

The Electoral Challenge
Theory Meets Practice

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candidate's character and values. The uproar also showed a lot about how Obama responds to a crisis—very well, it turned out. Voters don't make up their minds based on blank paper. They want to know what the candidate is like, and how he or she behaves and responds under pressure. When a focus group of undecided Tampa Bay voters was convened during the final months of the presidential election, we learned that John McCain's erratic reaction to the financial meltdown hurt his standing, while Obama's response helped him. Group participants, by the way, were overwhelmingly turned off by the rancor and overtly partisan brand of politics so often on display on certain cable outlets and talk radio shows (and when we reconvened the group in January 2010, the turbulent town hall meetings held during the previous summer could be added to the list).

Elections in America's largest battleground state are still decided by those in the middle—swing voters and independents who are hungry for credible and reliable news sources. As long as that's the case, and I'm doing my job by helping them to better understand their world, I feel very upbeat about my business. Before I get to that, however, I'd better find something new to blog.

¹See www.factcheck.org/2009/08/palin-vs-obama-death-panels.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the speech and Obama's strategy in responding to the public controversy, see Hollihan (2010).

2. This agreement, reached in 1989, allowed the *News* and *Free Press* to merge their printing, advertising, and circulation operations while maintaining the independence of their newsgathering and editorial staffs. The circulation declines at both newspapers continued, however, and in 1998, the *Free Press* staff moved into the same building with the staff of the *News* (Vaughn 2008). The joint-operating agreement changed further when Gannett, which had owned the *News*, acquired the *Free Press* from Knight Ridder in 2005. The *News* agreed to join the *Free Press* in putting out a morning edition, and the two papers, which had been publishing joint editions on the weekend, decided that there would be two separate papers on Saturday but that only the *Free Press* would publish on Sunday.

3. See <http://teabagparty.org>.

8 Campaigning in the Internet Age

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The 2008 presidential campaign of Barack Obama set a new high-water mark for use of the Internet in election campaigns. Obama astonished most observers by raising approximately half a billion dollars online, much of it through small donations (Balz and Johnson 2009, 366). This achievement enabled Obama to forgo public financing for the campaign and the spending limits that would have come with it (Luo 2009). Obama's Facebook page registered more supporters than any other candidate—approximately 3.2 million by November 2008—thereby giving the campaign access to an expansive online social network (Vargas 2008). Viral videos² championing Obama's candidacy, such as the "Yes We Can" collage organized by performing artist will.i.am, were downloaded millions of times, providing the campaign with valuable, free advertising (Wallsten 2009). These and other factors led some observers to agree with the journalist Arianna Huffington (2008), who proclaimed that "were it not for the Internet, Barack Obama would not be president." Indeed, the 2008 election helped to do for the Internet what the 1960 election did for television: legitimize its role and demonstrate its potential.

Since the embryonic efforts of the Clinton-Gore campaign to use the Internet in 1992, campaign professionals and their candidates have sought to harness the power of the Web to win elections (Chadwick 2006, 131). Candidates started creating Web pages in the mid-1990s, though the Internet did not begin to show its significant fundraising potential until John McCain's campaign utilized it in McCain's bid for the 2000 Republican presidential nomination (Bimber and Davis 2003). Democrat Howard Dean was perhaps the first candidate to integrate the Internet extensively with the logistics of a campaign, but his loss in the 2004 Iowa caucuses and subsequent withdrawal from the presidential contest that year cast a shadow on this achievement (Hindman 2005). However, Obama's decisive victory in 2008, as well as the tremendously visible role that the Internet played overall in the election that year, left potential candidates clamoring for ways to make the Internet work better for them.

In light of recent expansions in the use of the Internet in the electoral process, it is important to ask how the development and diffusion of online technologies have affected the practices and outcomes of campaigns. The past few years have witnessed the proliferation of handheld wireless devices, the growth of online social networks, and the intertwining of the Internet with everyday life. These developments collectively have been dubbed "Web 2.0," which refers to Internet applications that facilitate interactivity and collaboration (Chadwick 2009). It is tempting to assume that these changes have transformed every aspect of modern campaigning; after all, the 2008 presidential election was won by the candidate with the strongest Internet presence. Yet that candidate also was challenging the party of an outgoing president with low approval ratings, was opposed to an unpopular war, and was running during a period of economic hardship. Such conditions historically have prompted rhetoric calling for change and the replacement of an incumbent party (Abramowitz 2008). Thus, while campaigns are increasingly using the Internet, they may do so in ways that simply extend established formats, leaving campaigns working today much as they have for the past fifty years. To understand how the Internet has affected campaigning, it is necessary to differentiate between where it has altered the organizational practices of campaigns and where it has been compatible with traditional practices.

In this chapter we assess how the Internet has and has not influenced the practices and outcomes of campaigns. We do so by focusing on four inter-related aspects of the Internet: (1) low marginal costs of communication, (2) decentralization, (3) digital social networks, and (4) rapid technological change. In some ways these four factors have the ability to alter campaigns noticeably, but in other ways they exert little or no effect. We discuss how these aspects matter for campaign organizations, the media, and the electorate. We then look forward to the 2010 and 2012 elections to consider how the Internet might make a difference in coming years.

Low Marginal Costs of Communication

Communicating through the Internet brings the marginal cost of sending information close to zero. Once a single copy of a document, graphic, or video is produced, it can be distributed widely at little cost since printing and postage is not required. The only marginal costs incurred come from responding to feedback from recipients and from server capacity to handle the requested downloads of the material. Costs are low both for candidates, who wish to

distribute information about their campaigns, and for their potential supporters, who can communicate with the campaign instantly at any time of the day or night without leaving the house or even using a stamp. What are the implications of this cost structure for campaigns?

The low costs of Internet communication only matter for campaigns if the Internet actually allows them to reach potential supporters. Consistent with this need, recent surveys show that the Internet's audience is expanding. According to a 2009 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center,³ nearly three-quarters of Internet users in the United States (representing 55 percent of the adult population) went online to get information about or to discuss the 2008 election (A. Smith 2009, 3).⁴ Although traditional media outlets are still the dominant sources of political news, an increasing proportion of voters are learning about politics through the Internet (A. Smith 2009, 6). Indeed, the audience is there—but can campaigns connect with it?

One problem with reaching audiences through the Internet is that viewership is self-selective. In one study of media use, Stroud (2008) found that individuals choose the political content of the material they view on the Web partly based on their own ideology and partisanship (see also Baum and Groeling 2008). This finding suggests that when candidates reach out through the Internet, they more often connect with likely supporters than with genuinely undecided voters. Thus, the Internet has more potential as a tool for organizing and mobilizing than it has as a tool for persuading (but see Davis et al. 2008). However, ideological self-selection only accounts for a portion of people's viewing behavior on the Internet; other viewing choices may be made based on other factors, or through "surfing," which has the potential to expose nonsupporters to campaign materials. Further, Stroud's (2008) findings show that choices about other media (such as newspapers, talk radio, and cable news) are similarly selected partly on the basis of ideology. If campaigns confront a self-selected audience on the Web, the same is true for almost any other media outlet in which they might choose to advertise or otherwise communicate with voters.

