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**Political Party Identity Change in the Internet Era
A Case Study of Malta**

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ABSTRACT

A change or development in communication technologies has often featured in studies examining change in political parties. Nonetheless, change within political parties' identities has largely been ignored. This dissertation addresses this gap in the literature and seeks to answer the question: How does technological innovation, in particular the Internet, affect party identity (change)? Malta was selected as a case study due to the small size of the political parties, which allows the researcher to analyse processes and events more closely. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the political elite of the two main political parties since they are the ones who can best explain change within their parties. The findings of this study show that the impact of the Internet on political parties' identities is extensive, since it affects their human face, organisational face, and policy face. Across these three faces, parties have both professionalised and democratised, and this has had a significant impact on political parties' issue uptake practices, organisational structure, and the range of supporters that identify themselves with the political parties under study. These findings make an important theoretical contribution that adds to the vast scholarly work on the Internet's affect on political parties.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IVF	In Vitro Fertilisation
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MP	Member of Parliament
PL	Partit Laburista (Labour Party)
PN	Partit Nazzjonalista (Nationalist Party)
TV	Television
US	United States

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Political parties develop their identities – their ‘human face’, ‘organisational face’, and ‘policy face’ – through the different facades they present to the public while in and out of government (Janda et al., 1995: 171). Most of the scholarly work on party identity change, or party change more generally, has exclusively focused on the causes of change. Harmel and Janda (1994), for instance, list leadership change, a change of dominant factions within the party, and external stimuli as drivers of party change. On the other hand, Müller (1997: 294) places a particular emphasis on external stimuli and argues that parties that do not adapt to a changing environment ‘will not achieve their goals or may even disappear’.

A change or development in communication technologies (regarded as a change in the environment) has often featured in studies examining change in political parties. The advent of television, especially, brought about a large number of studies on the effects of the then new communication tool on the political arena. Similarly, the Internet has resulted in a large volume of literature examining its effects on politics. Nonetheless, to the knowledge of the researcher, there have never been studies that have exclusively focused on the Internet’s effect on political party identity (change). This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap in the literature, while at the same time, bridge the literature on political party identity change and the more recent political communication literature on Internet in politics. Insight into the interaction between the Internet and political party identity can lead to a better understanding of how political parties’ are managing the ever-growing technological advancements and their effects on the identity that the parties’ try to project. Moreover, the findings of this study can also shed a light on an area of study which has largely been ignored in recent years – political party identity – while also contribute to the volume of literature on the effects of the Internet on political parties.

The research question that this study seeks to address is: **How does technological innovation, in particular the Internet, affect party identity (change)?** By attempting to answer this research question, this study looks at how political parties

are adapting to the new technological environment, and how this adaptation has affected their identity. Furthermore, this research also seeks to understand how technological innovation has impacted political parties' identities and the way their identities change. This dissertation thus builds on the theories of environment-driven change, first posited by Harmel and Janda (1994) and then expanded on by Müller (1997), where the Internet is the external stimulus that is examined as the driver of identity change.

This research project seeks to answer the research question outlined above by examining the Internet's effects on the identities of the two main political parties in Malta – the *Partit Nazzjonalista* (PN) and the *Partit Laburista* (PL). Malta is a parliamentary representative democratic republic, which is politically characterized by high levels of political mobilization, a relatively pure two-party system, and the polarized nature of party politics. These features make for an interesting case study to answer the research question, especially since a lot is at stake when parties communicate with the electorate (through the Internet medium), and more so when they communicate an identity change. Since Maltese political parties operate in a highly competitive winner-takes-all Westminster type two-party system, not adapting to new technologies may not be an option when the competitor party has already adapted to it, especially if the party aims to win the next election. In fact, this competitive nature in Maltese politics was clearly evident in the introduction of Facebook to the political parties' communication strategies, where the PL created its Facebook page on 7 November 2010, while the PN created theirs just two days later. Furthermore, the relatively small size of political parties makes the research feasible, and access to the political elite attainable. This is especially important in light of the methodology used in this study, which centres around semi-structured interviews with political actors, who can give insight into the very private decision-making processes of the political elite – those who make the decisions on how to adapt to the Internet and how to address challenges posed by it.

The research aims outlined above are addressed in the four remaining chapters. Chapter 2 consists of a review of the literature on political party identity and Internet use in politics. Chapter 3 is dedicated to the research design and methodology used in this study, and also outlines the limitations and ethical concerns faced during the research process. This is then followed by the case study analysis (Chapter 4), and

finally the dissertation concludes with Chapter 5, which sums up the findings of this research project.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Political Party Identity Change

Janda et al. (1995: 171) define party identity as ‘the image that citizens have in mind when they think about that [specific political] party’. Political parties develop and change their identities through the different facades they present to the public while in and out of government (Janda et al., 1995). Occasionally, a party may change its organisational face, where it might go from fragmented to centralized and highly disciplined, or vice versa (Katz and Mair, 1994). A party’s identity may also be shaped by its ‘human face’, which is primarily characterized by its leaders and supporters (Harmel et al., 1995; Janda et al., 1995: 171). Parties also create a ‘policy face’, where they ‘initiate a policy facelift by changing or repackaging their policies’ (Budge et al., 2010; Janda et al., 1995: 172), and in the process, altering their identities by moving along the political spectrum and championing new issues, such as LGBT rights.

This latter aspect of party identity change has been the most widely studied so far, with much of the research focusing on the changes in political parties’ manifestos to explain this phenomenon (most notably Janda et al., 1995 and Ladrech, 2001 with regards to Europeanization). However, some of the earliest research on party change had also focused on this aspect of change, in particular, two of the most influential theorists in this field – Kircheimer (1966) and Epstein (1967). Both shared the assumptions of what has been termed the ‘end of ideology’ thesis, which refers to the conditions that arose following the end of World War II that rendered ideologies irrelevant. They argued that following World War II and the advent of mass communication means, political parties would dispose of most of their ideologies in an effort to ‘exchange effectiveness in depth for a wider audience and more immediate electoral success’ (Kircheimer, 1966: 184). In this way, Kircheimer (1966) and Epstein (1967) argued that the post-WWII environment guided political parties to become as catch-all in nature as possible, in order to ensure their survival. Mendilow (2003: 11-12) labels this theory the ‘Darwinian approach’, since ‘parties undergo a

process of evolution that enables them to meet the challenges of their environment better’.

Three decades after Kirchheimer (1966) and Epstein (1967) first shared their theories, the idea of party change in scholarly work started to evolve, where academics like Mair (1989), Mair and Smith (1990) and Wolinetz (1988) focused on changes in party systems, while Wilson (1989), Katz and Mair (1992), and Harmel and Janda (1994) concentrated on changes in individual parties. The latter kind of research is particularly focused on the causes of change. Harmel and Janda (1994), for instance, list leadership change, a change of dominant factions within the party, and external stimuli as drivers of party change. On the other hand, Müller (1997) distinguishes between an environmentalist approach and a purposive-action approach to explain party change. However, while maintaining that these approaches do not contradict each other, Müller (1997: 294) states that the purposive-action approach, where party change is perceived as a ‘strategic leadership action’, does not necessarily require a change in the party’s environment. Katz and Mair (1990: 18-22) also make an important contribution to this discussion by distinguishing between the ‘immediate’ and ‘ultimate’ source of party change, with the former referring to the internal politics of political parties and the latter to the changes in the party environment. These authors conclude that this ‘dynamic aggregates to the observation that parties adapt to changes in their environment’ (Katz and Mair, 1990: 18). Using this conclusion, Müller (1997) argues that the appropriate research strategy to measure change in political parties would therefore be by explaining it through changes in their environment.

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that ‘change does not just happen’ (Harmel and Janda, 1994: 261), and indeed, Panebianco (1988: 243) concluded that where parties are concerned:

Change is the result of deliberate choices [made within the dominant coalition] influenced by bounded rationality and anonymous pressure [e.g. resistance to change, environmental changes...etc.] which interact with the choices to produce both desired innovations and counter-intuitive effects.

Luther and Müller-Rommel (2002: 129) expand on this assertion and point out that it is difficult to imagine a party that could ‘traverse the distance from democratic to oligarchical’ without a series of decisions that make it possible. Even if change occurs as a response to environmental trends, purposeful decisions made by party actors would have had to be taken in order for the change to take place.

