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# Social Media and the Future of U.S. Presidential Campaigning

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CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE

**SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE FUTURE OF U.S. PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNING**

SUBMITTED TO

PROFESSOR JOHN J. PITNEY, JR.

AND

DEAN PETER UVIN

BY

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FOR

SENIOR THESIS

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## INTRODUCTION

“Communication is the essence of a political campaign,” wrote White House media advisor Bob Mead in 1975.<sup>1</sup> Effective communication allows a presidential candidate to relay his or her message and rally support. This translates to monetary contributions, grassroots mobilization, and votes. To garner the support needed to win the election, candidates must adopt the latest media mediums supplying effective and efficient mass-communication. These mediums have become more readily available yet complex with the introduction of technology. The new technological mediums of each era, such as the radio in the 1920s and 30s, television in the 1950s and 60s, and today’s Internet and social media platforms, allow the candidates the opportunity to control their messaging and the potential to reach a greater audience than ever before. By eliminating the intermediary role of the traditional news media, presidential candidates can now take advantage of the latest advances in technology to communicate their messages directly to the public without being filtered by the press.

The radio became common in the 1920s, enabling candidates to reach a wider audience and equipping the American voters with the opportunity to be better informed. This medium revolutionized presidential campaigning for two reasons. Candidates could now access the untapped American voters who could not read, as well as voters who lived in less populated areas not serviced by print newspapers or campaign stops. Using

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Mead to Dick Cheney and Don Rumsfeld, “White House memorandum on “The Role of Radio and Television in Political Campaign,” June 19, 1975, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0047/phw19750619-01.pdf>

rhetoric akin to a friendly conversation, FDR appealed to all Americans regardless of economic and social class.<sup>2</sup> American Radio Works editor Stephen Smith regards President Franklin Delano Roosevelt as the first American president “to master the [radio] medium as a source of political advantage” for his ability to mobilize and engage the American people on measures FDR supported.<sup>3</sup>

Roosevelt was the first president to utilize electronic media in his campaign and throughout his presidency. He used the radio to directly broadcast his policies to the public, over the heads of Congress and the sensationalist press. He controlled the news about him and his campaign: “For FDR, it was quality time to clear up rumors spreading the nation, and squelch his critics as he gave people the ‘real news,’ on Roosevelt’s terms, unfiltered by the press,” wrote historian Lumeng Yu.<sup>4</sup> President Franklin Roosevelt quickly understood the power of the radio, in which he could directly promote his policies to the mass public and engage his audience on a more personal level.

In the following decade, television was introduced and quickly became a staple of the American home. Families could now keep up with broadcasted campaign events and political news at the comfort of their living rooms. Television was a unique medium of its time because the American people could now simultaneously hear and see the presidential candidates on the campaign trail. “Before television, most Americans didn’t even see the candidates – they read about them, they saw photos of them. [Television] allowed the public to judge candidates on a completely different basis,” stated Larry

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Brown, *Manipulating the Ether: The Power of Broadcast Radio in Thirties America* (North Carolina: McFarland Books, 1998), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Smith, “Radio: FDR’s ‘Natural Gift,’” *American RadioWorks*, November 10, 2014, <http://www.americanradioworks.org/segments/fdr-radio/>.

<sup>4</sup> Lumeng (Jenny) Yu, “The Great Communicator: How FDR’s Radio Speeches Shaped American History,” *The History Teacher* 39, no. 1 (2005): 89, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30036746>.

Sabato, a political analyst at Virginia University's Center for Politics.<sup>5</sup> In 1952, President Eisenhower was the first candidate to exploit television as a medium through his 20-second "spot" commercials. These established Eisenhower as an average man in touch with the people.<sup>6</sup> Learning from Eisenhower's success and the growing popularity of televisions, John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon spent heavily on television advertisements to market their campaigns for the 1960 election.

The 1960 race marked a huge turning point in presidential campaigning because the two major candidates heavily relied on television to sway public opinion, especially since 87 percent of American homes owned a television by that year.<sup>7</sup> The 1960 election also included America's first nationally televised presidential debate between Kennedy and Nixon.<sup>8</sup> An estimated 74 million people tuned in to the debate and "of the four million voters who made up their minds as a result of the debates, three million voted for Kennedy," according to *Broadcast Magazine*.<sup>9</sup> The new medium supposedly helped Kennedy win the debate because of his superior image, despite not being necessarily better on the issues. Frank Stanton, president of CBS at the time of the debate, said,

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<sup>5</sup> Kayla Webley, "How the Nixon-Kennedy Debate Changed the World," *TIME*, September 23, 2010, <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2021078,00.html>.

<sup>6</sup> "1952 Eisenhower vs. Stevenson," *The Living Room Candidate*, accessed November 27, 2015, <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1952>; Geri Zabela Eddins, "Persuading the People: Presidential Campaigns," *Our White House*, accessed November 27, 2015, <http://www.ourwhitehouse.org/persuading.html>.

<sup>7</sup> David Lubin, *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 28.

<sup>8</sup> Monica Davey, "1960: The First Mass Election," *New York Times*, accessed September 26, 2015, [http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/indepth/upfront/features/index.asp?article=f100608\\_tp\\_jfk](http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/indepth/upfront/features/index.asp?article=f100608_tp_jfk).

<sup>9</sup> Webley, "How the Nixon-Kennedy Debate Changed the World"; "Campaign of 1960," *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*, accessed September 26, 2015, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/JFK-in-History/Campaign-of-1960.aspx>.



“Kennedy was bronzed beautifully...[and] Nixon looked like death.”<sup>10</sup> Television viewers were convinced that the young and handsome Kennedy had outshined the pale and sweaty Nixon, while radio listeners favored Vice President Nixon.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than relying on the radio’s audio and an imagination, the American public could now watch their candidates in broadcast time. The ostensible difference in appearance at the debate proved that image and personality mattered greatly in a presidential candidate. During an interview for the 1984 documentary “Television and the Presidency,” Nixon realized that “more important than what [one] say[s] is how [one] looks on television.”<sup>12</sup> JFK historian Robert Dallek adds that Kennedy had won over the public when “Kennedy came across as presidential... as someone who was poised, witty, charming, handsome, and deserved to be president of the United States.”<sup>13</sup> Television required presidential candidates to appeal directly to the public with an added pressure of maintaining perfect composure and an “on” personality when being filmed.

At the turn of the century the Internet developed into a key source for political and campaign information. Between 1996 and 2008, the percentage of Americans who received their political information online rose from 4 percent to 46 percent.<sup>14</sup> According to the Pew Research Center, Americans increasingly cited the Internet as their prime

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<sup>10</sup> James Druckman, “The Power of Television Images: The First Kennedy-Nixon Debate Revisited,” *Journal of Politics* 65, no. 2 (2003): 563, <http://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/~jnd260/pub/Druckman%20JOP%202003.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Geri Zaballa Eddins, “Persuading the People: Presidential Campaigns,” *Our White House*, accessed November 25, 2015, <http://www.ourwhitehouse.org/persuading.html>.

