**Chapter 1**

**Cameron’s Conservatives and the Internet**

The Conservative Party endured 13 years in opposition, 1997-2010, while ‘New Labour’ presided over a cultural transition to a new millennium. From the illusive ‘millennium bug’ in the year 2000 (Y2K) to the first release of Apple’s ‘iPad’ in 2010, the New Labour period was partly characterized by developments in computer-mediated communications (CMC). Amid the backdrop of an increasingly complex, transient and globalized world economy, the internet - a dynamic and ever evolving international network of computerized digital communication that has allowed the development of user-led interactive multimedia technologies, for the exchange of commerce, communication, entertainment, information, learning and social interaction - has facilitated the virtual compression of time and space; and greater freedom, choice and access to information for the individual and collective groups (Green 2002; Youngs 2009; van Dijck 2012). In a new millennium characterized by advances in digital technologies, one question for scholars of the contemporary Conservative Party has been: how and to what extent has the party changed under the leadership of David Cameron? (Bale 2008). This book joins a number of wider works in the pursuit of the essence of that question (Snowdon, 2010a; Snowdon 2010b; Bale 2010; Dorey et al. 2011; Heppell and Seawright 2012).

In the early 2000s, academic interest in how the internet might have been impacting on party change, notably, at that time, within the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties (Lusoli and Ward 2004), was beginning to emerge. However, there have been few published studies that explore directly and comprehensively the impact of the internet on driving change in the culture of ‘Cameron’s Conservatives’ (Bale 2006). This book attempts to go some way in addressing the gap in the scholarly literature with its examination of the role of the internet in the party’s organization, 2005-14. It consists mainly of an analysis of the party’s culture in the run-up to General Election 2010 (GE2010), which, for the purpose of this book, begins from the point at which David Cameron became leader of the Conservative Party in December 2005. Lilleker and Jackson’s study (2010) of Web 2.0 tools used by six party websites in GE2010 found that the political parties used differing strategic approaches to internet technologies. Therefore, comparisons with other parties are not made extensively in this book, because it would not significantly further enlighten an understanding of how internet technologies impacted on change in the specific case of the Conservative Party.

This book is largely a descriptive and explanatory study that sits between historical party analysis and the contemporary analysis of parties and new media. The work is influenced by cultural history and ethnographic methodology. It aims to understand culture change using insider knowledge of the Conservative Party. Furthermore, it aims to provide a more focused understanding of the role of the internet in any potential ‘decentralization’ of Conservative Party processes, rather than party policy. The book’s central aim is to build the case for the discovery of a new and somewhat latent technologically-fuelled organizational subculture observed within the Conservative Party between 2008 and 2010. In the specific case of the British Conservative Party, I call this integration of technocultural and political phenomena ‘Cyber Toryism’. The nomenclatorial inspiration for this came from Helen Margetts’ (2006) evocative model for ‘cyber parties’. Margetts presents the cyber party as a new party ideal type, which she argues to fit well the nature of party development in Britain. However, this book does not prescribe to the notion of party ideal types, but rather views them as useful indicators which, when integrated with a party’s unique cultural context, provide useful theoretical signposts for the identification of phenomena in relation to a specific party’s organization and culture.

STUDY OF MEDIA AND POLITICAL PARTIES

The theoretical foundations on which this book rests are influenced by the well-established central thesis of British liberal media history which states that the ‘process of democratization was enormously strengthened by the development of modern mass media’ (Curran 2002: 4). Historically, advances in the democratic process in Britain, like the five major extensions of the right to vote, between 1832 and 1928, were accompanied by significant developments in mass communications, like the supposed freeing of the press in the eighteenth century; and the growth in film and radio in the early twentieth century. These major developments occurred prior to universal suffrage in 1928. Therefore, this book is based on the assumption that, in terms of media power, the advents of the more recent mass communication technologies, like television and the internet, both of which developed in a period characterized by an historic peak in enfranchisement, have been unrivalled in their potential for impact as tools for democratic and political activity.