Regardless of whether campaigns are reaching out to their core supporters or to potentially undecided voters, however, the low marginal cost of Internet communication has three principal implications for campaigns. First, campaigns have incentives to post as much content online about their candidate as possible. Second, campaigns can expect greater efficiency in fundraising through the Internet than through traditional means. Third, the low cost of communication over the Internet brings with it a broader, more diverse audience that is able to participate actively in campaigns.

Expanded information about candidates is a first implication of the low marginal cost of publishing information on the Web. Virtually all candidates in congressional campaigns publish material to a Web page, regardless of whether or not they are engaged in a competitive election (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2009a). In contrast, many campaigns never use television or radio advertising if the competitiveness of the race does not call for it. Beyond posting "brochureware" materials on their Web pages, candidates often make their pages interactive through blogging and by accommodating user comments (Chadwick 2006). Political advertising is increasingly moving to the Web, as "the Internet is an extremely cost-effective medium when compared with its traditional counterparts" (Institute for Politics, Democracy, and the Internet 2008, 1). Campaigns can take made-for-television commercials and distribute them for free on YouTube (Gueorguieva 2008; Gulati and Williams 2009). Or they may benefit when Web advertising earns attention from major media outlets (Lipinski and Neddenriep 2004). The fact that Internet advertising is cost-effective, though, does not imply that it necessarily is inexpensive. Campaigns are well advised to match their online expenditures to what they have become accustomed to spending offline, and to develop an online media strategy in conjunction with an offline strategy (Institute for Politics, Democracy, and the Internet 2008).

As candidates publish more material online, some scholars have speculated that the new medium may affect the content of what they post. One hypothesis is that a shift to low-cost online advertising will exacerbate trends toward negativity in political advertising (Klotz 2003; Schweitzer 2009). Counter to this view, Druckman and colleagues (2009b) provided evidence that candidates go negative on the Web with about the same likelihood that they go negative in traditional media. Thus, the degree of negativity is one area where campaigns do *not* appear to have been affected by the rise of the Internet. Nonetheless, the nature of the information that candidates espouse about their issue positions may change in an online environment. Sulkin, Moriarty, and Hefner (2007) reported that competing candidates' issue positions in online discourse are less likely to converge to similar positions than they are in offline discourse; in other words, candidates appear to make less of an effort to appeal to the median voter online. This result is consistent with the view that Internet communication promotes more issue-driven campaign politics (Bimber 1998).

A second implication of the low marginal cost of Internet communication is that it is vital to making the Internet a bountiful fundraising tool. Traditional fundraising methods are expensive for both candidates and contributors. If a

candidate stages a fundraising event, then a certain percentage of the funds raised must pay for the cost of the event. Contributors must make a minimum contribution and plan to attend the event. Direct mail must be sent to a large number of noncontributors to reach those who *will* give, and it requires that people who want to contribute receive the solicitation and have it in hand at the time that they want to donate. In contrast, receiving contributions via the Internet requires few overhead costs for the campaign. Mailings are not sent to people who will never give, and contributors need only have an Internet connection and their credit card handy. Thus, by greatly reducing the transaction cost of fundraising, the Internet expands the base of contributors to include people who are unable or unwilling to pay those transaction costs, namely small donors. Techniques for raising money in this way have proved effective not only at the national level, but also among candidates in state-level races (Rackaway 2007).

The shift to small donors may have a "profound impact on who contributes, and how they become involved in politics" (Wilcox 2008, 1). The Internet helps to "engage people who in the past would not have participated, due to time constraints, geographical and transportation issues, and personal inclination" (Vaccari 2008, 658). Many of these new participants are younger and less affluent (Wilcox 2008). This shift gives an advantage to outsider candidates, such as Rep. Ron Paul (R-Texas), who raised millions of dollars through the Internet during his 2008 campaign for president at a time when he was showing less than 1 percent support among Republicans nationwide (Wilcox 2008, 1).

While Internet fundraising did not win the Republican presidential nomination for Ron Paul, it did allow Barack Obama to gain leverage vis-à-vis Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primaries. Senator Clinton's long association with Democratic Party elites gave her extensive access to large donors that Obama did not have. However, by raising money on the Internet, Obama was able to compete with Clinton throughout 2007, leaving him in a strong position when the Democratic primaries and caucuses got under way in 2008. These examples support the view that Internet fundraising has the potential to alter which candidates are competitive at the nomination phase.

A third implication of the low cost of communication over the Internet is that it is now easier to organize supporters and thereby engage a more diverse range of people to participate actively in campaigns (K. Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2009). The Internet is especially effective as an organizing tool because it "integrates different modalities of communication" that include "reciprocal interaction, broadcasting, individual reference-searching, group discussion, [and] person/machine interaction" (DiMaggio et al. 2001, 308). Internet

communication makes it possible for campaigns to interact with their supporters in a more cost-effective way than in the past.

Campaigns started using the Internet to organize their supporters on a large scale during the 2004 election campaign. Howard Dean sought increased visibility by using Meetup.com, a Web site that facilitated meetings of about seventy-five thousand Dean supporters in 612 cities (Hindman 2005, 125). Other candidates noticed and imitated this approach. John Kerry followed Dean in relying on Meetup,⁵ while the George W. Bush campaign adapted Meetup's organizational form by encouraging supporters to throw "house parties" for the president. Campaigns may even try to recruit canvassers directly through the Internet, eliminating the intermediate step of the house party/meetup (Fisher 2006). These communication methods bring supporters together and put them to work on various tasks without the expense of paying field organizers to make the arrangements, in the process allowing campaigns to expand their reach at a relatively low cost.

Campaigns may gain an edge if they are able to use the Internet to communicate more effectively than their competitors. Fisher (2009) examined the manner in which the two major-party presidential campaigns used their campaign Web sites to mobilize the ground war in 2008. She compared my.barackobama.com (also known as MyBO) with www.mccainnation.com (McCain Nation). Fisher and her students used the Web sites in an effort to attend campaign events in New York City. They found that the technology used by the MyBO Web site allowed users to pinpoint effectively the locations of campaign events and to interact directly with event organizers; McCain Nation lacked these features. Fisher may have obtained different results if she had repeated the same study in a swing state, or in a Republican-dominated area, but the deeper point of her research is that potential differences in organizing technology may give advantages to one candidate over another. The Obama campaign claimed that, by the end of 2008, more than thirteen million people had been recruited through the MyBO Web site (Fisher 2009). While the exact number is unverifiable because the data have not been made available to scholars, the sheer magnitude of the claim suggests that the Obama campaign raised the possibilities for computer-mediated grassroots organizing to a whole new plane. It seems to have discovered a formula for turning *supporters* into *activists* (Vaccari 2008).

While the lower costs of Internet communication facilitate genuine grassroots organizing, such as Bush's house parties, they may also spawn less authentic forms of participation. Campaigns sometimes enlist the Internet to lay "astroturf" rather than to plant grassroots—for example, encouraging supporters to submit letters to the editor that are actually written by the campaign.

This approach saves letter writers the time and effort of writing the letter themselves, while giving the campaign a greater chance of having its talking points appear on editorial pages around the country. Klotz (2007) described these submissions as "plagiarized" participation. Although newspaper editors may be able to spot plagiarized submissions and choose not to run them, many such submissions are published nevertheless. A Republican National Committee letter praising President Bush's economic leadership was printed in more than one hundred newspapers under different names (Klotz 2007, 5). Through plagiarized participation, the Internet opens new pathways for campaigns to reach the traditional media.

