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“You Are Now Friends with Barack Obama: the
Influence of New Media in the 2008 Presidential Campaigns.”

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It appeared on February 2, 2008 under the YouTube username “WeCan08,” a sleek, professionally mixed song from Black Eyed Peas front man will.i.am. In four minutes and thirty seconds, the video wove between black-and-white shots of youth-idolized celebrities and the youth-idolized presidential candidate they back. Taking Senator Barack Obama’s uplifting phrase, “Yes We Can” and sending it through the lips of Scarlett Johansson, John Legend and 35 other celebrities, the song represented a banning together of the hip and the young behind a message, a medium and a candidate that resonated with them.

When Obama took the stage at a crowded auditorium in Nashua, New Hampshire to give the original “Yes We Can” speech after Senator Hillary Clinton’s unexpected victory in the first primary of the 2008 election, his supporters were stunned, disappointed and defeated. When his words were immortalized through will.i.am’s video, his supporters passed them on, forwarding the link to networks of Facebook friends and classroom peers, family and online buddies, until it had been viewed over 17 million times.¹

The will.i.am video was a powerful demonstration of the impact that user-generated videos can make in a sea of digital content posted by ordinary citizens and presidential candidates in hopes of swaying voters. The 2008 presidential election is the first in which candidates and supporters alike are utilizing YouTube, blogs, social networks and other new media to shape public perceptions and push through messages outside of the confines of the traditional news media. By remaining authentic, providing the tools for voter mobilization and fostering a message conducive to voter activism,

¹ Stelter, Brian. “Finding Political News Online, the Young Pass It On.” *New York Times*. March 27, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/27/us/politics/27voters.html?_r=3&hp=&adxnnl=1&oref=slogin&adxnnlx=1206666163-YpoMNe/u2DIXJ6Q+JgPILQ&oref=slogin>

successful e-campaigns have been able to harness new media, fundamentally changing the nature of campaign communications in the process.

The Beginning

In a 1996 appearance on MSNBC, Bill Gates said, "There's no doubt we'll look back at Web sites today and say...that they were quite primitive. They don't customize what they present to the viewers' interests. They don't remember: Have you been there before? What have you seen before? And that's got to change."²

Indeed, the sites of the presidential contenders in 1996 do look quite primitive in comparison to today's: primary colors, simple layouts, and few customized features.³ Gradually, however, candidates began refining their official sites to keep pace with the rest of the Internet. They tailored features for specific voter blocs and added capabilities for voters to donate funds, time and resources to the campaign, perpetuating their own survival rather than simply presenting official platforms via a one-way stream. Bob Dole began the trend through his 1996 campaign site, which allowed users to craft custom "Dole for President" wallpaper, campaign buttons, and postcards, even including a "Dole Trivia" section. However, the power of the Internet for raising campaign dollars had not yet been fully explored.

In 2000, John McCain was at the helm of new media technology, announcing his new Web site through an online chat. Beyond the standard press releases, speeches, and stances on issues, his Web site at the time contained then-innovative capabilities such as

² "Dole-Kemp 1996 Web Site." 4president.Us.
<<http://www.4president.us/websites/1996/dolekemp1996website.htm>>

³ Ibid

a fundraising tool and a widget that would allow supporters to volunteer their time.⁴ He combined his signature retail politics approach with the new Web tactics available, holding Web chats with hundreds of donors, each of whom would pay \$100 for the opportunity to watch him onscreen and to e-mail questions.⁵ McCain raised \$50,000 from one such Web cast from the College of Charleston in South Carolina in February of 2000, adding to the over \$4 million he raised electronically throughout this 2000 campaign.⁶ More than \$1 million in donations flooded into his Web site in the two days following McCain's victory in the New Hampshire primary, netting more than any candidate in history in online donations.⁷ The *New York Times* credited McCain's success to his user-friendly Web site, which combined simple, powerful messages with large "click here to donate" buttons from the landing page.⁸

McCain's fundraising prowess paved the way for 2004's candidates to capitalize on newer Internet tactics to generate "net roots" voter interest. In the Howard Dean campaign, it was Joe Trippi who realized the power of the Internet to de-centralize a campaign by energizing online clusters of supporters, raising an unprecedented amount of funds and steering a supporter-driven campaign organized largely through the Internet. As an insurgent candidate with few resources, Dean's campaign pioneered the use of blogs and online networks to "build the campaign virally...one person infects two more, who infects two more and two more."⁹

⁴ "John McCain 2000 Web Site." *4president.Us*.

<<http://www.4president.us/websites/2000/mccain2000website.htm>>.

⁵ "McCain Cashes in with Internet Fund-Raising Chat." *CNN*. Feb. 11, 2000.

<<http://archives.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/02/11/mccain.fundraiser/index.html>>.

⁶ Ayres, B. Drummond. "2000 Campaign Briefing." *New York Times*. April 27, 2000.

⁷ "McCain Cashes in with Internet Fund-Raising Chat."

⁸ Van Natta, Don. "THE 2000 CAMPAIGN: THE MONEY GAME; McCain Gets Big Payoff On Web Site." *New York Times*. Feb 4, 2000. <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C06E6D9103FF937A35751C0A9669C8B63>>

⁹ Trippi, Joe. 2004. *The Revolution Will Not be Televised*. New York: HarperCollins. Pg. 38

A firm believer that the Internet “invites people to be involved, rather than just showing pictures and slogans at them in the hope that they donate money,”¹⁰ Trippi discovered that Dean was generating a substantial amount of interest – more than any other Democratic candidate – on the then-recent Internet startup, Meetup.org. The site allows users in various cities to plan meetings based on shared interests and hobbies. In this case, the shared interest was Howard Dean.