The intraparty dynamics, in other words internal interrelations, of British political parties, like the Conservative Party, can be viewed culturally. Internally, where the different organizational groups and factions interact, divisions and unifications of practices and values are identifiable (Bourdieu 1991). Between these dynamics, symbolic forms of communication are exchanged (Geertz 1973). Traditionally, few political scientists engage with methods that embrace the complex dynamics of political parties in a holistic cultural context (Baynard de Volo and Schatz 2004). However, with prominent work like that of Philip Howard (2006; 2010) and Darren Lilleker (2013), which places the role of new media in the wider context of changing political cultures, political science is recognizing more frequently the importance of culture. This book is influenced by Howard’s idea that, firstly, technology can evolve and, secondly, that it has the power to impact on individuals and groups. This supports the assumption, on which the argument for this book is based, that certain technocultural evolutions in wider society can lead to new technological innovations which have the potential to impact at micro- and macro- cultural levels in the Conservative Party. This book aims to explore this theme with a focus on the latent intraparty culture of Cyber Toryism through comparing different groups within the Conservative Party.

Scholars of political parties and political history have tended to divide themselves into subfields that address areas like political communication, party organization, party systems and party development. Political communication tends to focus on the marketing strategies that political parties use to connect with the electorate. Traditionally, scholars of party organization have been interested in the structural components of political parties (Lamprinakou 2008). Party system theory and party development have tended to a focus on generic party models and ideal types (Margetts 2006). Political histories often provide valuable panoramic views of the most salient aspects in the chronology of a party (Ball 1998; Ball and Seldon 2005; and Charmley 2008), but tend to focus on the upper echelons of party dynamics.

The outcome of these sometimes divergent approaches to the study of political phenomena has meant that our understanding of parties can be fragmented. Therefore, some often latent political phenomena have been neglected in academic research and scholarly literature. This book aims to take a more integrated and holistic approach to the study of internet technologies and the Conservatives. A further disciplinary influence that may be evident in this book is the anthropological methodology of New Ethnography. The research on which the book is based was especially influenced by the work of Alexander Smith (2011), a socio-cultural anthropologist who conducted an ethnographic study of the Scottish Conservatives. The aim for using an ethnographically-inspired approach is to capitalize on my first-hand accounts and experiences generated while embedded in the field with Cameron’s Conservatives in the run-up to GE2010 and beyond. While maintaining a critical stance, the aim is to embrace personal and emotional responses in order to unearth what feels ‘anthropologically strange’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 2009) about contemporary Conservative Party culture.

The interdisciplinary nature of this book means that it draws upon aspects of a range of scholarly disciplines in the social sciences and, as such, does not claim to adhere to any particular discipline in absolute terms. Rather, it seeks to borrow deliberately selected aspects of appropriate theories and concepts, which in some way relate to the study of the role that specific internet-fuelled technologies have played in the Conservative Party’s evolving organization and culture. Max Weber’s significant works in political sociology, in which he ‘was less concerned...to analyse the historical structure of the state than to clarify the nature of the political phenomenon in general’ (Thakur 2006: 2) has influenced the thinking behind the approach that this book takes to understanding the Conservative Party. In line with the Weberian view, it is therefore appropriate to identify Conservative Party characteristics, such as its responses to the advent of new media, in order to determine what is significant about the party’s nature and evolution. Rather than extensively comparing multiple political parties, the book compares multiple groups and factions within the Conservative Party 2005-14. There is value in a focused case study because it can unearth the interactive dynamics of party phenomena, while allowing the study to be placed within wider time specific contexts (Lawson 1994). Furthermore, being mindful of the Conservative Party’s status as a prominent and elite institution in the history of modern Britain, this case study of party change presents a symbolic opportunity to include in the analysis a reflexive sensibility that helps inform our understanding of what such institutional change tells us about wider technocultural change in Britain.