While major parties and their candidates benefit from being able to organize supporters at low costs, interest groups and minor parties may benefit from this aspect of the Internet too. Howard Dean's early front-runner status in 2004 owed much to his win in an "online primary" sponsored by MoveOn.org in June 2003 (Hindman 2005, 123). By holding this "primary," MoveOn upended the Democratic Party establishment and significantly raised the prospects for outsider candidates. Even though the primary had no legal standing, it generated the media attention that Dean needed to stand out from his rivals. Because of these tactics, major parties may face greater complications in controlling their nomination processes in the future.

Whereas MoveOn sought to circumvent the process specifically within the Democratic Party, Unity08 attempted to buck the two-party system as a whole four years later. Unity08 was crafted by Doug Bailey, Gerald Rafshoon, and Hamilton Jordan (former advisors to Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter), who sought to counter the polarization of the two major parties with a centrist, bipartisan approach to the presidential election (Rapoport et al. 2009, 1). Their plan was to host an online convention in the summer of 2008 that would nominate a high-profile candidate, such as New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg or former U.S. senator Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.). Ultimately, the effort attracted 124,000 members and raised \$1.5 million (Rapoport et al. 2009, 2). The campaign was scuttled, however, by (what it perceived as) obstruction from the Federal Election Commission, inability to secure ballot access in the fifty states, and difficulties in attracting a high-profile candidate.⁶ It disbanded without nominating a standard bearer. The Unity08 effort suggests that it is now at least imaginable that a third-party candidate with broad appeal might be nominated solely using an Internet infrastructure. Yet it also brought into focus the limits of Internet-based organizing. While the Internet certainly aids party-based organizing, it seems unlikely that an Internet presence alone is ready to replace the

grassroots infrastructure of a major party, which plays a critical role in recruiting candidates, raising money, and gaining ballot access.

In sum, the low marginal cost of communicating via the Internet offers several advantages for campaigns. Candidates are able to make more information about themselves available on the Internet than in printed materials, and to employ a wide array of Web 2.0 technologies in doing so. The option of advertising online does not promote greater negativity in campaign advertisements, but it does widen the range of issue positions between competing candidates. The Internet has been a boon for fundraising, especially for nonestablishment candidates, and has drawn a new cadre of citizens into the electoral process. Finally, the Internet enhances the organizing capacity of campaigns, although this ability may be as much a threat as a benefit since interest groups and minor parties are also able to exploit these tools in ways that disrupt the plans of major candidates and parties. At the same time, it is difficult for alternative actors to replace the role of major parties, which have evolved to perform innumerable functions for candidates (Aldrich 1995). In the following section, we consider the implications not only of the Internet's low marginal cost, but of its proclivity to decentralize communication.

Decentralization

The Internet is a highly decentralized forum for the exchange of information, especially in comparison with other forms of mass media (Bimber 1998). In the traditional media model, information is collected by a small number of centralized news bureaus, filtered by an editorial staff, and then passed on to the general public with limited opportunities for feedback. In the Internet model, information is collected by a much larger number of people—some professional and some amateur—and then posted both filtered and unfiltered, allowing comment from the general public. In theory, virtually anyone can gain an international audience on the World Wide Web. We argue that the decentralization of communication through the Internet has two principal implications for campaigns. First, decentralization removes some control of information from the hands of campaigns, exposing them to new risks and benefits. Second, decentralization empowers new actors, especially bloggers, who are able to influence campaign dynamics.

A first implication of the decentralized information dynamics of the Internet is that it undermines the ability of campaigns to control the flow of information about their candidates (Gueorguieva 2008). Nonaffiliated actors now

have a greater capacity than they once did to disseminate both damaging and beneficial information during a campaign. In a traditional media environment, campaigns may be able to impose some limits on which credentialed reporters have access to their candidates; persons without bona fide credentials can be denied access altogether. In an Internet media environment, virtually anyone could be a "reporter," so candidates worry that anything that they say or do could be caught on video and used to their detriment (see Newsom 2008). Of course, campaigns have never been able to exert outright control over news about their candidates in the face of a free press corps. Media have long exploited candidates' gaffes—for example, when the national press corps caught President Gerald Ford eating a tamale improperly in Texas during the 1976 Republican primary campaign (Popkin 1991, 1). Yet by dispersing the power of the press more widely, the Internet loosens to an even greater degree candidates' abilities to shape and contain stories about them.

The risks to candidates from Internet decentralization are well illustrated by former senator George Allen's (R-Va.) so-called Macaca moment in 2006.⁷ Allen's reelection was being contested by Democratic nominee Jim Webb, whose campaign asked a University of Virginia student, S. R. Sidarth, to follow the senator with a handheld video camera. At one of Allen's rallies, he introduced Sidarth (who is of Indian-American descent) to the crowd by referring to him as "Macaca," which is considered a racial slur. The video of this comment was played more than four hundred thousand times on YouTube over the course of a few weeks, and was the subject of extensive discussion in the blogosphere. Ultimately, it contributed to Webb's narrow victory of about nine thousand votes (or only 0.4 percent) to claim the Senate seat. These events gave the appearance that a U.S. senator was brought down almost single-handedly by a college student with a handheld camera, suggesting the potential power of viral videos in shaping campaign outcomes.

Recounting Allen's Macaca moment as a David-and-Goliath story, however, may be more hyperbole than truth. Karpf (2009) has argued that the political impact of the story came not only from its dissemination on YouTube, but from other factors as well. Allen's presidential aspirations and the expected closeness of the national contest for control of the Senate, for example, made him a relatively high-profile target. And the clip not only played widely on YouTube, but was the basis for an article appearing in the *Washington Post*. Further, the Webb campaign had worked closely since its inception with liberal bloggers, especially DailyKos, and these allies amplified the Macaca story within the national media. Thus, the senator was brought down not simply by a lone posting on YouTube but rather through coordination among the

opposing campaign, a team of bloggers, and traditional media, all of them working to leverage the YouTube framework. Decentralization mattered, but it was not the entire story of Webb's victory.

Like the risks of Internet decentralization, the potential benefits of decentralization also may depend on the involvement of campaigns. For example, will.i.am's "Yes We Can" video set to music Obama's concession speech after the New Hampshire primary and included appearances by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Scarlett Johansson, and various other celebrities calling for change (see the image on the following page). It spread virally through the Internet and amounted to considerable free advertising for the Obama campaign. Wallsten (2009, 41) used statistical analysis to demonstrate that "bloggers and members of the Obama campaign played crucial roles in convincing people to watch the video [twenty million times] and in attracting media coverage." He showed that postings about the video on the Obama campaign's blog, and on other noncampaign-affiliated blogs, made a crucial difference to the viewership of the video.

If any person with a handheld video camera has the potential to post a video that is viewed worldwide, then candidates clearly are subject to a higher level of scrutiny than they have been in the past. It is harder, for example, for them to claim that they were misquoted or misunderstood when video of the statement is replayed thousands of times on the Internet. Lightning may not strike twice, however. George Allen's Macaca incident raised awareness of the potential consequences of unscripted remarks on the campaign trail, such that "it is not surprising that the 2008 Senate campaign did not produce any influential tracker footage despite a concerted effort to find it" (Klotz 2009). The 2008 presidential race, however, did feature a minor fracas when Obama's comments to Samuel Joseph Wurzelbacher (otherwise known as "Joe the Plumber") were caught on video. Although Obama's interaction with Wurzelbacher did not include a flub comparable to Allen's, the candidate's suggestion that tax policy should be used to "spread the wealth around" became a focal point for the McCain campaign's cries of socialism in its final month (Rother and Robbins 2008).