<sup>12</sup> John Corry, “Television and the Presidency,” *New York Times*, June 18, 1984, <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/06/18/arts/television-and-the-presidency.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Don Gonyea, “How JFK Fathered the Modern Presidential Campaign,” *NPR*, November 16, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/2013/11/16/245550528/jfk-wrote-the-book-on-modern-presidential-campaigns>.

<sup>14</sup> Lee Rainie et al., “The Internet and Campaign 2004,” *Pew Research Center*, March 6, 2005, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2005/03/06/the-internet-and-campaign-2004/>; Aaron Smith, “The Internet and the 2008 election,” *Pew Internet & American Life Project*, June 15, 2008, [http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media//Files/Reports/2008/PIP\\_2008\\_election.pdf.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media//Files/Reports/2008/PIP_2008_election.pdf.pdf).

source of campaign news and information.<sup>15</sup> Online traffic has been facilitated partly by the recent emergence of social media under the interactive Web 2.0, where any participant can be a content creator, rather than the content consumer in Web 1.0.<sup>16</sup> Web 2.0 allows any online participant to be an active voice of authority and broadcast his or her opinion and information to an online community, which is open for others to participate in, develop, and challenge.<sup>17</sup>

Social media and its highly visible environment provides presidential candidates the ideal platform to promote themselves, articulate their policy goals, and interact with voters – directly and without the filter of the mainstream media. As of February 2012, the Pew Research Center found that 80 percent of adults use the Internet and 66 percent of those online adults use social networking sites.<sup>18</sup> Social media provided candidates the facility to distribute their campaign message to a growing audience as well as a platform for two-way communication and engagement with their supporters.<sup>19</sup> Candidates today are increasingly using social media and the Internet as a vital campaign source for spreading information, raising money, and rallying voters. President Barack Obama harnessed social media in his 2008 campaign to communicate information on his background, policies, and goals.

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<sup>15</sup> Rainie et al., “The Internet and Campaign 2004.”

<sup>16</sup> Matthew James Kushin and Masahiro Yamamoto, “Did Social Media Really Matter? College Students’ Use of Online Media and Political Decision Making in the 2008 Election,” *Mass Communication and Society* 13, no. 5 (2010), 612, doi: 10.1080/15205436.2010.516863; Graham Cormode and Balachander Krishnamurthy, “Key differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0,” *First Monday* 13, no. 6 (2008), <http://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2125/1972>.

<sup>17</sup> Emily Metzgar and Albert Maruggi, “Social Media and the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election,” *Journal of New Communications Research* 4, no. 1 (2009), 146, [https://fralincm.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/socialmedia\\_08election.pdf](https://fralincm.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/socialmedia_08election.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Lee Rainie and Aaron Smith, “Social networking sites and politics,” *Pew Research Center*, March 12, 2012, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2012/03/12/social-networking-sites-and-politics/>.

<sup>19</sup> Metzgar and Maruggi, “Social Media and the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election.”

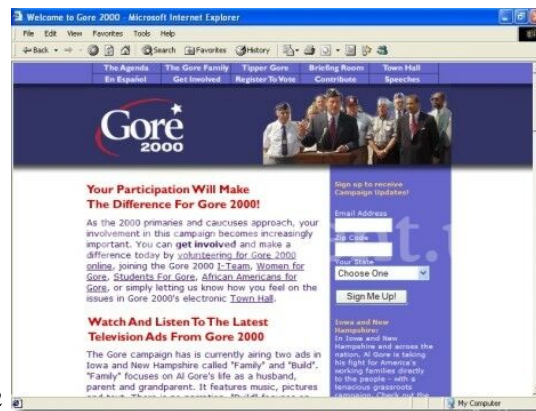
Because the audience is no longer passive in the world of social media, presidential candidates today need to embrace the democratic nature of the new medium and take advantage of all the benefits social media has to offer. “Campaigns need to change with the technologies, going where the voters are going and employing the tools the voters are using,” wrote policy analyst and political journalism professor Dr. Emily Metzgar.<sup>20</sup> Whether social media will measure into offline votes and political influence is yet to be seen, presidential candidates who quickly recognize the potential of the latest technologies and use the new mediums at their disposal will nonetheless reap the most benefits of political communication.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

## THE 2008 ELECTION

The Internet first surfaced as a tool for presidential campaigning in the 2000 U.S. presidential race. Both candidates Al Gore and George W. Bush created simple websites for the 52 percent of American adults who were active online by that time:<sup>21</sup>



These campaign websites were the product of the static Web 1.0, where citizens could obtain campaign news, policy preferences, background information, and personal family photos from content posted by the candidates. At this time, the Web 1.0 technology was revolutionary because the campaign websites allowed “citizens to learn about politicians and their platforms in a direct fashion,” wrote Communications Professor Robert

<sup>21</sup> Rebecca Pineiro, “E-Electioneering: The Political and Cultural Influence of Social Media in the 2008 and 2012 Presidential Election,” *Student Pulse* 7, no. 2 (2015), <http://www.studentpulse.com/articles/990/e-electioneering-the-political-and-cultural-influence-of-social-media-in-the-2008-and-2012-presidential-elections>; Perrin and Duggan, “Americans’ Internet Access: 2000-2015.”

<sup>22</sup> “George W. Bush 2000 Web Site,” *4President.us*, accessed November 28, 2015, <http://www.4president.us/websites/2000/bush2000website.htm>.

<sup>23</sup> “Al Gore 2000 Web Site,” *4President.us*, accessed November 28, 2015, <http://www.4president.us/websites/2000/gore2000website.htm>.

Wicks.<sup>24</sup> However, these early campaign websites were merely non-interactive informational websites, where the majority of users were simply content consumers.<sup>25</sup>

The 2008 campaign denoted a major shift in presidential campaigning because of the social media tools hosted under dynamic Web 2.0, including blogging, social networking, and media sharing. With the launch of Facebook in 2004 (but open to the public in 2006), YouTube in 2005, and Twitter in 2006, social media would play a much more extensive and significant role in the 2008 presidential campaign than in previous elections.<sup>26</sup> Web 2.0 provided interactive, two-way communication, offered integration of different media, and gave all users the opportunity to be active participants and content creators.<sup>27</sup> By 2009, the U.S. Census Bureau recorded 69 percent of American households with Internet use,<sup>28</sup> and 35 percent of Americans have used the Internet to get most of their campaign news.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Web 2.0 social media allowed supporters to promote their favored candidate directly: 15 percent of Americans used the Internet at least once a week to urge their family and friends online to support a candidate, and 10 percent made an online donation.<sup>30</sup>

Realizing the growing potential of the Internet and the Web 2.0 technologies, nearly all major party candidates in the 2008 presidential race used social media as a tool

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Wicks et al., "Differences and Similarities in Use of Campaign Websites during the 2000 Presidential Election" in *The Millennium Election: Communication in the 2000 Campaign*, ed. Lynda Lee Kaid et al. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 190.

<sup>25</sup> Cormode and Krishnamurthy, "Key differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0."

