Not Your Father's Internet: The Generation Gap in Online Politics

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Introduction

Young people have traditionally been at the forefront of new information technology use, remaining at the top of Internet usage statistics and distinguishing themselves as early adopters of features such as instant messaging, peer-to-peer file sharing, and social networking tools.[1] As noted in the introduction to this volume, today's younger citizens are among the first to have come of age surrounded by digital technologies. They not only demonstrate fluency with new ways of communicating and connecting through them but are also helping to define the contours of their adoption. Despite a surge in voter turnout among eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds in the 2004 presidential election, however, this age group has also typically been understood as trendsetters in the area of declining social capital, positioned at the forefront of falling rates of civic engagement and political participation.[2] With respect to voting in particular, researchers have long noted the general decline in youth voter turnout over the past few decades, interrupted only sporadically by spikes such as that seen in 2004.[3]

With an eye toward the dramatic growth in political communication and activity online in the past decade, many have hoped that developments in the political uses of new media might have the potential to help fuel a return of the young hypermedia generation to healthier patterns of electoral participation. In this way, we might imagine Howard Rheingold's Shibuya Crossing (2002) morphing into a raucous, youthful partisan convention.[4] On the surface, the events of the 2004 U.S. elections would seem to have buoyed such a convenient assessment of the intersections between trends in new media, politics and youth participation. During the 2004 primary process, citizens waged an online effort to "draft Wesley Clark" as a candidate, and the Howard Dean campaign took Web campaigning to new levels with the creative integration of tools such as Meetup.com and blogging. Although neither of these campaigns went beyond the primaries, the trend of increasing technological sophistication in the campaigns certainly did, as both major party presidential candidates fielded sophisticated campaign Web sites that supplemented traditional campaign Web site fare, such as candidate biographies and issues statements, with newer features like blogs, greater use of multimedia, and other interactive techniques.[5]

For their part, the wider electorate followed the candidates into cyberspace in 2004, in many ways led by young voters. Looking at the electorate as a whole, an estimated 75 million Americans, representing 37 percent of the adult population and more than half of American Internet users, went online to get information about the 2004 campaigns and engage in

the political process; a substantial number, some 20 million, were estimated to have used the Internet to monitor campaign developments *daily* up to the close of the election.[6] In marked departure from their stereotypical indifference to politics, younger Americans were a surprisingly vibrant part of these broader statistics, showing marked increases in reading news of the election, talking about it with others, and thinking about the election and how the outcome might affect them.[7] An estimated 28 percent of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds accessed *most* of their information about the 2004 election from the Internet, up from 22 percent in 2000, and more than those in any other age group.[8]

Most notably, turnout for young voters in the Internet-intensive 2004 election was the highest in more than a decade. Naturally, much of this increase can be explained by factors unrelated to new media, like the partisan tendencies of youth as a group and their particular interest in the Iraq war as a policy issue in 2004.[9] However, given the optimistic hopes associated with new media and the reliance of young people on the Internet for political information, it is tempting to view these developments as fueled in part by online politics. But a closer and more systematic look reveals a yawning generation gap between the Web production practices of traditional political actors (especially political candidates and their campaigns) and the preferences and expectations that today's young people bring to political cyberspace. As long as this gap remains unexplored, we believe optimism about the potential of online politics to reverse historic declines in youth participation in the electoral arena may be premature.

The generational disconnect in online politics is evident in the features typically used (and not used) by candidates campaigning online, and in the relative absence of direct (or even indirect) appeals to young voters on most candidate Web sites. To be sure, some of the roots of this gap lie in the exigencies of electoral competition in the United States, specifically the relatively small and historically shrinking part of the electorate represented by younger voters. However, we suggest that differences between campaigns' and young voters' perspectives on interactivity, control, and the value of coproduction may be significantly compromising the full potential of the Internet as a positive force for reinvigoration of youth political participation, thus exacerbating the problem.

In this chapter, we attempt to identify and help understand the basic structure of the chasm between typical uses of the Internet by political candidates and leaders, and the expectations of a younger cohort that is increasingly turning to the Internet for political information. To do so we draw on a variety of research data, ranging from feature analyses of campaign Web sites, to survey data and interviews with campaign site producers, as well as detailed focus group discussions with young citizens about their experiences with and expectations of campaign Web sites.

We begin by discussing a number of relevant patterns in the uses of digital media by young people, and their attitudes toward new communication technologies. By supplementing publicly available data from representative national samples with more finely grained responses from student focus groups conducted during the 2000 presidential election, we highlight important aspects of the modus operandi of young people's uses of the Internet for general, as well as political, purposes. Drawing from these data, we then derive a set of baseline expectations about Web production and Web use against which the potential for campaigns to capture and sustain the interest of young voters via the Internet may be assessed.