In addition to this, much of the scholarship on individual parties has viewed this process of change as ‘incremental and gradual’ (Harmel and Janda, 1994: 260). In fact, there is considerable validity in viewing party change as a gradual process, as is evident in Katz and Mair’s (1992: 9) cross-national study which assumed that from 1960 to 1990 parties ‘were changing’ and ‘were adapting to the challenges’ posed by their changing environment. In contrast to this view, however, scholars like Panebianco (1988) have described instances of abrupt changes in political parties in reaction to environmental changes. In view of this, Harmel and Janda (1994: 261) present two scenarios; one where changes in a political party can be depicted as a ‘gradual erosion of the organisation’; and one where parties are ‘forced to professionalise in response to changes in the environment’, a point which is further expanded on in the next section.

2.2 A More ‘Professional’ Model

A common theme emerges from the works of Kircheimer (1966), Epstein (1967), Panebianco (1986) and Katz and Mair (1995) – all of whom point towards the demise of the mass party, and its replacement by a more ‘professional’ model. According to Luther and Müller-Rommel (2002: 65), this move exhibits a shift in focus by the parties, ‘away from inward concerns with party members and activists towards more outward concerns with voters’, with more attention being given to campaign goals.

This shift was also evident in the literature, where there was a sudden change of focus from party change to ‘professionalisation’. By becoming ‘catch-all’ in nature (Harmel and Janda, 1994), political parties needed new ways to appeal to voters, essentially by making use of the new communication techniques that became available over the years. Indeed, much of what is referred to within the discourse of professionalisation is linked to responses to technological change, and may therefore be seen as:

the longer term process by which political systems and political actors adapt to the emergence of new media of communication and to the increasing specialization of tasks common in modern societies (Negrine and Lilleker, 2002: 305-307).

From an internal point of view, parties may be seen as ‘reconfiguring themselves organisationally and tactically’, with much of the power moving upward and outward to the leaders, public relations consultants and the external media, and, even more recently, to the ‘new in-house’ research and polling units (Gibson and Römmele, 2009: 266).

This process of ‘professionalisation’ has been a long way coming; from the Newspaper Age of the early 1900s, to the TV Age of around the 1940s, and finally the Digital Age (Farrell, 1996; Luther and Müller-Rommel, 2002). Each period brought about different technological trends, power relations, and methods of communication, all set against a background of distinct political environments (Refer to Table 2.1).

	1860s	1880s	1900s	1920s	1940s	1960s	1980s	2000s
Newspaper Age			TV Age	Digital Age	
Technological trends	train, telegraph		radio, cinema		TV, airplane		cable, satellite	Internet
Political environment	partisan voters				volatile voters		turned-off voters	
Power relations	party > candidate				party = candidate		party < candidate	
Campaign personnel	party machines (bosses)				public relations 'men' as campaign technicians	campaign consultants as insiders	campaign consultants as campaign personalities	
Method of communication	party orientation aimed at mobilization				candidate orientation aimed at mobilization	selling orientation aimed at persuasion	marketing orientation aimed at 'product placement'	

Table 2.1. The evolution of campaign environments. *Reproduced from Luther and Müller-Rommel, 2002: 67.*

According to Blumer and Kavanagh (1999: 12), the ‘second age’ exhibited ‘the core features of the professional model’, but perhaps, professionalisation peaked in the digital age, which saw an increasing ‘professionalisation of the tools and strategies parties and candidates use to appeal to voters’ (Gibson and Römmele, 2009: 266). The Digital Age introduced innovative modes of voter outreach, which were complemented by a significant expansion in the use of existing techniques (such as opinions polls and focus groups) (Gibson and Römmele, 2009). Nonetheless, the

central challenge of this new technology for political parties and strategists was how to effectively utilize it to achieve the central objective of all political parties – to win elections. Unlike previous technologies, such as the printing press and television, the Internet presented itself as an ever-evolving tool, thus making its political use ‘evolve, change, and expand’ continuously (Olson and Nelson, 2010: 62-63).

However, while the introduction of Internet technology has resulted in the professionalisation of political parties, where more power was given to the leaders and public relations consultants (Gibson and Römmele, 2009), it has also led to party democratisation. As discussed in the next section, the advent of the Internet meant that power was also given to the lower levels of the party, and that control of party identity or party image was no longer *solely* in the hands of the party leader and top party decision-makers.

2.3 The Internet and the Distribution of Power

Over the last decade or so, scholarly analyses of the relationship between politics and the Internet has grown at a remarkable rate, as has the appreciation for the deeply rooted changes in social, economic, cultural and political life brought about by the Internet (Chadwick and Howard, 2008). As from the early 2000s, people started to conduct important aspects of their lives online, while online services such as shopping, public services and social support networks started to proliferate (Chadwick and Howard, 2008) – leading to what Castel (2013: 151) labelled ‘a new era in politics’. Margolis and Resnick (2000) succinctly describe three types of Internet politics; the first being politics within the Net (intra-Net politics), which encompasses the political life of cyber-communities that regulate their own affairs and settle disputes among themselves. The second type refers to politics that affects the Net, which is directed towards the host of public policy issues and government actions that arise from the fact that the Internet is both a new form of communication, and an ever-evolving one. Political uses of the Net is the third type listed by Margolis and Resnick (2000: 8), who suggest that this is the type most used by activists, parties and governments ‘to achieve political goals having little or nothing to do with the Internet’. The latter type of Internet politics achieved its full potential in the advent of blogging, under the influence of new platforms such as WordPress (Chadwick and Howard, 2008). The spectacular growth of blogging and its associated offshoots led to

the Internet taking on a life of its own, and soon led to the invention of Web 2.0 – which is essentially how the Internet is nowadays known and understood.

When Web 2.0 was created, technological developments had reached a stage where websites were allowed to evolve – initially from ‘online brochures’ to allowing users to ‘shape their own experience of a site’ and the experiences of others (Lilleker and Jackson, 2011: 28). This new and improved version of the Internet gave consumers new possibilities, with the most important being (1) the ability to attain a greater volume of information at faster speed, (2) the ceding of information control to the individual consumer who can actively search out desired information rather than be a passive recipient of news from a limited number of sources, (3) the ability to ‘become producers of news’, and (4) the capacity to use the Internet as an interactive medium where citizens can debate with politicians and other groups of citizens from any distance (Gibson et al., 2003: 4).

On the other hand, Chadwick and Howard (2008) suggest that Web 2.0 presented the public with (1) a platform for political discourse, (2) collective intelligence, and (3) large amounts of data. The first point is strongly embodied in online social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Within these platforms, participation is facilitated by offering few barriers to taking part and by allowing users to not only browse but also ‘become producers’ (Lilleker and Jackson, 2011: 31). In this way, a notion of ‘openness’ is created by permitting access to all – thus leading to what Lilleker and Jackson (2011: 31) call ‘the network effect’. This phenomenon is further propelled through Chadwick and Howard’s (2008) second point – collective intelligence – which mostly refers to user-generated content sites, such as YouTube and Wikipedia, where the core idea is that a distributed network of creators and contributors, most of them amateurs, can, using simple tools, produce information that may outperform those produced by so-called ‘authoritative’ sources (such as media consultants and professional journalists) (Chadwick and Howard, 2008: 5). This, in turn, leads to the aggregation of huge amounts of information, the third point listed above, where Web 2.0 has allowed for the emergence of informational value through the ‘confluence of distributed user-generated content and its centralised exploitation’ (Chadwick and Howard, 2008: 6).

The ability of users to shape their online experiences, and with Web 2.0 also shape the experiences of others, has led scholars to suggest that there are social impacts and consequences that have emerged as a result of this new co-productive online environment (Van Dijk, 2007; Castells, 2007, cited in Lilleker and Jackson, 2011). Political parties and their strategists have had to adjust to the norms of societal communication and embrace it – both as a resource generation tool, as well as a platform to interact with their audience – which has led to a number of socio-political phenomena, as is discussed in the next section.