<sup>26</sup> "The History and Evolution of Social Media," *Web Designer Depot*, October 7, 2009, <http://www.webdesignerdepot.com/2009/10/the-history-and-evolution-of-social-media/>; Katherine Elizabeth Leuschner, "The Use of the Internet and Social Media in U.S. Presidential Campaigns: 1992-2012," (bachelor's thesis, James Madison University: 2012), 17.

<sup>27</sup> Cormode and Krishnamurthy, "Key differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0";

<sup>28</sup> "Computer and Internet Use in the United States: October 2009," *U.S. Census Bureau*, accessed November 28, 2015, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/computer/publications/2009.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Aaron Smith, "The Internet's Role in Campaign 2008," *Pew Research Center*, April 15, 2009, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2009/04/15/the-internets-role-in-campaign-2008/>.

<sup>30</sup> Rainie and Smith, "The Internet and the 2008 election."

for campaign communications. Hillary Clinton announced her 2008 presidential in a video announcement that was posted to her campaign website.<sup>31</sup> A month after announcing his candidacy for the Democratic nomination, Barack Obama connected his campaign website with his personal Facebook profile to link posts on both pages and to expand his online presence.<sup>32</sup> John McCain routinely released his television ads on YouTube and his personal campaign website.<sup>33</sup> All the major presidential candidates used social media and the Internet as a supplemental platform to disseminate their campaign messages and expand their presence to the public. But, Web 2.0 offered the 2008 candidates the social media tools to foster engagement and political participation in their campaigns.

### ***Barack Obama 2008***

Barack Obama fully embraced the potential of social media and the interactive features of the Web 2.0 technologies to win the 2008 presidential election by nearly 200 electoral votes and 8.5 million popular votes.<sup>34</sup> Stanford Professor Jennifer Aaker wrote, “Obama’s campaign used social media and technology as an integral part of its strategy, to raise money, and, more importantly, to develop a groundswell of empowered

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<sup>31</sup> Dan Balz, “Hillary Clinton Opens Presidential Bid,” *Washington Post*, January 21, 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/20/AR2007012000426.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Rahaf Harfoush, *Yes We Did! An Inside Look at how Social Media Built the Obama Brand* (Berkeley: New Riders, 2009), 29.

<sup>33</sup> Sunil Watal et al., “Web 2.0 and Politics: The 2008 U.S. Presidential Election and an E-Politics Research Agenda,” *MIS Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2010): 670, <http://aisel.aisnet.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2929&context=misq>.

<sup>34</sup> Jennifer Aaker and Victoria Chang, “Obama and the power of social media and technology,” *European Business Review* (May-June 2010), 16, <https://faculty-gsb.stanford.edu/aaker/pages/documents/TEBRMay-June-Obama.pdf>.

volunteers who felt they could make a difference.”<sup>35</sup> Rather than using social media and the Internet to solely disseminate information about the candidate and the campaign, Obama focused on voter involvement and engagement. He worked to empower his online supporters and convert them to be the Obama representative advocates of their respective social networks.

Early on, Obama understood the importance and potential of social media as a tool for political communications and campaigning. He hired Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes to revolutionize his new media campaign and provide expertise of the various social networking platforms that resonated with the millennial generation that had always been technologically connected.<sup>36</sup> His campaign was also the first to include a New Media Department that “was responsible for everything related to the Internet beyond the technical areas,” according to Obama’s principal digital strategist Joe Rospars.<sup>37</sup> Obama’s savvy and pioneering use of the Web 2.0 technologies allowed him to reap the benefits that social media had to offer.

A direct product of the Web 2.0 technologies, Obama’s user-generated campaign website served as a crucial tool for grassroots campaigning, voter engagement, and fundraising. His campaign website, BarackObama.com, not only allowed online supporters to seek campaign information, but encouraged users to create personalized profiles on Obama’s customization page (MyBO), as can be seen in the screenshot below. Users could access campaign content to their specific interests, find upcoming events, volunteer with neighborhood campaign offices, and donate to the campaign. MyBO

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Brian Stelter, “The Facebooker Who Friendened Obama,” *New York Times*, July 7, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/07/technology/07hughes.html?pagewanted=all& r=0>.

<sup>37</sup> Aaker and Chang, “Obama and the power of social media and technology.”

attracted two million registered profiles, of which volunteers and supporters planned over 200,000 offline events and generated \$30 million on 70,000 personal fundraising pages.<sup>38</sup>



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Obama used his social network to not only communicate, organize, and fundraise, but more importantly, to leverage his online supporters in a genuine bottom-up grassroots movement that encouraged others to play a more active role in electing Obama as president.

Besides his campaign website, Obama was very active in his social media platforms, garnering 5 million supporters on his major social networks. By November 2008, Obama had nearly 2.4 million supporters, compared to McCain's 640,000.<sup>40</sup> On Twitter, Obama had over 11,000 followers and McCain had less than 5,000.<sup>41</sup> Obama posted twice as many videos to his official YouTube channel and had an online presence in thirteen lesser known social media platforms while McCain was present in only four of

<sup>38</sup> Aaker and Chang, "Obama and the power of social media and technology," 16.

<sup>39</sup> "Barack Obama 2008 Website," *4President.us*, accessed November 28, 2015, <http://www.4president.us/websites/2008/barackobama2008website.htm>.

<sup>40</sup> Jeremiah Owyang, "Snapshot of Presidential Candidate Social Networking Stats: Nov 3, 2008," *Web Strategist Blog*, November 3, 2008, <http://www.web-strategist.com/blog/2008/11/03/snapshot-of-presidential-candidate-social-networking-stats-nov-2-2008/>.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*; Olivier Blanchard, "Obama vs. McCain: How Social Media started to change the game in '08," *The Brand Builder Blog*, November 7, 2008, <https://thebrandbuilder.wordpress.com/2008/11/07/obama-vs-mccain-the-social-media-scorecard/>.



those.<sup>42</sup> “Social networks external to campaigns are good places to reach supporters where they already conduct a portion of their social lives,” wrote *Wired* journalist Sarah Lai Stirland.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, the Obama campaign understood that it needed a variety of social media platforms to target different demographics with diverse interests. By creating a presence on multiple social media platforms and websites, Obama was able to communicate his message to a growing online audience and mobilize, sway, and engage those individuals for his campaign.

Prior to announcing his candidacy, Obama realized the potential of social networking’s communication capabilities and colossal database, of which he could harness to his political advantage.<sup>44</sup> When his supporters subscribed to his campaign website, MyBO social network, email database, and social media websites, Obama’s campaign was accumulating a database of names and contact information to organize and mobilize support for a strong political base.<sup>45</sup> “All of the Obama supporters who traded their personal information for a ticket to a rally or an e-mail alert about the vice presidential choice, or opted in on Facebook or MyBarackObama [could] now be mass e-mailed at a cost of close to zero,” remarked New York Times journalist David Carr.<sup>46</sup> In accumulating a sophisticated database of supporters and their political leanings through

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<sup>42</sup> “McCain vs. Obama on the Web,” *Pew Research Center*, September 15, 2008, <http://www.journalism.org/2008/09/15/mccain-vs-obama-on-the-web/>.

