

**The Growing Power of Web Politics:**  
**Best Practices of Reaching Voters Online**

**Adrienne Royer, M.A.**

**American University 2007**

## **The Growing Power of Web Politics**

The Internet is a growing force in America and the world. As more Americans turn to the Internet for news, information and research, social movements and political organizations must harness new media strategies to reach this growing audience. While the majority of older Americans still rely on televisions and newspapers for their primary news sources, a growing number of individuals under the age of 36 are turning to the web for news, shopping, organizing, and socializing. Technology has created a new type of Internet involvement known as Web 2.0.

The last three election cycles have proven that the Internet is a powerful strategy for navigating the national political scene. The Internet provided new strategies for online mobilizing and organizing, which complemented traditional activist techniques. Technology and the Internet radically changed the face of democracy in our country. Politically charged social movements and parties use online tactics to organize, advocate, and mobilize grassroots supporters in order to pressure policymakers. The Internet has ingrained itself into every aspect of modern life, and Web strategies need to be factored into all types of communication campaigns. The widespread use of the Web helps make public policy a more transparent and democratic process, and provides access to the political process to anyone with Internet access.

## **A Fundamental Shift in Communications**

At the core of Web 2.0 and political engagement is a fundamental shift in the way that organizations are communicating with their audiences. The expansion of the World Wide Web not only radically altered the political dialogue in the country, but made foundational changes in the way that individuals communicate:

- 1) Communication moved from few-to-many to many-to-many.
- 2) The Web provides increased resources of information that are available to almost everyone because of the low-cost to access.
- 3) Communication shifted from “producer-driven to receiver-driven.”
- 4) Communication is more access-driven.
- 5) Through the Internet, organizations are able to “break segments into microsegments” and target special messages toward these groups.<sup>iii</sup>

Through interactive 2.0 tools, such as blogs or social networking, individuals are able to engage in conversations with organizations or other individuals. Given this power, large

numbers are able to bypass the traditional gatekeepers of the media and seek out information. Not only is this altering the way that mass media operates, but it is also changing the way that organizations, marketers and political movements must engage their supporters, appease opponents and sway the undecided.

Since the mid-twentieth century, television and top-down approaches have dominated national political discussion. Grassroots activism was overshadowed by television advertising and lobbying dollars. However, given the conversational nature of the Internet, there has been resurgence in political activism, which is evidenced by increased turnout at the polls during the 2004 and 2006 elections after a sixty year decline in voters. Younger generations seem to be the most affected by this medium.

Web-based strategies were a natural fit for activist movements. The ability to share information instantaneously to either targeted publics or the general public created a boon for activist causes. The Internet also offered ways to organize large numbers of people over long distances, share ideas, pressure policymakers, and provide ways to creatively distribute messages often without the expense of traditional communication mediums. As explained by McCaughey and Ayers:

How is the Internet different from previous communications media that have influenced the nature and shape of political organizing? The Internet is immediate, even more immediate than a daily newspaper. It can be more interactive than TV. It is not only instant and transspatial but multilateral, including many participants and connecting many different activist groups. Not since the institutionalization of the U.S. Postal Service have we seen a communication development in society that can give power to individuals like this.<sup>iii</sup>

Coined as “Web 2.0,” these online strategies allow organizations to brand and distribute messages to targeted audiences in addition to supplementing traditional media sources. Strategies can either be entirely Web-based or complement offline activities. Online activism remained a fringe element that existed on the extremes of both the left and the right until the 2004 Election when online activism became a permanent part of American politics. Online movements have created a rich tapestry of voices that bring democracy directly to the individual computer screen, engage the average American in politics, and improve the transparency of the political process.

## **Trends of Online Activists**

According to two studies, Pew's Election Online 2006 report and the Institute for Politics, Internet and Democracy's Political Influentials Online in the 2004 Presidential Campaign, trends are emerging about a new breed of political enthusiast who relies on the Internet. Basing their information on RoperASW's work on Influentials in America, these two studies found that while online strategies only reach 10% of Americans, 69% of this minority are Influentials. This means, that an overwhelming number of individuals who rely on the Web for information on political and advocacy causes, are relaying their efforts toward everyone around them. This word-of-mouth influence is far more powerful than any advertising or marketing campaign possible. These individuals spend considerably more time online engaged in political activities than the typical American. However, these users maintain tremendous sway in their communities and social networks and are usually considered influencers or opinion leaders. Both studies found that these groups may be statistically small but are very active citizens both online and offline.