2.3.1 Socio-political Implications of the Web

According to Curran (2002: 4, cited in Ridge-Newman, 2014: 3), '[the] process of democratization was enormously strengthened by the development of modern mass media', and many scholars and professionals attest to this, with Howard Dean's (2004 US presidential hopeful) campaign manager stating that 'the Internet is the most democratizing innovation we've ever seen'. Margolis and Resnick (2000: 25) even go as far as calling the Internet an 'electronic agora'. In fact, much of the scholarly work on the relationship between the Internet and politics maintains that technological developments have enhanced representative democracy (Bohman, 2004; Gibson et al., 2004; Gimmler, 2001), especially since, as Lilleker and Jackson (2011: 32) put it, interactivity 'underpins many of the big ideas that are associated with Web 2.0'. By interactivity, these authors are referring to communication exchanges, which have increased with the introduction of global social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter, since these platforms have provided users with a new space for conversation. Furthermore, the existence and widespread use of open forums and message spaces online has further facilitated conversation between any number of participants. In this way, Web 2.0 has presented users with the necessary tools for building and maintaining relationships. It is perhaps these 'user-to-user' relationships that link well to the notions of representative democracy (Lilleker and Jackson, 2011: 34).

On the other hand, Ward et al. (2003: 4) have challenged the idea that the Internet enhances representative democracy. Although they agree that the Internet can serve to reinvigorate participation, and serve as a platform for 'single-issue networks and protests campaigns' – thereby increasing choice for citizen activity and allowing for

increased competition between parties – Ward et al. (2003) argue that the Internet may have devastating effects on traditional representative organisations, mainly by reducing their role in society. The introduction of electronic voting and e-discussion fora are an example of the tools made available through the Internet that may take away political parties' representative role. On the other hand, the interactive possibilities of Internet technology may be used to recruit members and cede more power to them over policy and party elites (Ward et al., 2003). Less radically, Gibson and Ward (2000) suggest that political parties may harness the possibilities of new technologies, but not necessarily the participatory ones. Parties may simply use the information capacity and speed of the Internet 'to modernise and make more efficient their existing practices with limited impact on their participatory and representative functions' (Ward et al., 2003: 5). Cunah et al. (2003: 72) explain the choice to abandon the participatory features of the web by arguing that political parties and actors may be reluctant to expose themselves to the vulnerability that 'dialogue with citizens via interactive web features' might bring, namely attacks from journalists and opponents.

Nonetheless, there have been many instances in the history of the Internet when political actors have taken full advantage of the medium, even bypassing the party hierarchy (Lachapelle and Maarek [2015] list Howard Dean and Ségolène Royal as examples). The Internet empowers individuals to take direct action outside of the traditional political structures (Olson and Nelson, 2010), and in the process may elevate them to 'a new elite status' by filling niches in cyberspace (Ridge-Newman, 2014: 16). These new possibilities for communication seem to have rekindled a spirit of 'individual activism', not only in politicians, but also the general public – who have become both a source of horizontal and vertical communication, thus 'breaking the monopoly that politicians had back in the television age' (Lachapelle and Maarek, 2015: 3). It is this capacity that the Internet has created that has changed the way the political world operates (Olson and Nelson, 2010).

2.3.2 Online Politics

In the age of the Internet, political parties and their strategists have had to understand how to 'build simultaneously from the bottom up and the top down', especially when it comes to self-organisational capacities of the web (Olson and Nelson, 2010: 51).

This is best explained through Barack Obama's 2008 campaign narrative of 'change', where a strategic decision was made to promote a message of individual Obama supporters coming together via the Internet. Therefore, while Obama supporters were communicating horizontally through platforms such as Facebook, they were also being 'channelled from top echelons of the campaign', as part of the broader campaign narrative (Lachapelle and Maarek, 2015: 3; Olsen and Nelson, 2010: 60). Of course, this engagement from the 'bottom-up perspective' rests on the assumption that a large share of the population has access to the Internet, and at the same time is willing to use it for political purposes (Cunah et al., 2003: 84-87). In this regard, Cunah et al. (2003: 87) found that the potential for parties to actively exploit the Internet in this way is greater in those countries in which 'the peculiarities of both political parties and the political culture facilitate communication between parties and citizens', and subsequently their digital interaction. This is particularly pertinent in the case of Malta's political characterization – specifically, the high level of political mobilization and the willingness of Maltese citizens to use social media channels for political purposes (Eurobarometer, Autumn 2014) (refer to Chapter 4).

Nevertheless, there seems to be a disagreement in the literature on the nature of activists and voters in the digital age. As illustrated in Table 2.1, Luther and Müller-Rommel (2002) argue that the Internet has brought about 'turned-off voters', who are not interested in political events, let alone in participating in them. Martigny (2015) and Gusse (2015) elaborate on this and state that the impersonal nature of new technologies (such as the lack of face-to-face contact with voters), coupled with the closed circuit characteristic of social media like Twitter, where an ultimately rather small group of citizens interact on a given topic, has led to an on-going decline of political activism, with the remaining generations of old-style activists steadily dying off. This contrasts greatly with Cunah et al.'s (2003) and Olson and Nelson's (2010) narratives of voters and activists in the Internet age, where the Internet is regarded as a tool to harness the power of the people.

From the top-down perspective, it seems that the Internet has brought about numerous benefits for political parties. Firstly, the Internet has offered a space to candidates and political parties to 'establish [their] identity and cultivate supporters' (Lachapelle and Maarek, 2015: 24). The flexibility of the web also permits the rapid change of organisational or personal images – an attractive feature for parties and candidates

during a campaign (Margolis and Resnick, 2000). Furthermore, the Internet can serve as a ‘permanent opposition research repository’, where everything an opposing party or candidate has done or said is available at a moment’s notice (Olson and Nelson, 2010: 65). Of course, this works both ways, and while the web has brought many benefits to politicians and their parties, it has also brought about a sense of paranoia; where political actors have recognized that everything they say or do is potentially in the public domain and can be used against them at any time. An excellent example of the power of the Internet to quickly change political dynamics is illustrated by Olson and Nelson (2010), who refer to US Senator George Allen, who was seeking re-election in 2006, and was at the forefront of the electoral race. However, on one of the campaign stops, Allen was filmed saying the word ‘macaca’ to (vulgarly) describe a person from the opposing side who video tapes a candidate. Within hours a copy of the video was uploaded to YouTube and subsequently made headlines on cable news, leading him to an electoral loss. The popularity of social networks has now amplified such instances, where even the slightest gaffe or slipup goes viral and becomes a news item (Lacapelle and Maarek, 2015). As a result, negative campaigning and attacks ads have gained popularity in political communication, and in recent years a rise in personal attacks has been witnessed – attacks which have become ‘hard to refute and even harder to erase from the Net’ (Lacapelle and Maarek, 2015: 5).

2.4 Professionalisation vs. Democratisation?

This chapter represents the first attempt of this research project to understand how the Internet has affected party identity. This has been done by first delving into the research on party change and political party identity, starting with the foundational work of Kircheimer (1966) and Epstein (1967) and their ‘end of ideology’ thesis, and then moving on to the fundamental theories presented by Harmel and Janda (1994) and Janda et al. (1995) on the causes of change, and the nature of political party identity and its three faces (human, organisational and policy), respectively. The chapter then continues to expand on Harmel and Janda’s (1994: 261) hypothesis, that parties are ‘forced to professionalise in response to changes in the environment’ – a concept that Negrine and Lilleker (2002) link to the emergence of new technologies. A thorough discussion of the literature on the Internet and politics followed, which shed a light on a third scenario in addition to those presented by Harmel and Janda (1994) – disintegration and professionalisation –, with the third scenario being

democratisation. In this scenario, as a result of the introduction of the Internet, power is ceded to the lower levels of the party. Consequently, the Internet may be seen as having led to the democratisation of political parties.

Thus, it seems that there are two competing hypotheses at play – professionalisation and democratisation – and both exhibit different aspects of the Internet's affect on political parties and their identities. Specifically, professionalisation refers to the centralisation of decision-making powers to the leadership and media experts, and to the adaptation to new technologies that contribute to the overall campaign goals. With professionalisation, decisions on the three faces of party identity are taken by members found at the top of the party hierarchy, and perhaps it could also be said that professionalisation can lead to a more unified message exhibited across all the three faces. On the other hand, democratisation, brought about by the open-for-all social media platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter), has ceded powers to individuals situated in the lower levels of the party, or even those outside of the party structure (e.g. voters). Consequently, this may lead to perceived divisions in party identity, within the human face, the organisational face and the policy face, since various messages are communicated freely by a number of different members across the party hierarchy within the same platform – the Internet. Thus, it seems that while the empowerment of media experts or influencers remains (due to professionalisation), the influencers may not necessarily be employed or controlled by the party leadership (as a result of democratisation).