<sup>43</sup> Sarah Lai Stirland, “The Obama Campaign: A Great Campaign, or the Greatest?” *Wired*, November 30, 2008, <http://www.wired.com/2008/11/the-obama-campa/>.

<sup>44</sup> David Carr, “How Obama Tapped Into Social Networks’ Power,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/10/business/media/10carr.html>.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

the Web 2.0 social media, the Obama team executed successful and well-organized get-out-the-vote and volunteer campaigns.<sup>47</sup>

More so than enlisting in social media, Obama knew how to use the medium to market his brand and garner a positive response to translate that to offline support. Obama “was illustrated as a hip and dynamic force... [and] depicted as an amiable and relatable figure that the country sought at the time,” wrote Rebecca Pineiro for the academic journal *Student Pulse*.<sup>48</sup> He regularly shared intimate photos of his family, and YouTube clips of his campaign ads and rallies. His Facebook page highlighted Obama his favorite activities, such as playing basketball and watching SportsCenter. In contrast, John McCain appeared very dull and less in touch with the digital constituency – in the summer of 2008, his Facebook page listed his favorite pastimes as fishing and reading *Letters from Iwo Jima*.<sup>49</sup> Young party members interviewed at the Personal Democracy Forum (a conference concerning the Internet’s role in politics), suggested that McCain’s mediocre presence on the major social media sites made him “look out of touch with that demographic, particularly when compared [to] Obama.”<sup>50</sup> Because the Republican Party brands themselves with traditional values, there is still a widespread perception that McCain and the Republicans are out of step with the current digital age. At the Personal Democracy Forum, McCain’s deputy e-campaign manager Mark SooHoo acknowledged Obama’s online success, but explained that McCain did not need to use the same Web 2.0

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<sup>47</sup> Stirland, “Obama’s Secret Weapons: Internet, Databases and Psychology.”

<sup>48</sup> Pineiro, “E-Electioneering: The Political and Cultural Influence of Social Media in the 2008 and 2012 Presidential Elections.”

<sup>49</sup> Soumitra Dutta and Matthew Fraser, "Barack Obama and the Facebook Election," *US News*, November 19, 2008, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2008/11/19/barack-obama-and-the-facebook-election>.

<sup>50</sup> Catherine Holahan, "John McCain is Way Behind Online," *Bloomberg*, June 27, 2008, <http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/stories/2008-06-27/john-mccain-is-way-behind-onlinebusinessweek-business-news-stock-market-and-financial-advice>.

and social media technologies because the Republican voters were of a different, less-digitally interested audience, reported Mark Walsh of The Media Post.<sup>51</sup> Obama had a much more progressive and modern attitude to using social media and harnessed the technologies available to him during his 2008 campaign.

Obama not only engaged in the recent social media platforms and technologies, he also created a lot of original campaign content to upload to his digital portfolio. Rather than simply posting television ads and content that were already being played in the traditional broadcast media news cycle, Obama gave his supporters reason to visit his YouTube channel and social media platforms, discovered Jon Hickey in his study of YouTube's influence in the 2008 presidential election.<sup>52</sup> Hickey suggests that Obama's original and fresh campaign content resulted in Obama overshadowing his opponents in the number of views on YouTube.<sup>53</sup> By Election Day 2008, all YouTube videos mentioning Obama received a total of 1.9 billion views, compared to McCain's 1.1 billion views – or the equivalent of 14.5 million hours on Obama's YouTube channel versus 488,152 hours on McCain's.<sup>54</sup> According to an analysis by the TechPresident blog, the same amount of airtime on television would have cost the Obama camp roughly \$47 million and the McCain camp \$1.5 million.<sup>55</sup> Advertising through YouTube and other social media platforms revolutionized presidential campaigning and soon became the cheaper and more effective alternative to traditional broadcast and print advertising.

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<sup>51</sup> Mark Walsh, "McCain Camp Downplays E-Factor in Face of Obama's Online Onslaught," *The Media Post*, June 24, 2008, <http://www.mediapost.com/publications/article/85351/mccain-camp-downplays-e-factor-in-face-of-obamas.html>.

<sup>52</sup> "The YouTube Election 2008," *Center for Communication and Civic Engagement*, accessed November 28, 2015, <http://ccce.com.washington.edu/projects/youtubeElection2008.html>.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Jessica Ramirez, "The YouTube Election," *Newsweek*, November 9, 2008, <http://www.newsweek.com/youtube-election-85069>.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

Web 2.0 social media offered presidential candidates a variety of ways to engage their online supporters in campaign fundraising efforts. Ravi Singh of ElectionMall.com, a nonpartisan software firm that helps candidates raise money online, remarked, “This is the first year – with Web 2.0 – that candidates gave the tools to the voters allowing them to help raise money.”<sup>56</sup> Rather than asking supporters to visit his campaign website to donate money, Obama incorporated donation links to the social media platforms where his supporters already spent their time. For example, his YouTube channel designated a section next to the video player for donations up to \$1,000. Or, if an undecided or apathetic voter clicks on the Obama picture next to a pro-Obama friend’s Facebook profile, he or she will be directed to Facebook donation site for the Obama campaign.<sup>57</sup> In addition to the standard online fundraising tools, such as a prominently featured “Donate” button or link on a social media profile, the Obama campaign employed more interactive and engaging Web 2.0 features to encourage donor participation.<sup>58</sup> For example, “users could establish their own fundraising page or affinity group on MyBO to encourage their friends or contacts to make a donation and then watch their personalized ‘fundraising thermometers’ climb as individuals gave in response to their requests,” wrote Brookings political finance expert Anthony Corrado.<sup>59</sup> Online supporters were also asked to donate any amount, of which the Obama campaign would find a matching donor

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<sup>56</sup> Richard Barron, “Masters of the Internet: How Barack Obama Harnessed New Tools and Old Lessons to Connect, Communicate and Campaign his Way to the White House,” *University of North Carolina* (2008), <http://web.cs.swarthmore.edu/~turnbull/cs91/f09/paper/barron08.pdf>.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Anthony Corrado, “Financing the 2008 Presidential General Election,” in *Financing the 2008 Election: Assessing Reform*, eds. Anthony Corrado and David B. Magleby, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 134.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 135.

to give the same amount.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, Obama's fundraising strategy focused on making emotional connections with supporters to foster relationships: Obama showcased the 75,000<sup>th</sup> donor on his blog, by email, and on the website.<sup>61</sup> Using these Web 2.0 social media innovations and his fundraising strategy based on emotional appeals, Obama not only inspired his supporters to donate, but also encouraged donors to play a more active role in his campaign's fundraising efforts.