After establishing a basic understanding of youth preferences with respect to political uses of the Web, we turn to a counterpart examination of the contemporary practices of

the primary players in the world of electoral politics online. In doing so, we focus on U.S. House, Senate, and gubernatorial candidates. Although presidential candidates typically get the bulk of attention from Internet observers and commentators, it is candidates for these lesser offices that make up the lion's share of online electoral campaigns, so we focus our attention on their efforts to campaign online. Here, we assess the feature characteristics of campaigns' Web production practices, drawing on prior analyses we conducted with other scholars of a very large sample of U.S. campaign Web sites.[10] With these data, we explore a distinction between different ways of approaching online campaigning we have demonstrated elsewhere, within the specific context of digital media, politics, and American youth. Specifically, we distinguish between Web production practices we identify as *adapting traditional campaigning to the Web* and those we identify as *Web campaigning*, which uniquely tap the interactive and networking potentials of digital media.[11] Consistent with other research in this area,[12] our data document the tendency of candidates to rely heavily on the former set of practices, remaining out of step with the expectations of a younger set of site visitors. Moving beyond basic features and design elements, we also discuss results from additional content analyses of campaign Web sites conducted during the 2002 and 2004 election cycles, which document the surprising paucity (given the relative dominance of younger citizens online) of direct or indirect appeals to youth on these sites.[13] Finally, we review research on similar campaign Web sites from the 2004 elections and discuss some of the patterns that emerged in online campaigning for the 2006 elections, which show the enduring nature of the disconnect between how candidates and young people appear to be engaging the political Web.

Having identified the basic structure of the generational gap between youth expectations about the presentation of materials and information on the Web and the actual products offered to young consumers of political information by those at the center of electoral politics online, we devote the remainder of the chapter to fundamental differences between younger citizens' and traditional political actors' approaches to digital media. Specifically, we explore a variety of ways of thinking about one of the Web's signature affordances, interactivity, as it relates to online politics and American youth. While most Web surfers are familiar with the general concept of interactivity, scholars have engaged in a lively debate over its essential elements.[14] Setting aside the search for consensus on the true nature of interactivity, we instead draw on some of the different dimensions of interactivity identified in these debates to explain more systematically the generation gap in online politics. By applying these ideas to the differences identified in the first two sections of the chapter, we hope to point the way toward strategies that political candidates and other practitioners of online politics can use to more effectively reach out to would-be young voters online.

Youth Demand for the Political Web

In considering the ways that younger voters use the Internet for political purposes, it is important to consider both the extent and nature of youth preferences and tastes for online political information resources. It is also important to consider some relevant aspects of youth Web use that fall outside of electoral politics or even the broader conceptions of politics found in other chapters of this volume. How much interest do young people exhibit in finding political information online? What kind of information do they seek? When young citizens use the Internet for political or other uses, what do they like to do, and how? By considering all of these factors together, we can begin to paint a picture of the

kinds of expectations and preferences that young people bring to the Web when seeking information about politics, whether from Rock the Vote, the League of Women Voters, a candidate seeking office, or from their online peer network.

It is commonplace to refer to the crisis of youth disengagement from politics, but it is clear that in both the online environment in general and the world of politics and public affairs on the Web in particular, the youth cohort is active and vibrant. By a variety of measures, the demand for political information on the Web among young people rivals or eclipses that of those in other age groups. By now, most are aware of the widespread adoption of Internet technology among teens and eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds. Similarly, most are also familiar with the fact that survey data routinely shows this age group to possess relatively low general interest in politics as traditionally conceived (and practiced by the "dutiful citizen" described by Bennett in this volume). However, the presence of teens and eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds in the online world of news and political information is formidable. As noted earlier, the eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-old age group was the most likely age cohort to seek political information online during the 2004 elections.[15] And, if we look at a slightly broader category of turning to the Web for general news, we see similar patterns. Indeed, survey data suggests that eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds are the most likely to seek news from sources like the Internet and late-night comedy programs and are the least likely to seek news from the traditional channels of network programming and daily newspapers.[16] Simply comparing teens to adults in a head-to-head matchup, we find that regular Internet users in both categories get news from online sources at about the same rate, with "[t]hree-quarters (76%) of online teens and 73% of online adults" getting at least some news from the Internet.[17] Given that youth possess a lower interest in news generally,[18] these figures further highlight the preference of youth for new media over traditional channels. Moreover, as Kathryn Montgomery and others have documented, there has also been an explosion of youth-oriented political portals in recent years, with familiar sites like Rock the Vote being joined in a burgeoning youth political Web sphere by dozens of other youth sites related to campaigns and elections, and hundreds more devoted to broader public and social concerns.[19]

Another way of approaching the question of youth demand for politics online is through their reactions to the efforts of candidates to engage them through new media. Perhaps related to the fact that they have long been the most intensive users of the Web, youth are certainly among the Web's most discerning and demanding users. This point was made clear to one of the authors through focus groups conducted during the 2000 presidential primary elections with groups of college students. Equipped with a laptop, high-speed Internet connection, and projector, each group collectively navigated its way through several campaign and nonpartisan civic sites while a moderator elicited feedback from the group on various aspects of the sites. Student participants consistently provided highly detailed commentary, noting all manner of visual and technical details, including the specific placement of various items (and what that communicated), as well as the frequency with which sites were perceived to have been updated.

One focus group centered on the first ever online fundraising event, the John McCain campaign's "Cyber Express Webcast" in February 2000 which was promoted as a "live and interactive" event.[20] Those who wished to participate in the Webcast had to register with the campaign ahead of time and contribute $100 each to receive the URL for the hour-long Webcast. One member of the focus group research team registered for the event, and the Webcast was projected onto a large screen so that all focus group members were able to view it.

Webcast participants were invited to e-mail questions to the candidate during the event, and streaming video featured John McCain fielding questions—presumably a selection of those that were being received by the campaign via e-mail. The Webcast consisted of four primary information streams. A live video feed featured John and Cindy McCain sitting at a table, with Cindy McCain reading the questions and her husband answering them. In a window below the video feed, a text box streamed questions submitted by audience members. A series of still photographs and graphics were displayed in another part of the window illustrating Senator McCain's comments or emphasizing his issue positions. In addition, occasional "poll" questions and tallied results were presented to the audience.