This discussion is continued in Chapters 4 and 5, which explore the strategy of political parties in relation to Internet adaptation, and the effects of Internet technologies on the three faces of their identity. In using the term 'strategy' to discuss party adaptation to Internet technologies, this research is seeking to avoid an overly deterministic approach whereby the introduction of new technologies within political parties is seen as leading to certain outcomes. Instead, an institutionalist approach of political change is adopted, as suggested by March and Olsen (1989), whereby change and development within parties follows a slower, less determinate and more endogenous course. 'Institutions', understood as party norms and traditions, play an important role in the way new technology is taken up and used (Löfgren and Smith, 2003: 44) – a notion supported by the findings of this study, as is explained later on in Chapter 4.

First, however, the research design and methodology applied during the research process is discussed, in order to give an overview of the data collection process and methods used to arrive to the conclusions outlined in Chapters 4 and 5.

CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Method

Following the analysis of the literature already available on political party identity change and the Internet, this chapter looks at the research design and methodology applied to analyse the link between the two areas of study, and to ultimately answer the research question: How does technological innovation, in particular the Internet, affect party identity (change)?

According to Burnham et al. (2008: 39), a research design is defined as ‘the logical structure of the research inquiry’ that a researcher is engaged upon. This definition refers to the overall plan of investigation, taking into account the structure and strategy employed in order to obtain answers to the specified research questions. The chosen research design for this project is a case study, where Malta’s two main political parties – *Partit Nazzjonalista* (PN) and *Partit Laburista* (PL) – are examined in relation to changes in their identity *vis-à-vis* the Internet.

As a case study entails the ‘detailed and intensive analysis of a single case’ (Bryman, 2012: 66), semi-structured interviews with top officials within the political parties were chosen as the main method of data collection. The decision to interview party officials was based on Luther and Müller-Rommel (2002) and Panebianco’s (1988) hypotheses that change is a result of deliberate choices made by party actors. Therefore, party officials are the ones who can best explain the Internet’s affect on their party’s identity, if any. Moreover, prominent bloggers and journalists were also interviewed since they are considered to be the main political observers in Malta, and could thus confirm statements made by political actors, while also give their views on the subject. Thus, data triangulation is applied (Denzin, 1989: 237-41, in Flick, 1998:229), that is, different data sources (in this case, people) are used for ‘further grounding’ of the knowledge obtained. Here, it has to be pointed out that while most interviews are what Meuser and Nagel (1991, cited in Flick, 1998: 91) call ‘expert interviews’, where the interviewee is of ‘less interest as a (whole) person than in his or her capacity of being an expert for a certain field of activity’, interviews with two

particularly social media active (elected) politicians were conducted in order to explore their views in relation to their behaviour on social media and its effect on their party in recent years. The full list of interviews and the description of roles of interviewees can be found in Appendix I, together with a list of main questions asked in Appendix II.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method of data collection due to their nature of allowing the interviewees to freely express their point of view. In semi-structured interviews, 'rambling or going off at tangents is often encouraged' as it gives insight into what the interviewee regards as relevant and important (Bryman, 2012: 470). This type of interviewing also allows for follow-up questions, which grants the researcher the opportunity to further investigate a point raised during the interview. Therefore, the flexibility of semi-structured interviewing fits perfectly within the objectives of this research, which is concerned with the views of political actors and insider information that they can provide to better understand the link between party identity change and the Internet. Nevertheless, whenever available, secondary sources are also used to substantiate information gathered through the interviews. These include public opinion statistics on Internet use, election reports and newspaper articles.

Since a case study is typically 'very flexible and [is an] open-ended technique of data collection and analysis', it is considered to be the ideal design for studies whose focus is on extensively 'exploring and understanding rather than confirming and quantifying' (Grinnell, 1981, cited in Kumar, 2010: 126). Indeed, since there is a gap in the literature when it comes to political party identity change and use of the Internet and its effects, the study's aim is to mainly explore and understand this phenomenon, while at the same time make use of the literature (in Chapter 2) to arrive to conclusions. This case study allows the researcher to examine key processes thoroughly due to the relatively small size of Maltese political parties, and the rather easy access the researcher has to political actors. In this way, this research project is able to generate an intensive examination of this case study, which is then engaged in theoretical analysis (refer to Chapter 4 and 5).

3.2 Analysis

The research methodology reaches its peak in the analytic phase, where all the collected data is put together and examined. Since semi-structured interviews are the chosen method of data collection for this research project, it is important that when analysing the data, the context in which statements occur is taken into consideration (Flick, 1998). It is for this reason that in qualitative semi-structured interviews, open-ended questions are asked; so to encourage the respondents to produce enough textual material for the researcher to analyse in terms of contextual considerations.

Analysis of interview data begins early on when examining the first few interviews in order to make sure that the project makes sense and concerns matters important to the answering of the research question (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Based on this on-going analysis, main questions are modified and follow-up questions prepared to pursue emerging ideas. The analysis of interviews then proceeds in two phases. In the first, the researcher prepares transcripts, finds, refines and elaborates concepts, themes and events, and then codes the interviews to be able to retrieve what the interviewees have said about the identified concepts, themes and events, and to reveal patterns (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). In the second phase, concepts and themes are compared across the interviews, and finally, separate events are combined to formulate a description of the setting under study (Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

Nonetheless, although the analysis is based on the descriptions presented by the interviewees, the interpretations in the final reports are those of the researcher. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative methods take the researcher's communication with the field and its members 'as an explicit part of knowledge production' (Flick, 1998: 6). The subjectivities of the researcher and of those interviewed are part of the research process, and the researcher's reflections and observations become data in their own right, forming part of the interpretation (Flick, 1998). This, of course, raises questions on the reliability, validity and generalizability of the research, which have been addressed in a number of ways by qualitative researchers, and in this study, as outlined below.

First, when developing main questions in research interviews, the researcher has to be cautious of not imposing his/her own understandings in presenting the questions. While doing so is tempting, especially when trying to get the conversation going, the

approach limits the interviewee's freedom to respond and might lead the interviewee to saying something out of pressure rather than out of wanting (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Moreover, the interviewer must ensure that he/she does not practice 'selective plausibilization' – which is often one of the main critiques expressed in qualitative research, especially when interviews are the researcher's only data collection method (Flick, 1998: 221). Girtler (1984: 146, cited in Flick, 1998: 221) explains this critique by stating that, when making a point in academic writing or when trying to explain a phenomenon, a researcher quotes 'the corresponding passages from [his/her] observational protocols or interviews', quoting only those passages which illustrate the world the researcher is trying to portray. While there are no proven remedies for this critique, qualitative researchers cannot 'delude themselves' (Bryman, 2012: 70), as the nature of qualitative research evidence makes it difficult to address such critiques. Thus, the researcher has to be forthcoming about such limitations.

Nevertheless, perhaps the biggest discussion in qualitative research has centred on the external validity and generalizability of a case study, as researchers have found it difficult for a single case study to be representative of other cases (Bryman, 2012). In this regard, as Bryman (2012: 70) states, a case study cannot be taken as 'a sample of one'. On the other hand, however, both Stake (2000) and Bryman (2012) list different types of case studies which shed a light on the representativeness of particular cases. Using the criteria set out by both scholars, this research project fits the description of the 'intrinsic' case study, where the 'case is of interest [...] in all its particularity and ordinariness' (Stake, 2000:437). The particularity in this specific case study is found within Malta's political characterization – high voter turnout, pure two-party system, and high polarization – which is something that is unique to a modern European democracy. The 'intense and pervasive partisanship' (Hirczy, 1995: 255) present in Malta provides an interesting case study to answer the research question outlined above, especially since a lot is at stake when parties communicate with the electorate through the online medium, and more so when parties communicate an identity change. Furthermore, the competitive nature of Maltese politics means that parties cannot afford to lag behind in their adaptation to new technologies, as they risk losing the support of a significant number of the electorate. This statement is further confirmed by a Eurobarometer survey (Autumn 2014: 76) which found that almost 70% of Maltese citizens believe in the political relevance of social media channels –

amongst the highest in the EU –, and therefore this leaves political parties no choice but to adapt to the needs of the people. On the other hand, this case study is still considered to be ordinary since all (or nearly all) political parties in modern democracies make use of the Internet nowadays, and therefore findings from this case study could, to some extent, be representative of other political parties. Moreover, since this particular research project is the first of its kind – where political parties’ identities are examined in relation to the Internet – the findings provide an insight into a new phenomenon. Thus, although it may have limited generalizability, it still provides valid and valuable information on a new occurrence in today’s reality.