Obama revolutionized presidential campaigning by demonstrating the power of social media and technology to inspire individuals to be the driving and offline grassroots force behind a campaign. Political consultant Joe Trippi lauded Obama's social media strategy "to organize his supporters in a way that would have in the past required an army of volunteers and paid organizers on the ground."<sup>62</sup> In taking a risk with the Web 2.0 social media, Obama effectively harnessed the medium to create a sense of emotional connection and engagement with his supporters. This motivated the supporters to mobilize into local grassroots communities, participate in the online political discussion, and fundraise on his behalf.

### ***The 2008 Benefits of Social Media***

The 2008 presidential candidates quickly realized that social media could function as "a highly relevant and cost-effective campaign tool when properly employed," wrote Dr. Emily Metzgar for the Society for New Communications Research.<sup>63</sup> YouTube, for

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.; Aaker and Chang, "Obama and the power of social media and technology," 18.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Claire Cain Miller, "How Obama's Internet Campaign Changed Politics," *New York Times*, November 7, 2008, [http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/11/07/how-obamas-internet-campaign-changed-politics/?\\_r=0](http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/11/07/how-obamas-internet-campaign-changed-politics/?_r=0).

<sup>63</sup> Metzgar and Maruggi, "Social Media and the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election."

example, played a critical role in the 2008 campaign, where “7 out of 16 candidates actually announced their candidacy on YouTube,” said Steve Grove, YouTube’s head of news and politics.<sup>64</sup> According to the Pew Research Center, 39 percent of voters had watched some sort of campaign-related video online by late October 2008, up from 24 percent before the primaries began in December.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, YouTube logged about 200 million total views of official campaign videos,<sup>66</sup> where to purchase that kind of publicity on broadcast airtime would have cost a campaign millions of dollars. Another benefit of social media and the Internet is the digital permanence of the content. Online viewers can continue to watch and share YouTube videos long after the video’s release, providing lasting coverage and multiple opportunities to circulate online, in contrast to broadcast media’s typical 24-hour news cycle. As more Americans began to embrace YouTube, the 2008 presidential candidates quickly understood the potential of the social media platform to reach a growing digital audience in a cost-effective way.

Obama took advantage of YouTube’s free platform for advertising and communicated campaign messages to the growing online constituency. Political consultant Joe Trippi explained that the Obama campaign’s official content for YouTube was watched for 14.5 million hours, which would have conventionally taxed the campaign \$47 million.<sup>67</sup> Instead, his campaign only paid a single initial recording cost to create his official campaign videos and upload them onto the Internet for free. Similarly,

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<sup>64</sup> Nikki Schwab, “In Obama-McCain Race, YouTube Became a Serious Battleground for Presidential Politics,” *U.S. News*, November 7, 2008, <http://www.usnews.com/news/campaign-2008/articles/2008/11/07/in-obama-mccain-race-youtube-became-a-serious-battleground-for-presidential-politics>.

<sup>65</sup> “Internet’s Broader Role in Campaign 2008,” *Pew Research Center*, January 11, 2008, <http://www.people-press.org/2008/01/11/internets-broader-role-in-campaign-2008/>.

<sup>66</sup> Schwab, “In Obama-McCain Race, YouTube Became a Serious Battleground for Presidential Politics.”

<sup>67</sup> Miller, “How Obama’s Internet Campaign Changed Politics.”

Julie Germany from George Washington University's Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet noted how YouTube helped the McCain campaign promote their message and advertisements without jeopardizing their smaller budget (relative to Obama's) on television.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, by uploading their campaign content on YouTube, Obama and McCain opened up their digital coverage to millions of viewers who were encouraged to share the video to their social networks, incidentally expanding the candidates' reach and coverage. Trippi argued that the YouTube videos are more effective than television ads because viewers either chose to watch them or they were passed from friends who had posted the campaign videos on their social media platforms.<sup>69</sup>

Not only was YouTube a social media platform for the presidential candidates to upload their official campaign videos, but it also allowed fervent supporters to create independent and unauthorized content expressing their views. For example, a McCain-supporting Iraq War vet created the most popular election-related video on YouTube titled "Dear Mr. Obama," receiving a little over 14 million views.<sup>70</sup> Two videos unassociated with the Obama campaign, "I Got a Crush... On Obama" and "Yes We Can" featuring musician Will.i.am, reached 11.6 and 13 million views respectively.<sup>71</sup> Although the actual influence of these videos on the outcome of the election is unknown, Dr. Metzgar argues that curtailing such "unauthorized" and independently-created

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<sup>68</sup> Rajini Vaidyanathan, "Top hits of the YouTube election," *BBC News*, October 30, 2008, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/us\\_elections\\_2008/7699509.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/us_elections_2008/7699509.stm).

<sup>69</sup> Miller, "How Obama's Internet Campaign Changed Politics."

<sup>70</sup> Schwab, "In Obama-McCain Race, YouTube Became a Serious Battleground for Presidential Politics."

<sup>71</sup> Metzgar and Maruggi, "Social Media and the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election."

content would “cost [a] campaign the benefits of viral media.”<sup>72</sup> Andrew Rasiej co-founder of the TechPresident blog wrote, “The power to control the message is no longer in the hands of the political parties and candidates or the mainstream media. It is now shared by the public at large.”<sup>73</sup> These videos saved both camps millions of dollars that would have been spent on broadcast television, but more importantly, these user-created videos and their millions of views manifested Obama’s “desire for more engagement by the American public... without any influence from the mainstream media and the political parties,” added Rasiej.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Vaidyanathan, “Top hits of the YouTube election.”

<sup>74</sup> Schwab, “In Obama-McCain Race, YouTube Became a Serious Battleground for Presidential Politics.”



## THE 2012 ELECTION

“By 2012, [social media] was an expected part of the election process for campaigns to... use their online presence as a way to influence voters and traditional news coverage,” wrote Sean Foreman for the *Encyclopedia of Social Media and Politics*.<sup>75</sup> Obama’s successful 2008 digital campaign strategy proved that social media would continue to play a huge role in the 2012 election. Susan Molinari, Google’s Vice President for Public Policy, dubbed the 2012 presidential race as the “first real digital election” for the public’s heavy use of social media and the new Web 2.0 technologies to discuss the election.<sup>76</sup> According to the Pew Research Center, 79 percent of American adults used the Internet by 2012.<sup>77</sup> And more convincingly, 69 percent of adults reported using social media to do something related to the 2012 campaign, compared to 37% who used social media in the 2008 campaign.<sup>78</sup> With more Americans actively engaging in social media platforms, the 2012 presidential candidates also embraced the Internet and social media to roll out their campaign strategies. President Barack Obama kicked off his

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<sup>75</sup> Sean Foreman, “Campaigns, 2012,” in *Encyclopedia of Social Media and Politics*, ed. Kerric Harvey, 209, [https://books.google.com/books?id=qS91AwAAQBAJ&pg=PA212&lpg=PA212&dq=romney+facebook+followers+2011&source=bl&ots=WEDks91HD3&sig=tTRabKsVUk0ls-OoidrStMOaTHk&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi\\_opG52rbJAhUFKogKHdFvDL4Q6AEIVDAI#v=onepage&q=romney%20facebook%20followers%202011&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=qS91AwAAQBAJ&pg=PA212&lpg=PA212&dq=romney+facebook+followers+2011&source=bl&ots=WEDks91HD3&sig=tTRabKsVUk0ls-OoidrStMOaTHk&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi_opG52rbJAhUFKogKHdFvDL4Q6AEIVDAI#v=onepage&q=romney%20facebook%20followers%202011&f=false).

