

## A MODEL FOR ASSESSING CONTENT STRATEGIES OF POLITICAL WEB SITES

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### ABSTRACT

*Despite hundreds of web sites published daily all over the world, to date, there is very little information on how we can evaluate web site content strategies, particularly of political web sites. This paper presents an attempt to fill this gap by introducing a model for evaluating content strategies of political web sites by adopting the Attracting, Informing, Positioning, and Delivering (AIPD) approach. Twenty political web sites from four different countries - Malaysia, United Kingdom, United States, and Australia, were analysed comprehensively to elicit the AIPD content elements. A total of 51 elements were identified that represent the basis for the content assessment model.*

### ABSTRAK

*Walaupun beratus-ratus tapak web baru muncul setiap hari, namun sehingga kini maklumat tentang bagaimana untuk menilai strategi kandungan tapak web masih berkurangan. Artikel ini membentangkan usaha untuk memperbaiki masalah ini dengan memperkenalkan sebuah model untuk menilai strategi kandungan tapak web politik dengan menggunakan pendekatan 'Attracting, Informing, Positioning, and Delivery' (AIPD). Dua puluh tapak web politik dari empat buah Negara iaitu Malaysia, United Kingdom, United States, dan Australia telah dianalisa untuk mengenal pasti elemen AIPD. Sejumlah 51 elemen dikenal pasti yang dijadikan asas kepada model penilaian kandungan tapak web.*

## INTRODUCTION

Theoretically, web site developers have certain goals and objectives for establishing web sites. However, these goals should be made very clear and interpreted into the right strategies. Most web sites projects with no clear goals and wrong strategies end with failures (Powell, 2000). Deciding the goals is not as difficult as deploying the right strategies to achieve goals. Despite probably hundreds of web sites published daily all over the world to date, there is still a need for clear guidelines on how we can evaluate strategies of web sites, in particular content strategies of political web sites.

Political web sites have huge potentials to become an effective political communication medium for political parties, government agencies, Non-Profit Organisations, and public leaders to communicate with the public (Etzioni & Etzioni, 1999; London, 1994). They are also said to have potentials in improving public participation in politics (Kurland & Egan, 1996; Mazmanian, 1995; Barbrook, 1998; Rheingold, 1993; Yates & Perrone, 1998). However, there is still lack of studies that tackle the issue of whether these web sites provide adequate content as required by the public. Any web site project tends to be a failure if not many people visit the site. To address this issue, this study attempts to fill this gap by introducing a model for evaluating content strategies of political web sites.

This paper starts with definition of the AIPD approach in measuring web content strategy, followed by a brief explanation on the methodology used in the study. Then, the result of the study is explained and discussed. Finally, the outcome and limitations of the study are also presented.

## AIPD APPROACH

The AIPD approach relates to the use of the benchmarking techniques in comparing the Attracting, Informing, Positioning, and Delivering (AIPD) strategies of commercial web sites in order to clarify strategic opportunities and advantages. This approach was introduced by Simeon in his study on web site strategies of 68 American banks and 54 Japanese banks in 1999 (Simeon, 1999). Each of these strategies is explained as follows:

## **Attracting**

One of the main objectives for establishing a presence on the Internet is to attract as many people as possible to visit one's web site (Berst, 1998). Therefore, web developers should use the right strategy so that many users are attracted to their sites. It can be noticed that different web sites use different techniques for attracting visitors. Companies selling gaming software for example, offer free games and demonstration programmes. University libraries, as another example, provide free access to online journals to students. Occasionally, we also find some web sites that offer free electronic mails and discussion forums for their visitors. These are examples of techniques used to attract visitors.

## **Informing**

Apart from advertising and conducting business transactions, most web sites are designed for information provision purposes (Ward & Codrai, 2001). Informing is, therefore, a strategic function of a web site that is related to the provision of information to visitors. Providing the right information to the right audience could determine the success of a web site. An organisation fighting for animal rights, for example, should provide information on their mission, campaigns, and organisation structure. Political parties on the other hand, should supply information on their manifesto, policies, and election candidates. Meanwhile university web sites normally provide information such as programmes offered, academic and services departments, library services, student affairs, and research activities.

## **Positioning**

Services provided in a web site could create an image and help an organisation remain competitive (Simeon, 1999). The extent and type of services offered will determine whether a web site has fully utilised its positioning strategy to gain reputation and competitive edge. Design layout and links to branches are examples of the criteria that can be used to evaluate the positioning strategy.

