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## The internet in U.S. election campaigns

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*In recent years, candidate websites and other internet-based innovations have dramatically altered political campaigns for national office in the United States. The internet has improved the ability of campaigns to inform citizens, mobilize voters, and raise money from political donors. Websites have become only one of several weapons in a candidate's online arsenal. Blogs, podcasts, social networking sites, and YouTube also have become additional means to reach voters, particularly those who would not visit the website or have their name appear on an e-mail list. We explore the immediate implications that these and other changes have had for national campaigns, as well as the possibilities for the future.*

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The advent and popularization of the internet has generated a great deal of hype about its potential to invigorate electoral politics. Dick Morris, former advisor to President Clinton, suggested that a “fifth estate” of internet politics would alter the balance of political power in the United States by linking people together (Morris, 1999). The early success of Howard Dean’s campaign on the internet led one journalist to ask in 2003, “what will happen when a national political machine can fit on a laptop?” (Ehrlich, 2003). Dean’s campaign manager, Joe Trippi, claimed that the internet would do nothing short of revolutionize electoral politics (Trippi, 2004). Indeed, by 2006, the internet had changed the way candidates conduct campaigns. Congressional candidates were using the internet for fund-raising, blogging, creating online communities, making video and audio clips available, and much more. In January of 2007, Hillary Clinton announced her run for the presidency on her website by way

of a short video titled “Let the Conversation Begin.”

This chapter examines the specific ways in which candidates and parties have used the internet in their campaigns. The main focus is on candidates for national office in the United States. The subject is important for several reasons. First, because it is a considerably less expensive medium than television, the internet holds the potential to level the playing field for outsider candidates and minor parties. Although major party candidates are still advantaged in terms of their ability to carry their message to the public (Margolis, Resnick, and Levy 2003), the existence of the internet as a campaign tool offers citizens more choice, thus potentially enhancing candidate options. Second, as an unfiltered medium, candidates and parties are able to “get their message out” through bypassing traditional media gatekeepers in order to reach groups of interested voters (Graber, 2006). The internet is also a sophisticated and relatively inexpensive communications

tool that like-minded citizens, candidate, and party organizations can use to interact with each other and mobilize support.

To begin, we review the short history of internet campaigning, focusing on how the use of the medium has evolved. We divide this discussion into three sections, each corresponding to a particular phase of the development of internet campaigning. In the discovery phase, which dates from about 1992 until 1999, candidates, parties, and groups began experimenting with the internet and exploring its possible electoral uses. By the presidential campaign of 2000, the internet campaign had reached a maturation phase. At that point, the vast majority of major-party candidates for federal elections, and many state-level candidates, maintained websites throughout the campaign. Political campaign websites no longer lagged behind their commercial counterparts in terms of interactivity, integration of server-side and database technologies, and aesthetic sophistication.

Internet campaigns entered yet another phase in the 2006 congressional election cycle and this continued through the 2008 presidential campaign. By this time, virtually all serious candidates for national political office had fairly sophisticated websites that professionals maintained. In this new phase, candidates, parties, and interest groups have turned their attention beyond their own websites to other venues. Campaign organizations, in particular, have begun to carry the campaign to blogs, social networking sites such as Facebook, and other quasi-media forums such as YouTube.

### **Discovery: experimentation and exploration**

George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton were the first presidential candidates to make use of the internet during their 1992 campaigns. During the election, the

White House Communications Office e-mailed approximately 200 Bush speeches and position papers, and distributed them to several commercial bulletin boards (Bradley, 1993). Clinton was more aggressive in his use of the medium, distributing speeches, position papers, and biographical information on various newsgroups and a Clinton Listserv. He also made his e-mail address for the campaign available through commercial internet service providers, such as Compuserv (Sakkas 1993; Bimber and Davis 2003: 23). However, the reach of these electronic campaign efforts was limited, as few citizens used or relied on the internet for their political information.

