

## Political campaigning is being shaped by the unseen technologies

**Mark Pack** discusses the ways in which technologies are changing campaigning techniques.



Taking part in one of the panels at the excellent *Parties, People and Elections: Political Communication since 1900* conference a few weeks ago, I heard Nottingham's [Phil Cowley](#) once again push his "Cowley's Law of Campaigning" (not to be confused with [Cowley's Syndrome](#)). Phil's a charming man and he insisted he would keep on mentioning the law until his mother got the pleasure of seeing someone put it into print, so who am I to disappoint him...?

Aside from the virtues of pleasing his mother, [the law](#) deserves a wider airing in its own right:

*"There is an inverse relationship between the importance of any election campaign technique and the amount of media coverage devoted to it".*

It encapsulates and broadens an experience I often had when working for the Liberal Democrats and running the party's 2001 and 2005 general election campaigns. Email was consistently the most important tool, but (back in those pre-social media days) websites were what the media most consistently asked about. As I often said at the time, if I had to face a choice between a catastrophic IT failure breaking the party's website for the duration of the election or one that wiped out the party's email system, I would have picked the former without any hesitation.

Part of the reason for this mismatch between importance and attention is that email is much harder for the outside world to track, especially when you start thinking about targeted emails and varying messages to different audiences based on where they live or what they have done.

Even after the Obama 2008 campaign made talking about email fashionable, tracking emails is still a very difficult art – partly because the advancing sophistication of message variation has meant improved reporting and attention is still struggling to keep up with the medium.

But this is not just a point about email. For the 2010 election, the *Financial Times's* James Crabtree coined the excellent phrase "[the unseen technology](#)". His [predictions](#) were not quite perfect – "[the TV leader debates] are unlikely to move the polls" – but his central point was spot on. It is the unseen technologies; the databases, the emails and other 'hidden' channels, which are shaping political campaigning.

Cowley's Law was originally coined with techniques such as direct mail in mind. Millions of pounds are spent on it by political parties, but it is little studied. (Here's a simple pop quiz question to demonstrate the point: what significant change in political party direct mail happened at the 2005 general election?)

Crabtree's unseen technology means changing campaign techniques are not weakening Cowley's Law, they are strengthening it.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

**About the author**

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