What started as a handful of supporters in major cities soon bloomed to 2,700 across the country when Trippi added a link to the Dean Meetup page from the campaign’s Web site.¹¹ The Meetup page would eventually be home to 190,000 Dean fans.¹² As Dean began appearing in person at some of the larger Meetups, growth in the group grew exponentially, and donations from the members garnered media attention, which increased interest in the Meetups even further.¹³ In March of 2003, one Meetup supporter sent an e-mail to all other Meetup members requesting that the members donate as much as they could to the campaign - with a penny attached so that the campaign knew where the donations were coming from. By the end of that quarter, the campaign had amassed over \$400,000 in these so-called “pennies from heaven.”¹⁴ By the third quarter of 2003, Dean had raised nearly \$15 million, a one-quarter record for any Democratic candidate in a presidential race.¹⁵

This year’s campaign cycle was poised to capitalize on new media outreach opportunities, as the Internet continues to grow more accessible to greater numbers of

¹⁰ Ibid, 100

¹¹ Ibid, 84

¹² Ibid, 106

¹³ Wolf, Gary. “How the Internet Invented Howard Dean.” *Wired*. January, 2004. 12(1).
<<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.01/dean.html>>

¹⁴ Trippi 2004, 106

¹⁵ Wolf 2004

Americans while evolving in speed and sophistication. In 2000, slow dial-up connections were the norm and only 46 percent of Americans reported spending time online.¹⁶ In 2007, just 15 percent remained offline, and 90 percent of those online were using high-speed broadband connections.¹⁷ With 30 percent of Americans socially networking, tagging, e-mailing, and twitting away,¹⁸ the 2008 candidates pounced on the opportunity to channel citizens' online energy into fuel for their campaigns.

Author Garrett Graff posited that 2008's campaigns would be the first to be entirely defined by technology, in that technology would be both the medium and the message. As candidates spar over how to handle the technological powerhouses India and China and over the need for scientific innovation in a globalizing economy, they will simultaneously be fundraising online, sending campaign updates via Twitter and tearing each other to shreds through YouTube.¹⁹ The American audience, too, is more tech savvy in 2008 than in previous elections – according to a Pew Research Center survey, nearly a quarter of Americans say they regularly learn something about the presidential campaign from the Internet, twice the percentage as in 2004. That number jumps to 42 percent for those between the ages of 18 and 29.²⁰ At the same time, the number of interested voters visiting the Web sites of campaigns is low – eight percent²¹ – indicating that, in order to be effective, online campaign news must find voters where they are, not the other way around.

¹⁶ Barker, Tim. "It Hurts to Lose that Internet Connection." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. March 17, 2008. <<http://www.stltoday.com/stltoday/news/stories.nsf/stlouiscitycounty/story/3DB06BF19731FE5B8625740F001175A2?OpenDocument>>

¹⁷ Graff, Garrett. 2007. *The First Campaign*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux. Pg. 7.

¹⁸ Ibid. "Twitting" refers to sending updates via the SMS online messaging service Twitter.

¹⁹ Ibid, 10

²⁰ Pew Research Center. Internet's Broader Role in Campaign 2008. January 11, 2008. <<http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=384>>

²¹ Ibid

Unlike television, which beams polished, removed messages at viewers, new media draws candidates and voters closer together.²² Several campaign strategists have described television as a “top-down” medium²³- all it requires of the voter is to sit passively and allow glossy, perfected political messages to wash over them. On the Web, however, authentic and genuine videos, personalized features and people-powered movements capture the hearts and minds of voters.

Online ads are cheaper than their televised counterparts and offer a wider array of options, and yet they represent a significant departure from the conventions of television advertising. “You can’t buy peoples’ attention online,” Graff says, “you have to earn it.”²⁴

The most effective online tactics have repeatedly proven to be the most creative, the punchiest and the ones that reach voters where they are.²⁵ Like Trippi’s Meetup Deanatics in 2004, modern campaigns can no longer rely on simply getting their message across - they have to make people feel they are part of the message. Although the mass media will remain a formidable force in widespread message dissemination, according to Jon Henke, new media takes campaigning back to the “one-at-a-time” days of “relationships, dialogue and virtual handshakes.”²⁶

The Web, social pressure and E-vangelists

New media holds a wealth of advantages for campaigns that utilize it to the fullest. New media directors can troll the blogosphere in order to find early warnings on

²² Trippi 2004, 38

²³ Trippi 2004, 83

²⁴ Graff 2007, 266

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Henke, Jon. New Media Deserves Its Own Seat At The Table. *Campaigns and Elections*. November 2007. 28(11).

impending problems, to connect with and mobilize supporters and to frame messages while bypassing media filters.²⁷

Above all is the potential new media holds to turn voters into evangelists for the campaign, spreading the candidate's message in a many-to-many dynamic that can be efficient, inexpensive and far more powerful than the traditional one-to-many model²⁸

Studies have shown that social pressure can be a significant motivator in influencing individuals on everything from which cell phone to buy to whose healthcare policy to choose. In one 2008 study, researchers observed an almost five percent increase in voter turnout when registered voters were told they were being studied and that their voting records would be publicized among their neighbors.²⁹

In keeping with the theory of persuasion marketing, many new media specialists agree that voter influence can be done effectively and inexpensively through citizens rather than campaign heads. The tactic is particularly powerful if campaigns can tap into the persuasion powers of so-called “influentials” – individuals with active minds and extensive community networks who are likelier than their peers to be interested in current events, politics and even the Web. These individuals are early adapters, embracing new waves of technology before the majority of the population, and are outspoken, spreading information about products, candidates, and ideas that appeal to them throughout their communities.³⁰

Finding individuals to mobilize on their behalf was a primary task among e-strategists in many of the campaigns.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Thomas, Brandon. Interviewed by author. March 27, 2008. Washington, DC.

²⁹ Gerber, Alan, Donald Green and Christopher Larimer. “Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Largescale Field Experiment.” *American Political Science Review*. February 2008. 102(1).

³⁰ Keller, Ed and John Berry. 2003. *The Influentials*. New York: The Free Press.

Mindy Finn, the Director of E-strategy for the Mitt Romney campaign, hoped to take activists who were interested in Romney and turn them into evangelists – people engaged enough to come to events, volunteer or donate to the campaign.

“We wanted them to become someone who is so invested and dedicated that they’re spreading support to others in their peer circle,” she said.

The John Edwards campaign sought out what they called “thought leaders” – individuals such as College Democrats presidents, student government board members and others with large social networks – in order to equip them with tools to perform voter contact.³¹ The search for thought-leaders was one of the primary tasks that Tracy Russo, Deputy Director of Online Communications for the John Edwards campaign, concerned herself with.

