THE ELECTION ALARM CLOCK:
PROJECT EVALUATION
The Election Alarm Clock Project Evaluation

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by

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for

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Overview: The Election Alarm Clock

The Election Alarm Clock is a website which lets users sign up for an email or SMS reminder about to register to vote as well as when to vote. Funded by the Electoral Commission’s New Initiatives fund through the London Borough of Lambeth (who contributed staff time in lieu of funds) the project was to trial the website in the run up to the May 2006 local elections. The key aims were to encourage young (17-34) transient voters to register to vote and to vote.

Initial work on the project began in October 2005 with supplier Delib presenting the software they had developed which could provide an election reminder service via email or SMS. Lambeth decided to pilot the software with support from the Electoral Commission and a site was launched at the end of February 2006.

To drive traffic to the Election Alarm Clock (EAC) site 2,000 postcards were spread around the Borough along with posters and some press work. A viral game, Elejumper, which linked back to the EAC was marketed around the Internet. Once on the site visitors were encouraged to register by the chance of winning an iPod Shuffle music device. Registered users would receive email and/or SMS messages about registering to vote, registering for a postal vote and polling day itself.

Methodology

Site visitor statistics are based on analysis of Apache log files provided by Delib for March until June 2006. The log files were processed using Urchin 5.7.03. Urchin automatically adjusts visitor numbers for accesses by search engines and other robots.

208 registered EAC users were emailed with a follow-up survey and an announcement of who had won the iPod Shuffle. The follow-up survey also gave participants a second opportunity to win an iPod Shuffle if they provided their email addresses on completion. There were 41 participants who responded to some or all of the follow up survey which was hosted by Delib on their consultation tool CitizenSpace.

A selection of council staff and youth council members who hadn’t registered to use the site were asked to use the EAC website and answer questions to provide insight into how the site might be perceived by new users. They were observed as they navigated the site. Staff from Lambeth Electoral Services and Delib were interviewed to provide background information and their perspectives on the project.
Increasing Awareness

Election Alarm Clock Goal:
To increase awareness and/or understanding of elections and government applicable in the UK.

To raise awareness of elections and government amongst its visitors the EAC site had two key pages. One, the election information page, discussed the mechanics of and eligibility rules for electoral registration. The second page presented upcoming electoral registration and election dates. These pages were provided in a generic national version as well as in Lambeth specific versions.

In total an election information page (title “How and why vote”) of some form was viewed 515 times with the Lambeth specific election information page being viewed 136 times.

All versions of the election dates page (title “Upcoming election dates”) were viewed 646 times with the Lambeth specific election dates being viewed 177 times.

Page views for Lambeth-specific Election Dates and Information pages, early 2006
(Source: Log files supplied by Delib)
It is interesting to note that the number of visits to the election dates page tailed off more slowly, perhaps showing that in May as the election approached people used the site to double-check when to vote.

Of three respondents to the follow-up survey who answered the relevant section, all had been aware of electoral registrations before visiting the site but one still found that the EAC site helped them to learn more about elections and/or government activities.

Clearly a web page alone isn’t going to have spectacular results. But these informational pages were used and if the overall numbers visiting the EAC could be boosted then the number of people benefiting from the electoral information will only increase.
Promoting Elections

Election Alarm Clock Goal

To promote electoral registration amongst the 17 to 34 age demographic through the use of new technologies

It’s extremely difficult to claim direct causality between use of the EAC site and changes in the numbers registered to vote. So many factors are at play including population shifts, national publicity and local activism which can all contribute to greater numbers on the register. Nevertheless it can only be welcomed that the numbers on Lambeth’s register have grown 6,396 between January and May 2006.

The register itself does not have data to indicate whether newly registered voters were the target 18-34 demographic the EAC aimed to reach. However optional demographic fields provided during the EAC signup procedure reveals that of 36 Lambeth registrants completing the fields 72% were in the 18-35 age group indicating some success in reaching the target demographic. For the national site 65% of those providing demographic information were 18-35. Of the 36 Lambeth registrations 44% were ethnicities other than White.
British and White Irish. Across the entire EAC site, of 161 participants providing ethnicity, 38% were not White British or White Irish\(^1\).

While numbers answering relevant follow-up questions were very low it’s interesting to note that of 3 answers 2 registered because “I feel strongly about voting and wanted to make sure I didn’t miss an election” and the other registered as “I wasn’t sure about voter registration and didn’t want to miss the deadline”.

Non-users of the EAC site generally felt that the site was useful although most wouldn’t use it themselves as it currently stood. Almost every person surveyed felt that the site should have more information about candidates and manifestos as well as links to political sites. This indicates that there is demand for online election-related information and if an election-related site is going to be visited they want to make the most of their time there.