Without question, the event featured an innovative use of the Internet, and was the first of several live Internet-based presentations by candidates during the 2000 campaign season and beyond. McCain's campaign took a risk by putting their candidate in a novel situation fraught with potential technical disaster. However, the focus group students—mostly committed Republicans and one strong McCain supporter—were disappointed that the McCain campaign did not make fuller use of Internet technologies during the Webcast. In contrast to the event's billing as a live and interactive Webcast, these young voters described it in bleaker terms. They perceived McCain's event to lack both the intimacy of an in-person fundraiser and the intensity of a live debate.

For example, even though the group witnessed the Webcast via a high-speed connection, the video feed froze frequently and the audio stream was interrupted every few minutes. "It's like the difference between going to a live concert and listening to a CD," one young man commented partway through the Webcast, "a bad CD." By the end of the event he had further downgraded his evaluation, saying, "It's worse than a CD."

Naturally, some of the technical aspects of this example are artifacts of a time when streaming video was not as reliable as it is today. However, focus group participants were also quite skeptical of the event on a deeper level. Of particular concern was the "interactive" nature of the question-and-answer process. For example, all subscribers to the Webcast could e-mail an unlimited number of questions and comments to the McCain Web site, and all e-mails received a nearly immediate response from a McCain staff member. Some questions were screened out by the McCain staff and not made visible to other subscribers, including a message submitted by a researcher containing intentionally inflammatory language. In all, more than 250 questions and comments were posted to the Webcast. During the fifty-minute event, McCain responded to twelve. Collectively, the students in the focus group submitted over a dozen questions, ranging from ones they considered "easy" to those they knew would be challenging for the candidate to address. Although McCain could not possibly have responded to all questions, he did not address any of the questions submitted by the focus group participants, nor any of the similarly oriented questions submitted by other Webcast viewers, which were visible to all viewers as they streamed across the bottom of the screen. The disenchanted consensus of the group was that McCain was only taking "softball questions." At least one other Webcast subscriber (not a focus group participant) expressed the same sentiment in the same terms, as he or she wrote in an e-mail to the Webcast that was incorporated in the video stream at the bottom of the Webcast:

> Senator, almost all of the questions you've been asked (so far) have been softball type opportunities for you to speak without getting down to specifics. Don't you think that your supporters that contributed to this event want to get more details on your positions?

While most of the McCain staff responses to the Webcast viewers' e-mails were brief but appropriate, a staff member seemed to have misread the comment above, responding on McCain's behalf:

Thank you so much—I am honored by your support! (From: Staff (McCain Staff—Craig (#2)))

The McCain campaign, perhaps in an attempt to add another form of interactivity to the Webcast, also posted a series of single-question "polls" featuring a multiple-choice question to which subscribers could respond. Within five minutes, a bar chart of the tallied responses from subscribers was incorporated in the Webcast stream. Questions included "How often do you visit the McCain 2000 Web site?" (44 percent responded two to three times per week); and "Should paying down the national debt be part of the Republican platform?" (96 percent responded affirmatively). However, the focus group participants' response to the online questions may cause online pollsters to shudder. They expressed great delight in clicking on the response options they thought were least likely to be chosen by other subscribers, and several confessed to a habit of trying to "mess up the results" of online polls elsewhere on the Web.

Overall, the young voters in this focus group expressed desires for more creative uses of Web-based technologies, and a more informal, playful presentation of candidates. Suggestions offered by the participants included the use of cartoons, animation, and parody in addition to the still photos of McCain in mostly serious, formal poses. One participant commented, "People expect funnier images on the Internet . . . they expect the Internet to be weird and offbeat." Other participants agreed and added suggestion such as "Let's see him on vacation," and "Yeah, with his shirt off, or at least out of a suit." The consensus of the group was that McCain had used the Webcast like an expanded yet retrogressive TV broadcast—incorporating e-mail and instant calculation features, but restricting visual content to "talking heads" and still photos. As one participant noted, "the Internet has a lot more potential than what [McCain's staff] is doing with it."

At the end of the Webcast, the group concluded that while they appreciated the McCain staffers' attempts to respond at least briefly to each e-mail, their one-line acknowledgements did not constitute an "interactive" Web event. "This is not meeting John McCain," one student said, to which another added, "If he doesn't answer our questions, it's not interactive." Comments such as these provide a detailed picture of the generational gap in expectations and perceptions of interactivity.

Surveying the landscape of contemporary survey research on youth Web use beyond the terrain of electoral politics, we can consider from yet another angle how "interactive" may have a very different meaning to young people than to professional political consultants. As discussed by others in this volume, today's youth are well represented in online activities with content production and modification components (e.g., see the chapters by Earl and Schussman, Howard, Levine, and Raynes-Goldie and Walker in this volume). Within the relevant survey data from recent years, a recurrent theme is the demand for interactive features that allow users to exchange information of all sorts (messages, images, files) and to generally take an active part in communicative and expressive processes. For example, while e-mail remains the "killer app" for older Internet users, teens of today display a clear preference for instant messaging (IM). Even more telling, younger users of IM are also significantly more likely than older users to do things like personalize their "away messages," rather than simply use the standard options provided by most IM client software.[21] Similar patterns are also evident in the use of each new, and typically more interactive, element of

Web communication. Commonly referred to as "Web 2.0," an emerging category of applications such as social networking sites, blogs, and other collaboratively authored documents is extremely popular among young people. The dialogical and coproductive nature of the type of interactivity manifested in these applications affords "communicative, creative, and social uses" of the Internet—and appeals to young people.[22] Indeed, in testimony to the House Committee on Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet, Pew researcher Amanda Lenhart summarized the appeal of social networking sites to younger users as stemming largely from their ability to enable them to create and share content, and to communicate through a broad variety of channels such as messaging, blogs, and other posting mechanisms.[23] Clearly, coproductive interactivity is foundational to the way that young people, more than any other age group, engage with the Internet.

