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Social Media Influencing The 2012 Political Campaigns

Gavin Brown*

In 2008, The Washington Post heralded President Barack Obama as the “Social Networking King” for his use of social media during his campaign for presidency [1]. While there were politicians before Obama who used blogs and web pages to seek funds and support, no one used social media to the same extent as the Obama Campaign. Obama raised over half a billion dollars online. J.A. Vargus of The Washington Post states, “3 million donors made a total of 6.5 million donations online adding up to more than $500 million. Of those 6.5 million donations, 6 million were in increments of $100 or less”[2]. When political supporters attended rallies, they voluntarily supplied their email addresses, and over the course of his campaign, Obama created a database of over 13 million e-mail addresses.

Obama maintained political profiles on over fifteen different social networks ranging from Facebook, MySpace, to BlackPlanet or Eons, among others, which allowed him to communicate with his supporters on a more personal basis. Obama was able to promote his message faster and to a much wider audience through several other methods: by collaborating with musician and rapper William James Adams, Jr., or “Will.i.am,” to create a promotional song out of sound bytes from his speeches and by commissioning a San Francisco artist who created the iconic “Hope” posters. Obama was able to promote his message faster and to a much wider audience than any politician in history [3] and [4]. By using social media as an outreach tool for communicating personally with his supporters, promoting his message, and creating a quick and easy way to donate to his campaign, Obama restructured the way politicians will run for the 2012 presidency.

According to Journalist J.C. Tedesco, since American citizens adopted broadband Internet in their homes, they have increased the amount of

usage “from less than 5% in 2000 to approximately 25% by 2004 and 55% by April 2008.” Since the early years of Internet, it has been utilized in political campaigns, but recently, “the percentage of Americans who indicate that most of their campaign news comes from the Internet increased from 10% in October 2004 to 33% in October 2008” [5]. The most frequently visited Internet sites are tracked by the websites themselves. The Obama campaign in 2008 tracked the traffic of Internet users going through their site, BarackObama.com. J.A. Vargus of The Washington Post states, the “‘analytics team’ measured everything that went in and out of the site – tracking which ad at what time drew the most traffic and which kinds of e-mails from the campaign got opened and read the most” [2]. The data is then collected and used to roughly determine the positions and trends of potential voters. Politicians can then adjust their campaigns to the positions and trends of voters. Political campaigns such as Obama’s have staff positions called “Big Data Analysts,” who “allow political campaigns to infer how likely specific people are to vote, and which issues are important to them” [4][6]. This collected and analyzed data of voters’ behavioral patterns could give one political party an advantage over the others in the election process.

Due to the increasing proliferation of mobile technology, politicians are now able to communicate with supporters faster and more effectively. According to a Pew Internet Research study, 75% of teens and 93% of adults, ages 18-29 now have a cell phone [7]. That is a huge percentage of the American public with whom politicians can directly communicate through their hand-held devices. Since people almost always have their cell phones with them, they are now registering their locations. Political analysts are able to record the people’s locations and use that as a data gathering point. By using Internet applications such as Foursquare and Facebook, political parties are able to keep track of people who have checked in at rallies and, then, send them more political paraphernalia related to the events they attended. G. Goodale of The Christian Science Monitor explains, that at rallies people can use “‘QR,’ or quick response codes, at mobile check-ins where users ‘check in’ at a location and get digital badges for other rewards such as free drinks and T-shirts.”

The rally organizers can then log the people who have checked in and “next time they want to raise money, they can text (or message) you with a ‘We need $5!’ appeal that you can respond to with a few flicks of your fingers” [8]. One of the biggest shifts in Obama’s 2012 campaign will be focused on “the central importance of mobile communications – as in cell phones, Smartphones, and iPads” [8]. Both President Obama’s and the front-runner of the Republican primary, Mitt Romney’s campaign web-pages integrate mobile technology into their respective campaigns [9].
President Obama’s homepage, BarackObama.com, allows Facebook users to log in with their personal accounts, and allows for easy redirection to Obama’s Flickr, Google+, Twitter, Tumbler, YouTube, and Pinterest webpages [10]. Mitt Romney’s webpage, MittRomney.com, also allows viewers to connect with him through Twitter, e-mail, Flickr, and Facebook [11].