<sup>76</sup> Kevin Liptak, “Digital Experts: Social Media and Dual Screens the Future of Online Campaigning,” *CNN*, September 5, 2012, <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2012/12/05/digital-experts-social-media-and-dual-screens-the-future-of-online-campaigning/>.

<sup>77</sup> Keith Hampton et al., “Social networking sites and our lives,” *Pew Research Center*, June 16, 2011, <http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media/Files/Reports/2011/PIP%20-%20Social%20networking%20sites%20and%20our%20lives.pdf>.

<sup>78</sup> “How Social and Traditional Media Differ in Treatment of the Conventions and Beyond,” *Pew Research Center*, September 26, 2012, <http://www.journalism.org/2012/09/26/how-social-and-traditional-media-differ-their-treatment-conventions-and-beyo/>; Lee Rainie, “Social Media and Voting,” *Pew Research Center*, November 6, 2012, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2012/11/06/social-media-and-voting/>.

reelection bid with an online video emailed to his 2008 database of 13 million supporters.<sup>79</sup> Republican Tim Pawlenty initially announced his 2012 candidacy for the Republican nomination with a video posted exclusively on his Facebook page.<sup>80</sup> In order to win over the modernizing constituency, the 2012 presidential candidates needed to implement an effective social media strategy and presence. Romney's online director Zac Moffatt sums up the 2012 attitude on social networking for presidential campaigning: "You have to take your message to the places where people are consuming content and spending their time. We have to recognize that people have choices and you have to reach them where they are, and on their terms."<sup>81</sup>

Social networking itself has popularized to include a greater number of American adults using at least one social networking site. In 2008, 34 percent of Internet users regularly accessed a social networking site, such as Facebook or Twitter;<sup>82</sup> by 2012, 69% had a social media account.<sup>83</sup> Additionally, the population of social networking sites was getting older: in 2008, only 27 percent of American adults aged 30-49 had a social networking site, where in 2012, 67 percent did.<sup>84</sup> A relatively nascent company that opened its domain to the public in 2006, Facebook started with an audience of 145 million members that jumped to 1.56 billion in 2012.<sup>85</sup> The growth of social media users,

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<sup>79</sup> Beth Fouhy, "Elections 2012: The Social Network, Presidential Campaign Edition," *Huffington Post*, April 17, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/17/elections-2012-social-media\\_n\\_850172.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/17/elections-2012-social-media_n_850172.html).

<sup>80</sup> Jackie Kucinich, "GOP's Tim Pawlenty exploring 2012 presidential run," *USA Today*, March 22, 2011, [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/politics/2011-03-22-pawlenty22\\_ST\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/politics/2011-03-22-pawlenty22_ST_N.htm).

<sup>81</sup> Fouhy, "Elections 2012: The Social Network, Presidential Campaign Edition."

<sup>82</sup> Andrew Perrin, "Social Media Usage: 2005-2015," *Pew Research Center*, October 8, 2015, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/10/08/social-networking-usage-2005-2015/>.

<sup>83</sup> Lee Rainie et al., "Social Media and Political Engagement," *Pew Research Center*, October 19, 2012, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2012/10/19/social-media-and-political-engagement/>.

<sup>84</sup> Andrew Perrin, "Social Media Usage: 2005-2015."

<sup>85</sup> Ami Sedghi, "Facebook: 10 years of social networking, in numbers," *The Guardian*, February 4, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2014/feb/04/facebook-in-numbers-statistics>.

together with the rise in using these social media sites as platforms for political communication, solidified the necessity for social media in the 2012 electoral race.

New social media platforms and Web 2.0 technologies have emerged onto the digital landscape that were not available in the previous campaign, providing campaign teams another online arena and opportunity to engage their supporters. In 2008, social media were capped or limited, for the most part, to the three major platforms: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube; and these technologies were in their relative infancy. By 2012, Obama, for instance, added Google+, Instagram, Reddit AMA, FourSquare, Instagram, Tumblr, Pinterest, and his Obama for America mobile app to his social media toolbox. Romney's Spotify playlist showed that he liked Johnny Cash, his Flickr and Instagram showed personal photos of Romney and his family on the campaign trail, and his wife Ann even showcased her favorite crafts projects and books on Romney's Pinterest board.<sup>86</sup> Romney's digital director Moffatt explained the reasoning behind presidential candidates signing up for as many social media platforms as possible: "The more people who interact with Mitt, the more likely he is to win. Social [media] extends and amplifies that."<sup>87</sup> The 2012 GOP Autopsy Report expressed a similar sentiment: "Technology is second nature to young voters. Using social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and Instagram is important, but we also need to be actively looking for and utilizing the newest and most cutting-edge social media platforms to engage this

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<sup>86</sup> Jenna Wortham, "Campaigns Use Social Media to Lure Younger Voters," *New York Times*, October 7, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/08/technology/campaigns-use-social-media-to-lure-younger-voters.html>.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

generation.”<sup>88</sup> Although the return on these excessive social media efforts, particularly participation in the less mainstream sites or the seemingly trivial online updates, is not easily quantifiable, the major presidential candidates of 2012 were not willing to risk any chances in gaining an advantage over the online audience.

### ***How Obama Leveraged Social Media and Technology to Win***

The 2012 presidential candidates have adopted the most successful digital tools from 2008, as well as implementing more refined and sophisticated uses of social media to their campaign strategies. President Barack Obama had a sizable incumbent advantage, including a strong and active supporter database from his 2008 campaign. He was also already established on many of the social media platforms. Prior to the primary and caucus season in late 2011, Obama had nearly 20 million followers on his Facebook page, compared to Romney’s 1.15 million and Newt Gingrich’s 1.3 million.<sup>89</sup> The strong advantage meant that the Republican challengers would be playing a game of catch-up in the 2016 digital campaign landscape.