3.2.1 Ethical Considerations

Without a doubt, ethics should be at the heart of research; from the early design stage, right through to reporting and beyond. Webster et al. (2014) maintain that ethical considerations in qualitative research are, at essence, about how researchers treat study participants. Bryman (2012) lists five principles that ethical research involves. First, the researcher must ensure that the research is worthwhile and should not make unreasonable demands on participants (Bryman, 2012). Secondly, participation in the research project should be based on informed consent, where in this research project, written and verbal consent was given before the beginning of all interviews. Webster et al. (2014) continue Bryman’s list by stating that adverse consequences of participation should be avoided, while confidentiality and anonymity should be respected. Lastly, it is of utmost importance that participation is voluntary and free for coercion, where participants do not feel pressured in any way to answer in a certain manner, as this would affect their wellbeing and eventually the research outcome.

In this regard, during the data collection process of this research project, strict measures were taken to satisfy any ethical concerns laid out by the University of Glasgow ethics board and ESRC research guidelines. All recordings and notes were kept securely and only shared with specified persons involved in the research project. Moreover, the researcher made sure that participants read the ‘plain language statement’ containing all the information about the research project and their participation, and that they knew that they can withdraw their participation at any time.

CHAPTER 4 – CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

Having gone through the research methods applied during the course of the research process, this chapter explores the findings of this study and sets them against a background of established theories. First, however, a brief background of Malta's political landscape is presented in order to give context to the findings. This is then followed by a discussion of what respondents understand by party identity, which is an important foundation for the research since respondents base their answers upon their understanding of party identity. The following sections then discuss the different effects of the Internet on political party identity (and its transformation), looking at both the parties' (PN and PL) adaptation to new ICTs, as well as the changes (and challenges) inevitably brought about by new technologies on political parties.

4.1 Malta's Political Landscape

Malta is a tiny Mediterranean republic and a former British colony. Politically, it is characterized by a relatively pure two-party system, high levels of political mobilization, and the polarized nature of its party politics. Since gaining independence in 1964, power has alternated between two main political parties – the *Partit Laburista* (PL) and the *Partit Nazzjonalista* (PN). The PN is best defined as a party representing (big) business, the Maltese middle class, and the Church (Cini, 2003), although in recent years it has tried to expand its politics. On the other hand, until 2008, the PL had gone some way towards 'tempering its ideologically hard-line, leftist politics of the 1970s and 1980s', however it had not yet reached the stage of fitting into the 'new Labour' mould as its counterparts across Europe (Cini, 2003: 1). In recent years, however, with the election of its new leader in 2008, Joseph Muscat, the party has transformed into a modern, catch-all party; managing to achieve a landslide victory over the PN in 2013, after serving 15 years in the opposition.

The PL's landslide victory was described as a 'historic' one since it successfully managed to gain the support of the biggest share of the electorate in Maltese electoral history, since Independence (Micallef, 2013). Despite the fact that voting is not compulsory, Maltese politics is notable for its extremely high turnout – well over 90%. Other than the 2013 election, the difference between the support for the two

main parties is usually very small, meaning that political parties win and lose elections on the basis of ‘electoral swings of only a few percentage points’ (Cini, 2003: 2). As Malta has a population of around 420,000, and an electorate of slightly more than 330,000, a very small number of disaffected party loyalists and floating voters can determine who runs the country (Cini, 2003; International IDEA, n.d.). Thus, a lot is at stake when parties communicate with the electorate, and more so when they communicate their identity.

4.2 Conceptualising Party Identity

The most prominent definition of party identity is that presented by Janda et al. (1995: 171), where party identity is described as ‘the image that citizen have in mind when they think about [the] party’. This description is supported by most of the political actors interviewed for this research project, although they make an addition to the above statement by stating that party identity is also defined by ‘what the party stands for’ (Respondent Eleven¹) and ‘by its sense of purpose’ (Respondent Three). Thus, party identity is depicted in two ways: (1) the image that citizens have of a party, and (2) the image the party has of itself. With the word ‘image’, the respondents mostly referred to the party’s human face and policy face, while only a few respondents also made reference to the organisational face. However, it is interesting to note that reference to the organisational face was always made as a result of explaining a change in the other two facades. This is best encapsulated in Respondent Four’s explanation of identity change, who stated that ‘[an] organisation necessarily changes if the people who interpret its values change [...] so it is natural that the organisational face of a party changes if the individuals that form part of it change’. Thus, forming a link between the human and organisational faces of party identity.

All respondents agree that a party’s policy face is in a state of continuous flux, where the core principles remain the same, but the party’s outlook on policy is updated, either as a result of leadership change, internal or external pressure, or because of changing environmental factors. This is best explained by looking at the PL, where with the advent of Joseph Muscat’s leadership, the party started to be identified as a pro-business party. This, of course, contrasts sharply with the party’s mission

¹ All interviews were held between June and July 2016. Full list of interviews and main questions can be found in Appendix I and II.

statement of being the working class' voice in the country's top institutions. However, Respondent Four, a party candidate and blogger, explains this by stating that the labour party (PL) in Malta was and still is the workers' party, and has started to become identified as pro-business only because 'in order for the party to look after the rights of workers, it must also make sure that businesses are well taken care of and functioning well, so in turn, the businesses will look after their workers'. Thus, the PL is still keeping to its core principles, yet has changed its thinking in accordance with the needs of the time and its new leader.

Nevertheless, in an age where whatever is said or written remains online forever, and where ideas or statements can easily be misinterpreted – what approach are political parties taking to communicate their identity (change) online? Are political parties adapting their image, organisation and policies to fit this new era? The next section attempts to answer these questions, while focusing on the overall strategy parties take when approaching the Internet.

4.3 Adapting to the Internet Environment

One of the most popular points highlighted in the data collected, with regards to parties' adaptation to new ICTs, is the impact that the Internet has had on the dynamics of the relationship between the electorate and politicians. Whereas in the television age 'the mass media [took] over responsibility for maintaining [contact] between political elites and voters/citizens' (Löfgren and Smith, 2003: 46), in the Internet era the contact is direct, where politicians have a direct line to voters and vice-versa. Another important aspect of the Internet is that it gathers people into one place, regardless of geographical or temporal constraints. This has turned platforms like Facebook and Twitter into large online 'squares', where everyone, from the President or Prime Minister to the lowest member of society can be present (Respondent One and Ten). This has changed both the communicative aspect of parties' identities, as well as the issue uptake and policy changes of political parties.

First, the Internet – in particular social media – has affected the issues that parties choose to speak about, where Respondent One (a senior communications official) argues that 'it is impossible to ignore an issue being discussed on social media', and in fact, politicians and even the Prime Minister 'take cues from online discussions'. Respondent One claims that:

Nowadays, when we sit down to discuss party strategy, we have to take into consideration what people are saying on the Internet. In cases where the majority seems to disagree with the party's stance, we cannot just hope that the issue will be forgotten... things are not forgotten on the Internet. So we have to respond to [a] discussion on social media, more often than not.

This kind of issue uptake or change has become more commonplace since more of the Maltese population has entered the digital world, with the primary reason being that 'political parties need to seem like they are taking note of what is being discussed, or else they lose the support of the electorate and their overall purpose [i.e. that of representing the people]' (Respondent Two). An example of this is the PN's recent uptake of environmental issues. The PN was never a party concerned with the environment, however, in the absence of attention given to the issue by the governing party, and the public uproar on social media about a number of environmental concerns, the PN took on the cause and has made the environment one of its central policy platforms (Respondents Two and Three).

On the other hand, the Internet has also impacted political parties' tactical considerations on how they communicate a new or changed image or policy (Respondent One). One of the most recent developments in communicating political identity is the 'priming content to go viral' phenomenon, where the 'share' function on social media is strategically incorporated within produced content (Respondents Eight, Nine and Ten). This 'new' consideration has altered the way parties go about campaigning and communicating with the electorate, where messages 'need to be developed and built with digital media in mind' (Respondent Three). Both political parties regard the Internet as the 'main channel to communicate [their] messages' (Respondents One and Two), and so it comes as no surprise that ICTs are a big part of the equation when it comes to strategic communication of a new or changed identity.

