and comment on what goes on in Parlia-
ment (TheyWorkForYou).

- humour, since joking is shown to possess a redressive function
  (Harris: 2003, 40)

> Please don't link to websites you wouldn't want your granny to visit.
> After that, we reserve the right to get medieval (TheyWorkForYou).

> What do you think of this website, the one that helps you write to your elected representatives.
> Did it work?
> Do you like it?
> How can we improve the service?
> Do the colours clash?
> How many fibres are intertwined in a Shredded Wheat biscuit? (Write ToThem)

In a communicative context characterised by constant interactivity as well as power asymmetry in which potential face-threatening acts are performed, politeness strategies can be seen to operate as mitigating or redressive utterances that do not damage communicative effectiveness, but rather enhance it. They serve, then, both instrumental and interpersonal goals (Harris: 2003, 27) and allow the flow of exchange to continue.

4. Conversationalisation of political discourse

It has been suggested that "a major change in discursive practices affecting many public institutions in contemporary society is the 'conversationalisation' of public discourse" (Fairclough – Wodak: 1997, 265), which implies that the register and discursive practices of everyday life are brought into public forums. As a linguistic strategy, conversationalisation has doubtless been enhanced by the Internet revolution and the extraordinary degree of interactivity that the Web 2.0 with its emergent genres has been able to offer.

The Internet remains, nevertheless, a fast-changing and contradictory medium whose undeniable transformative potential does not automatically advance democracy. Among the risks of political communication, especially since it is increasingly mediated by the Internet, there is that of being trivialised into an insignificant form of "'soft activism' that provides an illusion of political action through typing on a computer" (Kahn – Kellner: 2005, 93) and is often limited to an "al-

[4] For example, this is the criticism raised at New Labour's Big Conversation website, launched in 2001 and now dismissed: "The Big Conversation, of course, was sparked up a couple of years before that, billed as 'one of the boldest, most innovative democra-

ready politically active and privileged" minority (Lusoli *et al.*: 2006, 24).

In spite of the ambivalence of the phenomenon, which may lend itself to further manipulative efforts or to irrelevant chitchat, thus deflating the disruptive power of raising controversial issues[4], conversationalisation as a trend in influencing audiences may also help to build more democratic discourse relations whenever it manages to carry out the renegotiation of existing power roles. The ways in which it works on the mySociety websites, also in the light of the growing success of the initiative, ratified as it is by ordinary common citizens, would seem to favour a positive interpretation of this form of interactive written discourse and to shed an optimistic light on the proactive abilities of language to advance alternative social representations. The analysis of the websites reveals, in fact, that the focus of the mySociety efforts seems to lie not in the manipulation of public opinion, but rather in the construction of the responsible citizen, though "there is still a missing link between e-democratic activity in civil society and policy making that takes place in formal institutional spheres" (Chadwick: 2006, 113).

5. Conclusions

The mySociety websites are civic, non-party-political sites that encourage democratic participation from all citizens and exercise a form of polite surveillance on politicians. They also promote practical responsible action at community level. Though voicing a form of confrontational discourse which does not eschew very serious issues (such as boycotting a general election), these websites do not deliberately resort to vitriolic forms of political satire, as is the norm on other political blogs in the U.K., such as Guido Fawkes, Recess Monkey, or FibDems, but strive to respect polite forms of linguistic behaviour in a strategic way, that is, facilitating the ongoing flow of exchange on a number of meaningful topics concerning civic and political life.

The fact that this participatory perspective, initiated by small groups of citizens without direct electoral advantages or explicit vest-

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tic exercises in British political history'. This proved to be just the sort of underselling to which the PM is so bashfully given. For the duration of its life, the Big Conversation website carried not a single comment from a single voter on either Iraq, terrorism or Mr Blair's relationship with President Bush" (*Guardian Unlimited*, 18 November 2006).

ed interests, has been seriously espoused and maintained over the years is the real novelty of the mySociety experiment. According to political analysts, it is exactly in this area that the major failure of institutional websites lies, in their continual reluctance to abandon a patronising, hierarchical attitude in spite of their declared "egalitarian aims" (Scott: 2002, 140) and, therefore, in their intrinsic support of ratified forms of power.

In this regard, the mySociety platform stands out as a remarkable experiment in e-democracy, pedagogically combining a focussed use of technology with a balanced communicative style that does not abandon a critical gaze on political life and thus challenges existing relations of power. Citizens, after all, manage to make themselves heard by politicians, without having to overcome too many gate-keeping filters. This stance is strategically facilitated not by aggressive behaviour but by politeness, whose linguistic restraint turns into an effective means of speaking out. In spite of its apparent moderation, this is arguably the kind of website discourse whose politics could affect political behaviour in the long run and, auspiciously, with lasting results.

LIST OF SITES

mySociety.org websites

mySociety.org, http://www.mysociety.org
mySociety Panopticon, http://panopticon.mysociety.org
TheyWorkForYou, http://www.theyworkforyou.com (launched June 6th, 2004)
WriteToThem, http://www.writetothem.com (launched February 14th, 2005)
NotApathetic.com, http://www.notapathetic.com (launched April 7th, 2005)
PledgeBank.com, http://www.pledgebank (launched June 13th, 2005)
HearFromYourMP, http://hearfromyourmp.com (launched November 21st, 2005)
E-Petitions, http://petitions.pm.gov.uk (launched November 14th, 2006)
FixMyStreet, http://www.fixmystreet.com, previously Neighbourhood Fix-It (launched March 7th, 2007)
UKCOD, http://www.ukcod.org.uk/UK_Citizens_Online_Democracy

Other websites and political blogs

Downing Street Says, http://www.downingstreetsays.org
FibDems, http://www.fibdems.blogspot.com
Guido Fawkes, http://www.order-order.com
Let's Talk, http://www.labour.org.uk/letstalk
Recess Monkey, http://www.recessmonkey.com
10 Downing Street, http://www.pm.gov.uk
The Public Whip, http://www.publicwhip.org.uk
Webcameron, http:// www.webcameron.org.uk

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