## **Delivery**

Unlike other strategies, Delivery strategic function is related to the use of web technology in providing interactivity, reliability, security, and speed of a web site. In other words, it relates to the way in which a web developer utilises current web technology such as search

engines, online forms, databases, and JAVA applets to boost its delivering capability to visitors.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to adopt the AIPD approach in assessing the strategies of political web sites, elements of web contents that can be used as the criteria for assessing each strategic function have to be identified. For example, free gifts can be used as a criterion for the Attracting strategy whereas a local search engine is more suitable to be used as a criterion for the Delivery strategy. To achieve this, twenty political web sites from four different countries - Malaysia, United Kingdom, United States, and Australia, were analysed comprehensively in terms of their contents (refer to appendix). These countries were selected because each of them represents countries of different continents: Asia, Europe, America and Australia/Oceania. In addition, all these countries are practising parliamentary democracy and almost all the political parties have established their presence on the Internet for a number of years.

Analysing web content is a very difficult and tedious job. Apart from experience, it requires patience and computer knowledge. In this study, three reviewers were invited to participate. These reviewers possess different knowledge in Information Technology (IT) that is important for the analysis. Basically, all evaluators have strong knowledge of computer and the Internet, but each of them specialises in different IT areas - one specialises in Multimedia Design, one in Network Administration and Internet Service, and the last one in Information Management.

All reviewers were given a short briefing about the purpose of the study, the definition of the AIPD, the list of web sites to be reviewed, and the tasks that they should do. A small study room with two computers with Internet access was used for the review. The reviewers logged on to the Internet to visit all the listed web sites one by one. They then compared and discussed all key content elements in those web sites and categorised them into the appropriate AIPD strategic function. One reviewer acted as a mediator and note taker during the whole process. The web content analysis was carried out for a period of four days, where all reviewers spent about two hours daily. Towards the end of the brainstorming session, the mediator analysed the results, removed any duplication and listed down the key web content elements of each web site according to the four AIPD strategies. The

completed list would then be used as a guideline or checklist for evaluating the strategy of a political web site.

## RESULTS AND AIPD MODEL

Although all the reviewed web sites are political sites, they differ in terms of contents and design layout. The differences in contents suggest that these web sites have different purposes and strategies. Hence, in this study, the reviewers only concentrate on generic content elements that are applicable to all type of political web sites including political parties, pressure groups, and non-governmental organisations. A total of 51 key content elements were identifies as listed in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
List of Web Content Elements for Evaluating Web Strategies

|     |   |
|-----|---|
| 1.  | Announcements of activities/events                      |
| 2.  | Archive of previous press release                       |
| 3.  | Audio clips   |
| 4.  | Campaigns   |
| 5.  | Campaign banners  |
| 6.  | Choices of language                                     |
| 7.  | Contact details   |
| 8.  | Contact of politicians & public leaders                 |
| 9.  | Database search (e.g. registered voters, media release) |
| 10. | E-forum/E-discussion                                    |
| 11. | Enquiries on membership                                 |
| 12. | Free email  |
| 13. | Free e-postcard   |
| 14. | Fund raising/donation appeal                            |
| 15. | Games and quizzes                                       |
| 16. | Guest book  |
| 17. | High quality text (no grammatical or typo error)        |
| 18. | History   |
| 19. | Job advertisement                                       |
| 20. | Links to local branches                                 |
| 21. | Links to online newspapers                              |
| 22. | Links to other political web sites                      |
| 23. | Links to politicians' homepages                         |
| 24. | Local web search  |
| 25. | Logo with description                                   |
| 26. | Mission and vision                                      |
| 27. | News headlines in main page                             |
| 28. | Online forms (e.g. for feedback & registration)         |
| 29. | Online membership                                       |
| 30. | Online polls/readers polls                              |

(Table 1, continued)

31. Online shopping
32. Organisational chart
33. Parliamentary debates/reports
34. Photo gallery
35. Policies (e.g. on education, crime, health etc.)
36. Press release
37. Professional screen layout
38. Profile/"about us"
39. Q&A with politicians
40. Readers' comments
41. Readers opinion
42. Registration for email news
43. Reports/Publications
44. Speakers corner
45. Statistics
46. Technical help
47. Track record/ Report card
48. Updated news
49. Video clips
50. Web radio
51. Web TV

All the identified key elements of web contents were categorised into Attracting, Informing, Positioning, and Delivery strategies by the three reviewers as explained earlier. From this, a model for evaluating content strategies for political web sites was developed as shown in Figure 1.