In March of 1995, the Republican National Party registered the domain name “rnc.org,” and the Democrats followed with “dnc.org” the following month. During that same year, several Republican candidates for president, including Lamar Alexander, Phil Gramm, and Steve Forbes, built websites for the primary campaign. The eventual nominee, Bob Dole, and the Clinton–Gore re-election campaign had websites, although their internet campaign operations were still under the radar in most respects. This changed after the first presidential debate, when during his closing statement, Dole invited viewers to become involved in the campaign by giving the address of his campaign’s website. Although technically he erred by saying “www.dolekemp96org” rather than “www.dolekemp96.org,” the site received more than two million visitors in the following 24 hours (Cornfield, 2004a: 3).

By 1998, more than two-thirds of all congressional candidates maintained websites for their campaign, and many state party organizations had established an online presence as well. Most of these early campaign websites were little more than “brochureware.” They offered little interaction and were not updated often (Bimber and Davis, 2003: 24). However,

they did offer a wealth of information (for example, platforms, issue positions, and so on) through a new and growing medium (Francia and Herrnson, 2002).

In addition to websites, campaigns began to make greater use of e-mail communications. Former professional wrestler Jesse Ventura drew from existing networks of professional wrestling fans and Reform Party activists to build an e-mail network of more than 3,000 supporters. His Minnesota gubernatorial online campaign was able to facilitate registration and get-out-the-vote efforts, and the coordination of campaign events and rallies. While this was not exactly interactive web technology, it did suggest the potential for using the internet to mobilize support.

## **Maturation**

By the election of 2000, political campaign websites were no longer a novelty, and by 2004, the overwhelming majority of congressional, gubernatorial, and presidential candidates maintained websites (Howard, 2006: 26–8). In this maturation phase, campaign websites began to include many of the features that sophisticated commercial websites offer. For example, in 2000, the Gore–Lieberman site featured an “Instant MessageNet” for online chatting. In 2004, George W. Bush allowed visitors to ask questions to his campaign staff in real time in the site’s “State of the Race.” Many campaign websites now routinely include interactive features or games. Bush’s 2004 site included a “Kerry Gas Tax Calculator” that allowed visitors to see how much John Kerry’s proposed 50 cent per gallon gas tax would cost them. Within this maturation phase, the internet supplemented campaign efforts in four different functions: campaign operations, communication, mobilization, and fund-raising.

## **General campaign operations**

The internet allows the campaign to gather various types of information that are useful to the campaign effort. This includes possibly damaging information about the campaign’s own candidate (Baumgartner, 2000: 1), background material on the opponent (personal and public life, voting, speeches), as well as developments in polling, endorsements, statements by other public figures, and information about the various legal and technical requirements associated with running for public office. Campaign staffs previously acquired this information by other, less efficient means. With the rise of the internet, however, the process has become much easier and more convenient. Campaign information sources include news services such as LexisNexis, as well as standard internet news monitoring techniques like RSS news feeds and search engines.

Another aspect of general campaign operations conducted via the internet is the distribution of various campaign materials, such as posters, buttons, bumper stickers, and clothing. In 2000, for example, Al Gore’s online store for these materials was called “Gore Stores.” In 2004, Kerry sold campaign products from a section of his website labeled “Kerry Gear.” President Bush had a section called “Wstuff,” which in addition to traditional campaign materials, included a reading list, computer screen-savers and wallpapers, and a section to create and print a customized campaign poster.

## **Campaign communications**

Political campaigns are fundamentally exercises in communicating a simple message: “vote for me,” or, “don’t vote for my opponent.” Candidate home pages serve multiple purposes in this regard. Most home pages post the candidate’s personal

and professional biographies and information about the candidate's family. Under a heading labeled "Get to Know Us," the front page of the 2000 Gore–Lieberman website ([al Gore.com](http://al Gore.com)) featured small photos of each of the candidates and their wives linked to their respective biographies. Front pages typically include contact information for the campaign, including toll-free telephone numbers and e-mail addresses. Most also have other standard website features, including, for example, a way for visitors to search the site or to send a link to the site to someone.