The accountability function of the Internet is about more than amateur videographers catching candidates making egregious statements. In fact, the most popular political YouTube videos are professionally produced spots posted by the campaigns themselves (Klotz 2009, 149). But the archiving of videos on YouTube forces a candidate to remain accountable after an ad has aired on television, as videos that are pulled from the air may remain archived online indefinitely. The 2008 race in North Carolina between incumbent senator Elizabeth Dole (R) and challenger Kay Hagan (D) is an example of online accountability



in action. When Dole's campaign ran a television ad implying that Hagan was an atheist, the online record of that ad enabled the blogosphere and the Hagan campaign to respond that Dole had taken a cheap shot (Klotz 2009). While the final vote tally ultimately was not close, the enhanced ability to respond might have mattered in a more tightly contested race.

A second implication of the decentralization of the Internet is that it empowers new actors who can have an important impact on campaigns. Blogs (or weblogs) and those who write them are perhaps the most visible of this new species of political animal. Established political institutions have resisted blogs because they are published without editorial supervision, are generally written by people without journalistic credentials, and effectively challenge the roles of traditional media (Heaney 2008). Nonetheless, Farrell and Drezner (2008) explained that blogs play an important filtering function for the news media by quickly proposing a set of interpretive frames for events. Although there are thousands of blogs, only a small number of them develop reputations for being especially reliable sources of political commentary. Social networks are vital to building these reputations, as most leading blogs are connected in some way (if informally) to traditional media outlets. Thus, while blogging is a quintessentially decentralized activity (as anyone can write a blog and post it

online instantaneously), hierarchy determines which blogs are able to influence the flow of political information.

While most bloggers are content to influence the rhythms of the news cycles, others become more directly involved in politics. According to Pirch (2008), bloggers were instrumental to Ned Lamont's defeat of Joseph Lieberman in the 2006 Democratic Senate primary in Connecticut. Lieberman had grown in disfavor with some Democratic Party activists because of his support for the war in Iraq and for much of President Bush's foreign policy agenda. In response, several political blogs (especially DailyKos.com, MyDD.com, MyLeftNutmeg.org, and ConnecticutLocalPolitics.net) became forums for anti-Lieberman sentiment (Pirch 2008, 279). Not only did the bloggers discuss Lieberman, but they tried to persuade Lamont and other prospective candidates to oppose him and provided financial and logistical support once Lamont did enter the race. Bloggers thus acted as a kind of "virtual political party" as they sorted among candidates and helped to solidify a plan to remove Lieberman from office (Pirch 2008). The blogosphere's initial victory was undone in the general election, however, as the incumbent was reelected as an "Independent Democrat" with the support of the Connecticut Republican Party and moderate Democrats. As of this writing, Lieberman remains a favorite target of liberal online activists.⁸

While it is tempting to conclude that decentralization has reversed the power dynamics of campaigns, only a partial power shift has taken place. Decentralization has had important consequences in some races, including the 2008 Allen-Webb contest in Virginia, but the involvement of campaigns in interpreting, disseminating, and amplifying information remains critical. Nevertheless, candidates are now increasingly accountable for how they behave in public, with bloggers and other Internet users functioning as a new estate within the media. The extent to which bloggers and other online actors will become an autonomous political force is uncertain, but it is clear they that are already becoming part of expanding party networks (Koger, Masket, and Noel 2009, 2010). In the next section, we explain how online social networks create navigable structures, both to the advantage and to the detriment of campaigns.

Digital Social Networks

Social networks are at the heart of how people think about politics. We learn about politics from our family, friends, and coworkers; we talk with them about political events and what they mean. Social networks matter for deciding when

and how to become involved in campaigns and elections, or not (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). The Internet greatly enhances citizens' abilities to build and use social networks. Since the early to mid-2000s, Web sites dedicated to social networking (such as MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter) have proliferated online. These networks are of limited value if they are entirely online, as network studies have shown that face-to-face communication is a key ingredient in building trust in relationships (Nohria and Eccles 2000). However, when online social networks are combined with offline ties, they have the potential to strengthen communities and build social capital (Putnam 2000, 180). The key challenge for campaigns, then, is to find ways either to use the Internet to create and sustain offline interaction or to tap into already existing offline relationships through social networking sites.

Two types of online social networks are relevant in campaigns. One type is created for general uses that are not necessarily political. LinkedIn, Friendster, MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter are prominent examples. All these sites allow users to build social networks and include such functions as e-mail; instant messaging; sharing photos, videos, and music; status updates; and games. Since these sites are not built for exclusively political purposes, users develop connections with a diversity of uses in mind. Of course, they also can use these platforms politically by "friending" a candidate, creating or participating in a political group (such as Student Veterans of McCain-Palin 2008), or simply by exchanging opinions about politics. Many campaigns have concluded that these sites can work to their benefit. According to Williams and Gulati (2009, 23), more than two-thirds of all congressional candidates had an updated Facebook page in 2008, up from only 16 percent in 2006.

Presidential candidates and potential candidates have turned to social networks as well. As of this writing, Barack Obama has 7,063,365 supporters on Facebook, more than any other politician in the world; 2008 GOP vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin (see the image on the following page) is a distant second with 1,141,614 supporters. These networks are valuable not only because they contain lists of supporters but also because they provide campaigns with access to information about friends of their supporters. As a result, contact is made with people who might not otherwise have thought of themselves as supporters of the candidate in question. Further, such sites enlighten supporters about their own social networks. For example, someone who visits Palin's Facebook page will see which of her or his friends support Palin. Upon receiving this information, the person may think differently about these social ties, perhaps taking the initiative to engage one or more of the friends in conversations about politics.



A second type of online social network is created specifically for political purposes. Both John McCain and Barack Obama added social networking features to their Web sites in 2008. These sites often allow users to create a personal profile, search for other supporters in their geographic neighborhood, join issue-based groups (for example, concerning the environment or border security), volunteer, and donate money. Unlike general social networking sites that put the candidates in touch with many people, some of whom may not be strong supporters, candidates' social networks allow campaigns to interact with their core supporters and enable those supporters to network with one another. If such tools are used actively by campaigns and supporters alike, then they have the potential to transform the social structure of campaigns from a heavily top-down, leader-to-follower model to one that is more horizontal or peer-to-peer.

We believe that there are two principal implications of online social networks for campaigns. First, digital social networks (sometimes in combination with other media) enable campaigns to refine and target their appeals more effectively than do traditional approaches. Max Harper (2009), who worked with the Obama campaign's online video division, explained how in 2008 the campaign would determine the width of the audience that it wanted to reach with a video and then decide which media should be used to transmit it. A video could be posted on the Web site only, blogged, or added to Facebook, with the campaign monitoring diffusion of the video on the Web. Harper noted that videos that were added to Facebook had the widest reach, since they were viewed not only by Obama's registered supporters but also by friends of those supporters, and perhaps even friends of the friends of those supporters.

