



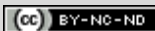
#140ToWinIt

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Abstract

The Internet has transformed from being almost insubstantial in political campaigns to being essential in only ten years. The elections of 2008 and 2010 have revolutionized the way that campaigns reach out to voters, with a new benchmark set by President Barack Obama and his campaign team in 2008. In the 2010 midterm elections, Republicans in Congress were able to match Obama's social media success, and voters turned out in their favor. By delving into the uses of social media in those campaigns, we can evaluate how Republicans in the upcoming 2012 campaign are sharing the same success.

Keywords: *Twitter, social media, campaigning, Republican primary*



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The Tip of the Iceberg

“Many flames burn out in politics, our Dad’s has just been ignited. What an incredible journey for our family. Thanks for all of the support!” tweeted @Jon2012Girls on January 16, 2012, shortly after former Republican presidential candidate Jon Huntsman announced the end of his bid for the 2012 primary. This was the 1,232nd tweet from the www.twitter.com/Jon2012Girls account run by Huntsman’s daughters on Twitter, designed to give his campaign’s social media department a fresh, young, and exciting spin. Their tweets are just a sample of the many attempts by the Republican presidential candidates to integrate themselves into the world of social networking. The 2008 Obama campaign galvanized a frenzy of social media-obsessed youth into one of the single most spectacular showings of voter turnout among a usually apathetic demographic. Likewise, congressional Republicans rode a similar wave of cyber-grassroots supporters to a landslide victory in the 2010 midterm elections. With the growing role of the web and importance of an online presence, a few concepts must be elaborated: the revolutionary stage of social media, its expansion to current standards, and what it signifies.

Obama’s 2008 Campaign

Barack Obama won the presidency in a landslide victory, by a margin of nearly 200 electoral votes and 8.5 million popular votes, in part by converting people into engaged and empowered volunteers, donors, and advocates through social networks, e-mail advocacy, text messaging, and online