Candidate home pages further allow for more targeted advertising. Sites typically have links to related or friendly campaign organizations, such as party affiliates or major interest or advocacy groups. Presidential candidate websites can provide state and local information about campaign events, as well as disseminate unique information about voter registration and early voting in all 50 states. In another form of targeted advertising, the major-party presidential candidates in 2004 allowed users to select Spanish versions of their website. Both campaigns had sections on their websites dedicated to demographic groups they were courting. Kerry called these groups "Communities." Bush referred to them as "Coalitions," devoting sections on the site to the concerns of women, African Americans, Catholics, educators, first responders, health professionals, Hispanics, seniors, small business owners, sportsmen, students, veterans, and more.

Campaign websites also provide information about the policy positions of the candidate, which include statements of issue positions, rebuttals of charges from the opposition, speeches, and campaign pamphlets. Frequently these materials are made available in printer-friendly or downloadable formats, reminiscent of campaign books of previous eras. Howard Dean's December 2003 "Common Sense for a

New Century," an eight-page manifesto "addressed to the Citizens of America," was one such example. It is also common for campaign websites to have a section devoted to why voters should *not* vote for the opposition. In 2004, for example, John Kerry's "Bush–Cheney: Wrong for America" section, which was linked to a "Rapid Response Center," outlined his case for why voters should oust the incumbent president. Bush's "Kerry Media Center" performed a similar function and included rebuttals to Kerry's positions.

Another way the internet aids in campaign communication is via e-mail. One reason e-mail is invaluable is because it allows campaigns to communicate *internally*. Of course, there are other technologically advanced communications (cell phones, text messaging), but an e-mail from a campaign manager can reach thousands of employees and volunteers easily, quickly, and cheaply.

E-mail also can keep supporters informed about the campaign, alert them to upcoming events, candidate appearances, and circulate rapid rebuttals in response to opposition attacks or press reports. For example, in his 1998 bid for Governor of Minnesota, Jesse Ventura relied on e-mail to his supporters to debunk a rumor that had been spread that he supported legalized prostitution (Cornfield, 2004a: 67–8). In early January of 2000, John McCain e-mailed supporters requesting that each make ten phone calls to registered independents or Republicans in New Hampshire; more than nine thousand did so. McCain also used e-mail to ask supporters to preview radio ads before they aired (Cornfield 2004a: 69–70). It is now standard for campaign organizations (candidates, parties) to maintain lists of e-mail addresses of supporters. Visitors to the campaign website can opt in or "subscribe" to a campaign newsletter, entering an e-mail address and other information

(for example, name, mailing address, phone number, age). Michael Turk, Bush's 2004 e-Campaign Director, claimed that the campaign collected more than seven million e-mail addresses using this method (Jenkins, 2004). With the additional information, campaigns can "narrowcast" messages, personalizing them to groups of individuals based on various characteristics.

### **Mobilization**

Mobilization is a specialized form of political communication, an attempt to do more than just inform, but to engage supporters to act. One mobilization tool that political campaigns employ is the blog. Blogs connect supporters with the candidate, the campaign, and each other, providing them with an arena in which to voice their opinions. In addition, the hypertext format allows writers to link to other stories relevant to the campaign. The most well publicized use of blogs in a campaign effort was Howard Dean in 2003. The Dean campaign directly or indirectly supported and moderated several blogs throughout 2003 and into 2004, including "Dean Nation" ([dean2004.blogspot.com](http://dean2004.blogspot.com)), "Change for America" ([www.changeforamerica.com](http://www.changeforamerica.com)), "Howard Dean 2004 Call to Action Weblog" ([deancalltoaction.blogspot.com](http://deancalltoaction.blogspot.com)), and what was to become his main blog, "Blog for America" ([blogforamerica.com](http://blogforamerica.com)). Dean even parlayed his blog into a forum for decision-making in his campaign.