“The first thing you have to do is search for people who are pre-made and already active on your behalf,” she said in a phone interview. “That’s a big aspect of your success or failure.”

For months, Russo trolled blogs relating to healthcare, the war effort and other topics to find individuals who would be responsive to the campaign’s message. Once she identified them, she would contact them, indicating the similarities between the campaign’s stances on the issues and the blogger’s own positions. Once the individuals were engaged, the campaign would grant them increased access, keeping them updated on campaign news, inviting them to participate in group conference calls with campaign managers and creating special online groups for them to connect with one another in order to perform outreach work.³²

³¹ Rubin, Amy. Telephone interview with author. March 26, 2008.

³² Ibid.

“You have to build a relationship with them as someone who isn’t necessarily just spouting your talking points,” she said. “Make them see that you share their same goal.”

The process of using new media to gradually escalate supporters’ engagement with the campaign has been referred to as bringing them up a “social technographics ladder” by Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff.³³ At the bottom of the ladder, individuals are spectators - reading blogs, listening to podcasts, and watching videos. As users become more drawn into a subject, however, they may become “joiners,” participating in social networking sites, and later “critics,” contributing to wikis and forums. In the upper echelon of new media engagement are “creators,” who publish their own blogs, create their own videos or write stories and post them.³⁴ This ladder translates to politics, Thomas said, in that candidates can bring supporters up the ladder by initially asking for an e-mail address or a \$5 donation, and then steadily increasing so-called “asks” until supporters are using campaign-provided new media tools to independently perform advocacy work on the candidate’s behalf.³⁵

Perhaps no campaign capitalized on Web influencers quite like the Ron Paul campaign, whose vigilant supporters were infamous for their e-vangelism. Paul supporters used the news-aggregation Web sites Digg and Reddit to consistently highlight stories relating to their candidate, keeping public awareness raised and the mainstream media intrigued. There were 362 Meetup.com groups dedicated to Paul, and authors of blog stories treating him unfavorably would often face the ire of angry Paul supporters commenting relentlessly.³⁶

³³ Li, Charlene and Josh Bernoff. 2008. *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies*. Boston: Harvard Business Press.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Thomas 2008

³⁶ Spiegel, Brenden. “Ron Paul: How a Fringe Politician Took over the Web.” *Wired*. July 27, 2007. <http://www.wired.com/politics/onlinerights/news/2007/06/ron_paul>

Admittedly, Paul polled in single digits for much of the campaign and was never credited with a serious chance at the nomination by experts.³⁷ But with only \$500,000 in start-up cash and no fundraisers, the campaign relied on the explosive support of activists to drive his entire campaign by creating graphics, forums, groups, videos and publicizing information about Paul on their own sites.³⁸

“They believed in the message, so we didn’t have to hire many people,” said Justine Lam, e-Campaign director for Ron Paul. “We pointed them to the tools and they were smart enough to do what they could do.”

Control versus release

One of the main drawbacks to allowing e-vangelists to take over, however, is the lack of message control that a campaign may incur as supporters attempt to push through their own opinions and agendas under the banner of their favorite candidate.

“In new media, the ability to control the conversation is almost impossible,” said Brandon Thomas, a Web 2.0 strategist and CEO of Nico Networks. “When you try to, you stifle your campaign.”

According to Rishad Tobaccowala, chief innovation officer of the media buying division of Publicis, the French advertising giant, “traditional media is based on

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Lam, Justine. Telephone interview with author. April 8, 2008.

command and control. But the digital world is all about grassroots. Traditional media is about authority. Digital is about authenticity.”³⁹

Fostering authenticity means allowing the campaign’s vast network of supporters free reign to blog, comment and e-vangelize as they choose, a relinquishing of control that can seem at odds with the classic “stay on message” approach to campaign communications.

Lam said the Paul campaign occasionally faced conspiracy theorists and others spreading false information, but added that these are common problems in decentralized campaigns that can be addressed through a consistent and effective communications department. Lam advised that in any campaign, the campaign Web site, press releases and videos should be ready immediately after issues arise in order to properly explain the candidate’s true position.

The Edwards campaign largely avoided out-of-control message dissemination by not releasing sensitive information to networks of Web supporters and by providing them with the means to get the message right.

“I would amend messages for activists sometimes, but you don’t want it to sound canned,” Rubin said. “Opinions are the most-read content.”

Refusing to respond or neglecting to provide information when supporters want it is another net faux-pas that can do more harm than good.

“If something is happening with the campaign, especially when there’s bad news, people will become frustrated by a lack of information because they were invested in the process,” Russo said.

³⁹ Leonard, Devin. “Obama’s Web Marketing Triumph.” *Fortune*. March 3, 2008.
<http://money.cnn.com/2008/02/29/technology/leonard_politics.fortune/index.htm>

Trading message control for free message dissemination is worth it, Lam said, particularly if you're an insurgent campaign looking to defeat establishment candidates without funds or name recognition. Letting go can be more challenging for the frontrunners.

"Obama has given voters the tools and resources to evangelize," Thomas said, "whereas Clinton and McCain are still fighting against the uncontrolled evangelism of their message."

With tens of thousands of people who blog on the campaign Web site, Joe Rospars, the New Media Director of the Barack Obama campaign, said that the risk of letting messages get out of control is there, but not significant. The community self-polices and reports objectionable content, so problems are rare.

"At the end of the day, it's easier to give people the power than to not let people in," Rospars said.

Barack Obama's campaign has been unique because he extends voters the offer to be a part of the "change" he repeatedly advocates in his campaign, says Anthony Hamelle of RTGI, a French new media strategy group that worked for the campaign of Segolene Royale in 2007. Experts agree that at every step in the process, Obama has been slightly ahead of the other candidates, reaching out to voters in their own communities and empowering them to create their own mini-movements.⁴⁰

"It's about figuring out how you can leverage technology to get people involved in various aspects of the campaign," Rospars said. "you have to make sure that what you're doing will result in people showing up to caucus or showing up to vote, or making calls."

⁴⁰ Hamelle, Anthony. Telephone interview with author. April 18, 2008.