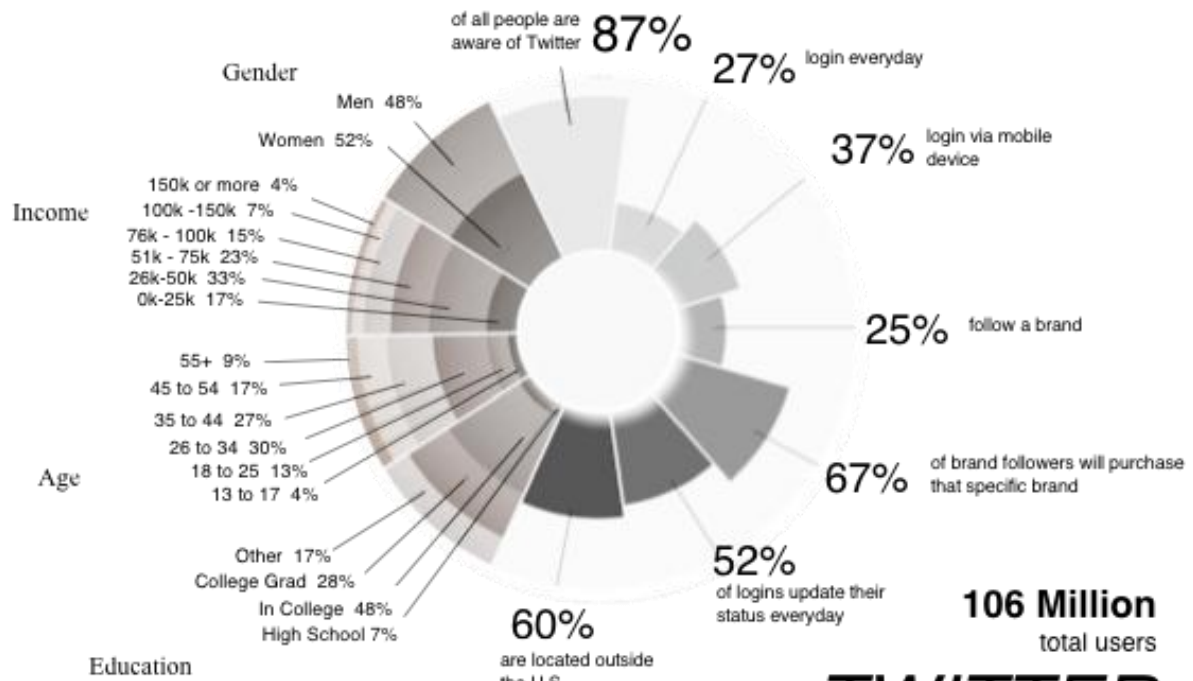
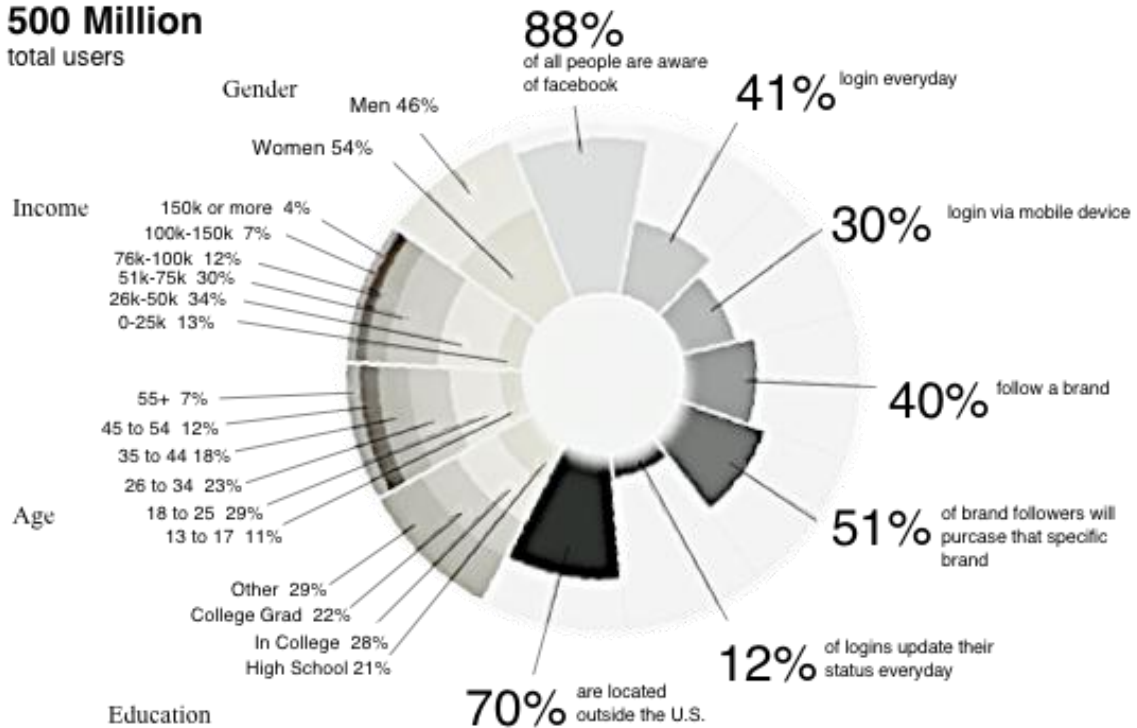
video. Since the election, the social media programs adopted by Obama’s transition team have foreshadowed significant changes in how Obama, compared with previous presidents, communicates with the mass of supporters who were collected, cultivated, and channeled during the campaign. Obama is the first president to govern with BlackBerry in hand and with a legion of 13 million advocates at his fingertips.¹

However, the key to Obama’s successful campaign was not just starting a blog, making a Twitter account, or getting on primetime television, it was how effective his team was at using these tools.² Obama was able to gain support by using a three-tier system, advocating at a union, personal, and societal level. Democrats found the support of many labor unions and liberal organizations. The administration reached out on a personal level through local groups and gave the public the option to donate and participate. The importance of public participation on the social media movement was essential for the Obama campaign. Individuals felt that their vote mattered and that they were being included in a revolutionary movement.³ Consequently, the 2008 presidential election saw a substantial voter turnout; more than 131 million people voted in 2008, as opposed to 125 million in the 2004 presidential election.⁴

As Obama adviser Scott Goodstein said, “Some people only go to MySpace. It’s where they’re on all day. Some only go to LinkedIn. Our goal is to make sure that each supporter online, regardless of where they are, has a connection with Obama.” Obama had profiles on more than 15 social networking sites, including Facebook and MySpace. He also was the first presidential candidate to have profiles on AsianAve.com, MiGente.com and BlackPlanet.com, influential social networks for the Asian, Hispanic, and

FACEBOOK

500 Million
total users



TWITTER

Source: Arbitrage Magazine

Image: T.J. Collanto

African-American communities.⁵ By diversifying his platform, the Internet was bombarded by Obama. By simply opening your Internet browser, you would shortly find what millions of individuals were raving about—Barack Obama.