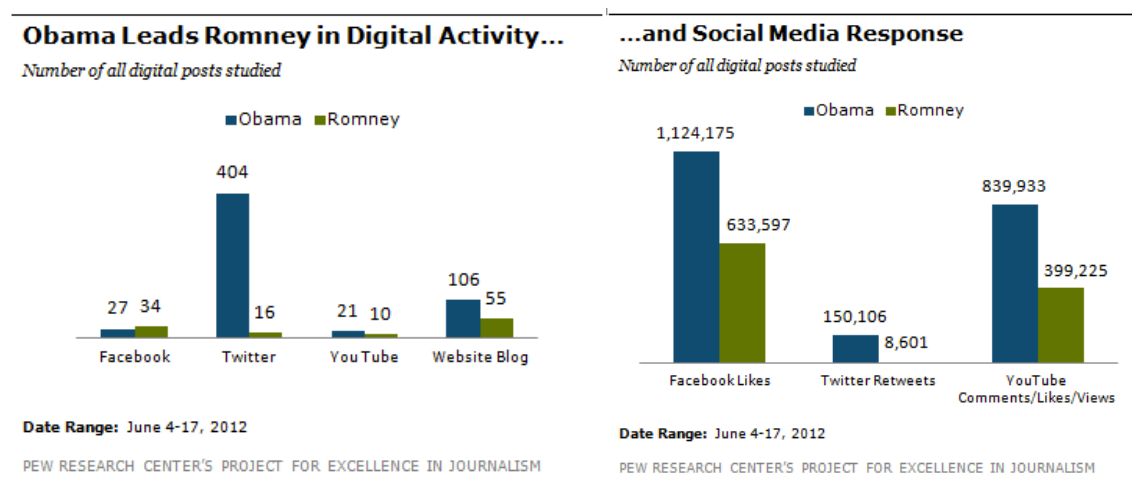
Understanding the importance of technology and social networks, Obama continued pursuing an active presence on his social media platforms, overshadowing Romney in number of followers and level of engagement: Obama had more than 20 million Twitter followers, compared to Romney’s 1.2 million; Obama had 1.4 million Instagram followers, while Romney had 38,000; Obama’s YouTube channel had more than 290,000 subscribers and more than 288 million video views, compared to Romney’s

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<sup>88</sup> “Growth and Opportunity Project,” *Republican National Committee* (2012), 22, [http://goproject.gop.com/rnc\\_growth\\_opportunity\\_book\\_2013.pdf](http://goproject.gop.com/rnc_growth_opportunity_book_2013.pdf).

<sup>89</sup> Pineiro, “E-Electioneering: The Political and Cultural Influence of Social Media in the 2008 and 2012 Presidential Elections”; Sean Foreman, “Campaigns, 2012,” 212.

29,000 followers and 33.6 million views.<sup>90</sup> CNN’s Peter Hamby also noted how the Obama campaign adopted a much more active and engaged presence on Twitter, while “Romney’s senior staff largely avoided Twitter to weigh in on the issues of the day and engage with their rivals [and followers].”<sup>91</sup> Hamby’s observation of Romney’s limited Twitter activity can be seen in the Pew Research Center’s graphs below:<sup>92</sup>



Across the platforms, Obama posted nearly four times as much content as Romney and was active on nearly twice as many platforms. Additionally, Obama’s content engendered nearly twice the response from the public in number of shares, views, and comments. Although the 2012 presidential candidates increased their digital activity, the candidates disregarded the *social* aspect of social media. Rather than using Web 2.0 social media’s interactive features to engage in a new level of dialogue with their voters, the presidential candidates used their online platforms mainly to communicate their messages.<sup>93</sup> Rarely

<sup>90</sup> Foreman, “Campaigns, 2012,” 210.

<sup>91</sup> Peter Hamby, “Did Twitter Kill the Boys on the Bus?” *Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy* (2013), 81.

<sup>92</sup> “How the Presidential Candidates Use the Web and Social Media,” *Pew Research Center*, August 15, 2012, <http://www.journalism.org/2012/08/15/how-presidential-candidates-use-web-and-social-media/>.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

did either candidate reply to, comment on, or retweet a post from an online citizen.<sup>94</sup> On Twitter, only 3 percent of Obama's 404 June campaign tweets were retweets from citizen supporters, compared to Romney's single retweet, which was his son's.<sup>95</sup>

To continue pioneering the newest and cutting-edge technology and maintain his digital superiority, Obama brought on a talented team to carry out his reelection campaign, creating different yet integrated departments of tech, digital, analytics, and field organizing. For his 2012 campaign, Obama hired Harper Reed as his Chief Technological Officer, who assembled an incredibly experienced team of Silicon Valley engineers to develop software that would make it simpler and easier for the public to engage in Obama's reelection campaign.<sup>96</sup> These developers worked closely with field organizers and volunteer leaders to create Dashboard, the Call Tool, the Facebook Blaster, the PeopleMatcher, and Narwhal – the Obama 2012 campaign tools that eventually turned out more volunteers and donors than his 2008 campaign.<sup>97</sup> Obama's former chief technology officer Michael Slaby said, "The real innovation in 2012 is that [the Obama campaign] had world-class technologists inside a campaign," who brought different perspectives, personalities, and expectations to the campaign.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Alexis Madrigal, "When the Nerds Go Marching In," *The Atlantic*, November 16, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/11/when-the-nerds-go-marching-in/265325/>.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

In their 2012 GOP Autopsy Report, the Republican leadership acknowledged the GOP's technological weaknesses in the 2012 campaign and proposed a strategy to solve their problem for future elections:

The 'digital divide' exist[s] between the GOP and the Democrats as a result of the Obama campaign's significant commitment to building an in-house tech and digital team and sharing data resources across multiple entities in the campaign. From social network processing to more effective targeting for voter contact, the Obama campaign benefited greatly from a relatively seamless integration of digital, tech, and data in their campaign efforts ...We need to define our mission by setting specific political goals and then allowing data, digital, and tech talent to unleash the tools of technology and work toward achieving those goals.<sup>99</sup>

The Atlantic's Patrick Ruffini agreed, stating that the GOP will never catch up to the Democratic Party's perceived tech advantage until the Republican Party "recruit[s] a new generation of technical and data talents to remake the culture of Republican campaigns."<sup>100</sup>

Although Mitt Romney attempted to pursue a more tech-centric campaign, his efforts to close the digital gap faltered by Election Day. For example, the Romney campaign introduced Orca, a "state of the art" software system that provided a real-time analysis of voter turnout and activity, allowing the campaign to allocate resources and organize field volunteers to mobilize voters in critical swing state precincts.<sup>101</sup> Orca was touted as the Republican counter to Narwhal, Obama's high-tech voter-targeting system. Unfortunately, Orca crashed on Election Day, failing the Romney campaign when the get-out-the-vote software was needed most, leaving "30,000 of the most active and fired-

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<sup>99</sup> "Growth and Opportunity Project," 30,

[http://goproject.gop.com/rnc\\_growth\\_opportunity\\_book\\_2013.pdf](http://goproject.gop.com/rnc_growth_opportunity_book_2013.pdf).

<sup>100</sup> Ruffini, "The GOP Talent Gap," *The Atlantic*, November 16, 2012,

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/11/the-gop-talent-gap/265333/>.