A New Framework for a New Age

The difference between the ways in which the Clinton and Obama campaigns approach their new media strategy is evident by the importance they place on their e-strategy in relation to the rest of their campaign, says Thomas, who has worked on new media projects with the Clinton campaign previously. Obama treats his e-strategy team as Joe Trippi treated his own during the Dean campaign: they report directly to chief strategist David Axelrod and sit right outside his office. Conversely, in the Clinton camp, the new media team reports to the communications director, indicating that the campaign sees the Internet as just another communications tool, rather than as an integral part of its overall organizational, fundraising and messaging effort.⁴¹

Obama's use of the Internet as full-service fundraising, communications and grassroots organization tool is evident through his Web site, which provides visitors with the tools to download call lists to phone from home, allows them to set and work toward individual fundraising goals, helps locate events near their homes, and even arranges for rides and places to stay in primary states.⁴²

The campaign also aggressively uses e-mail to drive donations and to engage supporters, letting them know when and where to watch the Senator speak and asking for donations. When Clinton donated \$5 million to her own campaign in February of 2008, Obama's campaign sent an e-mail challenging supporters that they could surpass her. Within 24 hours, the campaign was \$8 million richer.⁴³

Obama's campaign has also pursued a greater variety of new media tactics, preferring to try everything and be everywhere than to leave any Internet trick untried.

⁴¹ Thomas 2008

⁴² Leonard 2008

⁴³ Ibid.

That broad-reaching and costly strategy, when combined with the sheer numbers of their campaign staff and vigilant rapid-response efforts, has made for a mainly friendly relationship between the Senator and the World Wide Web.⁴⁴

Obama has continually used his web presence to perfect and refine his message and to quickly learn which language and images work best. The only factor remaining constant is his slogan – “Change you can believe in.”⁴⁵ Meanwhile, Hillary Clinton has been derided by new media specialists for being a new media late-adapter, staying rigidly on the same strategic course and remaining insulated by loyalists. According to Tobaccowala, her campaign has “a tin ear to what’s going on in the world.”⁴⁶

Perhaps realizing the need for a strong Web presence to overcome Clinton, often viewed as the “establishment” Democratic candidate, the Obama campaign set up a new media operation similar to the one recommended by Henke as most effective for modern-day Web efforts.⁴⁷ The campaign’s technology team handles infrastructure, while a new media team handles Web outreach tools and the structure of the campaign Web site. A video team shoots his speeches for posting on YouTube, while a blog team writes his Web site’s blog.⁴⁸ The new media team operation should not be its own department, Henke argues, but should be a “force multiplier” for every other aspect of the campaign – utilizing the Internet to advance the campaign in a multitude of ways.⁴⁹

Microtargeting

⁴⁴ Thomas 2008, Rospars, Joe. Interview with the author. April 18, 2008.

⁴⁵ Leonard 2008

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Henke 2008

⁴⁸ Holahan, Catherine. “On the Web, Obama is the clear winner.” *BusinessWeek*. March 5, 2008. <http://www.businessweek.com/technology/content/mar2008/tc2008035_280573.htm>

⁴⁹ Henke 2008

Some, however, say the Clinton campaign has been unfairly edged out by “big new media” – blogs such as DailyKos and HuffingtonPost which are seen as unfairly skewed toward pro-Obama coverage. As such, the Clinton campaign has been more focused on creating micro-sites, catering to niche communities of supporters and pushing campaign propaganda without competing on social networking platforms or YouTube with other candidates.⁵⁰

Sites such as MomsforHillary or WomenforHillary offer issue-specific stories, while Attack Timeline shows the origins and timeframes of attacks launched at Clinton from the other candidates. HillaryHub offers pro-Clinton news and videos, while DelegateHub keeps a running tab of delegates still needed for Clinton to win the nomination and provides a tool for voters to contact superdelegates.⁵¹

The “Hillblazers” site offers young people the opportunity to submit endorsements, organize trips to primary states or to organize trips on campus, many of the same tools provided on Barack Obama’s campaign site.⁵²

According to Hamelle, however, that may not be enough.

“The idea is not to have a beautiful Web site in the middle of nowhere,” he said.

“The idea is to go out and engage in voters where they are.”

These days, the voters are on Facebook.

Friend-ing the candidates

Social networking is no longer just a youth fad. Ever since networking behemoth Facebook opened its membership to the public in May of 2007, the site has seen growth

⁵⁰ Lopez-Ayala, Xavier. “The Hillary Clinton Internet.” *TechPresident*. April 25, 2008.

<http://www.techpresident.com/blog/entry/24520/the_hillary_clinton_internet>

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Ibid

percentage rates in the hundreds, expanding five times faster than rival site MySpace.⁵³

Facebook has over 60 million users worldwide, the majority of whom are outside of college. Between 2004 and 2007, the site grew faster than the entire Internet did within its first three years of existence. What's more, candidates who do manage to capture voters on social networks have their undivided attention: 50 percent of users are active daily, with the average logging 22 minutes of social networking time per day.⁵⁴ Through social networking sites, making the leap to supporting a campaign requires little extraneous effort for the supporter.

“With social networking, voters can be involved at the touch of a button or a click of a mouse while doing other stuff,” Romney campaign strategist Finn said. “It’s a change election, and people get excited when they make an impact. This time, there’s a reason and a method for them to get involved through the medium they use in their daily lives.”

In addition to setting up branded micro sites, all of the candidates have pursued voters where they congregate on social networks, self-segregating by interests, locations and groups. In addition to connecting voters with one another through their Web sites and community-based micro sites, all of the candidates have created profiles in a variety of social networks, accumulating virtual “friends” and building applications to allow supporters to publicize the candidate’s message further.