Furthermore, Obama's management team was able to access voters through their mobile devices. Instead of supporters surfing social web pages, consultants were able to keep them in the loop through their cellular phones. Surprisingly, 90 percent of Americans are within three feet of their cell phones 24 hours a day. People still read more than 90 percent of their text messages, while pages of e-mails sit unopened in inboxes.⁶ Text messaging and the mobile Web offer an opportunity to reach supporters directly anywhere they are, any time of the day. It also is a much more cost-effective way to mobilize voters. A 2006 study by the New Voters Project found that text message reminders helped increase turnout by four percent at a cost of only \$1.56 per vote, much cheaper than the cost of neighborhood canvassing or phone banking, at a cost of \$20 to \$30 per vote.⁷

As one researcher, George Washington University associate professor John Sides, noted, "Social media presents a tremendous opportunity to inform a national audience."⁸ Obama set the foundation and the tempo for future elections. His presidential campaign revolutionized the platform for a more competitive and engaging election. Barack Obama was the first democratic candidate to ascend the use of online advocacy past mundane email newsletters and set a precedent for the next election. In 2010, Republicans realized the success of Obama's campaign and used the same strategies to secure votes and seats nationwide.

The Republican Revolution II

With the assistance of social media outlets during midterm elections in 2010, the Republican Party gained 63 seats in the United States House of Representatives and swapped six seats in the United

States Senate from the Democratic Party. Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Florida were among the six states that gained Republican governors. On a more regional level, Republicans gained 680 seats in state legislatures, the most in the modern era. Republicans mimicked the social media tactics in 2010 that were implemented in the Obama campaign of 2008 to achieve the same success.

228-157. Those numbers represent the Republican and Democratic members of Congress who participate on Twitter, respectively.⁹ The Republican legislators of both the House of Representatives and Senate have a sizable advantage over their Democratic counterparts. 80 percent of the current sitting Republican representatives use Twitter, while only 64 percent of Democrats have taken up tweeting. The Twitter page of current House Speaker John Boehner reveals everything from reactions to the President's latest veto or remarks regarding high unemployment numbers: "Barely a minute goes by between the time Mr. Obama—or a high ranking member of his administration—makes a speech, holds a news conference or says something to a talk show host, and a team of young Republican House staffers, fueled by pizza and partisanship, punches back."¹⁰ Up-to-the-minute briefings from GOP-related accounts accrue in a matter of seconds after a ranking Democrat speaks publically. Republicans today have embraced the use of social media in an attempt to claim the young vote overwhelmingly won by the Obama campaign in 2008. @Senate_GOPs boasts over 54,000 followers, House Budget Committee Chair Paul Ryan, www.twitter.com/RepPaulRyan, checks in at 100,000 followers, and House Speaker John Boehner, www.twitter.com/SpeakerBoehner, leads the charge with 275,000 followers. It is an accepted fact that Democrats dominated the social media side of the Presidential race in 2008. Nonetheless, in light of the 2010 midterm elections, one begins to wonder which party has gained an advantage in social media. Andrew Raseij of Personal Democracy Media stated that, "This is the first time that both parties

have people on staff who are specifically focused on social media and willing to deploy and use it.”¹¹

In 2010, Republicans were able to utilize some of the same tactics Obama’s administration used in 2008. One of the candidates to do so most effectively was Texas Governor Rick Perry, who employed new strategies, such as Twitter, Facebook, and blogs, to attract young supporters for his gubernatorial campaign. At the time, Perry’s website had about 1,300 new visitors and gained 100 new followers on Twitter per day to add to his total of 10,600 followers. Now, after Perry’s presidential bid and subsequent dropout, he has over 137,000 followers and 181,000 people who “like” him on Facebook.¹²

Despite the buzz surrounding social media and how it is used to reach the large demographic that finds news on the web, how truly effective is the social media blitz? A recent study shows that only 10 percent of voters are seeking out complete election coverage through mediums such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. It appears the majority of constituents obtain information from the more traditional cable news stations. Despite this, researchers still say that social media has been tremendously helpful for campaigns. The “national mood” is reflected through online conversations and can be used to target specific groups and even specific people.¹³ All of these tactics to reach people on an individual level and get the campaigns’ overall message out are in hope of one end goal—a vote on November 6.