NEW MEDIA AND POLITICAL PARTIES

Before the widespread consumption of television in the 1950s, political strategy focused on the more simplistic forms of advertising and marketing (Wring 2007). Since the early 1970s, emerging technologies, namely computers, have been utilized to manage and process political information. At that time, scholars were interested in how parties were employing such technologies, for example the discovery that there had been a shift from handwritten letters to the use of word processing on a significant scale. Recently, we have witnessed new technological phenomena, namely the internet, impact significantly on society and culture (Dahlgren and Gurevitch 2005). However, some scholars warn that researchers should be wary of overstating the internet’s significance (Downey and Davidson 2007). This book positions itself in a similar mindset and, therefore, attempts to balance and contextualize its claims through setting the findings within wider historical and societal contexts.

In terms of political culture in Western liberal democracies, the advent of the internet has had its most notable impact in the US, first arriving to widespread prominence with the Obama campaign’s approach to online fundraising in the run-up to the 2008 Presidential Election (Vaccari 2010). This and other events have led many to view America as the home of web-campaigning. Furthermore, there has been greater academic interest in such phenomena in the US, with British scholarship remaining within what is currently viewed as a burgeoning field. Consequently, much of the work in the area of new political communications is centred on the United States and, in particular, American elections (Downey and Davidson 2007; Anstead and Chadwick 2009).

In Britain, the earliest mainstream political party websites were launched in the mid-1990s. The Conservatives launched their first website in 1995, a year behind Labour. However, such web presence is considered to have had only a minor impact on the 1997 General Election (Gibson and Ward 1998). At that time, general internet availability in Britain was limited when compared to the subsequent advances in broadband; and mobile and wireless technologies. Therefore, extensive investment in political internet technologies was not deemed as an election priority prior to 2001. In the run-up to the General Election 2001 (GE2001), market segmentation strategies, which were traditionally designed for mailing-out the direct marketing of hardcopies of political communications via the postal service, were beginning to be strategically applied to internet and mobile driven technologies like emails and text messages respectively (Ward and Gibson 2003). However, these developing technologies remained in a supporting capacity in terms of political campaigning.

Based on these trends and those observed in the US 2004 Presidential Election, General Election 2005 (GE2005) was expected to be hailed as Britain’s first internet election. However, the internet remained secondary to more traditional methods of electioneering (Ward 2005). There was no great qualitative advance in the impact of the internet in elections from GE2001 to GE2005 (Downey and Davidson 2007). Moreover, in between the two elections, the Conservatives lagged behind the other two major British parties in terms of its use of the internet for campaigning. Downey and Davidson’s (2007) review of British political party websites considers the main parties’ web content and format to have been generic; and that, at that time, the Liberal Democrats were leading the way in the online practice of political blogging.

Between GE2005 and GE2010, the Conservative Party underwent notable change (Bale 2010). Under the new leadership of Cameron, the party attempted to detoxify its dated ‘nasty party’ image and rebrand itself as an electable and progressive alternative to New Labour. Cameron’s contemporary style of leadership, while leader of the opposition, involved the use of internet applications like WebCameron, a video blog. This has been cited as the first significant case of e-politics in Britain (Downey and Davidson 2007). However, Ward et al. have suggested that rather than for use in political marketing, ‘internet-based technology might have a greater impact internally within parties’ (2005: 27). In part, it is this hypothesis that influenced the development of the research on which this book is based.

By 2005, the internet, as a tool for daily organization, had been assimilated significantly throughout British society and had grown to play a more significant role in the personal and professional lives of ordinary individuals (Livingstone 2005). In the cultural context, ‘evolution’ and ‘technology’ are often cited together, especially when researchers write about the rapid advances in ‘computerized systems for socializing’ (Hofstede et al. 2010: 471). In addition to Margetts (2006), there have been a number of additional scholars who have speculated about how the internet could empower grassroots participation in more networked and less centralized models of political organization (Bimber 1998; Pickerill 2003; Lofgren and Smith 2003). However, this book is not simply interested in analysing general trends in the use of social networks and other web applications for campaigning, rather it is focused on ascertaining whether the Conservative Party’s internal culture responded to the technological changes observed in wider culture and, if so, how it manifested itself in its organization and culture, thus providing an elucidation of Cyber Toryism. The book analyses whether changes were driven from the top or bottom of the party; and what the implications were and are for the central party and participants at the grassroots.