Barack Obama has dominated the social networking medium, with more online “friends” than any other candidate – over 810,000 on Facebook and almost 363,000 on MySpace. Luckily, the very friends willing to brand themselves as Obama supporters are

⁵³ Fortt, Jon. “Nielsen: Facebook growth outpaces Myspace.” *Fortune*. November 15, 2007.
<<http://www.e-strategyblog.com/micromarketing/>>

⁵⁴ Thomas 2008

also likely to turn out and vote for the Senator in primaries. In nearly every primary state where he has edged out Clinton, Obama has been carried to victory on the shoulders of youth voters. With the number of young Democrats turning out in the 2008 primaries up 135 percent from 2004, young voters preferred him to his competitors by often wide margins in nearly every primary and caucus thus far.⁵⁵

Obama's popularity with the youth correlates with the popularity of social networking with young Americans today. For 18 to 24-year-olds, online social networks rank as the most-visited sites, trumping even search engines, Web-based e-mail, and pornography sites.⁵⁶ According to a Pew Research Center study, 37 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 have gone to online social networks for campaign information.⁵⁷ By targeting youth, Obama's and other candidates' campaigns can use these ready-made online influencer networks to start chain reactions among peers, tapping into savvy activists who are eager to digitally brand themselves as supporting a particular candidate.⁵⁸

What's more, the types of voters most likely to socially network are also more likely to gregariously spread the word about a candidate to their peers, even outside of the virtual world.

According to Clinton strategist Mark Penn, individuals active in social networks are not the pent-up introverts that Internet addicts are sometimes portrayed as being. Instead, he argues in *Microtrends*, they are "social geeks," with 60 percent of avid tech

⁵⁵ Drehle, David Von. "Obama's Youth Vote Triumph." *Time Magazine*. January 4, 2008.
<<http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1700525,00.html>>

⁵⁶ Tancer, Bill. "Facebook: More Popular than Porn." *Time*. October 31, 2007.
<<http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1678586,00.html>>.

⁵⁷ Pew Research Center 2008

⁵⁸ Erickson, David. "Barack Obama's Micromarketing campaign." *E-strategy blog*. January 7, 2008
<<http://www.e-strategyblog.com/micromarketing/>>

users describing themselves as extraverted, over 10 percent more than average.⁵⁹

Furthermore, 53 percent of “super-engaged” technology users consider themselves to be socially savvy, with 41 percent saying they like to “get things going” at parties, compared to just 24 percent of those that eschew technology.⁶⁰ Since MySpace and Facebook users are the life of the party, it’s likely that their online presence would be equally gregarious, drawing peers in to candidate’s campaign.

Some candidates have gone so far as to build their own social networks in order to allow their supporters to remain within one online community. John McCain has McCainSpace, where users can build their own pro-McCain sites, and Rudy Guiliani had “Team Rudy.” On top of its presence on dozens of social networks, including demographic-specific sites such as Blackplanet.com, the Obama campaign also built MyBarackObama.com in order to allow users to create a profile, write blogs, plan and attend events, find other supporters, and fundraise for the campaign.⁶¹

According to Rospars, who also worked on the Dean campaign, the idea of building a separate social network is a costly one, but a “no-brainer” that simply takes out the middle man. The Dean campaign’s meetups drew thousands of supporters, but the campaign had difficulties keeping track of who they were due to privacy issues. These issues are circumvented, Rospars said, through Mybarackobama.com

“Now we have an events system so we can follow up with people, offer training, encourage them to host another event, etc...” he said. “On the Dean campaign, we had an intern with a giant spreadsheet. It was a nightmare.”

⁵⁹ Penn, Mark. 2007. *Microtrends: the Small Forces Behind Tomorrow's Big Changes*. New York: Hachette Book Group.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ O’Hear, Steve. “Barack Obama Launches Social Network.” *ZD Net*. February 10, 2007.

Since traditional politics focuses on identifying and engaging pockets of individuals, having a network of pledged campaign devotees can provide an incredible return on the initial investment of building such a site, according to Thomas.

“The resources are minimal after you figure out how to crack the nut. A campaign-owned social media network will equal or surpass the value of an e-mail list,” new media strategist Brandon Thomas said.

Once supporters are engaged in a social network, a variety of tools, also known as applications, can be used to further their participation in the campaign’s work. Thomas outlined three types of applications and users motivations’ for adding them to their profiles. The first, discovery applications, are simply displayed on the profile to represent an aspect of that user, such as the “Where I’ve Been” map. Interaction applications, such as Facebook’s Scrabulous, allow online friends to engage in some sort of online activity together. Finally, competition applications are leaderboards which can be used as motivational tools for fundraising, with event tickets and other free prizes for top competitors. The advantage is that, in the social media realm, the prizes for high performance are much less costly and can be something as simple as a picture or graphic.⁶²

Thomas used his premise of competition applications to build a “free gifts” platform for the Clinton campaign. The platform allows users to give “message” gifts (free healthcare and a strong economy) or kitschy gifts, such as a Clintonesque pantsuit. Thomas describes the platform as a low-hurdle “ask” that can then be used to drive

⁶² Thomas 2008

supporters further up the engagement ladder toward donating actual dollar amounts.⁶³

However, to date the application has only 88 active users and 94 total fans.

Involvement in social networks can have its payoffs when virtual world popularity translates into real-world votes, however. Mitt Romney won the Congressional Political Action Conference (CPAC) straw poll in February 2008, due in part, Finn said, to his social networking presence.

“He had tapped into supporters through Facebook and encouraged them to come out to the poll and to vote for him,” she said.

According to Rospars, the importance of social networking is evidenced by the fact that his candidate, widely hailed as the social media king, consistently wins primaries across the country.

“It’s hard to measure success, but we’re raising more money and winning more elections,” Rospars said. “We’re doing our job if we can build something that gets out of the way of people expressing themselves and doing as much as they want or can do for the campaign.”

Record-breaking Fundraising

Howard Dean’s campaign proved the power of Internet fundraising in 2004, and Barack Obama continued to do so this year. The Senator has shattered fund raising expectations, raising more money in January of this year alone than Dean did in his entire campaign, with 88 percent of it originating online.⁶⁴

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Arrington, Michael. “[Obama Sets Record With January Donations; Online Donations 88% Of Total.](http://www.techcrunch.com/2008/02/04/obama-sets-record-with-january-donations-online-donations-88-of-total/)” *TechCrunch*. February 4, 2008. <<http://www.techcrunch.com/2008/02/04/obama-sets-record-with-january-donations-online-donations-88-of-total/>>

Beyond traditional e-mail and phone asks, online applications can be a major motivator for fundraising. Facebook currently contains applications such as “Causes,” which allows users to display causes that they are passionate about on their profiles and donate funds. According to Thomas, however, the application mostly serves an “identification” purpose for users to “feel good about themselves” and has raised little revenue.⁶⁵ In order to create a sense of competition among online supporters, an online transparent metric should be used that allows donors to track their funds and to compete with other campaigns.