Here We Are

Undeniably, things change. The use of a new tool or strategy in the game of politics is no exception to this axiom. Even though the Internet had inched its way into campaigning as it grew to be more accessible in households, the Obama campaign’s 2008 tactics shattered any preconceived

notions about the Web’s role. The once avant-garde use of social media pioneered just four years ago has become banal and another thing to add to the “to do” lists of candidates vying for major office. From 2008, the original use of social media has since evolved and the number of new ways to utilize it continues to grow, extending into political families.

Campaigning has long been a family affair. Shira Schoenberg of *The Boston Globe* described today’s familial companionship as such: “The candidates’ spouses and families have become a ubiquitous presence on the campaign trail during the Republican presidential race. Most candidates have run ads highlighting their families. On the trail, it falls to family members to humanize them.”¹⁴ Even after almost two and a half centuries of First Families and candidate kids on the campaign trail, this is still a fundamental duty during campaigns. Social media, however, has tweaked this fairly traditional role and made another responsibility necessary.

The current First Lady did not tweet until two years after her husband’s staff started to send out a torrential amount of tweets under Obama’s name with a few personally stamped “B.O.” at the end. However, at a White House Correspondents Association Dinner on a Saturday in 2010, Michelle Obama became the premier First Lady to send out a tweet.¹⁵ Since then, the family members of the 2012 Republican candidates have taken this first step a lot farther.

Today, candidates’ social media presence can be established through their offspring. Rick Perry’s son, Griffin, experienced his fair share of spotlight prior to fizzling out of his father’s campaign. He tweeted more energetic—and aggressive—messages than the Perry camp could. Perry, now infamous for misspeaking, would have been discouraged from sending out a message that reads, “Ron Paul doesn’t remember saying those crazy things at the debate, bc he took off his

aluminum hat.” Griffin, however, was exempt from such deterrent.¹⁶

Jon Huntsman’s daughters, the aforementioned @Jon2012Girls, additionally contributed to their father’s campaign with YouTube videos. In a parody of Herman Cain’s ad featuring his campaign manager Mark Block smoking and making grave statements, the three girls were “shamelessly promoting our dad like no other candidate’s family ever has. But, then again, no one has ever seen a trio like the ‘Jon2012Girls.’”¹⁷

Even though Jon Huntsman was only polling at around 2 percent at that time, it would have been political suicide if a self-released YouTube video featuring him blowing soap bubbles and stating that “tomorrow is Friday, one day closer to the weekend” found its way to national spotlight.¹⁸ However, since Mary Anne, Liddy, and Abby took the matter into their own hands, the Huntsman campaign was both able to attack Herman Cain in a more lighthearted manner than would be possible in the typical debate-stage arguments and also connect with people on the Internet. Similarly, Rick Perry would have been widely criticized by the public if he had questioned Ron Paul’s sanity or mocked Rick Santorum’s trademark sweater vests.¹⁹ Given that his son was serving as the “attack dog,” the elder Perry did not receive as much flak from these aggressive statements.

The need to stay actively updated with an ever-present social media team has transformed the responsibilities that must be executed by a candidate’s family from maintain a publically passive persona to engaging more actively online. While standing with perfect posture behind a father or mother on stage during a speech smiling was once the norm for these offspring, this role has is quickly becoming more obsolete without additional efforts. Today, these additional efforts may occur in the form of a family blog; for example, the Five Brothers blog chronicled the travels across Iowa of Mitt Romney’s sons in an RV lovingly nicknamed the “Mitt Mobile.”²⁰

Despite their rush to get involved, the 2012 candidates caught up in this ever-changing current are not always the ones in control of the course that social media will take. Constituents looking for that one mistake or gaffe can still heckle them. Candidates can still be tested by for consistent answers and stances on policy. However, these “town hall” meetings are no longer always in town:

With the 2012 electoral season kicking into high gear, even the world of tech isn’t safe from getting sucked into the political hellstorm. The newest casualty: YouTube, and its new ‘Town Hall’ channel, which puts candidates’ positions on the issues head-to-head in a kind of online debate. The Town Hall page shows two videos, side by side, each from a different candidate. The videos, made especially for Town Hall, show the candidates discussing a particular issue, like the national budget or energy. The format of the channel lets users hear exactly what two competing candidates believe about a particular topic, which could have serious benefits for voters who want to clarify what their candidates’ positions.²¹

Facebook also released a feature that opens the floor of the discussion to over 500 million users with burning questions. The transition of question and answer sessions to the Internet will most likely continue and expand in future campaigns.²²

This gradual loss of control contrasts with the Obama campaign’s monopolistic management of output and intake of social media information in the past. Paving the way in the domain of Twitter, Facebook, and countless other websites, the 2008 campaign was the first of its kind. The Obama staff made the rules and set the standard. Four years later, the users and subscribers themselves have reacted to this tight-fisted control. Instead of just receiving information via email newsletters, the truly engaged can separate themselves from the slightly engaged. Citizens that want to play a more active role in a candidate’s campaign could do so with a few clicks of a button. Voters now have a viable and appropriate means of responding to the material they receive through online outlets.

Most importantly, politicians no longer view social media as experimental or as an alternative to traditional campaigning. The current president dipped his toes into the water and the rest of the political world came charging towards the lake. By 2010, the Republican Party was doing cannonballs and reached new heights in its online success. The Republican landslide victory in the 2010 midterm elections occurred with the help of social media, a brave new plan of action for the GOP. Half a presidential term later, this same party is clamoring to continue its electoral success. In some aspects, such as the reliance on family support, Republican candidates have been effective. Yet, they have not controlled all ends of the social media spectrum as the Obama campaign managed to do in the 2008 election. Republicans have been forced to accept the limitations created by the evolution of social media in the political process.

Maybe Tomorrow

From congressional campaigns in the outskirts of remote districts in South Dakota to the highly polarized battle the GOP nomination, social media is speeding towards widespread usage in campaigns. Politics in the United States are four years past the inception of perfunctory tweeting, status updating, and blogging by politicians. Consequently, politicians and their staff have developed multifaceted approaches to social media as part of its acclimation in the political scene. The online world of politics is not the Elysian Fields: there are still polemic statements and hate-filled diagnoses. Conversely, these messages are not tainted with the professional sobriety of a corporate board meeting. Candidates can lend their brand name to lighthearted appeals to a younger generation, talk about their families, and generally joke with their audiences.

Through its evolution, social media has burgeoned to a point that it is now as much a part of

modern election cycles as televised debates. Ironically enough, that is part of the problem of evaluating this developing trend: social media is so modern. While fascinating to observe, it is difficult to analyze.

Several developments do stand out: first, the use of social media has been surprisingly bipartisan. Neither of the two relevant parties have an indisputable monopoly over social websites. Along those lines, both parties have experienced game changing shifts in popular opinion in part by flexing their online muscles. Statistical analysis does not render a palpable conclusion, simply because these numbers have not reflected the outcomes of polls. Such uncertainty is discomfiting. This ambiguity is only reinforced by the fact that followers, “likes,” and re-blogs are not always proportionally aligned with online users that intend to go out to the polls and vote.

Second, social media’s transition onto the Internet and into our smartphones has yet to become entirely transparent. Much of these online efforts do not produce expected results, and many of the conclusions reached are hard to reinforce with concrete evidence. Did Barack Obama win the presidency in 2008 by introducing the concept of manifest destiny to the boundless frontier of the Internet? Well, maybe. Has Newt Gingrich’s superior number of followers on Twitter than any other Republican candidate translated into more primary wins? No, not exactly.

The most accurate evaluation of social media will be accomplished after everything is said and done. The passage of time will allow for retrospective analysis about the importance of social outlets in political campaigns. However, social media is not a chapter in a history book. Rather, it is a page torn out of the day-to-day lives of today’s citizens and politicians.

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Notes

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