### Attracting Strategy

Eighteen content elements were proposed for strengthening the Attracting strategic function (see Figure 1). The result of the study shows that most reviewed political web sites have some content elements that are commonly used to attract visitors. The most common elements are *readers' comments and opinion, video and audio clips, photo gallery, free email, news headlines in main page, and campaign banners*. Apart from these, some web sites add other unique elements to attract more visitors. Malaysiakini.com (<http://www.malaysiakini.com>) for example, provides a section for *question and answer with politicians* over certain political issues. Another example is the Scottish Tories web site (<http://www.scottishtories.org.uk>) with its *speakers' corner* that allows visitors to voice out freely their views on any political and social issues.

Other web content elements that can be used to attract visitors are *job advertisements* as introduced by the Labour Party (<http://www.labour.gov.uk>) as shown in **Figure 1**

**Figure 1**  
AIPD Model for Strategies of Political Web Sites

|  |  |   |   |  |  |
|--|--|---|---|--|--|
|  |  | <b>ATTRACT</b>  |   |  |  |
|  |  | <p>Guest book, Readers' comments, Readers opinion, Q&amp;A with politicians, Video clips, Audio clips, Free email, Photo gallery, Registration for email news, Free e-postcard, Job advertisement, Enquiries on membership, Speakers corner, Online membership, News headlines in main page, Campaign banners, Online shopping, Games and quizzes</p> |   |  |  |
| <b>I<br/>N<br/>F<br/>O<br/>R<br/>M</b> | <p>Profile/ "about us", Press release, Archive of previous press release, Organisational chart, History, Mission and vision, Policies (e.g. on education, crime, health etc.). Campaign, Logo with description, Announcements of activities/ events, Fund raising/donation appeal, Contact details, Reports/Publications, Statistics</p> | <b>CONTENT<br/>STRATEGIES OF<br/>POLITICAL WEB<br/>SITES</b>  | <p>Updated news, Professional screen layout, High quality text (no grammatical or typo error), Choices of language, Links to other political web sites, Links to local branches, Links to online newspapers, Links to politicians' homepages, Contact of politicians &amp; public leaders, Parliamentary debates/reports, e-forum/e-discussion, technical help, track record/ report card</p> | <b>P<br/>O<br/>S<br/>I<br/>T<br/>I<br/>O<br/>N</b> |  |
|  |  |   | <p>Online forms (e.g. for feedback &amp; registration), Online polls/ readers polls, Local web search, Database search (e.g. registered voters, media release), Web TV, Web radio</p>   |  |  |
|  |  |   | <b>DELIVER</b>  |  |  |

www.labour.org.uk) and the Democrats Party (<http://www.democrats.org>), and *online shopping* offered by the Republican

Party (<http://www.rnc.org>). Reviewers also believe that *free news subscription* found in the Labour Party's site (<http://www.labour.org.uk>), the Democrats (<http://www.democrats.org>), and the Liberal Party (<http://www.liberal.org.au>) could potentially attract visitors. Finally, providing *games and quizzes* as provided by Liberal Party (<http://www.liberal.org.au>) would also be beneficial in boosting the number of site visits. One key content element that is not available in any political web sites in Malaysia at the time of this study, is *online membership* although this element is very popular among web sites in the United States and Australia.

### **Informing Strategy**

Providing information is undoubtedly one of the main purposes of a web site. The results of the analysis show a lot of similarity among the reviewed web sites in terms of their contents that are associated with the Informing strategy. *Profile or about us, history, organisational chart, mission and vision, contact details, and press release* are a must for all reviewed sites. However, there are other content elements that are not offered by all sites. Although all web sites provide a news section, not all of them realise the need for *an archive of previously published news and articles*. Another important criterion for the Informing strategy is the party or organisations' *policies* on key public issues such as education, crime, health, and freedom of speech. Equally important is the information on the current campaign, announcement of activity reports or publications, and fund raising or donation appeal.

### **Positioning Strategy**

Gaining popularity and competitive edge are a necessity for political parties or organisations as these could garnish more support for their struggles. Using their Internet presence could be a good approach towards strengthening their position against competitors. A total of thirteen content elements are proposed by the reviewers as potential criteria for assessing the Positioning strategy. Merely having the news section is not enough but the news supplied in a web site should be updated regularly. In addition, text and documents provided should achieve an acceptable standard with no grammatical and typographic error. Equally important is the provision of web site with choices of languages especially in multi-ethnic countries such as Malaysia and United States. This study shows that some web sites such as ALIRAN (<http://www.malaysia.net/aliran/>) and DEMOCRATS (<http://www.democrats.org>) offer choices of languages for their audience.