Steve Petersen credits this so-called “video-game” effect for the success one such metric that his company, the Bivings Group, built for the Fred Thompson campaign. The site showed a simple red pick-up truck with the slogan “fill up the tank!” challenging visitors to push up the dollar amount displayed on a virtual gas tank.

In another display of the power of campaign-donor bragging rights, Ron Paul was one of the only candidates who was able to consistently increase his fundraising amount in quarter after quarter, due in part to his transparent fundraising graphics. In a classic example of Web 2.0 engagement, supporters would take campaign-provided fundraising widgets and place them on their own personal sites.⁶⁶

“People would take screenshots of their name showing how much they donated, and say, ‘hey, I donated, how about you donate?’” Lam said.

One supporter, Trevor Lyman, organized a “Money Bomb” on the 234th anniversary of the Boston Tea Party, raising \$6 million in 24 hours.⁶⁷ Despite having no official ties to the campaign, Lyman was able to set up a Web site and petition fellow

⁶⁵ Thomas 2008

⁶⁶ Lam 2008

⁶⁷ Vargas, Jose Antonio. “Ron Paul Beats Own Fundraising Record.” *Washingtonpost.com*. December 17, 2007. <http://blog.washingtonpost.com/the-trail/2007/12/17/ron_paul_beats_own_fundraising.html>

supporters to donate in unison. The feat garnered media attention and relative notoriety for the insurgent candidate as a master of the online fundraising domain.

PresTube

Viral videos also play a key role in the success of Web 2.0 campaigns. Both videos released from the campaign itself and those originating in the external community – like the will.i.am video – can be used in order to promote one candidates and deride others.

Nearly a quarter of Americans say they have seen either a campaign speech, interview, commercial, or debate online.⁶⁸ With millions of eyes watching at their leisure, re-playing and forwarding to friends, it became clear early in this campaign that YouTube, not just the mainstream media, would be the ultimate arbiter of a candidate's successes and failures, of their crippling flubs and their shining moments.

James Kotecki was a senior at Georgetown in 2007 when he noticed the lackluster nature of the candidates' YouTube videos. Armed with an inexpensive Web cam and pencil puppets of the candidates, Kotecki began uploading his own video responses to the candidates' online videos, giving pointers from the comfort of his dorm room.

"The funny stuff is most popular on YouTube," Kotecki said. "It's good to be funny but to be authentic. Don't worry about having a million dollar production – compelling is better than glossy."

Kotecki also advised against simply uploading campaign commercials to YouTube, saying that candidates should instead endeavor to have a two-way conversation with voters.

⁶⁸ Pew Research Center 2008

His advice proved so popular that soon candidates began taking part in his conversation by agreeing to be interviewed by Kotecki in his dorm room. In all, Kotecki interviewed seven of the candidates, including Ron Paul, John Edwards, Chris Dodd and Mike Huckabee.

“Most people would have deleted a message from a student asking to interview him, but I thought he seemed smart,” said Lam of her reaction upon being approached by Kotecki. “Since our campaign was small enough, we were able to take our chances. We made history, we got our message on YouTube, and Ron Paul had more time to talk about foreign policy.”

The new importance of YouTube was highlighted by the fact that so many of the candidates made their candidacy announcements through online videos. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama posted announcement videos on their Web sites, while John Edwards posted his directly to YouTube.⁶⁹ Hillary Clinton used viral videos in order to allow supporters to vote on her campaign theme-song and to show off her sense of humor. In a series of three videos posted on YouTube, Clinton first posted a clip of herself singing the national anthem, and finished with a “Sopranos” parody that debuted just as the television series wrapped.⁷⁰ The videos were watched nearly a million times on YouTube, and over 200,000 people voted on theme songs.⁷¹

Much like campaign-specific social networks, some candidates prefer to aggregate their videos on separate video channels. The trend began with HowardDean.tv, which provided around 24 hours of content total and enjoyed a viewership of about

⁶⁹ Kapustka, Paul. “John Edwards’ YouTube Candidacy.” *NewTeeVee*. December 27, 2006. <<http://newteevee.com/2006/12/27/john-edwards-youtube-candidacy/>>

⁷⁰ Vargas, Jose Antonio. “Hillary Clinton Rides Sopranos Coattails in Video Spoof of Finale.” *Washington Post*. June 20, 2007.

⁷¹ Ibid.

50,000 people per day.⁷² Mitt Romney was the first to host his own video channel this election cycle with MittTV, in addition to a create-your-own video contest for supporters through Yahoo.⁷³ Not to be outdone, Ron Paul's campaign began streaming conference calls on the "lifecasting" platform Justin.tv.⁷⁴

Whatever the method of delivery, new media experts have one resounding piece of advice: "Do not control, empower."⁷⁵

"Instead of using user-generated video, Clinton fakes user-generated content," Thomas said. "It's funny, but only how it's funny when your parents try to be like you."

Rather than attempting to force authenticity, it's best to let users do it themselves by making footage available for re-cutting and posting, Thomas advises. The result could be something as popular as "Vote Different," a parody of the "Think Different" Macintosh advertisement from 1984, which appeared on YouTube on March 5, 2007 attacking Hillary Clinton. The video was later attributed to a consultant working for Blue State Digital, the company that worked on Dean's 2004 bid, but in the meantime its originality and mystery kept the media buzzing and YouTubers logging in over five million views to date.⁷⁶

When an online video is sufficiently interesting or attention-grabbing, it can mean free mainstream media attention, as news networks frequently replay popular YouTube videos on-air.