Usage of election-related sites by the youth demographic has to be considered in the context that much of their Internet access is time-limited in cafes and libraries. Taking the time to visit an elections site out of their limited online allotment has to be seen as worthwhile. This probably reinforces their desire for a one-stop election site.

In fact during the 2006 election Lambeth saw a site of that type run by volunteers, electionmemory.com, which brought together fairly comprehensive candidate and party manifesto information into one place along with discussions. However the problems of libel and limited resources raise many questions of how such a resource could be provided by a local authority or government.

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\(^{1}\) If one includes Other White with British and Irish then the proportion of BME registrants becomes 36% for Lambeth and 32% for the national site.
Promoting Turnout

_Election Alarm Clock Goal:_

_To promote voter turnout amongst the 18 to 34 age demographic through the use of new technologies_

Turnout did rise in the 2006 election to 30.43% from 26% in 2002. In 1998 Lambeth’s turnout was 32% so unfortunately previous losses have not been regained. Nevertheless any gain should be cause for celebration but it would be impossible to say what part the EAC site played in this gain.

As noted in the previous section 72% of participants providing demographic information were in the target age group of 18-35. This is encouraging however when members the Lambeth Youth Council were surveyed on the site, they seemed ambivalent. While they liked the site they felt unlikely to use it either because they only checked email occasionally in a café and didn’t want SMS coming through or because they felt that it’s easy to tell when to vote due to the media coverage.

There are many steps to getting someone to vote or to visit a website. In the case of the EAC site the following process must be followed before a registered user is created:

1. Disinterest to interest
   _The person must care enough to spend time on something voting related._

2. Offline to online
   _Internet access must be available and the person must have time/money to use it._

3. Somewhere online (e.g. Yahoo Music) to the Election Alarm Clock site
   _Of all the sites on the Internet the EAC site must be found, clicked into or its address typed in._

4. Unregistered to Registered user
   _Once having reached the EAC site the person must be convinced to fill out the form to register._

Of course, as with all marketing, people will be lost on the wayside so that only a fraction of those originally interested will ever register. Similarly not all those who register to vote actually cast their vote. Yet by encouraging people to register, that vital precursor is met, thereby increasing the numbers of people who might vote. It is ambitious to expect the EAC to have any further impact on turnout beyond increasing registrations.
Nevertheless visits to the site clearly dipped but continued well past the close of the electoral register prior to the May 2006 elections.

Page views on the entire EAC site and the Lambeth EAC site, early 2006
(Source: Log files supplied by Delib)
Effectiveness

From March to June 2006 11,741 pages were viewed on the EAC site in approximately 2,750 sessions. 208 people signed up for reminders with 43 specifically in Lambeth. Thus overall the conversion ratio for the site was 8%

The flyer used to promote the EAC site

Driving people to the site

Only 6.4% of traffic to ElectionAlarmClock.com was from people clicking links on other websites. The top provider of visitors was i-am-bored.com a youth site filled with humorous links which provided 158 visitors. All the other referrers combined only provided 12 visitors and so do not warrant analysis. The Lambeth council website was not logged as a referrer.
Of particular note is the very low amount of traffic from search engines. The only search engine to send visitors to the EAC was Google UK which provided 3 visitors all of whom searched for electionalarmclock.com and thus probably typed it into a search box in error. In fact, as far as the logs show, none of the major search engines visited the EAC site to index it. In fact it can take quite some time for new sites to be included in search engine indexes. Because of the huge number of sites already online and the large number constantly appearing, it takes a while for the indexing software to get around to a site. Even once indexed it can take more time for a site to rise to it’s rightful position in the search results, over other less relevant sites.

A Lexis-Nexis search of all UK newspapers revealed no mention of the Election Alarm Clock site in the past seven months. A Google search reveals the appearance of a press release on a few specialist e-government sites, in
total 7 sites link to the EAC site though this is not comprehensive e.g. the Lambeth site does link to the EAC but is not listed by Google.

2,000 postcards and some flyers promoting the EAC site were distributed in the Lambeth area, a few non-users and users recalled seeing them in cafes and bars.

**Keeping people on the site**

82% of visitors to the Lambeth site entered through the main page (electionalarmclock.com/lambeth). 42% of visitors ‘bounced’ from this main Lambeth page to other websites. In other words they viewed that page and didn’t visit any other parts of the site. Large, busy websites can expect a bounce rate of 10-20% on their home page. The bounce rate for the main page of the EAC site (i.e. non-borough specific) was 48%.