From 2005 to 2009, access to the internet in the UK rose by 18 per cent, from 55 per cent to 73 per cent (ONS 2006; Ofcom 2010). In the run-up to GE2010, like in 2005, there was significant excitement that 2010 might mark the first internet election in Britain, but instead the internet did not live up to expectations (Gibson et al. 2010a). In terms of general political communication in GE2010, one could be forgiven for overlooking the internet, and questioning whether, in fact, television was the actual new political medium in Britain at that time. Arguably, in some respects, GE2010-style political television was indeed a new medium in British election culture. It was the first general election in British history in which the party leaders went head-to-head in an American-style leader debate (Chadwick 2010). In terms of academic interest in political communications, the television debates have gazumped thus far the historical prominence of the internet in the campaign (Kavanagh and Cowley 2010; Wring and Ward 2010; Bailey 2011; Coleman 2011;Coleman et al. 2011; Lawes and Hawkins 2011).

Literature on the relevance and activity of the constituency campaign in GE2010 is relatively thin. Fisher et al. (2011) found that in general local campaigns used a mix of new and traditional campaign techniques, but the internet was generally low on the agenda. This corresponds with findings outlined in Chapter 7. Rachel Gibson (2010) explores the role of Web 2.0 in the autonomy of participant activity across the main parties in GE2010 and argues that social media has begun to empower activism, but not to the degree observed in the US. Perhaps the reasons for this lie in the different political communication contexts and cultures inherent to the British and American cases, resulting in the US having a more fertile environment than the UK for e-politics (Ward 2005; Gibson et al. 2010b; Williamson et al. 2010). In the Australian case, Gibson and McAllister (2011) found that there were greater electoral benefits to having a candidate website than using social media in the 2010 election. Works such as these tend to address and compare the overarching activities of parties in Britain and other Anglophone political environments. Relatively few works address in detail the role of the internet in the Conservative Party’s organizational culture 2005-14.

INVESTIGATING CYBER TORYISM

The central problem addressed by this book is to understand what impact the advents of specific internet technologies have had upon the British Conservative Party. The word ‘advent’ is important in terms of exploring the research questions, because the book seeks to elucidate an understanding of how internet technologies, as new media, have arrived, assimilated and developed in Conservative Party organization and culture, 2005-14. The intraparty dynamics are considered to be organizational phenomena within the internal environment of both the local and national Conservative Party in England and Wales, which this book refers to as the party’s organizational culture. Each presented case study is deemed to be unique and individual in terms of its countless variables. The book understands political phenomena to be also sociocultural phenomena that have no predefined cultural trajectories. But are rather influenced by variables like their own organizational characteristics and external environmental factors.

The term ‘impact’ is considered to be the repercussions and consequences of phenomenological events; and the role that they play in cultural aspects and the nature of Conservative Party organization. The impact of these events can be limited to an individual (person) or a small collective (group), or be wide reaching for the party, or range on a scale anywhere between the two proportions. The work is built on the basis that certain new mass media, which arrive in a sociocultural context, arrive in the organizational culture of political parties in different ways in time and space (Tsatsou 2009). It uses both particular/minutia and general/overarching cultural themes. Therefore, the historical impacts of internet technologies in each case study are treated as being organizationally and culturally unique.

The fragmented nature of internet-driven multimedia and multipurpose technologies has come to, in itself, symbolize the general nature of communication technologies in recent times. Therefore, the analysis of the internet technologies in this book addresses each technology on a case basis in order to highlight further the fragmentation that is observable within internet-based channels of communication. That said, some internet technologies are designed to not only interface with people but to also interface with similar technologies. These technologies often share some characteristics and it is, therefore, useful to group some of the different types of applications and technologies into categories. For example, early internet applications like email and websites can be categorized as ‘Web1.0’. Facebook, Twitter and blogs can be grouped together as ‘social media’ or ‘Web 2.0’. Social media technologies are characterized by their interactive nature and publically viewable exchange of information in networked multimedia communities online (van Dijck 2013).

