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# Greek Political Marketing Online: An Analysis of Parliament Members' Web Sites

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**ABSTRACT.** The new communication system of interconnected computer networks is altering the nature of political communication in many innovative and significant ways. In Greece, the development of the Internet as a mass communication medium has a history of no more than five years, and it is far from being a fully fledged medium of political

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communication. With the exception of relatively few cases, the use of the Internet has been shown to increase during the pre-election campaign periods. This paper presents the results of a research project, which explores the personal Web sites of the Greek parliamentarians in an off-campaign period. The research was conducted through the systematic observation, examination, and analysis of a sample of personal Web pages owned by cross-party elected members of the Greek Parliament. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Digital political communication, personal Web sites, MPs, permanent campaign, equalization

### INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning, the multifaceted development of political communication as a research field and political marketing as applied communication in political campaigns has been dependent on the technological advances in communication and journalistic practices (Nimmo & Sanders, 1981: 24-26). Justifiably so, since it is the technology of communications itself that makes possible the expansion and evolution of public and political communication, so that research and theory ensue. In the history of the development of political communication and political marketing, the emergence of a new medium has been inexorably identified with changes and transformations in the realm of public life and participation (Perloff, 1999: 37). The expectations, along with the fears associated with the advent of a new medium, are also diagnosed in the case of the most recent medium of information and communication, the Internet. To be sure, the Internet is not a communication tool that will replace all others; rather it is a strong, sophisticated, and penetrating technological tool, which can be applied in campaign management and political public relations.

In Greece, political communication and political marketing research are in their early stages. At the same time, the rates of Internet adoption and penetration are lower in comparison to other European Union countries. The history of the political use of the Internet in Greece starts with the first official Web site of the party in government, PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement), in 1999. Until then, all attempts for estab-

lishing a presence online were restricted to pages created mainly by party activists on a more or less voluntary basis. At the time of the general elections of April 2000, all nine political parties running for office were accessible online and 170 personal political Web pages were operational. The numbers of political candidates visible online were significantly low, when compared to the much higher number of candidates running during the same elections—there were 3874 parliament candidates (Sartzetakis, 2003). Thus one can easily conclude that Greek politicians have not yet made personal use of this medium, while, on the other hand, parties themselves are highly visible online. This can be attributed partly to the party-centered style of electoral campaign held in Greece, and differs from the candidate-centered style of electoral campaigns in the United States. It should be pointed that the Greek general elections of 2000 was the first time that the Internet was used systematically as a political campaign tool by political parties.

Since then, the Internet is being used as a medium for the politicians to publish their views, their stances and propositions, in a way similar to a print political brochure. For the most part, Web sites function as yet another 'must have' for candidates to persuade the voters that their candidate is at the cutting edge of technology. This is not a Greek peculiarity; in other countries too, few candidates use their Web sites to perform real time or asynchronous communication with their constituents, through e-mail or public discussion (Stromer-Galley, 2000). Furthermore, such communication activity is mostly taking place during pre-election campaign periods, while there is no continuity between the elections. Nowadays, in Greece, as in most countries, a political Web page is seen as an integral part of a politician's campaign master plan. However, what it can really offer and how it should be used remains a mystery to the majority of Greek politicians and political marketers, whose role has significantly increased since the early 1990s (Yannas, 2002). In the future a new generation of campaign managers entitled "Web coordinators" might make an appearance in Greece and other countries.<sup>1</sup> For example, in the US Presidential elections of 2000, the candidate's Webmasters performed the role of campaign managers in their attempt to find the "killer" application. Al Gore's Webmaster, in an attempt to prove that he had employed every technological trick he could to outdo the Bush site, said: "We had live Web casts every day, we even did one from a moving school bus in Iowa" (Davis, Elin & Reeher, 2002: 31-32). During the Greek general elections of 2000, politicians visited online chats hosted by known Greek portals. It is worth noting that Prime Minister Mr. Kostas Simitis gave a live interview a week before the election at the official Web site of PASOK.