"I think the Clinton campaign does that effectively," Russo said. "After every single debate, without fail, they had a video up on YouTube that had 'the defining

⁷² Trippi 2008, 109

⁷³ Finn 2008

⁷⁴ Lam 2008

⁷⁵ Thomas 2008

⁷⁶ Huffington, Ariana. "Who Created 'Hillary 1984' Mystery Solved." HuffingtonPost. March 21, 2007. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ariana-huffington/who-created-hillary-1984_b_43978.html>

moment of the debate,’ and every single time the media would bite – it will play over and over on TV.”

However, on-camera faux-pas are even more likely to be re-played, much to the chagrin of candidates who carefully choreograph photo and video ops only to be thwarted by a rogue observer wielding a cell phone camera. The release of a video showing former Virginia Senator George Allen referring to a young man of Indian descent with the term “macaca,” became the slur heard round the Net, effectively ruining his career.

This campaign cycle, there have been similar “gotcha” moments, between John McCain’s singing “bomb Iran,” John Edwards preening to the tune of “I Feel Pretty,” and an spuriously authentic tearful moment from Hillary Clinton. Even more recently, the antics of Barack Obama’s “spiritual adviser,” the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, found their way to the mainstream airwaves after circulating on YouTube, leading some to question Obama’s patriotism.

According to Amy Rubin from the Edwards campaign, rapid response is the key to extinguishing fires relating to embarrassment on YouTube.

“The hair thing and the hedge fund, they were detrimental from the beginning when they came out,” she said. “I wish we had been more aggressive in responding earlier.”

Despite the negative fallout that campaigns may experience from an unfavorable YouTube clip, most can agree that it provides a valuable resource for candidates seeking to break out of the “sound byte” medium. There have been 37 million views of video content on Barack Obama’s channel, which includes 20-minute documentaries and 40-minute speeches.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Rospars 2008

“I’m delighted and flabbergasted that millions and millions of people are watching,” Rospars said. “I think it’s good that people want to consume primary sources and engage in a deeper level than the three-second clip on the news.”

Managing the Blogosphere

This year’s will be one of the first elections in which blogs will be a main influencing force in determining which campaign scandals are emphasized, which triumphs are lauded and which candidates are ignored entirely. Currently, the blogosphere is favoring coverage of the Clinton and Obama campaigns, with the two candidates grabbing up approximately 40 percent of the coverage each, leaving Republican nominee John McCain with around 20 percent.⁷⁸ That trend has persisted since the beginning of the year, although in January the three remaining candidates were sharing a small portion of their blogger pie with Mitt Romney, who garnered 15 percent of coverage.⁷⁹

Candidates often see bloggers as a megaphone for their issues, bypassing the media filter while drawing on crowds of supporters who are already likely to lean politically right or left.

“What’s kind of scary is that it enables people to congregate with others and confirm their worldview,” said Petersen, a blogger for the Bivings Group. “The media is forced to include more and more voices, but instead people are more focused on things they already agree with.”

⁷⁸ Linkfluence. 2007. “Presidential Watch 08.” <<http://presidentialwatch08.com/index.php/trends/>>

⁷⁹ Ibid.

In order to gain the favorability of bloggers with a critical eye and penchant for verbal asperity, cultivating relationships with bloggers is an essential part of any campaign's new media strategy.⁸⁰ According to Petersen, some blog operations, particularly those that lean left, tend to be "more grassroots," preferring to be treated as activists or surrogates.

"At times, bloggers received more information from our campaign than CNN or other mainstream media," Finn said. "We kept them engaged in what we were doing, offered exclusives, and nurtured our relationship with them."

Brian Lawson, a senior at Saint Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire, began the blog New Hampshire Presidential Watch in order to keep track of pre-primary activities in his town. Soon, his blog began receiving attention from the national news media, as many journalists would rely on the candidate and event schedules he posted in order to better cover the pre-primary scene. It wasn't long before he had 1200 unique visitors per day, up to 5000 in the week before the New Hampshire primary.⁸¹ Lawson said he was frequently contacted by campaigns with updates for his blog.

"Here in New Hampshire, the campaigns were really invested in new media outreach," he said. "They had staff people whose job it was to keep track of certain blogs and making sure that I was getting their press releases. The campaigns realize that with the rise of new technology, the quicker they get on board, the better."

The Tweet Smell of Success

⁸⁰ Thomas 2008

⁸¹ Lawson, Brian. Telephone interview with author. March 13, 2008.

“Thomas Friedman said the world is flat, but I like to think that the world is in a conference room,” said Robert Scoble of the Edwards campaign in Graff’s *The First Campaign*,⁸² referring to the ability of today’s engaged technology users to be connected to each others’ whereabouts regardless of location. Platforms such as SMS, or text messaging, as well as the instant update Web site Twitter make keeping tabs on people – including candidates – easier then ever before. By sending out 160-character messages to devotee’s cell phones regarding a candidates’ whereabouts, a campaign can make voters feel far more intimately involved, inviting them to participate in events or to come out and vote. Barack Obama and John Edwards used the service to send regular updates to their networks of trackers, while Hillary Clinton used text-messaging to allow supporters to vote on their choice for her theme song.⁸³

Rospars said the texting system has been more helpful than he imagined, with individuals texting their feedback at rallies or texting for the campaign to look up their local polling place. The Obama campaign encouraged voters to text the message “Hope” to 62262 to subscribe to text alerts.⁸⁴

“A lot of people signed up, and it’s turned out to be an interactive medium,” Rospars said. “I’ve come to appreciate the reply in ways I wasn’t expecting.”