The PL took online communication considerations even further when, prior to the 2013 election, it changed its image from a party to a 'movement'; an idea that runs parallel to the concept of the Internet – where the main premise is that of 'openness' (Respondents One, Four and Five). In this way the party wanted to communicate the idea that everyone is welcome to join the party/movement, where it disposed of the

confines of a traditional political party, and at the same time, projected an image that it is keeping up with the times, while heavily making use of the Internet to display this 'openness'. Respondent Four, who occupies a top role in the party, confirms that the idea of a movement stemmed from the features of new ICTs, stating that:

The concept is similar to that of the Internet... the concept is that of opening [the party to different people] rather than closing it. I think political parties are slowly losing their relevance in society, and so, by turning the party into a movement we aimed at keeping up with the times, and by using existing tools such as Internet technologies, stay relevant.

Nonetheless, while both parties admit to having ICTs at the centre of their tactical and strategic considerations, both parties concede to the fact that they are on different levels of 'ICT-friendliness' (Respondent Three), where the PL is at a far higher stage of technological adaptation than the PN. This might be explained through its drastic leadership change, where a young and relatively new face brought about new norms within the party, which as highlighted by Löfrgen and Smith (2003), play a significant role in the way new technology is taken up. In the same way, Respondent Three, who holds a top role within the PN leadership office, asserts that the party's traditions and structures have not yet been 'primed for the online environment' – which, he claims, is the primary reason why the PN is still lagging behind on technological uptake.

We're still discovering how to handle the Internet. The 2013 election was the first time that the party really tried to use Internet technologies, and unfortunately, I don't think it was a good experience for the party because it failed to use it effectively. In my opinion, the main reason for this failure was the party's inability, at the time, to integrate the different functions of the Internet within the overall party strategy [...] Moreover, the internal structures of the party did not help in creating a unified message. For instance, the social media team was separate from the other teams. And that team needed to be working hand in hand with other teams.

However, while both parties may be on different technological levels, they still face the same challenges when incorporating the Internet into their communication

strategy. One of the main challenges is that of ‘continuous public scrutiny online’ (Respondent One). Whereas before citizens would complain about a policy in their village or town square amongst a couple of friends, or at most write a letter to the editor of a newspaper, today everyone is free to write their thoughts online, where they are visible to more people. Furthermore, this continuous public scrutiny has made political parties and politicians more wary of what they communicate, since facts can nowadays be checked and double-checked by anyone with access to a search engine (Respondents One and Five) (Gibson et al., 2003).

Conversely, political parties have found ways to maximize the power of the people online by, for instance, investing heavily in their own online news portals (Respondent Seven). Through such portals, they can communicate their messages freely without the need for other media organisations. According to Respondent Nine, this has particularly helped the PL, since many of the independent media organisations have tended to show slight favouritism towards PN policies. Therefore, by bypassing these news organisations, the PL is now communicating its unedited messages directly to the people, through the Internet medium. In addition to this, political parties can now also manipulate their message for the social media news environment – a point highlighted by Respondents Eight and Nine, both of whom are senior journalists for their respective political party’s news portal. Both respondents argue that many online readers do not read the article, but only take note of the title or news headline (an assertion substantiated by the time a reader stays on the respective news portal page). Thus, these journalists purposely manipulate a headline in such a way as to communicate a message, intentionally mislead the public, and make it go ‘viral’, while leaving the details in the rest of the article, which few people read.

All in all, both the PN and PL seem to want to adapt to the social media environment and take advantage of the political opportunities that it presents. The findings outlined above exhibit their eagerness to engage and communicate with voters directly through social media – even taking up suggestions and ideas through the platform, which would in turn affect their policy face. Both parties are also showing signs that they are changing their organisational face to fit a social media mould in order to stay appealing to the modern day voter, as was exhibited by the PL when it started to refer to itself as a ‘movement’. In turn, the openness that this ‘movement’ has brought about has given rise to changes in the party’s human face, where its supporters are no

longer limited to the working class (note that the PL was previously referred to as the workers' party). This link between the parties' organisational and human face continues to expose the stark contrast between the PN and PL's adaptation to new technologies, where the PL is at a higher stage of adaptation, and consequently, the party's identity has been impacted more than that of the PN.

The different levels of adaptation seem to have also impacted the level of professionalisation and democratisation of each party. While the PL has adapted well to new technologies that contribute to the party's overall campaign goals, the centralisation of power seems to have been weakened due to the competing force brought about by democratisation, especially with the openness associated with the PL's movement coming into full force. On the other hand, since the PN has not professionalised as much as its opponent, it was more susceptible to be overtaken by the democratizing power of the Internet, and in fact, there have been more instances of issue uptake or change through social media platforms by the PN than by the PL (a statement supported by Respondents Two, Three, Five and Ten).

Nonetheless, the effects of the Internet on political parties' identities are not only the result of adaptation, but sometimes also due to the Internet's existence within a society. The next section focuses on this aspect of the Internet's impact on political parties, with the main themes being loss of control and vulnerability of party identity.

4.4 Consequences of Internet Technology on Party Identity (Change)

Through the data gathered by conducting interviews with senior political officials and journalists, this section details and analyses a number of interesting phenomena that occur in the rather closed world of the political elite. First, political parties' loss of control on their own identities is discussed, and a number of contributing factors to this loss of control are listed. This is then followed by an analysis of the effects of blogs and online comments on party identity – two Internet features which also contribute to political parties' loss of control on their identities and to the parties' vulnerabilities.

4.4.1 Losing Control

The loss of control on party identity brought about by a number of Internet-related phenomena was a recurring theme during the data collection process. Respondent Four, sums up the point by stating:

The matter in question is not the Internet as such, but what the Internet brings to the political table. It brings about immediacy – where things become immediately known by everyone in a matter of minutes –; it brings about a lot of feedback, which before was minimal; it brings about anonymity, which encourages people to express themselves without any inhibitions. So, political parties are inevitably affected by these factors.

The impact of immediacy, in particular, brought out strong reactions from all of the interviewees, who claimed that immediacy has been the most influential driver of identity change with regards to the Internet. This is mainly due to the fact that a piece of news travels through the Internet at an extremely fast rate and reaches many people in an instant. Consequently, pressure builds up on political organisations to issue an immediate reaction, leaving little (or even no) time for committee discussions or consultations (Respondent Two). This impacts a party's identity primarily because its policies are shaped at a faster rate, where perhaps identity formation has become more impulsive. According to Respondent Three, the circumstances brought about by the Internet leave political parties no choice but to 'shorten the decision-making process, otherwise the news or event runs out of control', and a late reply, or no reply at all, is interpreted as a message in itself.

In addition to this, the Internet has exposed certain divisions within parties. Before the digital age, the only way a member of a political party could express himself freely and publicly about something that goes contrary to the party line was by sending a letter to the editor of an independent newspaper. Whereas nowadays, all a member needs is a computer or a smartphone and a few seconds to write a tweet or a Facebook post. In Malta the contrast between the pre- and post- Digital Age is especially stark, since before the Internet, political parties had full control over which political representatives were to go on a particular TV show, or be interviewed on a particular newspaper, especially because of the small size of the media industry in Malta.

Consequently, the advent of the Internet was a shock to the political system, where political actors started to air their views freely, and citizens finally realized that there are divergent views within the same political party. This had an immediate impact on political parties' identities, with 9 of the respondents interviewed (Respondents Four and Seven disagreed) stating that the open show of dissent online by members of a political party heavily affects the image portrayed by that party. The primary reason given for this is that in the pre-Internet age the party could control the message that it wanted to portray to its citizen in a very strict manner. Nowadays, the free use of the Internet by everyone has introduced the possibility of instilling certain doubts about a party's message, especially if prominent members within the organisation do not send out a unified message – a phenomenon that gives legitimacy to Harmel and Janda's (1994) disintegration hypothesis. An example of this is given by Respondent Nine, who points out that:

In recent years, I have no doubt that the PL has become identified as a party that champions civil liberties. However, when in the past year, the party's parliamentary whip wrote certain posts on his Facebook account which go against the civil liberties legislation [the party is trying to push through parliament] ... I'm sure that instills doubts and raises questions about the party's true identity.

However, Respondent Ten, a prominent journalist, cautions that there is a limit to how dissenting a politician can be, as after a while a 'repetitive dissenter' may start to lose his/her effect.