In addition to these internet-driven technologies and applications, other internet-based technologies addressed in this book include the Conservative Party’s more centralized applications like ‘WebCameron’, ‘MyConservatives’ and ‘MERLIN’ (Managing Elector Relationships through Local Information Networks). These technologies were internet-linked applications that were designed and built for Conservative Party use in party organization and campaign contexts. The book presents and compares the sets of empirical evidence that centred on such technologies in order to develop a deeper understanding of how the Conservative Party has responded to the advent of these notable internet-mediated communications.

The primary hypothesis is that the advent of the internet has impacted on the Conservative Party’s historic and elite power structures in that it has loosened aspects of the party’s long established hierarchal organization; and facilitated a degree of cultural empowerment in the technologically savvy cohorts at the party’s grassroots. Empowerment is considered to be the active growth of an individual or group to act more autonomously, cognitively, effectively and independently. The concepts of tightening, or party ‘centralization’, and loosening, or party ‘decentralization’, are used. Southern and Ward’s study (2011) of the impact of the internet in the campaigns of the five main British political parties in GE2010 uses similar concepts. They conclude that new web based applications, like social media, provided a veneer of localism and, therefore, gave the appearance of a general trend towards decentralization. Moreover, their research found that any general decentralization from internet use was ‘countered’ by the increased centralization of party databases. This and similar research makes for useful comparison in subsequent chapters.

The aim is to provide the reader visualization tools with which to build pictures that illustrate the strength of grip held by the Conservative Party’s leadership and central hierarchy, or elites, over the wider party organization, also referred to as the grassroots. This is particularly in terms of giving indications to shifting power dynamics between elites and the grassroots participants. The term ‘power’ is understood to be the ability of an individual, or collective, to influence and/or impact on the roles of others and/or anthropogenic factors. The hypothesis is used in an attempt to determine the following: (1) whether the advent of the internet, as a potential driver of party change (Bale 2012), impacted on the party’s modes of adaptation; (2) whether these were deliberate top-down drivers of change versus organic change driven from the bottom-up; (3) the influence, if any, of such change on the party’s evolution; and (4) what such impacts mean more generally for the party’s organizational culture, and the distribution of power within the party hierarchy. The use of the term ‘hierarchy’ is in relation to party organization and the systemization of individuals into an organizational structure that functions in relation to the levels of importance and ‘power’ (Panebianco 1988) that may be wielded by any given individual or collective.

Providing an absolute and predefined list of variables that constitute the party’s culture would defeat the purpose of this study. However, it is always useful in any cultural study to develop an awareness of the types of holistic indicators that might be addressed in the work (Adoni and Mane 1984). Not all indicators were predefined before the commencement of the research, but those which were include Conservative Party: attitudes, behaviours, beliefs, bureaucracies, cultures, customs, innovations, lifestyles, motives, perceptions, resources, structures, and symbols. The analysis involves also the assessment of some key historical Conservative Party characteristics in relation to its evolution (Seldon and Ball, 1994). These include Conservative Party: activism and engagement (Whiteley et al. 2002); age and demographics (Whiteley et al. 2002); adaptability (Seldon and Ball 1994); association autonomy (Ball 1994a); awareness and consciousness; deference (Ball 1994b); discipline; geographical locations; hierarchies (Seldon and Ball 1994); ideas and ideologies (Heppell and Hill 2005); leadership (Bale 2012); organization; pragmatism (Seldon and Ball 1994); reaction to new technologies (Seldon and Ball 1994); and traditions. The chapters of the book tend to focus around some main fixed objects of interest like Conservative Party: artefacts; affiliated groups; cadres; cohorts; factions; leaders; and participants, all of which are addressed as individual units for analysis.

ETHNOGRAPHICALLY INSPIRED APPROACH

This book is informed and supported by evidence and data that were collected both on- and off- line while I was in the field with Cameron’s Conservatives as a committed party participant between 2006 and 2014. Therefore, the research on which this book is based benefits from an insider’s perspective and my personal access to an extensive national network of participants within the Conservative Party. The term participant is used as the preferred term throughout the book because it describes both members and supporters of the Conservative Party and recognizes the value that some non-members bring to the party’s operations. For example, the party’s national network of leaflet deliverers, many of whom will do voluntary work for the party but are not necessarily ‘paid-up’ members (Fisher et al. 2013).