Looking at these developments within the context of sanguine hopes for the Internet as a convenient pathway for young people toward greater participation in electoral politics evokes mixed feelings of hope and caution. To begin with, there is clearly a significant demand among young people for political information online as well as for tools to engage in a wide variety of political actions. To be sure, offline indicators of youth interest in politics remain underwhelming, and older adults have been more likely than younger adults to vote and to contribute to an electoral campaign or interest group. However, data on the frequency of online political information seeking among young people suggest that their greater rates of technology adoption may counterbalance these trends. Moreover, research on the general characteristics of youth new media use reinforces the notion that young people turn to the Internet not to join a passive audience for politics, but rather to seek their own audiences and engage in active processes of creation and interaction, as Peter Levine points out in this volume. As noted earlier, a few researchers have documented the emergence and growth of a variety of youth-oriented political portal Web sites to meet this demand, with many offering highly interactive and occasionally edgy political content that appears to be directly in line with these preferences.[24] However, if the rising tide of political activity on the Web is to bring a significant number of young people into the electoral process, political candidates and other actors central to the online world of electoral politics need to offer content and features that also resonate with the information seeking and sharing modes of online youth. In the next section, we will review a variety of research on candidate Web practices that provides insights into the extent to which candidates have met this challenge in prior elections.

Political Candidates on the Web

In 1994, Diane Feinstein launched the first ever political Web site;[25] this is sometimes referred to as the "Kitty Hawk moment" for online political campaigning. In the election years since, the use of the Web by political candidates has risen steadily. In the 1996 campaigns, approximately one-third of political candidates featured a campaign Web site.[26] Just two years later, the proportion nearly doubled as 63 percent of candidates took their campaigns online.[27] By the 2002 elections the proportion reached 73 percent,[28] which recent research suggests may be a plateau for online candidate campaigning, with comparable 2004 percentages hovering around the high 60s to low-to-mid 70s.[29]

As a growing number of people who have produced their own Web pages know, however, a mere presence in cyberspace does not in any way guarantee traffic to one's Web site, or return visits from those who happen to stop by.[30] In this respect, the kinds of content and features offered on Web sites and how useful or attractive they are to visitors are important

factors. In this section, we review findings from the most comprehensive efforts to date in tracking the content and features offered by political candidates through the Web, along with some more recent examples that provide a glimpse of contemporary developments. Although a few encouraging signs may be found in these data, the overarching picture is of a significant gap between the online sensibilities of young people and the ways in which the vast majority of candidates for office in the United States conduct the online portions of their campaigns.

From August through Election Day 2002, we worked with a team of researchers to draw samples of several hundred Web sites produced by candidates for U.S. House, Senate, and gubernatorial seats nationwide on a weekly basis for feature analysis (see Table 1). At the end of the data collection period, all of our observations were merged into a single database, providing a detailed picture of how those at the center of electoral politics were incorporating the Web into their campaign strategies.[31] More than just a listing of features and percentages, we believe these data provide important indicators of the shape, structure, and tendencies of the emerging world of online political campaigning. By looking comprehensively at campaigns' Web production practices (what candidates do, and do not do, with their campaign Web sites) we can examine their posture toward the Web, and by extension how they might appear to young people using the Web as an information source about campaigns and elections.

We have argued elsewhere that some features employed by campaign organizations on their sites reflect the Web production practice of adapting traditional campaigning to the Web environment.[32] Providing basic information about the candidate, including background information and issue statements, as well as managing interactions with potential supporters both within and outside the district, are characteristic of traditional campaigning,[33] whether conducted offline or online. We operationally defined this Web practice as consisting of fourteen specific features, easily recognizable as the online corollaries of traditional campaign tools, including candidate biographies, issue statements, contact and donation information, campaign news releases and calendars, information about voter registration, lists of endorsements, texts of speeches, information about contributors, and encouragement to write letters to local newspaper editors.

Features and structural elements that manifest more novel, Web-specific techniques evidence a practice we have termed *Web campaigning*. The practice of Web campaigning is indicated by the production of elements that may have prototypes in traditional campaigning, but are uniquely or especially catalyzed by the Web. Various scholars have attempted to identify characteristics of the Web that differentiate it from other media channels and environments, such as the ease with which multiple forms of media can be integrated and disseminated, the interpenetration of consumption and production processes, and the potentially unbounded network enabled by hyperlinks,[34] and we have integrated these characteristics into our concept of Web campaigning. Specifically, we conceptualized this Web practice as manifested on campaign Web sites via fifteen specific features, including linking to other Web sites, enabling users to make contributions via the Web, providing the capability to send links to the campaign site via e-mail, provision of toolkits to facilitate Web-based political actions, downloadable electronic campaign paraphernalia, provision of multimedia content, interactive polls, acceptance of visitor comments, onsite delivery of letters to local newspaper editors, interactive campaign calendars, online events, and the ability to personalize or individualize site content. Analysis of the overall prevalence of each practice showed that campaigns were far more likely to adapt traditional campaigning to the Web than to engage in Web campaigning.