Dean's blogs were updated daily (and sometimes more often) with journal entries, photos, audio, and video clips (Trippi, 2004: 16–17). On a single day in late December 2003, the Dean campaign posted roughly 400 messages to their "Blog for America," which in turn prompted more than 4,000 comments over the next 24 hours (Stromer-Galley and Baker, 2006). This activity helped propel Dean from a largely unknown

candidate in early 2003 to the presumed front-runner for the nomination by the end of 2004. By the time polling began in the Iowa caucuses, the Dean campaign estimated it had the support of approximately 600,000 online activists (Manjoo, 2003; 2004).

The Dean campaign ultimately did not win the nomination. In fact, Dean won a primary in only one state—Vermont. The Dean campaign's failure illustrated the drawbacks of using online discussion as a substitute for outreach to undecided voters. Even though Dean was able to appeal strongly to his online supporters, his base was simply too small a proportion of the primary electorate.

Dean's initiatives, however, did affect other campaigns' use of blogs. George Bush and John Kerry had official blogs linked from their campaign websites in 2004 (Trammell, 2006). Many of the candidates for president in 2008 also had blogs up and running as early as March 2007.

Another way that the internet aids in mobilization is by helping supporters find local campaign events, ways to volunteer on a local basis, or other ways to become involved in the campaign effort. In 2000, Al Gore had a section on his website called "Take Action," which provided visitors the opportunity to select their state and their "coalition" (group), and returned suggestions about how they might help the campaign based on those selections. Gore also gave supporters the opportunity to build their own Gore-for-president web page by joining the "Gore I-Team." The 2004 campaign website of John Kerry featured a section labeled "Get Local," in which visitors could get state-specific information on how to get involved in the campaign (Postelnicu *et al.*, 2006). Likewise, the Bush campaign had a "Grassroots" section on its website, designed to build networks of people who would canvass their neighborhoods

(Ceasar and Busch, 2005: 133–4). The efforts were based on a model used in the 2000 Iowa caucuses and the 2002 congressional elections in South Dakota. Volunteers were given the opportunity to become a “team leader” by recruiting ten additional people. Daily communications from national team leaders supported and informed these local leaders (Lowry, 2004). Approximately 1.4 million volunteers were recruited in this manner (Lizza, 2002).

### **Fund-raising**

The presidential primaries of 2000 demonstrated the potential of using the internet as a fund-raising tool. New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley, a candidate for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, was the first candidate to raise one million dollars online. Even more impressive was the internet fund-raising of John McCain, who was vying for the Republican Party nomination. At the time of the New Hampshire primary, McCain was virtually out of money. His surprising win, however, coupled with the publicity generated from it and an online appeal for donations, helped him raise more than one-half million dollars in online donations in a single day (Bimber and Davis, 2003: 38–9).

Online donations have become increasingly important because the current campaign finance system encourages small donations from a multitude of sources. The small donations McCain received from online donations after his New Hampshire victory, in conjunction with federal matching funds, enabled him to raise a large amount of money very quickly. While McCain eventually lost his bid to secure the Republican nomination, he raised \$6.4 million online, or about one-quarter of the total amount the campaign raised (Cornfield, 2004b: 66–7; Howard, 2006: 13–14). In 2003, Howard

Dean raised an enormous amount of money through internet donations. Altogether Dean raised approximately \$20 million solely online, roughly 40 percent of his entire campaign funding (Postelnicu *et al.*, 2006: 105). What makes these totals more impressive is that his campaign was over fairly early in the primary season. George Bush raised approximately \$14 million online, only about 5 percent of his total campaign funding. John Kerry, on the other hand, raised \$89 million online, a healthy one-third of his total (Postelnicu *et al.*, 2006: 105).

In terms of their demographic profile, online donors tend to be middle-class, fairly well educated, and politically active. Disproportionate numbers of online donors, for example, attended a house party or Meetup.com event. Online giving seems to have become the preferred method of donating to a campaign. Significantly better than half of both small and large donations were made online by all age groups except seniors (those over 65). Small donors between the ages of 18 and 34 overwhelmingly gave online (87 percent) (Graf *et al.*, 2006).