Alternatively, networking tools can be used to identify narrow demographic segments of the population and produce content that is micro-targeted directly to individuals in those groups. For example, Obama's sister, Maya Soetoro-Ng, recorded messages on his behalf in twelve Asian languages (including Hmong) in order to transmit targeted appeals based on information available through Facebook. Critically, this approach allowed the campaign to be more effectively multivocal—that is, to speak in different voices at the same time. While campaigns have been micro-targeting for years, the ability to parse a message such that each subdemographic receives its own targeted appeal might be better described as “nanotargeting.” According to Josh Koster (2009, 23), “It’s based on the idea that the Internet audience is extremely fractured. So, instead of identifying the most universally persuasive messages and broadcasting them to a wide audience . . . you take the most persuasive messages and nanotarget each one to the right niche.” This approach leverages the diversity of interests on the Internet by using scattered, but narrowly targeted, messages to attract support.

Targeted appeals to supporters may be employed not only during the campaign proper, but also during the messy aftermath that sometimes occurs following close elections. For example, the 2008 race for the U.S. Senate seat from Minnesota required a recount after an especially tight contest between incumbent Norm Coleman (R), Al Franken (D), and Dean Barkley (I). To identify monitors for the recount, Franken's campaign used online social networks to pull together lists of supporters who were lawyers or paralegals who could help with a mobilization that eventually involved approximately one thousand volunteers on the Democratic challenger's team (The Big E 2009). This example underscores the versatility of online social networks, showing that they can be mobilized quickly and for reasons only tangentially related to why they were

originally created. Franken did not build an online network with the idea of networking with lawyers and paralegals in particular but, when the need arose, information embedded within the online social networks made forging these connections possible.

Some scholars have hypothesized that social networking may be a way to target appeals to younger voters, who are more likely to use these sites than are their elders. Candidates who use social networking and respond (or have their staffs respond) to comments may be perceived as more “in touch,” especially by the young (Utz 2009). However, studies of the 2008 election suggest that younger users of online social networking sites were no more likely to participate in politics than nonusers. (Baumgartner and Morris 2010; Zhang et al. 2010). Thus, if there are benefits to candidates in reaching out to youth in this way, those benefits must be something other than boosting participation. The Internet seems unlikely to cure the problem of youth nonparticipation.

A second implication of social online networks is that they can empower a candidate’s supporters in ways that are beyond the control of (and not always in the best interests of) the campaign. Allowing “supporters” to post comments on a Facebook page, for example, gives them a forum for rendering criticisms of the candidate as well. This problem can be addressed by having a member of the campaign staff monitor the page and delete critical comments. But such issues grow more complex as the sophistication of online communities increases. Consider that one of the strengths of Obama’s MyBO Web site—its capacity to allow supporters to form user-generated discussion groups—is also a point of vulnerability. MyBO groups, for the most part, worked to the benefit of the campaign, as participants mostly focused on how to win the election. However, shortly after Obama secured the Democratic presidential nomination in the summer of 2008, some of his supporters formed a MyBO group called “Get FISA Right” that, with fifteen thousand members, became the most popular group on the site (Kreiss 2009c). Obama had earlier voted for reauthorization of FISA (Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act) in the Senate, which many civil libertarians complained would undermine judicial oversight of government surveillance within the United States (American Civil Liberties Union 2008). This group sought to pressure the Democratic nominee into changing his position on the reauthorization.

The FISA protest left Obama in a difficult position, as “Get FISA Right” was not created by Republican provocateurs seeking to disrupt the campaign but by genuine supporters. Simply deleting the group from MyBO might have led to a backlash and negative media attention with consequences worse than the

protest itself. Allowing the protest to continue exposed Obama’s problems in unifying the liberal wing of the Democratic Party as he attempted to move to the center of the political spectrum during the general election campaign. The irony of the situation was that the Obama campaign had put into place the social structure that was now opposing Obama’s decision. The fact that Obama neither changed his position on FISA nor stopped the protest did not prevent him from winning the general election. Yet these kinds of feedback effects are sufficiently troublesome that campaigns must consider whether the benefits of actively building online networks are worth the costs. Consistent with this worry, one study found that candidates in highly competitive races are less likely than candidates in less competitive races to use “advanced interactive innovations because these . . . options interfere with the candidate’s message” (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 425). Interactivity is indeed both a blessing and a curse for campaigns.

Online social networks are the latest aspect of the Internet to be incorporated into campaigns. Candidates only began to exploit these tools in a sophisticated manner during the 2008 presidential election, so their full implications are only beginning to become apparent. The real test of their value will be in the extent to which campaigns use these networks to reach people who might not otherwise have received the campaign’s messages. The more that campaigns target their supporters’ friends, the more likely they are to synergize online and offline social networks to expand social capital and build “thick” communities (Bimber 1998). At the same time, campaigns must do this in such a way that the communities they create do not bite back at their creators. In the next section, we consider how campaigns manage not only changes in online networks but also the rapid technological changes brought about by the Internet in general.

Rapid Technological Change

More significant than any specific technology available online is the fact that the overall environment of the Internet is one of rapid technological change. Meetup.com was a key part of the story of the 2004 presidential election, yet it was scarcely mentioned four years later. Facebook, which became a major media outlet for presidential politics in 2008, had been a little-known social networking site on Ivy League campuses in 2004. Understanding what it means to campaign in the Internet age is not about any one Web site or method of communication. Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube may be obsolete or bankrupt by the time the 2012 elections roll around. Instead, the key to understanding

communication in modern campaigns rests in why some campaigns respond effectively to technological change online and others do not.

Rapid technological change poses a challenge to campaigns because learning how to implement new technologies within dynamic campaign environments takes time. While it may be a simple task for any one person to learn to use an online technology, it is a complex task for an organization to channel these individual uses toward a collective goal. Consider what a campaign needs to learn to make Facebook an effective campaign tool. First, it has to know how to build a broad network of supporters. The campaign must not only attract supporters directly, but then also attract the friends of its supporters, and the friends of the friends of its supporters. This process requires the campaign to navigate the network structure effectively so that a small core group grows into a broad community. Second, it has to know how to target messages within that community and to the people who are linked to members of that community. If a presidential campaign has one million supporters, and each one of these supporters has an average of five hundred friends, then the resulting network is very large (though the exact size is indeterminate because of redundancies in the network—that is, person A is friends with many of the same people as person B). Knowing where to broadcast information within this network is a strategic challenge, since reaching the entire network is not feasible. Third, the campaign must be able to monitor and react to feedback from members of the network, including managing any disputes or protests in a way that will not tarnish the campaign's overall image. Given a network of one million supporters, this task is highly sensitive and enormously labor intensive. What's more, it may take an election cycle or two to learn how to do the job effectively. The problem here is that a campaign may find that a social site such as Facebook, once mastered, has become outmoded. By 2012, a new technology may be at the cutting edge of campaigns. Campaigns that learn how to harness these new technologies before their opponents have even thought to do so are the ones that may have the real advantage.

Which campaigns come out on top of the technological change game is partly a matter of serendipity. Howard Dean's campaign mastered Meetup.com before opponents had even heard of this tool, but that did not prevent the demise of his campaign in the 2004 Iowa caucuses. Prior to the 2008 election, a panel of prominent bloggers rated the use of online technologies by Democratic and Republican presidential campaigns (Perlmutter 2008). The panel concluded that Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.) had the "best blog," former senator John Edwards (D-N.C.) had the "best videos," and Barack Obama had

the "best Facebook." Christopher Dodd did not fare well in his quest for the Democratic presidential nomination; if he had, perhaps we would be devoting more space in this chapter to writing a good blog instead of building an effective Facebook network.