Nevertheless, news organisations quite often propel dissenting politicians into the limelight, since such news tends to be very popular with voters, especially those that support the opposing party (Respondents Eight, Nine and Ten). Of course, many politicians seek the front-page newspaper headline, and thus often tip off newsrooms when they are about to post something relatively scandalous or that shows strife within their party (Respondent Ten). In this way, these politicians not only bypass the party hierarchy, which is considered to be the main gatekeeper to individual speech, but also put themselves on a platform and establish their own identity, as separate from that of their party. Therefore, as Respondent Five put it:

The individual freedom brought about by the Internet has uncovered the fact that a political party is a coalition of individuals – and this is the case more now than ever. Before, parties had a very collective identity, and that was part of the traditional Maltese culture. The Internet has changed all that, and it has become normal for a politician, like me, to stand up for something I believe in ... even if it is against my own party.

In fact, according to Respondent Seven, with the advent of the Internet ‘democracy has finally infiltrated political party structures’, and decisions are no longer taken only by the top echelons of the party, a statement also backed up by Howard and Chadwick (2009). This sheds a light on the possible connection between democratisation and disintegration within the political Internet realm, since it seems that the democratisation of political parties via the Internet has led to the greater possibility of fragmentation of parties. In this context, political parties seem to have lost a lot of control over their members, and look helpless in the face of Internet technologies; first, because of the permanent nature of the medium – where even if a post is removed someone may easily take a screen shot and distribute it; and secondly because of the sharing capabilities of social media – where news travels at an extremely fast rate.

Nonetheless, respondents from within the PL point out that dissenting members within a political party are not necessarily disadvantageous. They argue that:

Members expressing their dissenting opinions online is not altogether bad news for the party. Our own private polls have shown that during the three month period of the Panama Papers scandal [in which a Minister and top government official were implicated], where a large number of ministers, MPs and MEPs started to show their unease with the situation on their Facebook pages [...] the party’s identity was not damaged, but rather the whole event proved to be a positive thing for us. (Respondent Five)

Indeed, while not showing a unified front in the face of a major scandal may seem to be destructive to a party’s identity (across all of the three faces), private polls revealed that more people were attracted to the party because of the range of views available

that members and voters could identify with (Respondents One, Four and Five). As Respondent One put it:

In reality, the people do not all believe the same thing. So, if they do not agree on something with the leadership of the party, but there is a party MP who shares their views, then those people can still empathize with that MP, and thus remain supporters of the party.

On the other hand, the PN is of a different opinion and believes that ‘identity depends on the ability of people to understand it [...] and the more confusion there is about that identity, the less people will understand it’, which impacts the overall success of the identity the party would be trying to project (Respondent Three). Thus, for the PN, teamwork is essential when it comes to party identity. In this context, however, it is interesting to note that the tendency to have dissenting MPs was found to be greater in the governing party. This was confirmed by those interviewed, who stated that the opposition is usually more inclined to show a unified front, with the aim of eventually winning the next election (Respondents Two, Five and Seven).

4.4.2 Blogs and Online Comments

Due to the increase in democratisation brought about by the advent of the Internet, or more specifically Web 2.0, it is not only individual politicians who may affect party identity, but also any member of society. An excellent example of this is found in political blogs. In Malta, there are two very popular political blogs, one written by an independent journalist and opinionist who is regarded as a PN sympathizer, and the other written by a PL party member and candidate for the 2018 general election. Being political blogs, their primary aim is to harm their political opponents, especially by posting photos of politicians in unfavourable angles and places (Respondents Four and Nine). According to those who work closely with the leadership of both parties, these types of blogs harm the opposing party because they ‘thwart’ the party’s image (Respondent Two and Four). In turn, this has made politicians aware of their and the party’s identity all the time, where not a moment goes by when they don’t think about how their actions reflect on their respective political party (Respondent Eleven). An example of a political blog post which is thought to harm politicians and their parties’ identities can be found in Appendix III.

On the other hand, while the link between bloggers and their respective party is an obvious one, both the PN and the PL, as institutions, continuously try to distance themselves from all that is written on these blogs. One of the primary reasons for this is that studies have found that these blogs have a harmful effect on political parties and the identity that they try to project. In a PN-commissioned report about the 2013 general election and their historic loss, bloggers were listed amongst the reasons why the PN failed at that election. In particular, the personal and ‘gossipy’ nature of certain blog posts was found to be damaging to the party’s reputation and identity (PN Report, 2013) (Refer to Appendix III for an example). Furthermore, all interviewees argue that blogs are regarded as a mouthpiece of their respective parties, and therefore, anything that is written is perceived to be coming from the political elite, thus exposing parties to false identities, since the content often goes counter to the party strategy. In fact, this is even used as a campaign tactic by the PL, who continuously push forward the idea that the journalist blogger (who has no direct links with the PN) is the ‘PN leader’s blogger’ (Bedingfield, 2016).

However, it is not only bloggers who may impact parties’ identities through what they write online, but also lay people who might be vaguely linked to a political party. For example, during the May Eurovision Song Contest in 2016, a prominent Maltese lawyer tweeted what was perceived as criticism towards the Maltese entry, using derogatory language towards both the singer and the current Labour government. His tweet was reported by many news outlets, and went viral on social media. Since he is associated with the PN, the general perception was that the political party also criticized the Maltese entry, therefore ‘distorting’ the PN’s image (Respondent Two).

Nevertheless, both political parties have learnt to use online comments to their advantage, mainly by employing a group of party activists to create multiple online accounts and comment continuously on social media and online comment boards. Political parties use these ‘online commentators’ to mobilize people online and to display ‘staged’ support for a policy, politician or party (Respondents Four, Six, Eight and Nine). This tactic is especially popular during election time, especially when electoral manifestos are launched and proposed policies start being scrutinized by the media and the general public. In this way, political parties try to control the public perception of the three faces of their identity, and sometimes try to counter online dissent.

In the context of the above findings, it is fair to say that the so-called ‘electronic agora’ (Margolis and Resnick, 2000: 25) has brought about new tools and challenges for political parties. First, the participatory nature of new technologies has meant that parties have to cede more power over the projection and formation of their identity to individual politicians, a theory already posited by Ward et al. (2003). This has exposed cleavages within the same political party, where conflicting ideas are continuously exposed, and as a result, the identity of the party is impacted across its three faces. Nonetheless, Respondent Ten makes an important point on the ‘malleability of a party’s identity’, who suggests that the impact of democratisation (brought about by the Internet) on political parties’ identity is very much dependent on how well the identity is established and ingrained in people’s minds. In fact, through the data collected by interviewing political elites, a common theme emerged, which points towards the PN’s identity being more pliable than that of the PL. Respondents pointed towards events which were considerably influential for both parties, yet the PN seemed to take the biggest hit:

Even when the PL’s parliamentary whip showed dissent [against the PL’s proposed IVF legislation] – which should have had a great impact, I mean, it’s the whip – the PL’s identity remained relatively intact. On the other hand, by gauging the people’s reactions to the news of the [PN-associated] lawyer who vulgarly came out against Malta’s Eurovision entry... that certainly had a great impact on the PN’s identity. And this just goes to show that the effect of the Internet on identity is also dependent on the strength of the identity itself. (Respondent Ten).

Therefore, the strength of the already-established identity seems to play an important role when it comes to the impact of the democratising effect of the Internet.

Furthermore, the Internet has given more power to the people, who no longer have to wait five years to give feedback. Citizens now have direct access to their representatives and can make their complaints and suggestions whenever they want, in the ‘online square’ (Respondent Ten). Thus, it comes as no surprise that politicians and parties are said to be reluctant to take up participatory features of the web, as was posited by Cunah et al. (2003), since it exposes them to a number of vulnerabilities.

However, in this day and age it seems that politicians are left with no choice but to participate and engage online, as otherwise he/she would lose their relevance in the political arena. In fact, in recent years, junior politicians have taken centre-stage with the help of social media, bypassing the traditional political structures and communicating directly with the people (Respondents Six and Eight) and consequently ‘filling niches in cyberspace’ as hypothesized by Ridge-Newman (2014).