 I have held a number of roles within the Conservative Party, which include being a Conservative Future (CF) branch chairman and president; Conservative councillor; and Conservative parliamentary candidate. These in addition to other official and unofficial roles within the party provided me with opportunities to gain access to new and alternative data, materials and sources that do not appear to have been represented before in the academic context. For example, in the run-up to the May 2009 local government and European elections, I began a participant observation in the electorally Conservative county of Surrey, with a focus on the Runnymede, Weybridge and Spelthorne Conservative Group (RWSCG). The RWSCG consisted of the two autonomous Conservative associations whose MPs represented the Runnymede and Weybridge and the Spelthorne constituencies. As will be evident, the ethnographically inspired fieldwork snowballed significantly to present me with many other opportunities for interaction within the party at a variety of levels throughout its hierarchy and in a range of geographical, socioeconomic, political, and cultural contexts. It included a period in the run-up to GE2010 when I was selected as the Conservative Prospective Parliamentary Candidate (PPC) for the Labour-Plaid Cymru marginal constituency of Ynys Môn | Anglesey.

The evidence presented in this book is a result of intensive experiential research from within the field of Conservative politics and elections. Therefore, the work draws on a wide range of sources in addition to the researcher’s observations and memoirs. These include: unpublished documents; published documents; articles and communications; formal and in depth semi structured interviews with Conservative Party participants; and information supplied directly by anonymous Conservative insiders, which are referred to as informants/respondents; or, where and when appropriate, assigned a generic label for general identification of the source like, for example, ‘activist’ and/or indication of the geographical and organizational relevance of the data, for example ‘Anglesey Conservatives’.

In keeping with other ethnographic-based studies (Smith 2011), source details are provided in reference to textual evidence and interview data, but the personal narrative, is presented without specific references to the ethnographic source, for example, research logs/journals. Informant and respondent identities are generally protected using anonymity, but some prominent party individuals in well-known public roles are named in order to note their specific roles in pertinent events in the party’s recent history.

 I informed overtly various Conservative Party participants about the research on which this book is based, including the interviewed respondents with informed consent; and the party board at Conservative Campaign Headquarters (CCHQ). However, as my roles within the party developed, my authentic commitment to the roles that I held within the party meant that it was impractical to inform every individual inside and outside the party with whom I had contact in the course of carrying out my academic, organizational and political roles. Therefore, I have consciously sanitized aspects of the narratives in this book that are informed by anonymous informants in order to ensure that the information disclosed is both ethical and appropriate to the research aims (Segall 2001). In the course of this research, I developed good relationships with a large number of informants. I am committed to maintaining their anonymity.

The manner in which I address this is followed using Alexander Smith’s (2011) approach to protecting ‘identities’. In most cases, I believe it to be ethical to maintain the informant’s anonymity. However, where an individual has acted in an official and public role in the political process I have engaged my judgement on a case-by-case basis in terms of the extent to which I reveal their actions, sentiments and identities. In 2011, I performed nine detailed and extensive semi-structured interviews of key Tory participants. The positions they have held in relation to the Conservative Party can be found in the bibliography. Each respondent’s interaction with the Conservative Party in the run-up to GE2010 is considered to be unique. Collectively, these data inform qualitatively rich indications about what was happening in relation to the internet and the Conservative Party prior to the dates of interview.

ETHNOGRAPHY, CONSERVATIVES AND THE INTERNET

Philip Howard is a proponent of creatively adapting ethnographic methods for research in e-politics and political culture. ‘As new forms of social organization and communities appear, researchers must adapt their methods in order best to capture evidence’ (Howard 2006: 208). He describes ethnographic approaches as ‘the systematic description of human behaviour and organizational culture based on first hand observation’ (Howard 2006: 208). His innovative ‘network ethnography’ is an integration of network analysis and ethnographic methods. This is an example of how researchers have become increasingly creative in order to tackle the challenge of understanding the cultural implications of the rapid developments in internet technologies. Howard argues for ‘a more cultural analytic frame that allows one to treat singular innovations and acts as conditions and symbols of important cultural change in the way we conduct our politics’ (Howard 2006: 206) and for ‘a more sensible analytical frame’ that ‘treats technological innovation as coevolutionary with organizational behaviour’ (Howard 2006: 205-6). This idea fits neatly in the context of this book which is based on the assumption that developments in technology can impact on parties like the Conservative Party, thus triggering changes in the evolution of its organizational culture.