According to *Election 2006 Online*, the use of the Internet to gather political information on campaigns has doubled since the last mid-term election. While television remains the dominant medium for gathering news and information, 15% of Americans used the Internet as their primary news source.<sup>iv</sup> Throughout the past decade, the Internet began to dominate lifestyles in ways that were not possible previously. Pew found that overall 31% of Americans, or 60 million people across country used the Internet to gather news and information about campaigns or the election and engaged in activities such as e-mail to discuss election topics.

IPDI found a similar subgroup in their study, *Political Influentials Online*, and described them as:

...nearly seven times more likely than average citizens to serve as opinion leaders among their friends, relatives and colleagues. OPCs are disproportionately "Influentials," the Americans who "tell their neighbors what to buy, which politicians to support, and where to vacation...Normally 10% of Americans qualify as Influentials. Our study found that 69% of Online Political Citizens are Influentials."<sup>v</sup>

Equally split between men and women, this individual trends to younger age groups with 30% under the age of 30 and is much more likely to have a college or graduate degree than the general public. Ideologically, online political activists are typically more moderate or

liberal, and political affiliation is evenly split three ways with 34% Democrats, 31% Republican and 35% Independent.

In the *2006 Election Online* report, 52% supported Democratic candidates and the study found that liberal Democrats are far more likely to engage in online political activities than their conservative counterparts. According to the report, “Among ideological groups, liberal Democrats were most likely to be an OPA, to get political material from blogs, international news organizations, email listservs and humor or satire sites.”<sup>vi</sup> Again, this data supports the IPDI study, which found that although its population was evenly split between parties (36% Democrats and 33% Republicans), 49% of Democrats fell into the OPC category compared to only 29% of Republican participants.

While this is a small part of the total American population, these individuals are influencers and hold tremendous sway in the political process. This group is far more likely to identify as an activist, encourage friends to vote for a candidate, contact elected officials, maintain involvement in their community, donate money to a political or social cause, and volunteer. Essentially, this small segment of the population, which influences everyone else, is easily accessed through the Internet. For example, these individuals are:

...seven more times likely than the general public to have attended political rally, speech or protest in the last two to three months. They are nearly five times more likely to have contacted a politician, three times more likely to have written a letter to the editor, and three times more likely to belong to groups trying to influence public policy. These activities suggest that OPCs are much more heavily involved in politics and civic life than the general public.”<sup>vii</sup>

The importance of the Internet and online activism only appears to be increasing. As a greater number of Americans start to use broadband and high-speed Internet connections, their access to information only increases. Furthermore, users under the age of 36 typically view the Web differently than older populations and are more likely to integrate Internet resources into everyday life, especially news and information sites. As younger generations continue to age and dominate the electorate, the role of the Internet will continue to increase in importance. Because this group yields so much power in their communities, “...if candidates, parties and issue advocacy groups want to reach the people who reach others, the place to find them is on the Internet. These citizens are active and engaged members of their communities, which suggests that their involvement may not be short-lived.”<sup>viii</sup>

As the United States enters the 2008 Presidential race, early data suggests that online, interactive tools are a crucial part of any political or activism campaign. As the media focuses more on the online strategies of the political and activism world, greater numbers of users are visiting these sites and engaging in interactive technology.

Collectively, these studies show that there is an overall trend that a small segment of individuals are highly-engaged with Web 2.0 technology and expect to find it on Web sites for political candidates and advocacy groups. Web-based tactics have the ability to reach everyone, but Influentials are far more likely to utilize this resource. It is important for organizations and campaigns to reach this select group and build relationships with them.