Table 1
Campaigns' Web practices in the 2002 U.S. elections

Feature	Sites with Feature Number	Percent	*N**
Adapting traditional campaigning to the Web			
Campaign Web site	1168	100	1168
Candidate biography	965	92	1045
Issue positions	936	90	1045
Campaign contact information	491	83	589
E-mail address	851	81	1045
Donation information	837	80	1044
Campaign news	427	73	589
Signup to volunteer	721	69	1044
Online donations	321	55	589
Sign up to receive e-mail	429	41	1044
Campaign calendar	352	34	1044
Voter registration information	321	31	1044
Endorsements	154	26	589
Information about sending letters to the editor	29	5	589
Web campaigning			
Links to external Web sites	634	76	831
Photos of campaign events	250	42	589
Campaign advertisements	109	19	589
Send links from site	87	10	865
Web toolkits	80	9	858
Audio or video materials	52	9	589
Electronic paraphernalia	79	9	865
Site search engine	68	8	858
Text of speeches	49	8	589
Pop-up windows	55	6	865
Online polls	41	5	865
Online letters to editors	25	3	865
Visitor comments	20	2	865
Interactive calendar	2	<1	589
Online events	3	<1	865

**N*'s vary due to variations in the frequency with which different features were coded throughout the election cycle.

Interpreting these data from the perspective of the young political information consumer, the blunt reality is that candidates do not appear to be doing a very good job of using the Web to reach out to those who are arguably the most likely to be receptive to political Web communication. On the upside, the data do suggest that candidates and their campaigns appreciate the efficiency of using the Web to get out basic information about themselves and their quests for office. Biographical information and statements about various political issues were found on 92 and 90 percent of sites in our analysis, respectively. Given that young people have demonstrated a considerable appetite for this kind of information online, this is a good sign. But if one considers interactive features more in line with the typical Web experiences and tastes of younger voters, campaign sites come off more as static information booths than as dynamic places to connect, create, and interact. Thus

Table 2
Summary of Web practices

Practice	Number of Features in Practice	Number of Features on Sites							
		Minimum	Maximum	25th Percentile	Median	75th Percentile	Mean	SD	*N*
Adapting traditional campaigning	14	1	13	7.0	9.0	11.0	8.8	2.43	589
Web campaigning	15	0	10	1.0	2.0	3.0	2.2	1.68	446

based on our analysis of close to twelve hundred different candidate Web sites from the 2002 elections, we believe it is fair to say that many if not most campaign Web sites are markedly skewed more toward the parents of today's younger voters than toward youths themselves.

As if this were not enough, additional research on a random subset of campaign sites from 2002 has shown that even in the simple act of providing information on their issue stances, candidates often made little effort to reach out to younger voters. In a study of the rhetorical characteristics of candidate issue statements, Bennett and Xenos (2004) examined the frequency with which candidate Web site issue statements featured either direct or indirect appeals to younger voters as a group, and also the frequency with which older voters were similarly targeted.[35] The study sought to identify portions of the issue statement pages that made age-specific appeals either through direct, textual references, or simply through the presence of images or photos featuring younger or older people. Despite the disparities between how likely younger versus older voters were (and are) to seek issue information online, the study found that while candidates were comfortable reaching out to younger voters (typically when discussing issues like education), they were more likely to reach out to the senior demographic through their online issue materials. Even more than the relative emphasis of candidates on certain types of features in campaign Web site design, this finding further reinforces the impression held by many young people that candidates and politicians simply aren't speaking to them, even when they are using the medium of choice for the younger generation.

Although we analyzed a smaller number of campaign sites in 2004 (one hundred) our findings were consistent with those from 2002, reflecting a relative preference among campaigns to use their Web sites for providing information rather than for more interactive practices such as involving site visitors with the campaign, connecting them with other political actors, and mobilizing supporters to become advocates.[36] In another recent study, Conners examined the Web sites of 139 major- and third-party candidates for the U.S. Senate in 2004,[37] focusing in particular on their use of tools such as Meetup.com (a site that uses the Web to organize offline meetings for groups of all kinds), blogs, and features facilitating campaign involvement, such as donation and volunteering. Consistent with our data from 2002 and 2004, this study also points to relatively infrequent use of the kinds of interactive features that young people have come to expect from online communication. Specifically, Conners found links to Meetup.com on only 16.3 percent of Senatorial campaign Web sites in 2004, and blogs on only 26.3 percent (2005).

To their credit, candidates appear to be moving slowly in the direction of greater interactivity in campaign Web development, but the overarching tendency is still toward a style of

Web communication that is significantly out of step with the tastes and preferences of most young people seeking political information online. For example, a recent informal survey of candidate Web sites from the most competitive 2006 Senate races suggests that while features such as blogs and podcasts were employed on about one of three campaign sites, they were still absent from the majority. Given that we have typically found candidates in the most hotly contested races to be those with the most sophisticated Web sites,[38] this suggests that U.S. electoral campaigns in general are still largely reluctant to engage in more interactive Web practices. Moreover, many of the blogs currently offered on campaign Web sites tend to feature mostly press-release–style entries, and do not always offer users the opportunity to comment on posts. Where commenting is enabled, it is typically restricted to those willing to provide not only their name and e-mail address, but also, in some cases, the visitor is required to provide even more information, such as additional contact information, along with demographic, and issue interest information. For example, at the time of this writing, Jim Talent's 2006 Senate campaign Web site allowed only those willing to sign up as volunteers for the campaign (and indicate what types of volunteer activities they are willing to perform) to comment on the site blog.[39]