While Facebook, YouTube, and other social media sites are expected to play a large part in the upcoming election, Twitter is proposed to have a huge role in the election process. In 2008, Twitter was still relatively new and wasn’t used to its full potential. Since Twitter’s inception four years ago, it has steadily grown to become a “part of an elite group of social Web start-ups that have flourished in recent years by rapidly attracting users” [12]. Over the last couple years, “Obama and all the GOP presidential candidates have obtained Twitter accounts, as have 85 senators and at least 360 House members” [13]. Through Twitter’s services, those politicians are able to get their messages out to their supporters in seconds. By using Twitter as a campaign tool, there is a shorter gap between the politician and the American people. Anyone subscribed to Obama’s or Romney’s Twitter feeds are updated regularly on the daily experiences of both men. Not only is Twitter a great tool for getting a campaign message out to the public, it has also recently started selling political advertisements. Politicians are able to pay for “Promoted Advertising,” which will publish posts “in the [Twitter] timelines of people who follow campaigns.” The “Promoted Advertising” will also “pop up when certain search terms are used” on Twitter feeds [13]. Twitter is now hosting advertisements of politicians, making it even more of a political battleground between groups.

Not only is Twitter changing how politicians are campaigning, it is also changing how reporters cover elections. Twitter is a real-time social network, where users are able to Tweet (or write 140 character messages) out to their subscribers. It also allows users to subscribe to other people’s feeds as well as the Twitter feeds of other organizations [14]. For over ten presidential elections R.W. Apple Jr. (A.K.A. Johnny Apple) would report for The New York Times by getting to know the candidates “up close and personal, with their feet up, their guard down and, perhaps, a drink at the ready” [15]. Nowadays, the reporters are “tweeting” every little thing that is going on as they follow the political races. There is a “24/7 news cycle brought on by cable news and the Internet” [15]. Political reporters are able to constantly make their thoughts available and respond to each other’s “Tweets.”

In 2008 The Huffington Post launched “a citizen-based reporting project called “OffTheBus,” which showcased stories through Twitter by no fewer than 12,000 unpaid bloggers,” bringing the political opinions of non-re-
porters into the media that can be seen nationally [15]. In 2012, The Huffington Post re-launched the “OffTheBus” program. The goal of this project is to get the American people reporting their thoughts and opinions on the 2012 election. The citizen reporters covered politics through social media networks for “OffTheBus” in locations where regular journalists were not always allowed. For example, “OffTheBus” reporters reported many dinners and rallies, where journalists were not always allowed [16]. While having many people report their opinions about politics through OffTheBus, there is also an issue of the credibility of those reporters. Having 12,000 people reporting news that they may not fully understand or may not have been educated for would certainly produce 12,000 people opinions, not always news. While having the news brought by average people is good, it might not be better than having the news presented by people who were properly educated in political science, economics, and other subjects related to the political fields.

President Obama’s campaign administration completely changed the face of political campaigning by using social media to take control over the 2008 election. Through social media, they were able to bridge the gap between average Americans and a politician running for president. In 2012, both Democratic and Republican parties are using sites like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and many others to spread their political messages and gather support across many different fronts. The election of 2012 will be the first in which the American public will have opportunity to know almost everything that is going on in both presidential campaigns with lightning speed. The portable devices carried by the sides of 93% of American adults will get political messages out faster than any other time in history.

Works Cited


**Footnotes**

1. Eons is a social media network much like Facebook, but it caters to Baby-Boomers who want to connect with each using social media. Black Planet is another social media network that caters to African Americans.