### **A New Generation of Voters**

In 2004 and 2006, Millennials, persons born between 1977 and 1997, surprisingly showed up at the polls and revealed a new trend among 18-29 year olds. Now rivaling the size of the Baby Boomers, young people are traditionally known for being the least likely to vote. However, individuals under the age of 29 have started engaging in civic and activist causes, largely through the power of the Internet. According to *Young Voter Strategies* at George Washington University<sup>ix</sup>, 49% of voters aged 18-29 voted in the 2004 Presidential Election compared to 40% in 2000. There was also a 2% increase in the 2006 mid-term election with 10 million young voters casting ballots compared to the 8 million in 2002. This group continues to grow each year and by 2015, Millennials may represent one-third of U.S. voters. Given the power of the Internet and the decline of television viewing among this cohort, organizations and campaigns must utilize web strategies to recruit new advocates and voters. More media savvy than any other generation, this group prefers personal relationships and connections. While they are engaged mostly by online tactics, they are only satisfied when these strategies are backed up with real interaction. According to a recent Pew Report, this generation watches far less television than their parents or grandparents and prefer to obtain their news online or through e-mail with 88% being online with majorities checking their e-mail daily or using social networking programs such as Facebook.com. These young people are more civically engaged and ready to vote than previous generations with nearly 70% of all college students reporting that they regularly keep up the news and volunteer in their communities. This presents a challenge for traditional broadcast campaigns depending on television advertising to win elections.

## **Guidelines for Successful Online Campaigns**

- 1. The Internet needs to be viewed as a strategy in the larger campaign not as an additional tactic.** Millennials are voting in record numbers. If organizations or parties wish to woo this new source of voters, they must be reached on the Web.
- 2. Organizations can no longer control the message.** Organizations must realize this crucial change and plan ahead for contingencies. Plans should be fluid and organic. In an era of interactive communication, scripted messages are no longer successful. Web consumers are extremely savvy and sense disingenuous or staged messages. Bloggers especially focus on these moments and will jump on opportunities to expose the opposition.
- 3. Fully integrate traditional communications functions with Web 2.0.** Successful campaigns bring the traditional marketing and public relations teams together with the Web and grassroots teams to improve relations with bloggers, activists and media in an effort to make all tactics seamless.
- 4. Never engage in astroturf tactics.** Not only is astroturfing unethical, it is the easiest way to destroy the reputation and credibility of any movement or organization. It is advisable for organizations to stay away from this technique. Some guerrilla activism may be questionable, but astroturfing is clearly unethical. All organizations wishing to enact real policy changes or elect candidates should try to maintain ethical and transparent tactics. No matter how well astroturf activities are planned, there is an army of bloggers and opposing forces working to catch this type of activity. These tactics violate most codes of ethics for communications and marketing professions and should be avoided at all costs.
- 5. Political parties and organizations need to engage in online activism if they are not already.** As subsequent generations reaching voting age, they are geared towards fully integrated strategies. While reliance on broadcast campaigns may work for several more election cycles, younger people are coming of age and starting to vote in greater numbers. Voter turnout for the 18-29 group increased by 9% in 2004 with 20.1 million young people casting ballots compared to 15.9 million in 2000. The 2006 mid-term election also saw an increase in younger voters. It is estimated that 10 million voted in 2006 compared to the 8 million in 2002. If this trend continues, organizations must get their names out and start reaching out to the youth demographic.

**6. Localize messages and opportunities to create opportunities for buy-ins.** Web sites that provide ways for supporters to localize their message are far more successful at recruiting and retaining members and pushing their messages forward. While the Web is extremely helpful in engaging users, organizing, research, and messaging, grassroots supporters still enjoy seeing issues that they care about promoted at the local level. If a message can be tailored to the local level, supporters are far more likely to join the organization and support it.

**7. Create a sense of community and encourage relationships.** Grassroots modeled movements typically create a strong sense of community on their Web site. The key to this is making the Web site interactive and allowing members to engage in discussion. Lasting movements are built on strong relationships. Individuals must feel connected to something that is bigger than they are. While causes often focus on key figures, successful movements foster a sense of community, and the ability to create relationships, either virtually or in real life. Supporters should be encouraged to form relationships with each other, in addition to building close ties and loyalty to the movement or organization. Messages need to be real, heartfelt, and genuine. Supporters should never feel as though they are a number or a lowly foot soldier in a vast army.