Of course one would always like to see the lowest bounce rate possible. However the EAC site had a very specific proposition which was communicated and delivered essentially in the first page. A user didn’t need to dig through pages upon pages to understand the site and if the idea of reminders didn’t attract there really wasn’t much else to do on the site. This in a sense is all confirmation of the admirable focus put into the EAC’s construction. Many of the non-users surveyed expected the site to do more but this should be taken less as a criticism of the EAC but more as a wider challenge about providing easy information in the run up to an election. It’s quite possible that the EAC site would have been the only election-related website people had visited, if so, it’s understandable that they wanted to make the most out of it. As will be discussed later, perhaps the way to meet more users needs, and reduce the proportion of users bouncing right out of the site, is to integrate the EAC into something with a wider remit.
Usability & Design

Aside from what the site did one aspect which can be changed is the design and implementation of the site. Could the layout of links and buttons have been more conducive to users? Was the design style off-putting?

Amongst the 7 registered users who rated the site’s design in the follow-up survey, the average score was 1.7 out of 5 with the modal score being 1. However among non-users the average score was 3.33 out of 5 with the modal score being 3. Registered users offered no ideas on improving the design however surveyed non-users (particularly from the youth council) felt that the design was a bit young. Respondents wanted a more funky,
bold design which was more clearly from the government. Also many questioned the relevance of the items on the desk to elections. The signup form was very easy to use, though many felt that the privacy policy should have been more explicit about the long term use of their details.

It was noticeable when watching non-users first access the site that they had trouble navigating the site. While it was clear to them how to sign up, they often clicked on the coloured bubbles instead of the links when trying to access further information.

Also frequently missed was the menu along the bottom of the page. The following graphic shows the click-through percentage for the links on the Lambeth EAC homepage. The low percentages at the bottom highlight the problem with the menu navigation. The figures are calculated as a percentage of all the pages visited from the home page, including ones not on the EAC site.
Thus while it was very clear to testers and users how sign up to the service, the other aspects of the site were not well appreciated. In particular, if the menu had been moved to the top of the screen it is likely that some of the visitors who immediately left the site may have instead been drawn further in by the additional options.

Overall the simplicity and clarity of the EAC website deserve praise and the above comments should be taken as being about improving from the solid foundations the current site presents.
Branding

Users and non-users both felt that the EAC site could have been more clearly identified as a governmental site. There was no strong feeling over whether it should be a locally versus a nationally run and branded site. Of course it was expected that the information provided be customised to the user’s location but as long as the provider was ‘government’ then the specifics were less important to those asked. Hence there is nothing to suggest that having a single centralised EAC service would be detrimental to adoption of the service by the target demographic. Indeed centralising to a single service would most likely make marketing and promotion much easier.

The Elejumper Game

According to the logs the game was accessed 716 times, though it was played more times than that as the top score file was accessed 1,364 times. The function to send the game to a friend was accessed only 4 times.

The key goal of the Elejumper game was to draw target demographic users to the EAC site. However 35% of visitors to the game were from the rest of the EAC site, not new users in other words. 54% of visitors to the game left the EAC site from that page while another 20% went into the main EAC site from the game. Of all people visiting the game page 7.3% clicked directly into Lambeth specific pages.

Comments from non-users were cautiously positive about the game. It had clear text and links encouraging people to visit the EAC site. It was noted that every tester first tried controlling the elephant with their mouse before realising that they needed to use the keyboard. A few testers felt the game was a bit young and cute for 18-35 year olds. One tester suggested that users should have been able to sign up to the Election Alarm Clock service from within the game, which seems perfectly reasonable considering that a high-score signup form was already available within the game. Another tester commented that the game should have been included in emails instead of having been on a website. This would create the potential for a viral game with alarm clock functionality signup built-in, eliminating the jump from the game to the site which lost many potential users.

The game did not prove to be a massive draw on traffic but it certainly contributed. Only one person of all those surveyed felt that politics should be serious and that the game wasn’t suitable. Otherwise feedback was positive and with additional marketing on youth websites and via email such a game could make even larger contributions to the success of an EAC type website.
Value

As an initial trial of the Election Alarm Clock concept Lambeth are pleased with what can be learnt from the project. There’s no doubt that the initial targets set for the project were ambitious given the timescale that became necessary. Putting aside absolute numbers of visits the EAC project raises interesting challenges and questions.

Without a large (or even medium) marketing budget how can the target demographic be effectively encouraged to visit such a site? We have seen that a few thousand postcards placed with care in the more ethnic parts of Lambeth did have some impact, how could that be built upon? Lambeth staff who helped distribute the material noted that many café and shop owners were keen to support anything that encouraged young people to vote. Members of the community recognise the importance of voting and perhaps could be tapped further in encouraging younger people to vote.

The other challenge is that because Lambeth.gov.uk is not youth-orientated and has a fixed fairly bland design, the EAC needed to be a separate website. This means a different web address for people to remember which is a further marketing challenge. The main Lambeth website is limited in how much traffic it can drive, particularly from the youth demographic, and will only provide front page links to the EAC for a short time period before an election.