Smith’s ethnographic study (2011) of a Conservative association in the run-up to the 2003 Scottish and local elections is focused on describing and understanding the culture of its bureaucracy and activism, and how the Scottish Conservatives interacted in social and political contexts. In this sense, it has some similarities to the approach taken by this research and is, therefore, a useful reference point. However, conversely, this book places the social and political contexts in the background and puts the view of the party’s relationship with new media in the foreground. Smith states that his academic interests in the party began before he became actively involved within it. In contrast, I became a Conservative member at least two years before considering and conducting this study. Therefore, as my political interests predate my academic interests, Smith and I have approached the ethnographic study of the Conservative Party from opposing ends of the same plane.

Smith’s study pays some attention to the traditional communication practices at the Conservative association level, such as the use and symbolism of the widely used Conservative medium of the ‘InTouch’ leaflet. Although there is further mention of the use, coordination, and quality, of CMC technologies in the campaign, the analysis of the role that new media played is not a focus of his work. The setting is also quite different. Since Scottish devolution, Conservatism north of the border has underperformed when compared with the Conservative Party’s progress in England and the devolved electoral region of Wales (Smith 2011). Therefore, the wider political backdrop in which this book is set is different in temporal and geographic terms because it presents primary data that is concerned mainly with the Conservative Party in England and Wales 2005-14.

Ethnography can illuminate what other approaches do not consider relevant. There are significant parts of everyday cultures that go unnoticed by those living in them, and the positivistic methods that are often employed to research them. Conversely, organizational ethnographers seek to draw out the intricate everyday aspects of the organizational environment (Koot 1995). Approaches to studying political histories, organizations and cultures, tend to, like Howard’s work, address the more salient issues. Therefore, much of the everyday mechanics which collectively power the political machines of our democracy remain latently unrecorded. Conversely, this book seeks to connect the everyday practices of the ordinary party participant to the more elite and prominent, some might say glamorous, aspects of Conservative Party culture and life.

OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the post-Thatcher Conservative Party changed most notably from 2005 under the new leadership of David Cameron. An outward example of such change was the launch of the ground breaking WebCameron video blog in 2006. Chapter 2 examines the impact of WebCameron and two other Tory internet-linked technologies, MyConservatives and MERLIN. The chapter focuses on the role of Conservative Party elites and CCHQ operations in the development of these new Tory technologies. It is suggested that when the party leader demonstrates change, wider party change follows (Charmley 1996; Taylor 2008). On this basis, the chapter argues that the innovative WebCameron platform was a symbolic event that catalysed further internet use in the wider party and led the way in terms of greater participation in e-politics in the party culture and beyond. While supposedly giving greater interactive access to the real politician, WebCameron was rather more the embodiment of top-down change. Therefore, the advent of WebCameron is deemed to be a demonstration of the party seizing more absolute control of its own communication output through a particular communication technology, the likes of which had not been seen since the early days of TV in the 1950s.

 In the run-up to GE2010, according to the Total Politics Political Blog Directory, the Tories dominated the political blogosphere in terms of the number of blogs associated with the Conservative Party. Research by Southern and Ward (2011) supports this observation. Chapter 3 explores some prominent themes and pertinent examples of phenomena in the Tory blogosphere, including the potential pitfalls of using the microblog platform Twitter. The chapter focuses on the place of the ConservativeHome blog in contemporary Conservative organization. The chapter particularly examines the role of prominent individuals like ConservativeHome’s founder, Tim Montgomerie. It is identified that Montgomerie and others benefitted from raised profiles through engagement in Cyber Toryism and subsequently filled niches in cyberspace that elevated them to a new elite status. These phenomena are compared with the roles of central elites in Chapter 2. It is argued that ConservativeHome is an example of Cyber Tory leadership that helped catalyse change from the grassroots upward and, in turn, it steered aspects of central party change in the form of greater internal transparency.