Adapting to rapid technological change, however, is more about organization than it is about luck. Daniel Kreiss examined the use of technology by Howard Dean in 2004 and concluded that the nature of the campaign's formal organizational structure was critical to its technological effectiveness.⁹ First, the campaign displayed the willingness to take risks by relying on new technology. William Finkel, the outreach manager of Meetup.com, contacted all of the Democratic primary candidates in 2003, but the Dean campaign was the only one that showed any interest in this new technology. Dean's receptivity and risk-taking was encouraged by campaign manager Joe Trippi, whose professional career arc had spanned both political campaigns and Internet start-up companies. Second, the campaign adopted a "postbureaucratic" structure that emphasized flexibility of internal roles, sensitivity to the external environment, and integration of the campaign with an online social network. A Director of Online Organizing was hired to command an Internet Division, which had the largest staff of any unit within the campaign; members played boundary-spanning roles and often worked closely with other divisions. Third, the campaign created a set of novel practices, such as the Blog for America, which was the first time a major presidential campaign had written a blog. Collectively, these factors yielded an organization that, like MoveOn.org, hybridized the structures of interest groups, grassroots social movements, and political parties (Chadwick 2007; Goss and Heaney 2010). Essentially, the Dean campaign succeeded at incorporating new technologies into its own organization by networking with elements in the environment that used these technologies.

The Obama campaign's adaptation to rapid technological change, like Dean's before it, was born out of a combination of strategically cultivated networks and wise choices regarding organizational structure. Kreiss has shown that, despite Dean's loss in 2004, members of his campaign staff (Kreiss called them "venture progressives") were in great demand by the Democratic Party establishment in the years that followed.¹⁰ Dean alumni went to work for the Democratic National Committee, Barack Obama, Gov. Bill Richardson (D-N.M.), John Edwards, 21st Century Democrats, America Votes, WesPAC, and former senator Mike Gravel (D-Alaska), to name a few. The most prominent business firm to emerge from this group was Blue State Digital.

The Obama campaign's decision to contract with Blue State Digital to work on its behalf made all the difference for the campaign's online strategy. Blue State Digital developed "Party Builder" software that became the basis of the MyBO Web site and allowed the campaign to use Facebook Connect to synchronize data between MyBO, Facebook, and other online sites. This move "allowed the campaign to directly leverage these external networks. For example, Facebook Connect users could see a list of their friends in battleground states and easily contact them with voting reminders" (Kreiss 2009b, 20). Thus, the Obama campaign did not figure out online campaigning on its own; rather, it drew heavily on technical and campaign expertise that existed within a newly emerging organizational field in Democratic Party circles. It then integrated these new technologies into its organizational structure in a way that bore greater resemblance to a social movement than to the marketing approach traditionally used in campaigns (Ganz 2009).

The next stage of adapting to rapid technological change will be to find ways to create greater continuity between campaigning and governing. After the 2008 election, the question arose as to what campaigns planned to do with the e-mail lists and online social networks they had created. To this end, President-elect Obama took his campaign organization (Obama for America), renamed it Organizing for America (OFA), and brought it within the organizational structure of the Democratic National Committee (Trish 2009). This reconstituted organization was intended to help the president pass health care reform and other items on his agenda while in office, while keeping his supporters engaged during the intervening years between elections. Indeed, Dean campaign manager Joe Trippi had envisioned something similar several years earlier:

[Imagine that] the president of the United States shows up in Washington with the e-mail addresses of six million of his closest supporters. [Imagine that] the president vows to govern the way he'd won—by tapping into the will of the American people. [Imagine that] he drops them all a note that says, "Hey, if you're really interested in health care, I need your help. Go to your computer right now and e-mail your congressman and tell him that you don't want him listening to the pharmaceutical lobby, that you don't want him listening to the HMO's. Tell him that you want him listening to you . . ." (Trippi 2004, 224, emphasis in original).

Despite the fact that OFA followed Trippi's script to the letter, it was not successful in transporting the organizational energy of the Obama campaign to the Obama presidency. Part of OFA's failure may have stemmed from the

decision to merge it with the formal organization of the Democratic Party rather than allow it to remain an independent organization (Trish 2009). During the debate over national health insurance in 2009, for example, OFA was not effective in rallying the grassroots to support a public option insurance plan, one of President Obama's signature provisions, partly because it did not have access to the same level of resources that Obama for America had in the presidential campaign and because of activist burnout (Zeleny 2009a). Instead, conservative activists who were mobilized through the "Tea Party" movement proved more agile in summoning the Internet to promote the view that the Democrats were overreaching in their health care reform effort (Zeleny 2009b).

Adapting to rapid technological change is about more than just recognizing technological developments and attempting to use them. It is about creating organizational structures that are capable of channeling these technologies in pursuit of collective goals. The campaigns of Howard Dean and Barack Obama formed hybrid organizational structures that enabled them to blend with their environments, making them more like social movements than like traditional campaigns. As of this writing, OFA has yet to assist substantially in the governing process in the way Joe Trippi and others anticipated. Perhaps solidifying this campaign-governing connection will be the next important step forward. In the next section, we look to these potential changes as we consider how the Internet is likely to matter in future campaign cycles.

Looking to 2010, 2012, and Beyond

As we look into our crystal ball, we expect to be surprised by how the Internet factors into the 2010 and 2012 elections. The surest bet we can make about the Internet's place in elections is that it will keep changing. The campaigns that are able to integrate new technologies within their organizational structures are likely to benefit with enhanced performances at the polls.

For the past several election cycles, Democrats have held the upper hand in using the Internet. They have seized upon new technologies and used them more effectively than have Republicans. Concomitant with this advantage has been the development of a network of experts who advise Democratic campaigns in implementing Web 2.0 technologies—resources that allowed Democrats to dominate grassroots organizing from 2004 to 2008 much as Republicans had from 1994 to 2002. Looking ahead, it is reasonable to expect the pendulum to swing back in the Republican direction. With the 2010 midterm congressional election campaigns gaining steam as of this writing, Republicans are anticipating

that political momentum will be on their side as Democrats face some degree of public dissatisfaction with Obama's handling of the economic crisis, health care reform, Afghanistan, terrorism, and other issues (Thrush and Kady 2009). Republicans will likely also benefit from the fact that midterm elections traditionally tend to favor the party that does not hold the presidency (Born 1990). With the perception of momentum on their side, Republican candidates may be especially motivated to close the technology gap with the Democrats.

Analysis of early technology use by candidates for the 2010 elections suggests that Republicans may be accelerating their use of online technology vis-à-vis Democrats. We examined Facebook and Twitter use by all declared candidates for congressional seats in 2010 as of the first week of July 2009. Our data yield only a snapshot of a dynamic process, but they are nonetheless informative of current trends. To determine if there was a difference between Democrats and Republicans, we gathered data on (1) the candidate's number of Facebook fans, (2) the number of posts to the candidate's Facebook page, (3) whether or not the candidate uses Twitter, and (4) the candidate's number of Twitter followers. Results are reported in Table 8.1.

