

Political arena enters cyberspace

Blogs and web pages may play pivotal role in Barcelona mayoral elections

BRADEN PHILLIPS

Depending on who you ask, the internet is either the star medium in this year's mayoral election campaign or a new tool of uncertain value. One thing is certain, the internet has never had such a major presence in Catalonia's political process.

Every candidate in the race for Barcelona mayor has a web page and blog, which local newspapers have picked up, introducing an online dimension to the campaign.

For Xavier Trias, candidate of the centre-right CiU Party, the internet cannot be ignored, which is not the same as a firm endorsement.

"All the candidates are using the internet, but I don't know how much influence it really has," he says.

Trias is right; objectively speaking, no one knows for sure.

"A serious study on the political impact of blogs has yet to be done," says Daniel Ureña, partner at Madrid's Mas Consulting Group España. "But they are very positive because they allow more direct contact."

Antoni Gutiérrez-Rubí, a communications consultant in Barcelona, goes even further in his assessment of the internet's role.

"For the first time ever, the internet will be decisive in Catalan elections," he says.

Gutiérrez-Rubí bases his contention on the social networks built up by bloggers, a contin-



A screen shot of candidate videos on La Vanguardia's web site

gent of political insiders, journalists and junkies, many of whom have a disproportionate influence on voters. Taken as a whole, he says, these networks add up to a critical mass of opinion.

Moreover, for the candidate himself, a blog forces a refinement of the message.

"Online communication improves politics," he says.

In response to the doubts of candidates like Trias, Gutiérrez-Rubí adds that blogs often end up in the major newspapers, especially in the event of a gaffe of some kind.

Neither Ureña nor Gutiérrez-Rubí sees any one candidate taking better advantage of the internet, but Ureña makes a distinction between Catalonia and most of the rest of Spain.

"There are still not many candidates doing blogs; in Catalonia politicians are farther along," he says.

For Ureña the model blog by a politician is webcameron.org, the brainchild of David Cameron, leader of Britain's Conservative Party.

"His party had an image practically of dinosaurs," he says. "Not anymore."

LONG-TERM RESIDENT

Tita in denial



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I have been watching the neuronically-challenged status junky that goes by

the name of Carmen "Tita" Cervera for years. We all have. Ever since she crawled out of her B-movie acting career into the European aristocracy, via her 1982 marriage to the art-loving Baron Hans-Heinrich 'Heini' Thyssen-Bornemisza, the Spanish media set about converting Tita into the National Institution she now is, and with a heavily capitalised N: when she allowed just 75 of her and Heini's 1,300

paintings to be permanently exhibited in Barcelona, she stipulated they would be whisked back to Madrid if Catalonia became independent (prompting some Catalans to remark it was surely no coincidence that 'tita' means 'prick' in their language).

Well, the whistle on the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection has just been blown, with the recent revelation that Heini's inherited fortune was made on the backs of 10,000

slave labourers provided by the Nazis, whose favours his family fervently curried: in 1945, Heini's sister Margit hosted a party for the SS at the family castle, at which her guests were invited to hunt down 200 half-starved Jewish prisoners.

Even the 'donation' of Tita and Heini's partially-looted collection to Spain turns out to have been a fraud: we taxpayers chipped in 600 million dollars for what is, in effect, little more than a long-term loan. Tita has recently been

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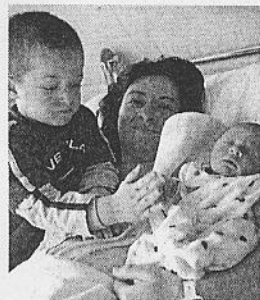
back in the Spanish press. To apologise for her late husband's ghastly past? No, to trumpet the fact that she has saved the trees that line Madrid's Paseo del Prado from being cut down. Tears welled up in her eyes as she announced this victory, blinding her, presumably, to the ghosts of 200 murdered Jews scuttling from trunk to trunk, still trying to dodge the bullets of her sister-in-law's Nazi friends.

Catalonia's demographic boom hits an unprecedented high

CATALONIA TODAY

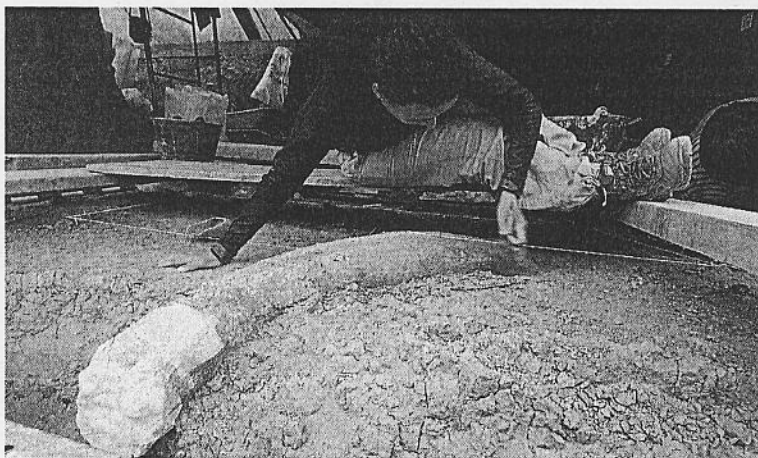
From 2001 to 2006 Catalonia has undergone an unprecedented demographic change, reflecting the continuous arrival of migrants from abroad, who have also contributed to a bounce in the birth rate. The population grew by 800,000 in the recent five-year period, a figure that exceeds the population boom of 1966 to 1977, when Catalonia grew by 700,000, a result of the influx of migrant workers from the south of Spain. Catalonia ended 2006 with 7.1 million inhabitants, a figure which has now reached 7.2 million due to the uninterrupted arrival of newcomers.

In Spain as a whole, the phenomenon is similar, with a rise in the population of three million from 2001 to 2006, due ex-



A new Catalan baby boom partly accounts for the population increase

clusively to immigration. The Spanish case represents a significant break with the past, since Spain traditionally had large numbers of its population migrate to other parts of Europe in search of work, which was never the case for Catalonia.



Tusk and tools in Tarragona tell ancient tale

Archeologists in La Boella, in Camp de Tarragona, recently discovered a million-year-old mammoth tusk and flint tools, evidence of a feast in which sections of the giant animal were carried off to other locations. The discovery, made possible by the recent rains, is one of few made so far that confirm the migration of human groups from Africa into Europe at such an early time./EFE