 Chapter 4 provides an alternative narrative of Cyber Tory activity in that it shifts the spotlight from more elite figures in the party to those at the grassroots who are perhaps lesser known in the public sphere. The chapter is rooted in an analysis of the role of Facebook in the party’s organizational culture from 2008 onward. It is argued that while the phenomena in chapters 2 and 3 were significant in influencing a proliferation of uptake of the uses of new media at the party’s grassroots, the culture of Facebook participation evolved naturally through a learning and copying behaviour. The chapter reveals the importance of leadership in this process and identifies specific individuals in the ranks of the younger cohorts of the party as significant influencers of change. The chapter argues that Cyber Tory Facebook participation was characterized by a technologically centred innovation culture that helped dissolve traditional geographical and hierarchical barriers to grassroots activity.

 In 2014, it might seem a more normalized concept to imagine signing up to an organization using the internet. In fact, for many it would now be preferable in order to reduce bureaucracy, paperwork and postage/travel costs. However, in 2006, for many in the Conservative Party this was a relatively new concept. Chapter 5 takes a look at the journey of becoming a Conservative Party member from the participant’s perspective. The chapter identifies how the party’s online processes were out of sync with its traditional membership structure and that, while the party was in transition in the run-up to GE2010, the party seemed to lose some active engagement potential from its online membership because the party was ill-equipped to convert weaker forms of online membership (Margetts 2006) in to stronger forms of face-to-face participation. The chapter provides the narrative of the ethnographer journeying from an online political neophyte to a fully initiated and active member of Cameron’s Conservatives.

 Chapter 6 is the first of two geographic case studies that place the use of internet technologies in the Conservative Party within the constituency organization and campaign contexts. The chapter details the first-hand observation of the participation of the researcher and others within the RWSCG context in Surrey. The chapter features an analysis of the role of internet technologies in a local council by-election campaign in 2009 from the candidate’s perspective. It is argued that there was both an age and digital divide observable amid cohorts in the Surrey Conservatives and that trust and rapport building were central to dissolving cyber-based barriers to deeper engagement within local Conservative associations. It is found that the internet facilitated new network interactions that made association and campaign organization a looser and more fluid experience, which ultimately led to richer and more diverse campaign-based and social interactions in the offline world.

 The second of the geographic case studies features the run-up to GE2010 through the eyes of the researcher as the PPC for Ynys Môn. Chapter 7 is divided into subsections that generally focus on particular groups of communication technologies, like, for example, Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. It is argued that although the internet was used to enhance the campaign in some circumstances, for instance, the use of the medium to facilitate a remote candidate presence, and a virtual campaign team of participants separated by large geographical distances, the internet, in particular e-campaigning, was not a priority for use within the campaign. In fact, although the internet helped with organization and process, the lack of sufficient internet capacity in some aspects of the party’s wider national campaign organization led to negative bureaucratic impacts at the local campaign level for the candidate.

The book culminates in Chapter 8, which is used to present and bring together some of the more recurring and prominent themes from earlier chapters. The chapter is used to develop the case for Cyber Toryism as a cultural singularity in the history of the Conservative Party in existence mainly between 2008 and 2010. It is argued that, before WebCameron, a widespread culture of political-focused internet use in the party context was not evident; and that, post 2010, the use of internet technologies in the party organization became a more normalized practice across cultural and age divides which meant it ceased being a subculture and a more mainstream constituent aspect of wider Tory organizational culture. The chapter concludes that generally the internet acted like a lubricant oiling Conservative Party processes, which in turn resulted in greater fluidity within networks and organizational and campaign operations. It is argued that this loosening of centralized control allowed for shifting power dynamics and subsequent culture change to occur. It is found that the younger cohorts were central to this change in party culture, which had remained more traditional since John Major’s leadership; and that the advent of David Cameron’s leadership acted to punctuate, in other words speed-up, technocultural evolutions in the life of the wider party.