4.5 Overview of Findings

The findings outlined above seek to answer the research question outlined in the first chapter of this study: How does technological innovation, in particular the Internet, affect party identity (change)? This chapter has attempted to answer this question in two ways: first by exploring how political parties have adapted to the Internet environment and the impact this adaptation has had on the three faces of their identity, and then, by analysing the consequences of the introduction of the Internet into the political arena.

In the first section, it is clear that the two main political parties in Malta were ‘forced to professionalise’, as was suggested by Harmel and Janda (1994). The demands of the public online inevitably caught up with the political parties, who had to update their identity to fit the new era, as well as allow for the democratisation of their structures. Through this democratisation, political parties expanded their issue uptake practices by taking up ideas presented by the public online (therefore affecting their policy face). Furthermore, the democratisation of the parties’ structures inevitably led to the altering of the parties’ organisational face, although to different extents in both the PL and PN. Finally, the openness brought about by the change in the parties’ structure has led to changes in the parties’ human face, where supporters are no longer considered to be the stereotypical supporters of each party (e.g. the stereotype that only the working class supports the PL).

In the second part of this chapter, the themes of loss of control and vulnerability of party identity as a result of the introduction of the Internet were explored. The loss of control on party identity brought about by the immediacy and openness of the Internet, has led to what Harmel and Janda (2014) called the ‘gradual erosion of the organisation’, or perhaps in this case, of party identity. The findings make it clear that

it is no longer the case where the party is in control of its message and the message that its various members convey to the public. The free access and availability of social media, and the immediacy of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, have made it easier for members from across the party hierarchy to voice their differing opinions, and in turn, present a different identity to that projected by the party leadership. This aspect of party democratisation has exposed cleavages within a party's identity, especially in its human and policy faces. Of course, this inevitably affects the organisational face as well, where a party may seem to go from centralized to fragmented. Nonetheless, as outlined above, the impact of democratisation on a party's identity seems to be dependent on the strength of the already-established party identity. Political parties may, however, use the power of democratisation to their advantage, as displayed by the PL during the Panama Papers saga, where the dissenting MPs kept supporters (who were angered by the news story) close to the party.

Nevertheless, it is not only party members who may affect a party's identity, but also any person with access to the Internet. Blogs and online comments boards have made parties' identities vulnerable since online public scrutiny is more visible than that traditionally done in newspapers or in local squares, and in turn, this has a stronger affect on the public's perception of parties' identities. Furthermore, through blogs and online comments, political parties are prone to being misrepresented by people vaguely associated with the party, and thus risk being attributed false identities. This is the downside of Internet democratisation, although Maltese political parties quickly turned this into an advantage by recruiting a number of avid online commentators to push forward the party's message across online platforms, and consolidate the party's identity online.

CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION

Through the literature review, the selected research methods, and the analysis carried out, this study has sought to understand how technological innovation, in particular the Internet, has affected party identity change. The research process has yielded a number of interesting findings, as discussed in Chapter 4, which shed a light on how political parties are adapting to the Internet and how they have been affected by the challenges that it poses on their identities.

By adapting to the new technological environment, the PN and the PL have not only taken a Darwinian approach to change to meet the challenges of their environment better (Mendilow, 2003), but they have also ‘professionalised’ by ‘reconfiguring themselves organisationally and tactically’ (Gibson and Römmele, 2009: 266). In turn, this has affected the communicative aspect of their identities, where both parties have started to develop and build their messages with digital media in mind. Moreover, political parties now have their own online news portals, which have helped them consolidate their message by bypassing journalists and news organisations. Organisationally, political parties have created specific teams within their structures to accommodate the parties’ social media needs. The PL has even gone a step further to adapt its organisational face to the age of social media by changing the party’s image to a ‘movement’, in order to signify that the party is open to everyone, as is social media.

Nonetheless, the interactivity that underlines the key features of the Internet has also made political parties’ identities vulnerable to criticism and negative comments or attacks. This has led political actors to become more wary of what they communicate, taking into consideration the permanency and the fast manner in which the Internet operates. On the other hand, however, this interactivity has also led to political parties taking up issues or changing existing policy positions due to social media discussions or campaigns. This democratising feature of the Internet confirms that the medium has indeed enhanced representative democracy (as theorized by Bohman, 2004; Gibson et al., 2004; Gimmler, 2001). In addition, the Internet has also democratised political parties, where political actors are now able to bypass the party hierarchy and take

action outside of the traditional political structures. This has inevitably led to political parties loss of control over their own identity, since it has exposed divisions within parties, both within the human face as well as within the policy face. Consequently, the organisational face has also been affected since the party can be perceived as having transformed from centralized to fragmented due to the diverse ideas being presented to the public. Nonetheless, this is not necessarily disadvantageous for a political party, since as outlined in Chapter 4, the PL has benefitted from its members exhibiting diverse views, since diverse opinions within the party have provided supporters with different figures to identify with.

All in all, this case study has provided a number of interesting findings which shed a light on a never before explored phenomena – the Internet’s effect on political party identity. As expected, professionalisation has been a key driver of party identity change in both the PN and PL, especially when it comes to communicating a new or changed policy face, organisational face or human face. Nonetheless, democratisation (as a result of the Internet) has been an equally powerful driver of change within all three faces of political parties’ identities, but especially within the organisational face due to the platform that the Internet has provided to members found at the lower levels of the party hierarchy (which has also to some extent led to the disintegration of political parties). It is this capacity that the Internet has created that has changed the way the political world operates.

This insight into the interaction between the Internet and political party identity not only adds to the volume of literature on the Internet’s effect on politics, but also gives a better understanding of its use and effect in the political arena in a highly polarized country such as Malta. In light of the findings of this study, it would be useful if future research explored the Internet’s effect on political parties in other countries, in order to test the generalizability of these findings, while also update them. In 2006, Lev Grossman (writer for TIME magazine) described Web 2.0 as a ‘massive social experiment’, and ten years later, the experiment is still incomplete. If technologies are constantly evolving, so are parties and their identities, and therefore the researcher hopes that this study can serve as a foundation for future researchers who aim at analysing the complex relationship between political parties’ identities and the Internet.

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APPENDIX I – LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Respondent One – Senior government² official, communications department.

Respondent Two – Senior party official, communications department, PN.

Respondent Three – Senior party official, office of the leader of the opposition, PN.

Respondent Four – Senior government official, office of the Prime Minister.

Respondent Five – Government Minister.

Respondent Six – Member of Parliament.

Respondent Seven – Senior Journalist, State Broadcaster.

Respondent Eight – Senior Journalist – PN media.

Respondent Nine – Senior Journalist – PL media.

Respondent Ten – Digital Editor, Independent media.

Respondent Eleven – Blogger and party candidate, PL.

All interviews were held between the 9th of June 2016 and the 19th of July 2016 in Malta.

² All government officials interviewed held top positions within the *Partit Laburista* (PL) before the 2013 general election, and still do, whether directly or indirectly.

APPENDIX II – MAIN INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- What do you understand by party identity?
- Do you think a party's identity changes? If yes, what influences it to change?
Do you think the Internet plays a role in changing a party's identity?
- In what ways has the Internet affected party identity?
- In your opinion, does the Internet help or encourage individual party members to go against the official party line, or does it make no difference at all?
- Who is shaping party identity nowadays?
- Since the advent of the Internet, social media in particular, there have been many party members who have written something against the party line on Facebook or Twitter. How is this tackled from the party's point of view?
- What are your thoughts on political blogs?

Questions were changed depending on who was interviewed, and follow-up questions were asked.

APPENDIX III – EXAMPLE OF A POLITICAL BLOG POST

Economy Minister at The Stable last night with woman, 50, in hot-pants

[« back to home](#)

PUBLISHED: JUNE 22, 2016 AT 10:56AM

[Share](#) 5586 [Tweet](#) 34

The Minister for the Economy and newly elected Labour Party deputy leader, Chris Cardona, was at The Stable bar in Sappers Street, Valletta, yet again at 10.30/11 last night, with a non-Maltese woman of around 50, who had bleached hair and wore hot-pants.

"She looked like a tramp," an eyewitness said. "The Minister was using foul language and this woman had her arm around him. The place was full of sleazy guys who were smoking indoors and who didn't seem to be up to anything good. The atmosphere seemed quite intimate in a bad way."

"At one point this woman's hand was around the Economy Minister's waist with her fingers slightly tucked into his waistband from behind. He seemed quite paranoid when he saw me looking. It all looked so wrong."

(Posts are usually accompanied by photos)