Our analyses support the expectation that Republican candidates gained some ground relative to Democratic candidates in early preparation for the 2010 congressional elections. First, no significant difference existed between the two groups in the number of Facebook friends, both averaging about 700. Republicans, however, held a statistically significant advantage on the other indicators: Republican candidates averaged more items posted to Facebook (21, compared with 6 for Democrats); more than half (53 percent) had a Twitter account, compared with just one-quarter (25 percent) of Democrats; and among candidates with Twitter accounts, Republicans averaged 1,701 followers, compared with 812 for Democrats. We also checked to see whether these results held up when factors other than party affiliation were taken into

Table 8.1 Average Use of Social Networking Sites by 2010 Congressional Candidates

	Democrats	Republicans	T-score	Significance	Sample Size
Number of Facebook fans	765	693	-0.48	No	574
Number of posts to candidate's Facebook page	6	21	5.31	$p < 0.01$	574
Candidate uses Twitter	25%	53%	7.18	$p < 0.01$	574
Number of Twitter followers*	812	1,701	5.04	$p < 0.01$	215

Sources: www.facebook.com; www.twitter.com. Data were compiled the first week of July 2009.

Note: Current or former presidential candidates are excluded from these computations.

*Number of Twitter followers is only computed for candidates having a Twitter account.

account. Multivariate regression models were estimated, including variables on characteristics of the candidate, the race, and the district. Multivariate analysis allows the analyst to assess the impact of a focal variable—such as a candidate's party—while holding constant the effects that may be due to other factors. Results indicate that taking the impact of multiple variables into account does not explain away the basic difference between Democrats and Republicans. The latter appear to be taking the lead in using online social networks.¹¹

Such findings are noteworthy because they stand in direct contrast to Williams and Gulati's (2009) analysis of the 2008 election, which revealed a clear advantage for Democrats on Facebook. This outcome is the product of a concerted Republican strategy to improve its online presence (Bellantoni 2009). Of course, having a Facebook or Twitter account is not the same as using it effectively in a campaign context. Still, the fact that Republicans are moving forward in this area is a harbinger that the balance of power online may be about to change.

In keeping with our statistical results, many of the interesting dynamics in 2010 and 2012 may be on the Republican side of the political spectrum. We should look for whether Republicans employ online technologies differently than do Democrats, as the organizational structures and networks in the two parties differ considerably (Freeman 1986; Masket et al. 2009). With Barack Obama as the incumbent, there is not likely to be a serious contest for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2012. Thus, innovations in Internet technology will probably not emerge during the Democratic primaries. With the Republican nomination up for grabs, however, the leading candidates may be distinguished by their uses of the Internet. As Internet technologies penetrate more exhaustively within campaigns, greater variations in style of use will likely emerge. In the not-too-distant future, it may not make sense to talk distinctively about "campaigning on the Internet," as the Internet may be practically inseparable from any other aspect of campaigning.

Conclusion

The development and diffusion of new online technologies is truly astonishing. From BlackBerries and iPhones to new applications on Facebook and Google, the world is becoming linked electronically at a rapid pace. Just because new technologies appear, however, does not mean that they will become relevant to campaigning. Candidates and their advisors must not only learn how to use the technologies in question, but also how to incorporate them into the

organizational structures of campaigns. The more that campaigns facilitate the creation of political networks online, the more resources they will have to devote to monitoring these forums, commenting on the discussions that take place there, and coordinating the work of volunteers. Such a shift will draw staff away from working in the field, leaving more field operations to volunteers working in tandem with central office personnel online. While campaigns have recently chosen to hire distinct directors of online campaigning, in the future they may lean more in the direction of merging online campaigning with all divisions within the organization. Such a move would place the Internet firmly at the center of the action.

The benefits of campaigning in the Internet age are numerous. Candidates are now able to communicate with their supporters and potential supporters at radically reduced marginal costs; they can leverage decentralized communication structures to build their organizations. Online social networks promise access to vast expanses of information about voters that never existed in the past. Those campaigns that are able to manage the rapid pace of innovation will be more likely to win their electoral contests. A wider audience of diverse peoples will become activists in campaigns, which will bear a closer resemblance to social movements. Yet these factors may not change some fundamental aspects of campaigning. Even in the Internet age difficulty in reaching young voters continues to be a problem, and decisions about the valence of advertisements (positive or negative) may not be significantly affected. Long-standing traditions such as week-long party conventions and network television debates appear secure for now. The major parties will not be replaced by online skeletons that nominate candidates without ever meeting in person.

The excitement of introducing new technologies into the political world comes with ill-understood risks. Candidates may create online social structures that begin to operate counter to candidates' own strategic objectives. If candidates are not sufficiently responsive to user comments posted on their Web sites, supporters may become more alienated than if they had never interacted with the campaign online at all. Blogs and amateur videos transform the press corps from an elite circle of trained journalists to an ocean of episodic participants seeking to advance their personal political agendas. While the result is something short of a genuine "democratization" of campaigns, the political world today is more open and less controlled than ever before. The Internet is defining the reality of communication in the early twenty-first century; accordingly, the future of the United States rests with those who learn to use it to speak to "We the people."

THE POLITICAL PROFESSIONALS RESPOND

Chris Casey

What do you want? A Web site like Obama's. What should it look like? You have total creative license, so long as it's red, white, and blue. When do you need it? Yesterday.

So begins a typical conversation between a political consultant who specializes in online campaigns and a candidate or first staffer who is looking to bring a fledgling campaign online. Weeks of effort follow—designs, revisions, development, content, testing—all leading up to a Web site launch, which is inevitably followed within a day by a question from the campaign: "How come my site isn't #1 in Google's search results?"

Online campaigns have come a long way in almost twenty years of practice, but we still have far to go. Every presidential election since 1992 has brought renewed attention to the art of campaigning on the Internet. Each cycle sees new innovations that others will want to replicate—and discovers missteps to avoid. And at the end of each cycle, a search begins for the candidate who would not have won were it not for the Internet. In 1998, it was Jesse Ventura's third-party victory to become governor of Minnesota that was hailed as the first major election in which the Internet made a difference; in the dozen years since, scores of campaigns may have turned out differently if not for their use of the Internet. And maybe Barack Obama would indeed not be president today were it not for the Internet. Regardless, while it's a fun discussion to analyze and ponder whether the Internet provided a critical push, tipping a particular candidate to victory, it can safely be said that no serious candidate for elective office today can afford to ignore it. Candidates do so at their own peril.

Presidential elections are relatively few and far between, a quadrennial Super Bowl of campaigning in which only a few candidates will ever compete. Things are different in the thousands upon thousands of races that take place every year for lower offices. Can candidates for a state or local office really expect their shoestring budgets to deliver "a Web site like Obama's" multimillion-dollar effort? And even if they're able to, can they really expect their campaign to generate similar levels of interest and support? Not bloody likely! But that doesn't mean they can't employ and benefit from techniques developed and refined at a higher level. With realistic expectations, scaled to their appropriate size and nature, even the smallest campaigns can benefit from the advantages of campaigning online and innovations developed at the top of the ticket. And guess what? There is plenty of innovation coming from down the ballot as well.

Establishing an online presence, especially getting critical list building and contribution functionality in place quickly, has rapidly climbed the list of high-priority “to-dos” for all candidates, particularly challengers. Content and interactivity can come later (naturally, the sooner the better), but what’s needed immediately is a pair of buttons on a Web page labeled *Sign Up* and *Contribute*. Building an e-mail list of supporters has become THE critical first step for campaigns, as they have come to understand (usually) that with proper care and management, said list can grow into one of their most powerful campaign assets—one that they will use to share news, deliver calls to action, and, of course, appeal for contributions (again and again).