Two Approaches to Interactivity on the Web

In the preceding sections, we have demonstrated how the Web production practices of contemporary campaigns diverge significantly from the tastes and expectations of younger Internet users. Based on the best available indicators of what young people are looking for in an electoral politics experience on the Web, and what campaign organizations are providing, a substantial gulf is evident between them. If this gap is left unaddressed, we believe future developments in online campaigning will fail to attract all but the most politically oriented young voters into greater involvement with the electoral system. In the long run, this means that the potential of new media to help reverse significant declines in youth political involvement may go unrealized. In the following sections, we provide a conceptual map to help interested parties prevent such a tragic, missed opportunity. As mentioned at the outset, the concept of interactivity is at the center of this map, and we believe it is the key to understanding not only *why* candidates and young voters may be missing each other online but also *how* this disconnection may be remedied. Unfortunately, owing to the complex nature of both Internet technology and political behavior, there is no easy solution to the problem, and so readers will not find a simple recipe for online youth political engagement in these pages. Rather, we hope to provide the conceptual foundation for such efforts, and to highlight examples as well as questions that appear especially ripe for further study and experimentation.

In many ways interactivity is the defining element of Web communication. Some even go as far as to say that interactivity and new media are synonymous.[40] As such, the concept of interactivity has received a significant amount of attention from empirical researchers in marketing and communication. These studies emphasize the possibility for greater levels of interactivity present in a Web site to lead to all kinds of positive outcomes, including greater cognitive engagement with site content, increases in the perceived favorability of site producers, and the persuasive impact of the communication. Several studies of interactivity and political communication through the Web have been conducted on samples of college students, a substantial portion of the youth voting demographic. For example, Sundar et al. conducted an experiment in which three versions of a fictitious political candidate

Web site were given to study participants (for each Web site, content was held constant, while interactivity was manipulated by creating deeper and more complex levels of clickable pages).[41] Consistent with the idea that young people are favorably predisposed toward interactive site content, interactivity was shown to have a demonstrable positive impact on college students' perceptions of the candidate, as well as agreement with his or her issue stances.[42] In a similar study, Warnick et al. demonstrated the positive effects on college students of two different types of interactivity found in campaign Web sites: "text-based interactivity" consisting of features such as first-person text and captioned photos, as well as "campaign-to-user interactivity" consisting of features that enable two-way exchanges of information and correspondence between the user and the campaign.[43] Moving beyond simple persuasive effects on site visitors, Tedesco has also demonstrated the impact of interactivity on college students' feelings of political efficacy, or the extent to which they felt confident in their abilities to perform traditional citizenship roles and to trust that the political system would be responsive to such behavior.[44] After an interactive experience with political Web content, students reported increased feelings of efficacy and trust in the political system. Clearly then, we know that in general terms the increasing prevalence and sophistication of online campaigning stands a good chance of providing an attractive avenue to political participation for many young adults.

But, as we have discussed in the preceding sections, campaigns tend to favor simple information distribution over interactivity in their Web production practices. Moreover, as the McCain example illustrates, even when candidates attempt to be "interactive" the results are not always clear-cut or positive. Existing bodies of empirical research as well as ongoing theoretical debates reveal a variety of different dimensions to this quintessential aspect of digital communication.[45] Scholars agree that there are several variants of interactivity, even if they do not agree on a schema for characterizing forms of interactivity. With respect to questions about how new media are being used in the arena of electoral politics and the extent to which such uses promote greater involvement among younger voters, however, the specifics and outcomes of these debates are not as immediately relevant as some of the key concepts we see represented in the world of online political campaigning. We contend that not all forms of interactivity are as convincing or appealing to young people as site producers would like.

Two concepts from contemporary discussions of interactivity are particularly helpful in understanding the disconnect between young voters and candidates online. The first of these is the notion of interactivity as transaction between the site producer and site visitor. Although Web-based transaction can take a variety of forms, one important form is media customization. For example, you might visit a Web site and in the course of doing so provide some basic information about yourself. In response to that information, the Web site provides you with content tailored to the information you provided, offering you information on products you may be interested in or the weather conditions outside your home. By reacting to information you provide (consciously or not) this form of interactivity helps to create a custom communication experience, and like other forms is associated with positive attitudinal outcomes.[46]

A second concept from scholarly discussions of interactivity that is especially useful in the context of youth, new media, and civic engagement is that of shared control between the producer and the collectivity of site visitors. When interactivity is approached in this way, the content and experience of Web communication is coproduced by both users and Web site creators. This form of interactivity can at times stand in direct tension with transaction.

At a technical level, visitor or user control simply refers to the fact that, when surfing the Internet, you have a varying degree of control over what content is accessed, how it is accessed, and so forth. While there are only a few different ways of reading the newspaper, there are an almost unlimited number of ways you can explore the Web site of the *New York Times*, and by posting a comment to a discussion board on the *Times* Web site, you can even exert a small but noticeable level of control over site content. When a comment you post is responded to by other site visitors, the result is a collaboration between the *Times* and its readership in the production of the site. By applying these two concepts of interactivity to problems of youth political engagement and online campaigning, we can begin to get greater purchase on the generation gap in online politics.