In terms of online fund-raising strategy, some lessons can be gleaned from the presidential campaign of 2004. One comprehensive study suggests that Democrats were more successful at raising money online. Twice as many donors who gave \$500 or more gave to Democratic rather than Republican Party candidates (64 percent to 31 percent), and the disparity between the two parties was even greater with respect to those who contributed \$100 or less (54 percent to 19 percent). The study speculates that this was in part due to the fact that many of Dean’s supporters migrated to Kerry’s candidacy after the primaries. In addition, Kerry was forced to be somewhat more aggressive in his fund-raising efforts given the financial advantage of the incumbent President Bush (Graf *et al.*, 2006).

However, online giving remains unpredictable. Approximately half (46%) of all small donors and more than one-third (39%) of large donors contributed without being asked (Graf *et al.*, 2006). The implications of this for future fund-raising strategy are unclear. It does seem safe to conclude that candidates who can capture the imagination of the electorate (e.g., underdog candidates Bill Bradley and John McCain) or appeal to a politically active base (e.g., Howard Dean or Ned Lamont in 2006) will enjoy more success raising money online.

### **Post-maturation: beyond the candidate website**

Since the initiation of candidate websites, campaigns have realized the limited reach of this medium. Websites reach those who actively visit them, and those who visit them are a relatively small percentage of the electorate. Moreover, those who visit candidate websites are existing supporters rather than the “undecided” voters who can often swing an election (Bimber and Davis, 2003). While e-mail has the potential to expand beyond the narrow reach of a website because it does not rely on a site visit and “pushes” its message, it is constrained by a subset of supporters (spam blockers prevent widespread distribution of e-mail messages, and, if they do not, candidates face the wrath of voters who punish spammers).

How, then, do candidates go beyond the self-selection problem that limits exposure to their message to those who already intend to vote for the candidate? What are the means by which they can reach voters—and even activists—who are not site visitors or e-mail recipients?

Campaigns have reached out beyond their own websites to two other types of internet-based political communication tools: media controlled and user controlled.

The next section describes each of them, as well as their variations, and then discusses how candidates are using them to present themselves to voters.

### ***Media-controlled online communication***

Media-controlled online communication refers to websites disseminating news and information to a relatively large number of voters, but which a third party controls. One type is the traditional news media website (for example, ABCnews.com, Foxnews.com). In terms of the news functions, candidates approach the online versions much as they do the traditional print or broadcast versions.

A growing area of interest for candidates is advertising on media-controlled sites. Internet advertisements cost only a fraction of what advertising on television costs. Because the audiences for such sites are likely voters, candidates have steadily increased the share of their advertising budget devoted to online advertising. In 2004, both presidential candidates produced and distributed many of the “banner” ads (small rectangular advertisements that appear on a web page that lead visitors to the advertiser’s website). For example, by the spring of 2004, the Republican National Committee placed banner ads that attacked John Kerry’s war record on more than 1,000 different websites (Kaid, 2006). Both the Bush and Kerry campaigns directed most of their internet ad buys to local news organizations (television, radio, newspaper). One study suggests that almost 70 percent of Bush’s internet ads, and 60 percent of Kerry’s, appeared in venues like these (Cornfield, 2004b). Also popular were the websites of national periodicals and blogs.

Online campaign advertising increased by more than 700 percent between 2002 and 2006 (PQMedia, 2006). Twenty-nine candidates or party organizations advertised

online in the last week of 2006, but the number of online ad impressions bought (approximately 4 million) was small compared to 2004. However, the 2006 election lacked a presidential race (Kaye, 2006). The 2008 presidential campaign featured early advertising, including online advertising, by major contenders.

A newer relationship is between candidates and another form of media-controlled website, the blog. In addition to candidate-controlled blogs or blogs started by an individual, there are also more popular and well-known political blogs such as Daily Kos or InstaPundit. These blogs constitute a new type of online information that is beginning to rival some existing traditional media sites in readership size and loyalty. Moreover, much like traditional media, many of their writers—bloggers—have journalistic status, gaining special entrance to political events such as national party conventions, and candidate and policy-maker press briefings. These bloggers serve a political news dissemination function, and, most importantly, candidates court them regularly.

Politics is not the primary topic in the blogosphere, but national political blogs have acquired a niche and an expanding readership. Some national political blogs reach hundreds of thousands of people, and political blog readership is approaching the size of the traditional news media audience. Daily Kos has approximately one half million visits per day. InstaPundit, Eschaton, and CrooksAndLiars each have more than one hundred thousand visits daily. By comparison, the daily circulation of the *Los Angeles Times* is 775,000 (Ahrens, 2006b).

Political blogs offer the opportunity to reach well beyond the campaign's website. By placing information with blogs or, even better, currying the support of high-profile bloggers, candidate campaigns hope to tap into the millions of Americans who read blogs. Candidates have started to

learn to give exclusives to blogs in order to gain the goodwill of bloggers who see themselves as the underdogs in competition with the traditional news media.

However, candidates do not treat political bloggers quite like other media. Unlike journalists, bloggers sometimes join campaigns as consultants. In return for a consulting fee, bloggers become advocates of a particular campaign. Much like the partisan press of the late 1700s and early 1800s, bloggers are willing to establish a relationship with candidates that traditional journalists would eschew. One current debate in internet campaigning regards the ethical question of whether bloggers should reveal any financial connection to a campaign when writing about that candidate and their opponents.

Candidates must be wary of establishing relationships with bloggers, given that blogging can be quite shrill and feature extreme and flagrantly abusive language. Even when a blogger tones down rhetoric to accommodate the campaign, another problem is the transparency of the past history of blog posts. Many blogs include archives on their sites, allowing easy access to journalists, interest groups, or other campaigns that wish to locate material that a blogger has written, which might embarrass the candidate through association.

Indeed, candidates already have faced such a situation. For example, in 2006, a Catholic group accused two bloggers, working for presidential candidate John Edwards, of posting anti-Catholic statements on their personal blogs. At first, the Edwards campaign made a decision not to terminate the bloggers, although it did separate itself from their statements. Eventually, however, both bloggers resigned as the controversy continued to swirl around them (Broder, 2007).

Relations with bloggers can be especially problematic for a moderate candidate. A candidate with rather extreme



political views can appeal to a larger blogging community than a candidate with centrist positions. One example is the contrast between Joseph Lieberman and Ned Lamont. Lieberman aroused the wrath of liberal Democrats, including bloggers, when he supported the Iraq war and continued to do so even when Democrats (and even some Republicans) had largely abandoned that position. Lamont, Lieberman's primary opponent in the Connecticut Democratic Senate primary, acquired broad support from liberal bloggers who favored Lamont's liberal stances. When Lamont won the primary election, many political observers credited the activities of liberal bloggers for his victory. Although Lieberman later defeated Lamont in the general election, the primary election outcome suggested that bloggers may be helpful to more ideologically polarizing candidates within intraparty nomination contests.

### ***User-controlled online communication***

One of the features of the internet is the potential for self-publishing. At its inception, this was one of its much-heralded characteristics. However, the audience for an individual's website was rarely more than family or friends. But a new medium for self-publishing—the social networking site—has enhanced the reach of the practice. Online forums such as YouTube, Flickr, MySpace, and Facebook have centralized self-publishing efforts and brought large audiences to such portals. These types of sites have recently begun to have an impact on political campaigns.

Perhaps the best known online site for self-publishing is YouTube, a website that allows people to upload videos for general viewing. The growth of YouTube's audience has been phenomenal. In a six-month period in 2006, the number of unique site visitors grew by 300 percent.

In July 2006, an estimated 19.6 million visitors went to the YouTube website ("YouTube U.S. Web Traffic Grows 75 Percent Week over Week"). A visit to YouTube usually is not a quick one; because site visitors spend time browsing videos (many of them lengthy) the average visit is 28 minutes (Cornfield, 2006).

YouTube has become the one-stop source for popular videos about politics. The site even created a separate section for political campaign videos for the 2008 presidential campaign (Vargas, 2007a). Videos posted there largely consisted of candidate ads from the campaigns themselves. The most popular candidate videos seem to be those in which the candidate says or does something not intended for viewing (e.g., videos of Hillary Clinton singing the national anthem off-key, or John McCain sleeping through the State of the Union address). Controversial advertisements, such as actor Michael J. Fox's appeals to voters to reject candidates who were against government funding for stem cell research, or the racially charged negative advertisement against Senate candidate Harold Ford in Tennessee, were also popular.

Of course, journalists have sought to catch candidates in embarrassing positions for years. Examples from an earlier era include a comment made by 1968 Republican candidate George Romney to a television journalist that he had been brainwashed by the U.S. military while visiting Vietnam (Sabato, 1991), Ronald Reagan's 1984 joke caught on an open mike that "we start bombing [the Soviet Union] in fifteen minutes" (Taylor, 1984), or news stories that emphasized George H. W. Bush's mistake in calling September 7 Pearl Harbor Day in 1988 ("Bush Trips in Speech" 1988).

Ever-present video recording devices have increased candidate exposure to an unprecedented level, and the existence of YouTube democratizes "gotcha journalism"

by allowing anyone who catches a candidate or politician off guard to self-publish the gaffe. The problem is not limited to a candidate doing or saying something in an off moment. An old video could highlight the candidate making a speech or speaking in a debate and contradicting his or her position on an issue. An example is a YouTube video of Mitt Romney giving a speech in an earlier campaign touting his pro-choice position on abortion and his support for gun control (Finnegan, 2007). By 2008, presidential candidate Romney had changed his positions, but YouTube has been there to remind voters of his previous position.

Campaigns can, it should be noted, use YouTube to their advantage. They can, for example, upload videos touting their own candidate (Jalonick, 2006). Placing a campaign ad on YouTube enhances audience exposure at no cost to the campaign. Campaigns also are using the reality characteristic of YouTube to trip up their opponents. Campaigns now hire staffers to follow their opponent with a video camera to record candidate gaffes and post the video online (Jalonick, 2006). The most famous example in 2006 was the Jim Webb staffer who followed Senator George Allen and became part of the story himself. When Allen made reference to the Webb staffer by using the term “macaca,” the staffer was recording Allen’s remarks. The staffer uploaded the video to YouTube, and then the campaign informed local and national journalists on where to view it. With journalists’ assistance, the “macaca” video was able to reach millions of Virginia voters, as well as tens of millions of others watching around the nation. The video became a national story that forced the Allen campaign into defensive mode from which it never recovered (Lizza, 2006). Ultimately, Allen lost the race.

Another forum within user-controlled media is one commonly called a “social

networking site.” These are web portals where users can create their own web pages and link to the “profiles” of others. Social networking sites are used to conduct conversations, express opinions, keep journals, display photos, and so on. Many such sites exist, but the two best known of this growing genre are MySpace and Facebook. These have acquired a large following, particularly among young people. According to the Pew Research Center, 54 percent of young people aged 18–25 have used one or more of these sites. In addition, 76 percent of young people visit them at least once a week (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2007), and spend an average of about two hours per visit (Noguchi, 2006).

The growth of online social networking has been dramatic. In its first 30 months of existence, MySpace filled to 124 million profiles. Facebook (the newer site) acquired nine million members in two years and was already the target of a billion dollar buyout offer by a media conglomerate (Ahrens, 2006a).

Candidates have discovered the political uses of these sites. In 2006, several candidates created profiles on MySpace and Facebook including Sherrod Brown, Claire McCaskill, and Ned Lamont. All the major presidential candidates for 2008 did so. Not only do candidates create their own sites, but supporters also create sites and groups in support of their favored candidate. At about the time Barack Obama announced his candidacy for president, there were already more than 500 Obama groups on Facebook. These groups devoted their space to discussing the Obama campaign, posting photos of Obama, and spreading news about their favored candidate (Vargas, 2007b). While candidates may not control such sites, they can benefit from them. Chris DeWolfe, one of the founders of MySpace, called them “digital yard

signs, for lack of a better term” (Williams, 2007).