Twitter has been used by multiple campaigns to keep devotees posted on events and the candidates’ daily goings-on, as well as for fundraising. By attaching Twitter-specific URLs in each call-to-action “tweet,” the Clinton campaign has been able to track return on investment for each tweet they send asking for funds.⁸⁵ For example, when the

⁸² Graff 2007, 268

⁸³ Graff 2007, 270

⁸⁴ Zeigler, Todd. “Technology that will impact the 2008 elections (follow up post).” *Bivings Report*. March 12, 2008. <<http://www.bivingsreport.com/2008/technologies-that-will-impact-2008-elections/#more1384>>

⁸⁵ Lopez-Ayala 2008

campaign announced MyPA, a site that allowed donors to determine how their dollars were spent in the campaign, Clinton sent a tweet saying, “TV Spots? Signs? Radio Ads? You decide! Tell us where to put your dollars in our campaign to win PA!_

<http://hillaryclinton.com/twitterMyPA>.”⁸⁶

However, just like YouTube and blogs, Twitter can also be a double-edged sword for candidates. When video released in early April by the Obama campaign revealed three individuals standing behind the speaking Senator clad in “Abercrombie and Fitch” – an expensive trademark that does nothing to dispel accusations that Obama is an arrogant-chomping elitist liberal – the gaffe reverberated through the Internet, showing up repeatedly on “TweetScans” in the immediate aftermath.⁸⁷

It’s the Message that Matters

Although new media may have placed a newer, edgier face on classic campaign communications, the main methodology – grabbing voters’ and reporters’ attention, getting through to thought leaders and creating an inspiring message – remain the same.⁸⁸ Despite the expanding options that are available for campaigns to rally voters, both the campaigns and new media experts agree that it’s the message, not the method, that truly matters when it comes to raising funds and bringing out voters.

“You can have a bunch of Facebook friends in Canada, and that won’t help you get elected,” said Russo of the Edwards campaign.

In order to most effectively make use of new media efforts, a campaign must integrate all of the methods and tactics and drive them toward a central goal. According

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ Thomas, Brandon. “Obama, Abercrombie, and the Social Web.” *Web Strategy and Politics*. April 2, 2008.

<<http://www.gbrandonthomas.com/>>

⁸⁸ Rubin 2008

to Finn, it's not enough to simply engage voters - an effective e-campaign must activate them. Finn's example of this convergence of tactics was Romney's use of videos, events, e-mails and updates to mobilize voters during "Sign-up America," in which the campaign aimed to get 24,000 new supporters signed up in 24 hours on May 16, 2007.

"We broke that goal, raised money and got 31,000 new supporters," she said.

Still, having a formidable online presence is often not enough to win elections, no matter how aggressive a campaign's online foot soldiers are. Ron Paul's army of Diggers turned the entire Internet into a niche social network of sorts,⁸⁹ and he was frequently credited as having the most effective Web strategy of any of the Republican candidates. Lawson said that whenever he made a Paul-related post, his traffic would soar, and he said he was surprised when the candidate won few primaries.

"The campaign was able to create this huge image of Ron Paul controlling the Internet," Lawson said. "But 20 years from now we'll discover that it was like a thousand people doing it all from their basements."

However, Paul won only the primary of his home state of Texas and gained little headway in other states.

"Ron Paul had the tools and used them effectively, but he didn't have a good message," Thomas said. "Zealots can't drive your e-campaign - you have to transcend them to get to the masses."

Aside from online components, a variety of other factors - speech, charisma and an overall message - must have broad-based appeal in order to resonate both online and off.⁹⁰ YouTube guru James Kotecki cited Obama as a candidate who is able to effectively

⁸⁹ Zeigler 2008

⁹⁰ Kotecki, James. Telephone interview with the author. March 13, 2008.

combine a strong message with online tools that serve as a supplement, not a foundation, to the overall campaign. Thomas agrees that the primary reason for Obama's success so far has been the groundwork he laid with a powerful message that encourages supporters to evangelize while providing them with the online tools to do so.

"The same principles that get people engaged in social networking will get people engaged in a conversation in church, in a book club, etc...it's a symptom of a much larger evangelism," Thomas said.

Indeed, there does appear to be a clear difference in the way Obama's messaging strategy works with new media as opposed to the two other remaining candidates. Social media speaks to the "me" generation's innate narcissism – our desire to read blogs that best represent our own views, have an online profile with our interests and causes proudly displayed, and elect politicians who can make us feel a part of something special. Obama offers voters that opportunity while the others don't quite as much.

John McCain's Web site shows the story of John McCain. Hillary Clinton's message has changed repeatedly throughout the campaign, but mainly emphasizes her experience. Barack Obama's, by contrast, asks voters to "make a difference" and proclaims "yes we can,"⁹¹ peddling the type of life experience and individualized attention that today's audience, bred on participation trophies and plugged into personalized media, adores. In effect, he lowers the threshold to engagement not only through a plethora of online tools, but through his inclusive, go-get-'em message as well.⁹²

⁹¹ Shiffman, Denise. "Obama's Rivals Should Steal from His Social Playbook." *Advertising Age*. April 14, 2008. <http://adage.com/campaigntrail/post?article_id=126336>

⁹² Thomas 2008, Hamelle 2008, Rospars 2008

The Social Web and the Future

Despite the fact that this campaign may have launched candidates into a future filled with more blog posts than campaign buttons and more online Digging than offline debating, e-strategists say the new media movement is still in its infancy.

“So much of this is trial and error and experimentation and copying our friends on other campaigns,” Russo said. “We won’t know the full impact for a few more years.”

All signs point to a continuation of the trend of personalization, community-based outreach and virtual engagement. Finding so-called “pockets of people” in a world where each demographic follows its own networks, its own blogs and its own YouTube channels will be increasingly important.

“More and more, campaigns and the media will become community-based, and in the future, it will become harder and harder to speak to the electorate at large and to the nation at large,” Hamelle said.

For all the hype, it’s still unclear how new media will impact the general election, or when or if it will overtake traditional media in popularity or importance. A sizeable chunk of each campaign’s funds are still spent on TV advertisements, and this is not likely to change simply due to the advent of YouTube. According to Thomas, the gap between the most wired and the traditionalists in American society is growing, and there is still an audience for newspapers and televised outreach.

Even Barack Obama, praised by experts as a powerful old-style orator who has integrated new-style online tools in order to bring young voters to their feet, has not been able to fully edge out the less-techy Clinton in repeated primary battles. Thomas feels this is because Clinton appeals to the “tail” of the wired spectrum – the low-tech, low-brow

lunch-pail Pennsylvanians her competitor has been caught disparaging. Conversely, Obama appeals to the “head.” His followers are the savvy, the wealthy and the technologically apt – the “social geeks” from Penn’s *Microtrends*.⁹³

“If Obama wins the nomination, then speaking to the head is more effective than speaking to the tail,” Thomas said. “But what will that mean for the disenfranchisement of the less-wired crowd?”

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⁹³ Thomas 2008

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