**8. Develop online to offline opportunities.** Online activism is primarily successful in organizing, recruiting, informing and persuading members to engage in activities. While some activities are geared towards the Web such as signing a petition or e-mailing an elected official, organizations that have both online and offline activities are the most successful. It is this combination of engaging members online and recruiting them to take part in “real life” activities that builds the most beneficial online activist.

**9. Target the influencers.** At this point, online activism only attracts roughly 10% percent of Americans. However, these people are overwhelmingly the influencers, early adopters and opinion leaders. While organizations may try to target everyone who falls into their target demographic, realistically, they should only target this small population. By narrowing their focus towards recruiting these individuals, organizations can effectively implement localized programs that generate support and action for nationwide causes. However, organizations need to reach these key individuals to rally groups in the field and motivate them to join the organization and get involved.

**10. Movements should begin as true grassroots efforts.** While often effective, the public can see through top-down efforts. Larger parties should identify these movements and seek to build relationships with the leaders in order to tap into these resources. Instead of trying to quiet them or bring them under the direction and control of campaign managers, political parties should work with them, share resources and build mutually beneficial relationships.

## **Conclusion**

On a larger scale, there is a paradigm shift currently going in communications. Traditional communications models are being challenged, and new ways to communication are possible and affordable. This change particularly affects political communication, which has relied on broadcast and mass communication for the past forty years. Not only is it possible to achieve efficient and affordable one-on-one, one-to-mass, mass-to-one and mass-to-mass communication, but audiences now expect it. Online activists are typically much younger and educated than the average American. These users are very Web savvy and wary of manufactured political messages.

Communicators and the mainstream media are slow to respond to this change. Not only is this a difficult time in the field, but given the huge dichotomy between senior citizens, the most likely age group to vote, and Millennials, a growing voting bloc, most campaigns struggle to reach everyone. Since seniors are dependable voters, and consume broadcast media, it is understandable that campaigns are hesitant to try new methods. Furthermore, because technology is changing so quickly, it is difficult to judge what method will stick and become an integral technology and what is a fad.

Due to the power of politics in modern society, control is a subject that all political parties and movements must address. It is possible that traditional views of controlling the message are no longer valid in our media saturated environment. This is a difficult view especially in the political field where news changes by the minute. Campaign personnel are only just beginning to see the full ramifications of not only a 24/7 news cycle, but a system where all archives, records, previous statements, photos and information are instantly accessible to anyone with a connection to the Web.

Furthermore, campaigns and organizations need to do a better job of understanding the profile of an online activist. At this stage of the integration of the Web with everyday life, no campaign is going to successfully reach everyone. This may be possible in the future as the wall between the virtual world and the real world disappears, the digital divide is

eliminated, and the average American becomes a more sophisticated user. Until that point, campaigns need to be targeted towards the Influentials. While this is only roughly 10% of the population, this small group influences everyone else. The online activist is key to successful viral or word-of-mouth marketing. Campaigns need to cater towards these individuals or risk making the situation worse.

---

<sup>ii</sup> Dean Kazoleas and Lars Georg Teigen, “The Technology-Image Expectancy Gap: A New Theory of Public Relations,” *Public Relations Theory II*, eds. Carl H. Botan and Vincent Hazelton (Mahwah: LEA, 2006) 420-421.

<sup>iii</sup> Martha McCaughey and Michael D. Ayres, Introduction, *Cyberactivism*, (New York: Routledge, 2004) 4.

<sup>iv</sup> Lee Rainie and John Corrigan, Election 2006 Online, Pew Internet & American Life Project, Pew Research Center, 17 Jan. 2006.

<sup>v</sup> Joseph Graf and Carol Darr, *Political Influentials Online in the 2004 Presidential Campaign*, Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet, The George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management.

<sup>vi</sup> Rainie, 22.

<sup>vii</sup> Graf, 15.

<sup>viii</sup> Graf, 35

<sup>ix</sup> Young Voter Strategies, “Background on the Millennial Generation.” 2007/