The self-selective nature of the online audience is probably the most fundamental characteristic that distinguishes it from traditional means of campaign communication such as television, radio, direct mail, or phone banks. In each of those instances, the campaign selects an audience and attempts to communicate with it. Only on the Internet does the audience truly self-select. Users decide they want to learn more about a candidate, or find a way to help him or her, and they go online to do so. They may not yet even know the person they are looking for. But campaign Web masters see the proof in their referrer logs and understand the importance of Google and other search engines for delivering such visitors. Online advertising offers powerful opportunities to bait a hook in search of specifically targeted audiences, but they still must self-select in choosing to take that bait and follow an ad to a specific Web site. Self-selection is not a problem for using the Internet to campaign for office; in fact, it is an advantage of online campaigning over traditional means of campaign communication.

The growth of online social networks was to the 2008 campaign what blogs and Meetups were in 2004. Emerging Internet technologies spread quickly across campaigns at all levels, offering easy-to-use audience benefits such as Flickr for photos and YouTube for video without burdening campaigns with the task of hosting infrastructure. Internet technologies potentially increase the audience for candidates’ content by making it available to users of those sites, rather than just to those who find it on a campaign’s own Web page. On Facebook and Twitter, candidates need to work to engage these networks in the same way as their users do: with a genuine personal voice. Campaigns shouldn’t be looking to control their growing and dispersed online supporters; on the contrary, they need to engage, enable, and energize them.

Online fundraising is clearly an area where innovations at the presidential level have been successfully adopted for down-ballot races. Innovations introduced by the campaign of Howard Dean in 2004 stand out as excellent examples. Dean’s campaign stole a page from the telethons of Jerry Lewis, with their baseball bat

thermometer and fixed fundraising goal with a fixed deadline. These successful tactics have been repeated in recent elections with countless variations by campaigns at all levels. Another of Dean’s innovations involved sending an e-mail appeal to the candidate’s own mailing list, but seeking support on behalf of someone else. Dean asked his enthusiastic supporters for contributions to Iowa’s representative Leonard Boswell, whose support Dean sought in the presidential race and who reaped the financial boost as Dean’s backers obliged. Tools that allow supporters the ability to create their own fundraising goals, solicit their friends and family, and raise money have also now come within the reach of smaller campaigns, though they may remain impractical for those below the state level that lack potential for broad-based support.

How much money will you raise online? That question has an easy answer: none, some, or a lot—it depends. It is actually becoming harder to raise “none.” Online contribution services such as ActBlue permit supporters to contribute to campaigns that haven’t yet bothered to implement a contribution system of their own. “Some” is a relative term that can mean vastly differing amounts to campaigns of different levels, budgets, and interest. But few campaigns today would be satisfied with the modest goal typical of the late 1990s—specifically, that an online campaign just raise enough money to pay for itself (the goal then being one of promotion). “A lot,” of course, is what every campaign wishes for, and it can strike when you least expect it—for example, when the congressman you are challenging yells “You lie!” at the president on national television. It’s at times like these when the decision to go with bargain-priced Web hosting at twenty dollars a month proves not to be the good idea it initially seemed. Campaigns can’t know how much money they will raise online, but they must prepare for such unexpected opportunities or be left to wonder how much they might have raised if their Web site hadn’t buckled under the load when lightning struck and people who an hour earlier had never heard of them suddenly wanted to give them money. A meaningful investment in infrastructure, people, and technology is necessary in order to reap the maximum benefit of online campaigning.

Online innovations can come from down the ballot as well. In 2009, Bill de Blasio, a candidate for the office of New York City Public Advocate, sought to bring attention to the issue of poor housing conditions and negligent landlords. His staff worked with NGP Software to develop a Google map mashup dubbed the “Slumlord Watch List” that allowed visitors to submit their buildings for consideration for inclusion on the map. While this particular feature may not be the sort that lends itself to widespread use among other campaigns, it certainly served a useful purpose in generating earned media attention for de Blasio’s winning effort. And that is but one example among many—some of which may take hold and see

widespread use, and others that will pass by unnoticed. As online campaigning approaches twenty years of practice, it remains an area of political campaigning still ripe for innovation.

It is no surprise that innovation is more likely to come from a challenger with nothing to lose than from an incumbent who is often campaigning defensively and hoping to avoid fatal mistakes. Likewise, a minority party might be quicker to embrace new technologies: as Heaney, Newman, and Sylvester point out, Republicans are forging ahead with Twitter. The GOP does, after all, have more time on its hands while the Democratic majority in Congress and the president work at governing. My own partisan stripes will show, however, in my disagreement with the notion that the current Democratic advantage in national politics necessarily foretells a technological pendulum swing toward the Republicans. Instead, I believe that both parties will continue to innovate online. Sometimes those efforts will fail, as with the recent problem-filled re-launch of the GOP.com Web site; others will join a growing number of proven techniques for online campaigning that future campaigns will replicate. But don't expect Democrats to rest on their online laurels in cycles to come.

As online campaigning has matured over the last decade, expectations for what it can deliver have increased tremendously. Campaigns can't fake it. They must dedicate genuine effort, staff, and resources to the development and management of their online activities to meet these expectations. And yet, despite the growth of a professional class of online political consultants, online campaigning is still likely to be tasked to the inexperienced.

The fictional sports agent Jerry McGuire asked his football star client to "help me help you." A candidate for office turns that around, seeking to use the Internet to "help you help me"—to win, and to win using information, tools, and resources that allow you to make meaningful contributions. Campaigns that best utilize the proven strategies of the past while pursuing innovative Internet technologies will gain an online advantage, and that just might be all it takes to deliver an electoral one.

Notes

1. The authors are grateful to Fabio Rojas and Edward Walker for helpful suggestions. Our research was funded in part by a grant from the University Scholars Program at the University of Florida.

2. As described by Wallsten (2009, 1), viral videos are "online video clips that gain widespread popularity when they are passed from person to person via email, instant messages and media sharing websites."

3. See www.pewinternet.org/Shared-Content/Data-Sets/2009/April-2009-Economy.aspx.

4. Lack of access to the Internet among certain groups (the so-called digital divide) remains a serious problem. A recent study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that online political engagement is dominated by people with higher levels of income and education (A. Smith et al. 2009). As a result, we make no claim that everyone has access to the Internet or that access is evenly distributed throughout the electorate; instead, we simply note that a growing share of the polity is online.

5. See <http://johnkerry.meetup.com>.

6. See the open letter to group members at www.unity08.com.

7. The facts about the Macaca incident in this paragraph and the next are taken from Karpf (2009).

8. For example, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vS6kIbJu64&feature=player_embedded.

9. All of the facts about the Dean campaign reported in this paragraph are taken from Kreiss (2009a).

10. Unless otherwise noted, all of the facts about the Dean and Obama campaigns reported in this paragraph and the next are taken from Kreiss (2009b).

11. Models were estimated for the number of Facebook fans, Facebook posts, and Twitter followers using Tobit Regression, since these dependent variables were left censored at zero for candidates without Facebook or Twitter use. We estimated the model for whether a candidate had a Twitter account using Probit Regression, since our dichotomous dependent variable evaluated whether or not a candidate uses Twitter. Complete results are available from the authors upon request. For information on how to use these methods, see Greene (2008).