Within the realm of online campaigning, our research and that of others suggests that to the extent that campaign organizations are likely to further pursue interactivity, they will do so through a carefully managed form of exchange that is manifest in transactional techniques of Web campaigning.[47] In practical terms, a transactional approach to interactivity is a preference for features that return strategic goods for the campaign while involving a relatively small investment of resources. As strategic organizations with a concrete goal (electoral victory), campaigns have structural imperatives to carefully manage and utilize all resources at their disposal, and resources that may be exchanged through the Internet are certainly no exception.

Typically, transactional techniques are achieved by creating online structures on campaign sites that facilitate the collection of personal information and contributions from site visitors.[48] For instance, one of the primary ways campaigns provide interactivity to site visitors is through online structures that collect and manage e-mail addresses, a relatively straightforward conduit for two-way exchange.[49] Viewed through the lens of the technique of transaction, site visitors' e-mail addresses are more than just a way to interact. Rather, they can also be understood as a resource that can be harvested and managed via the campaign site when appropriate online structures are produced and configured strategically. Beyond collecting and managing e-mail addresses, some campaign organizations have extended their transactional capacity to build ongoing and highly personalized relationships with site visitors. These campaigns have the capability to combine data provided intentionally and consciously by the site visitor with additional data about the site visitor that he or she may or may not be aware of. The visitor's experiences on the Web site, for example, including the frequency of page views, may be combined with data about the site visitor obtained from outside sources, such as party registration, turnout history, contribution record, and even purchasing patterns (from credit card company databases). These "constituent relationship management" (or CRM) systems attempt to extend to the political realm the powerful marketing tools commonly found in the business community, with the goal of providing relevant information to individually identified site visitors, and serving important strategic goals, principally fundraising, and efficient, effective persuasion.[50]

Keeping in mind the strategic imperative of campaign organizations, it is thus unsurprising that forms of interactivity other than those that serve a clear transactional purpose are less attractive. For example, online events such as the McCain Cyber Express Webcast, or even less complicated features such as interactive message boards, provide little in the way of tangible resources for campaigns, in comparison to their costs in terms of technical and staff resources. Indeed, this cost–benefit rationale is precisely what Stromer-Galley explored in her early study of the low frequency with which campaign Web sites engage in what she termed "human-interactive features."[51] Based on interviews with campaign staff members and an

analysis of candidate Web sites in the 1996 and 1998 elections, she concluded that, for campaign organizations, interactive features like "direct e-mail exchanges and Web boards were not conducive to the objective of winning an election," and represented a style of Web campaigning that visibly "drains resources from more pressing campaign needs."[52] In addition, features that enable coproductive forms of interactivity, such as message boards, multiauthored blogs, and chats, allow users to produce content directly on a campaign site.[53] Such features can also pose tangible threats to the ability of campaigns to control their message. As a campaign professional interviewed in Howard's study of new media campaigning put it, "Anybody involved in a campaign. . . is always concerned about control. Chat is difficult to control."[54] Thus we see that by looking at interactivity in campaign Web practices through the lens of transaction, some forms of interactivity (those that enable fundraising and sophisticated targeting of persuasive messages) are more appealing than others (those that are relatively more costly in resources and compromise efforts to control campaign messages).

In direct contrast to the transactional approach to interactivity as a two-way exchange (preferably one that favors the campaign organization) is the notion of interactivity as user-control, which is more consistent with the preferences of younger Internet users. In general, youth tend to be suspicious of transactional relationships with campaign organizations and favor the more coproductive elements of Internet communication. For example, in a particularly telling portion of one of the focus groups discussed earlier in which college students participated in guided discussions of a variety of political Web sites during the 2000 campaigns, participants provided some interesting reflections on one of the principal ways in which transactional interactivity is instantiated on campaign Web sites, the personalization of site content.

> I really don't like giving them all that information. I can see all the mail that will come in a few days. . . Even though I'm going to vote for Gore, I wouldn't want to get a bunch of mail. I wouldn't want them to have all that information that they don't need. I don't understand why they need my address, nor should they need my phone number for the Web page.

Another participant added the following comment:

> I don't like the idea of personalizing a political site because if I personalize it for me, how can I tell what they are telling someone else? I like the idea of the same content and that I'm seeing what everyone else is seeing; otherwise, they could be changing their story for someone else.

Precisely because they are among the Web's most savvy and discerning users, younger voters are keenly aware of the transactional nature of many popular forms of campaign interactivity. Although Howard expresses a concern that most Internet users are unaware of some of the ways in which they are involved in transactional interactivity, these comments, along with the greater technical sophistication of younger Internet users suggests that they are not only aware but likely to be turned off by more transactional techniques of Web campaigning.

Unsurprisingly, some of the most popular forms of interactivity among young people are those that are coproductive—that is, they bring the user into the process of producing and manipulating the content of the site. This is an important element of interactivity as user-control, and represents what is arguably the most favored aspect of the medium for the younger generation. As mentioned earlier, the concept of user-control has a relatively straightforward technical meaning; by clicking, typing, accessing, and surfing a site the user

provides input that generates noticeable changes in output. But at a deeper level, control is also about power. This notion of a shift in power is most strikingly seen in the kinds of interactive activities popular among younger Internet users—when these users engage in the "communicative, creative, and social uses" of the Internet,[55] they are taking advantage of the vastly greater level of control afforded by Web 2.0 applications, which enable them to create their own content, and share it with others in an ongoing and multifaceted exchange. At the same time, campaign organizations also have strategic imperatives to resist these forms of coproductive interactivity, on the very same grounds that they shift power, and control, away from the campaign itself.

Conclusion: Bridging the Generation Gap in Online Politics

It is hoped that through the foregoing discussion we have highlighted the need to be cautious about assuming that simply adding new media to old electoral politics will entice new and younger voters to greater participation. At the surface, we have documented the vast differences between the ways in which younger Internet users are accustomed to engaging with new communications technology, and the ways in which the principal actors in the arena of electoral politics, candidates, have been expanding their campaign operations into cyberspace. At a deeper level, we hope we have introduced concepts that can help candidates, and the broader public, to understand the nature of these differences. In our view, understanding the generation gap in online politics as a clash between differing notions of interactivity clearly identifies the ways in which these differences must be negotiated, if the true potential of the Internet as a medium capable of facilitating significant changes in political participation among American youth is to be realized. Simply put, if greater numbers of young voters are to be attracted to the system of electoral politics through the Web, candidates and their campaigns will need to learn how to balance the competing logics of transactional and coproductive interactivity. A balance, rather than a wholesale embrace, of coproduction is suggested because in the present system it is unrealistic to expect candidates to ignore the structural aspects of the electoral system that force campaigns to behave strategically. It is also reasonable to expect that while it may not be their favored form of interactivity, young voters accept some elements of transactional activity as part of political life.

This conclusion points toward two practical ways in which Web production practices might begin to bridge the generation gap in online politics: inclusive and transparent forms of transactional interactivity, and creative ways of splitting the difference between transactional and coproductive Web practices. Earlier, we pointed out that candidates in the 2002 election cycle were more likely to use their Web campaigns to target senior rather then junior citizens. One obvious way in which to make transactional, targeted forms of online campaigning more attractive to younger voters is simply to address them more often. As one of the students in the focus groups from the 2000 campaign study remarked in reference to a campaign site menu of pages for specific groups (e.g., women, firefighters, Latinos), "There's nothing wrong with being specific if you include everyone, but if you don't include someone then you are going to turn them away." In addition, it is especially important for campaigns deploying transactional Web campaigning techniques to supply transparent statements about how information is being collected and used by the campaign in its efforts to achieve electoral victory. There is a general need for more campaign sites to post these kinds of statements about their privacy policies, but the sophistication of younger Internet users suggests that it is of particular importance if younger voters are not to be put off by candidate Web

sites in significant numbers. To their credit, an increasing number of campaigns are already moving in this direction, offering specific pages and materials targeted to young voters and providing clear statements about the privacy policies of the campaign. However, we believe further effort in these areas is needed if more young citizens are to be drawn into electoral politics through online campaigns.

With respect to creatively splitting the difference between transactional and coproductive forms of interactivity, there are also some fortunate (although all too rare) examples that help to illustrate the point. Perhaps the most famous example is that of the Howard Dean campaign's innovative and remarkable deployment of new media during the 2004 democratic presidential primary. In their study of the Dean campaign, Iozzi and Bennett document the ways in which many of its techniques represented a pioneering qualitative shift in American campaigning away from the traditional "War Room" style (which places a premium on message control) and toward a more fluid and dynamic "networked" style of campaigning.[56] In doing so, the campaign was able to realize tangible benefits from coproductive interactivity in return for modest compromises in message control. Less extreme (and less risky from the perspective of traditional campaigns) examples of creative compromise between competing forms of interactivity may be found in some of the Web campaigns for the 2006 elections. For example, on Rick Santorum's 2006 Senate campaign Web site, a "Running with Rick" campaign blog was offered, complete with comment functions.[57] Perhaps as a way of counterbalancing the costs of this coproductive element (in campaign staff and possible risks), however, when a user clicked on the "comment" button beneath each blog entry, they were directed to a registration page for the site, which asked for pieces of personal information, along with whether one identified with one of twenty different "coalitions," which included "youth" and "young professional" alongside more traditional groupings such as "seniors" and "women."[58] Another example from 2006 was the Bob Menendez for Senate campaign site, which in addition to the official campaign blog featured "diaries" or other Web logs created by individuals.[59] Similarly to the Santorum site, the Menendez site required would-be campaign bloggers to register with the site (i.e., provide the campaign with a useful informational resource). But once registered, the user was offered their own venue for creating and sharing content with others.[60]

To be sure, these examples are certainly not flawless from the perspective of the average young Internet user who may be curious about the campaigns. Moreover, the extent to which the coproductive elements in the immediately preceding examples were filtered and managed by the campaigns is unclear, potentially creating only more sophisticated, Web 2.0 versions of the McCain Cyber Express Webcast. Indeed, if opportunities for coproduction are only displayed for effect, and youthful voices and nonsoftball questions are systematically avoided, then there is a distinct possibility that such efforts will be for naught. To paraphrase one of the youth focus group participants quoted earlier, such efforts may come off as no better than poor-quality MP3 files, or worse, broken or virus-ridden MP3 files. However, on a more positive note, if young voters' voices are represented in experiments such as these, and the coproduction opportunities offered are genuine, then our research suggests that younger citizens curious about the campaigns will be more likely to linger on the sites, send their links to friends in their social networks, and begin to engage with a system that their demographic group has been disengaged from for a considerable period. To be sure, more research and experimentation in this vein are needed in order to find the optimal mix of features required to satisfy both the strategic demands of campaigns and the social good of simulating greater numbers of young people to participate in the electoral system. But we believe it is essentially through the negotiation of these competing forms of interactivity

that political practice on the Web must pass if the generation gap in online politics is to be effectively bridged.

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