The reviewers also feel that having a professional screen layout and appearance could make a difference for a web site. This could in fact be one of the factors that determine the credibility and trustworthiness of a web site. The Australian Liberal Party's web site (<http://www.liberal.org.au>) is a good example whereby its screen appearance is well designed in terms of choice of colour, navigation aids and content structure. Political web sites should also fully utilise the capability of Hyper Text Mark-up Language (HTML) documents within web sites to make links to other related sites so that users do not have to search for the web pages on their own. Among the links proposed are *links to other political web sites, links to local branches, Links to online newspapers, and links to politicians' homepages*. In addition, having information on politicians' and public leaders' contact addresses could also be an added advantage.

Freedom of speech is considered vital for the democratic process. However, there are always claims that this right has never been fully exercised even in democratic countries such as Malaysia. With the Internet, however, this problem can be minimised in the sense that it allows free transmission of data without much restriction. Having said this, the reviewers believe that all political web sites should provide facilities for *e-forum or e-discussion* on key social and political issues.

Another important aspect of web content that could strengthen a position of a political party or organisation is to establish its *track record or report card* on the web site. Three political organisations in this study namely the American Green Party (<http://www.greens.org>), the Democrats (<http://www.democrats.org.au>) and the Liberal Party (<http://www.liberal.org.au>) have all provided their track records in politics.

### Delivery Strategy

The Internet technology is moving very fast. From time to time, a new technology comes into place. The emerging technology such as search engines, online forms, databases, and JAVA applets can be used to boost the web sites' delivering strategy. Six elements are suggested by the reviewers as suitable for delivering strategy (refer to Figure 1). The most popular facilities are *online forms* mainly for feedback and registration purposes, *online polls or reader polls*, and *local web search*. Another is *database search*, used for checking registered voters and retrieving media release. The latest technology is the *Web Television (WebTV)*, which can be used to televise events such as political gatherings, news, and speeches on the Internet. A good example is the HARAKAH web

site (<http://www.harakah-daily.com>) where it offers daily online news through WebTV.

## CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study is to develop a model for assessing strategies of political web sites. There are four main strategies used in this model namely Attracting, Informing, Positioning, and Delivery (AIPD). After analysis of selected web sites, a total of 51 elements of content are identified. These elements are then grouped into the AIPD categories according to their suitability and judgement from the reviewers. The AIPD list of content elements can be used as a guide for those who intend to assess the strategies of political web sites. A good political web site with clearly defined goals and that is well designed is the one that has almost all the elements of contents listed in the proposed model. This list can also be used to identify the weaknesses of a particular web site in terms of its content provision. Some web sites, for example, might be good at providing basic information to the audience but lack ideas on how to attract regular visitors. Using this model, political web designers might be able to strengthen their position of the Internet presence so as to attract regular visitors.

This study has proven that the AIPD approach developed by Simeon (1999) can be extended and adopted for political web sites. Our future research would be to test the applicability of this model so that it can be further enhanced. In addition, it would be useful if we can conduct a study to determine the importance of each content element within each category. This study will allow evaluation on web strategies to be performed based on priorities. Also worth noting is the fact that our study does not include the promotion strategy. Ideally we should promote our web sites effectively so that people will know of their existence in the cyberspace. Various methods can be applied to achieve this including submitting the URL to popular search engines and advertising in the traditional media (Wilson, 1999). However, we chose to ignore this strategy because of the difficulty in measuring its criteria.

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## APPENDIX

List of Web Sites Selected for Review.

### Malaysia

- <http://www.malaysia.net/aliran/> (ALIRAN)
- <http://www.malaysiakini.com> (MALAYSIAKINI)
- <http://www.umno.org.my> (United Malayan National Organization -UMNO)
- <http://www.pas.org.my> (Pan Islamic Party of Malaysia -PAS)
- <http://www.dap.org.my> (Democratic Action Party -DAP)
- <http://www.harakah-daily.com> (Opposition Political Newspaper)
- <http://www.mca.org.my> (Malaysian Chinese Association)

**United States**

- <http://www.democrats.org> (Democrats)
- <http://www.rnc.org> (Republican Party)
- <http://www.americanreform.org> (American Reform Party)
- <http://socialist.org/base.html> (Socialist Party)
- <http://www.greens.org> (Green party/ Pressure group)

**United Kingdom**

- <http://www.labour.org.uk> (Labour Party)
- <http://www.snp.org.uk> (Scottish National Party)
- <http://www.scottishtories.org.uk> (Scottish Conservative)
- <http://www.green.org.uk> (Green Party/ Pressure Group)

**Australia**

- <http://www.democrats.org.au> (Democrats)
- <http://www.alp.org.au> (Labour Party )
- <http://www.liberal.org.au> (Liberal Party)
- <http://www.greens.org.au> (The Green Party/ Pressure group)