Campaign 2.0

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A concrete characterization of the electronic aspects of the 2008 presidential campaign can be hard to put a finger on, just as is the case with the elusive categorization of Web 2.0. Web 2.0, best paraphrased by Ian Davis,

is an attitude not a technology. It's about enabling and encouraging participation through open applications and services. By open I mean technically open...but also, more importantly, socially open...Of course the web has always been about participation, and would be nothing without it...Technology has moved on and it's important that the social face of the web keeps pace. [1]

It's time now that the politicians keep up with the emerging "social face" of potential voters, as well as modern America. The 2008 campaign has tapped into trends and attitudes regarding increased interactivity with the web as a platform. More attention is being paid to the social side, as well as user interaction with news and information online. Communication is changing, and so must the messenger.

Communication has always been a critical part of social interaction. That has not changed much, rather the modes of communication have. With faster bandwidths available, as well as information supported by multiple devices, communication can be nearly instantaneous. Also, according to David Talbot in an article explaining the use of the social technology at the center of Barack Obama's campaign for the presidency, "Americans are more able to access media-rich content online; 55 percent have broadband Internet connections at home, double the figure for spring 2004. Social-networking technologies have matured, and more Americans are comfortable with them." [2]
In a study by the Pew Research Center, it was found that now 42 percent of the age demographic 18-29 regularly gets information about the campaign online, compared to 20 percent in 2004. [3] Younger people also tend to rely on the Internet for campaign information, while older people tend to use more traditional media. David Talbot pointed out in his October 2008 article for the *Technology Review* that

...at times last year, [McCain] made effective use of the Internet. His staff made videos...celebrating his wartime service—that gained popularity on YouTube. But the McCain site is ineffectual for social networking... McCain's organization is playing to an older base of supporters... it seems not to have grasped the breadth of recent shifts in communications technology." [4]

While some of the new media is merely online versions of televised news stations such as CNN, there are also strictly internet-based news sites, like Yahoo News, and even YouTube. [5]

Social networking sites like MySpace [6] and Facebook [7] also play a role in providing information, because according to the Pew study, "more than a quarter of those younger than age 30 (27 percent)—including 37 percent of those ages 18-24—have gotten campaign information from social networking sites. This practice is almost exclusively limited to young people." [8]

However, according to Talbot, there is a growing population under 25 who, "are no longer using e-mails, not even using Facebook; a majority are using text messaging" [9].The advent of another more widely used form of instantaneous communication—text messaging—has been fully utilized by the Democratic Party, which uses text messages very creatively, as a political buffer. Leslie Sanchez states that, "The voters on Obama's cell phone, e-mail, and text-messaging lists can be contacted instantly, wherever they are. This will allow him to stay ahead of negative news stories, and in a close race, it might make all the difference." [10] The more instantaneous the communication, the more
quickly parties are able to combat bad publicity about their candidates before the news even hits the unwired masses via traditional modes.

For the politicians, this presents a new challenge to get their message across to voters, active and disaffected alike. With the individual in control of what they see, the politicians must be just as savvy in grabbing their attention, especially the attention of the voters who are using the Internet to test the waters and discern what they can about the election. The freedom of choice on the voters’ part puts the politicians at somewhat of a disadvantage.

So, we—the voters—can benefit from this system because we can choose when, where, and how we get our information. Should we choose, we can sign up to get text messages, browse websites, seek out only what we want to know. Besides benefiting on the receiving end, voters can also become part of a dialogue with others, and their party as a whole.

An article addressing this issue on CNN Politics.com states that, "Between political blogs, social networking sites, online media and video share sites, people need little more than an Internet connection to become a more active part of the political process—or at least keep up with it." [11]

There are two sides to every innovation, however. By only seeking out what one wants to see, especially when beginning with a slant towards one party or idea, the viewer may completely close themselves off to learning about the views of the other candidates. One of the drawbacks for both the people and the politicians is the wealth of information the Internet provides; "The [Internet], like many things in this world, is a very powerful tool when used judiciously. Subscribing to sound bytes with no depth and following sites that only affirm our currently held beliefs are just as bad or even worse than not being informed at all" [12], according to David Sanderson.
The Internet can be just as harrowing as it is helpful, but by keeping this in mind users can select information from competing sources, though they may clash with currently held beliefs. In a blog entry, Andrew Neubauer urges responsible citizens to, "use the internet to broaden your views, not reinforce your own preconceived notions." [13]

After Election Day, it should be interesting to look back at how the candidate's social networking strategies played into the results and turnout, if at all. Also, when we have a new President, it should be interesting to see how either Party continues with their networking strategies. Just think of the possibilities of an established network of the people and their government. Will the dialogue be continued, or will it be cut off once whoever is in office is safely there?

Sources:


