

Chapter 30

What a Difference a Download Makes: Political Advertising in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

The Internet has captured the attention of the media, the government and much of the public. It has changed the way Americans receive information and communicate. With a number of political candidates creating MySpace profiles, YouTube videos and Second Life avatars it appears that the Internet and web 2.0 technologies have been leveraged for political advertising and campaigning. In the early literature the Internet and its role in politics had been purely speculative, with research only making vague guesses as to where the Internet would lead politicians in their political ambitions. The following chapter first outlines a historical perspective of political advertising, then examines contemporary forms and avenues of political advertising.

INTRODUCTION

“Thanks for the add!” This statement is not a polite acknowledgment from a constituent to a politician regarding a political advertisement. Rather, in the world of Web 2.0 campaigning, it’s a comment from a political candidate’s friend on MySpace, thanking the politician for adding that person as a friend. Today, the Internet has captured the attention of the media, the government and much of the public. It has changed the way

Americans receive information and communicate. Even the term “Internet” has long since become interchangeable with a variety of expressions, such as new information highway or information superhighway (Pavlik, 1998). A 2006 survey done by Pew/Internet reported that 70% of American adults were Internet users (Lin, 2008).

Beyond going online for information and serving as a way to stay in touch, people are using the Internet to increase their knowledge about politics. During the 2000 election, Web sites became interactive and integrated campaign elements, helping

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to raise money, communicate with supporters, provide positions on issues, organize grassroots supporters, and turn out the vote (Fose, 2002). Fose then went on to say:

The Internet's importance in the political process will increase as more voters learn to use it as an avenue for activism and an opportunity to get information about the candidates. Because of this, candidates will continue to look to the Internet as a way to communicate their message, organize supporters, and raise money (pg. 1).

Of a reported population of 128 million Internet users in 2004, 40% indicated using the Internet for political information during that year's presidential election (Rainie, Horrigan & Cornfield, 2005). Candidate websites flourished in the 2004 election, but as is the ever-changing nature of the Internet, 2008 offered something new—the addition of political candidates—both presidential and local politicians—logging on to social networking sites and developing MySpace and Facebook pages.

In the early literature the Internet and its role in politics had been purely speculative, with research only making vague guesses as to where the Internet would lead politicians in their political ambitions. The future of American politics had been called an “age of Internet democracy” and the residents of the new political system were hypothesized to be known as “netizens.” The new medium was predicted as the beginnings of true direct democracy - a vehicle for enabling common citizens, rather than distant elected representatives, to make ongoing policy decisions (Davis, 1999).

A Historical Perspective

Political advertising and campaigning in the United States dates all the way back to the first presidential race. Though there was not a formal discipline of communication studies at that time, the art of rhetoric and persuasion had been in practice since the days of Socrates and Aristotle.

A political campaign is an organized effort which seeks to influence the decision making process within a specific group (Shea & Burton, 2001). Communication is the epistemological base by which campaigns begin, proceed, and conclude (Trent & Friedenberg, 2000). Political campaigns are not solely linked to politics; campaigns may include strategies and tactics to move the heads of religious organizations or corporations into and from power, to sell different products, or to encourage people to start or quit a behavior.

At the presidential level George Washington never had this problem. Washington, on the strength of his Revolutionary War heroism, ran unopposed twice. For John Adams the 1796 race changed things forever. It didn't take long for the campaign to turn bitter. Adams' Federalist party intimated that the Democratic-Republicans were involved with revolution in France. Thomas Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans, in turn, tossed around words like monarchy and aristocracy in taking the Federalists to task for friendly dealings with Britain.

“Other voices in the fall of 1800 were shrill by any period's standard. Murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will all be openly taught and practiced ... The air will be rent with the cries of distress, the soil will be soaked with blood and the nation black with crimes,” should Jefferson be elected according to the Connecticut Courant's prediction (Dunn, 2004, p.1).

With the Twelfth Amendment still eight years away, the electoral votes sent John Adams to the presidency and rival Thomas Jefferson into the role of vice president. That was merely the foreshadowing of the next bitter campaign, deemed the Revolution of 1800 by Jefferson who would have his revenge. Both Adams and Jefferson enjoyed long vacations from Washington, but the vice president worked on a campaign biography for a nearby newspaper and also helped influence state elections with correspondence and funding

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