Supporter networks also becomes a gauge for others (such as the press and other site visitors) to measure the appeal of a candidate. While candidates popular with young people, such as Barack Obama or John Edwards, gain widespread support, more traditional candidates appear to lag in attractiveness to this audience. For example, when the 2008 presidential campaign began with a flurry of announcements in early 2007, Barack Obama already had 64,000 “friends” on MySpace, while Hillary Clinton’s site only registered 25,000 (Williams, 2007).

One problem with online social networking as a campaign tool, however, is the demographic of the audience and their potential to affect the candidate’s chances of victory. These sites attract the least participatory age group (18–24) in terms of voter turnout. However, they can be effective for volunteer recruitment given that young people often become the foot soldiers for political campaigns.

The social networking concept has migrated onto official candidate websites as well. For example, on Barack Obama’s site, visitors can create their own profile, link to friends, and join groups just as they would on a commercial site. In addition, user-controlled media are even linked from candidate websites. The Obama campaign linked YouTube, Facebook, and Flickr, while the Edwards campaign linked all of those in addition to MySpace, Gather, del.icio.us, and a dozen others. The Edwards campaign’s site made a point of saying the candidate had a presence on all of these social networks.

## Conclusion

The internet is not television. Despite the hype, it has not changed campaigning in the same way. For example, unlike

television ads that reach potentially tens of million of voters in the midst of entertainment programming, an average campaign website attracts a relatively small audience that chooses to go to and use that resource. However, that does not mean the internet has no value in a campaign. By using the internet for research, communicating with supporters and activists, mobilizing voters, and raising funds, campaigns have carved out a critical niche for the website. The modern campaign for president and Congress relies on the website to perform tasks such as volunteer mobilization, fund-raising, and supporter reinforcement more efficiently and inexpensively than other means in the past.

As this chapter has shown, websites have become only one of several weapons in a candidate’s online arsenal. Blogs, podcasts, social networking sites, and YouTube also have become additional means to reach voters, particularly those who would not visit the website or have their name appear on an e-mail list. Of course, beyond some anecdotes, it is still largely unknown whether these new technologies can play a decisive role in determining the success or failure of a campaign. However, what is clear is that candidates and their campaigns will continue to experiment with these new technologies in order to discover if they are capable of having a major impact on election outcomes.

## Guide to further reading

Since the mid 1990s, there has been a plethora of published works that examined the effects of the internet on campaigns and political participation in general in the United States. Some of these works have operated as instructional guides for how citizens can use the inherently democratic nature of the internet to circumvent traditional forms of political participation

(see Browning, 2001; Davis *et al.*, 2002; Kush, 2000). A wide range of work then examined whether the internet had an effect on political participation. Some argued that participation had been positively influenced and that the prospects for the future of internet democracy were bright (Grossman, 1995; Morris, 1999). Other work (often grounded more in empirical data), found the internet to be much less consequential (Davis, 1999; Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Wilhelm, 2000), or even dangerous (Putnam, 2000; Sunstein, 2001) regarding the public's influence on democratic engagement. More recent research has also examined virtual political participation via blogs, chat rooms, and instant messaging (see Davis, 2005).

The debate surrounding the broader participatory influences of the internet gave way to empirical research that specifically has examined the medium in the context of campaigns. From the American national perspective, Bimber and Davis (2003) offer an overview of this topic, as does Chadwick (2006) and Foot and Schneider (2006). Williams and Tedesco (2006) also provide a comprehensive view of the internet's role in the 2004 presidential election. On a wider scale, Kluver *et al.*'s (2007) recent edited volume takes a cross-national comparative look at the internet and elections, and concludes that the internet has had significant electoral influences worldwide.