The Lambeth team certainly feel that there is a place for an email and SMS based reminder tool for important election dates and this project supports that view. Younger people who tend not to be registered are more likely to respond to this kind of tool. The questions that remain are around whether marketing a separate site for the tool can deliver viable take-up rates. This issue will be explored further in the conclusion.
Conclusion

Firstly a point of feedback on the pilot process itself. For a small company like Delib the official government procurement process proved arduous and time consuming as it did for the Lambeth Electoral Services staff. As a result the customised EAC site for Lambeth was launched right at the end of February, 10 days before the electoral register was due to close. Allowing small companies to participate in pilots should be encouraged and so anything to make their participation less burdensome should also be encouraged.

There can be no doubt that this pilot has contributed significantly to the knowledge and experience of e-democracy practitioners in using the Internet to boost voter registration. The concept of an Election Alarm Clock is a good one. The low numbers should not be disheartening, they reflect more on marketing issues than failings in the key concept.

While one can debate the principle of offering prizes for participating in democratic activities, many thought the idea of offering a prize to register on the EAC site was a good one but that there needed to be more prizes of greater value. The game and the site both needed to be more widely promoted through links on other websites, search engine indexes and through offline media. This kind of marketing is very expensive however and one must question whether it is worthwhile encouraging the public to remember to visit what is effectively a single-use website. Whether the EAC needs a dedicated website is the fundamental question which emerges from this evaluation.

As a tool an Election Alarm Clock is a wonderful idea. However it is only one tool in the ever expanding e-democracy toolkit. Thus one must ask, does this one tool need its own website and the dedicated marketing such a site entails? Perhaps mobile numbers and emails should be collected when registering for any council service to enable reminder messages to be sent without any further sign-up by voters.

Given the many requests for additional information on candidates and manifestos that were seen in the surveys, it seems that a site with a broader remit is required. Such as site could be formulated in many ways — as part of local council sites, as an Electoral Commission project, part of DirectGov or as a stand-alone portal — respondents certainly cited no preference for a locally branded service as long as the information provided was accurate. Given our increasingly mobile electorate and the resources required there are good reasons for creating a national elections site which tools such as the EAC as well as candidate information. Local authorities
would be able to link into such a site without facing the burdens of maintaining the information or the technology supporting the site.

Whatever the next step and the next site to be built for elections in the UK, what is certain is that the Election Alarm Clock will be a part of this new site in one way or another. The Alarm Clock is here to stay.

Some thoughts on dissemination

With the difficulties and costs apparent in marketing separate and micro websites, especially for local authorities, there may be some merit in addressing this issue. The LGA and IDeA could perhaps reinforce guidance which encourages councils to minimise the creation of new websites each of which may need separate marketing budgets.

Overall however the most productive output from this pilot would be to hold a seminar or one day conference on how to develop, support and maintain a national elections portal which would include Election Alarm Clock functionality as well as a wide range of other election related materials.
Resources

The main site http://www.electionalarmclock.com
The Lambeth specific site http://www.electionalarmclock.com/lambeth

Example email sent to registered users to remind them about postal voting

From: hannah.smith@teamrubber.com
Subject: Postal Vote Election Reminder
Date: 13 April 2006 12:59:48 BDT
Reply-To: support@electionalarmclock.com

Hi there,

Local elections are taking place on May 4th this year. This is a quick reminder to check to see if you want to sign up for a postal vote, as the deadline is April 18th.

Signing up for a postal vote is easy:

Simply download the relevant form from the Lambeth Council website and send this to the Council Electoral Services department before the deadline (April 18th).

The postal form can be downloaded here:

The address to send the form to is:
Electoral Services
Room 26
Lambeth Town Hall
London, SW2 1RW
If you are unsure about anything, then call Lambeth Electoral services on: 020 7926 2685 or 020 7926 2144, or email them at: electoralservices@lambeth.gov.uk

If you think a friend or colleague may want to sign up for a postal vote, please forward this information on to them.

Kind regards

The Election Alarm Clock team

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To contact the team direct, email: support@electionalarmclock.com
To unregister, email: support@electionalarmclock.com with "Election Alarm Clock" in the title, and your name.

**Follow-Up Survey: Registered Users**

Viewable online at:
http://citizenspace.com/local/consult/electionalarmclock/

**Follow-Up Survey: Non-Users**

Setup: Explain basics of what is going to happen. Note demographic and ask how confident with the Internet.

1. Are you registered to vote?

2. Did you vote? (If no, why not?)

3. Is the purpose of the site clear?

4. How do you rate the design? (1-5)

5. How could it be improved?

6. How do you rate the content? (1-5)
7. How could it be improved?

8. Would you use the site for reminders?

9. Why would/wouldn’t you use the site?

10. Do you think the game will help people come to the site?

11. Marketing ideas?