<sup>101</sup> Farber, "Why Romney's Orca killer app beached on Election Day;" John Hinderaker, "Project Orca," *Power Line Blog*, November 5, 2012, <http://www.powerlineblog.com/archives/2012/11/project-orca.php>.

up volunteers wandering around confused and frustrated,” reported John Ekdahl, one of the poll watchers in Florida who used Orca.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, Romney seemed to always be a little behind Obama when experimenting with new technological innovations: he announced his partnership with Square, a mobile payments start-up company, one day after Obama had.<sup>103</sup> Romney also finally launched his “victory wallet” page on his campaign website three months after Obama posted his version of “quick donate.”<sup>104</sup> Sasha Issenberg, author of *The Victory Lab: The Secret Science of Winning Campaigns*, argued, “Romney generally failed to [pioneer or] keep up with the cutting edge [technology]. It’s not in the culture of Republicans, and they are suffering for [their digital deficit].”<sup>105</sup>

### ***The 2012 Benefits of Social Media***

The rise in smartphones transformed the digital landscape of the 2012 presidential campaign towards an emphasis on mobile-based social media and technologies. According to the Pew Research Center, 46 percent of all American adults were smartphone owners by February 2012;<sup>106</sup> or in other words, one in two mobile phone users had a smartphone. Furthermore, smartphone owners were increasingly using their

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<sup>102</sup> “Did Romney campaign’s Project Orca sink GOP turnout? Users claim an ‘epic fiasco,’” *Twitchy*, November 8, 2012, <http://twitchy.com/2012/11/08/did-romney-campaigns-project-orca-sink-gop-turnout-users-claim-an-epic-fiasco/>.

<sup>103</sup> Nick Bilton, “Obama and Romney Campaigns Adopt Square for Funding,” *New York Times*, January 30, 2012, <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/30/obama-and-romney-campaigns-adopt-square-for-funding/>.

<sup>104</sup> Daniel Politi, “Did Romney Campaign Copy From Obama Website?” *Slate*, September 10, 2012, [http://www.slate.com/blogs/the\\_slatest/2012/09/10/romney\\_website\\_copy\\_of\\_obama\\_donation\\_victory\\_wallet\\_quick\\_donate\\_page.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2012/09/10/romney_website_copy_of_obama_donation_victory_wallet_quick_donate_page.html).

<sup>105</sup> Farber, “Why Romney’s Orca killer app beached on Election Day.”

<sup>106</sup> Aaron Smith and Maeve Duggan, “The State of the 2012 Election – Mobile Politics,” *Pew Research Center*, October 9, 2012, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2012/10/09/the-state-of-the-2012-election-mobile-politics/>.



mobile devices as a tool for political participation: 45 percent have used their smartphone to read other people's comments about the 2012 presidential candidates or campaign; 35 percent have used their smartphone to research or fact-check something they heard; and 18 percent have used their smartphone to post their own opinions on their social media platforms.<sup>107</sup>

Because more American were increasingly owning smartphones and using these devices to stay politically informed or participate in the campaign, the 2012 presidential candidates revamped their digital strategies to engage voters through their mobile devices. For example, Obama was the first to accept campaign donations via text messages.<sup>108</sup> Romney was the only candidate in the 2012 primaries with a mobile-specific campaign site.<sup>109</sup> In addition, both candidates launched mobile apps dedicated to their campaigns: Obama's Obama for America and Romney's With Mitt, Mitt's VP, Romney-Ryan, and Mitt Events.<sup>110</sup> These mobile campaign apps allowed supporters to quickly find information regarding the campaign and locate like-minded users and voting centers in their area based on the geo-locations tagged from their cell phones.

Mobile apps were effective in not only disseminating campaign messages to online supporters, but also equipped field organizers and campaign teams with valuable voter information and data. For example, the Obama campaign volunteers used the Obama for America app to prepare for possible constituent concerns that might arise while canvassing, wrote Cormac Reynolds for the digital marketing *MySocialAgency*

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Matt Petronzio, "The Rise of Mobile in Election 2012," *Mashable*, October 2, 2012, [http://mashable.com/2012/10/02/mobile-election-2012/#D\\_vnx1HFq5qP](http://mashable.com/2012/10/02/mobile-election-2012/#D_vnx1HFq5qP).

<sup>109</sup> Jen Christensen, "In 2012, campaigns target voters through their phones," *CNN*, May 24, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/05/24/tech/mobile/campaign-text-ads/>.

<sup>110</sup> Petronzio, "The Rise of Mobile in Election 2012."

blog.<sup>111</sup> Additionally, the app's geolocation features allowed field organizers to locate sympathetic supporters or pay special attention to undecided voters. When Facebook launched its mobile app, TIME reporter Michael Scherer noted that the one million Obama supporters who downloaded Facebook's mobile app essentially gave permission for their personal information and Facebook friend lists to be accessed by the Obama campaign.<sup>112</sup> Through this access, the Obama campaign found the missing phone numbers of half of their campaign's targeted swing-state voters under age 29 to add to their database.<sup>113</sup>

The 2012 presidential candidates also used mobile apps for targeted sharing, described by Scherer as the effort when "the team blitzed the supporters who signed up for the app with requests to share specific online content with specific friends."<sup>114</sup> This practice allowed a campaign to target a specific group of online users, but more important, the campaign messages came directly from their own friends, as opposed to a third-party agency. In the 2012 election, 30 percent of online users were urged to vote via social media requests from family, friends, or other social network connections.<sup>115</sup> Scherer reports that more than 600,000 Obama supporters followed through with the targeted sharing requests, and these 600,000 supporters reached more than 5 million of their friends with requests to register to vote, give money, or look at videos and

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<sup>111</sup> Cormac Reynolds, "Obama and Social Media - 4 Years of Progress," *My Social Agency*, November 15, 2012, accessed September 17, 2015, <http://www.mysocialagency.com/obama-social-media-campaign-then-and-now/3759/>.

<sup>112</sup> Michael Scherer, "Friended: How the Obama Campaign Connected with Young Voters," *TIME*, November 20, 2012, <http://swampland.time.com/2012/11/20/friended-how-the-obama-campaign-connected-with-young-voters/>.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Smith and Duggan, "The State of the 2012 Election – Mobile Politics."

infographics to change their mind.<sup>116</sup> Targeted sharing mirrors the persuasive and effective direct appeals of door-knockers and personalized phone calls, as opposed to robo-calls and mailers. Through one person's social media account, a campaign can now connect to 500 friends and more.

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<sup>116</sup> Scherer, "Friended: How the Obama Campaign Connected with Young Voters."

## THE 2016 ELECTION

More than a dozen Republicans and a handful of Democrats have announced their bids for presidency since the start of the 2016 presidential electoral cycle. Learning from Obama's successful digital campaigns, the 2016 presidential hopefuls are all employing social media to engage the increasingly wired American constituency. Regardless of whether the level of social media engagement will actually influence the outcome, participating in the available technology will expand their reach while maximizing control of their campaign message.

Voters are increasingly relying on social media for political and campaign news: 63 percent of users currently use Facebook to stay informed, compared with 47 percent back just two years ago, according to a recent Pew Research Center study.<sup>117</sup> Because most social media users use their social media platforms as a source for political news, digital media and communications are becoming that much more crucial for campaigns to master.

As the source of political news and public viewership shifts from traditional print and broadcast media to digital media, campaign teams are now directing more of their media budget to target advertising on social media platforms. Research firm Borrell and Associates anticipates that roughly one billion dollars will be spent on digital media,

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<sup>117</sup> Michael Barthel et al., "The Evolving Role of News on Twitter and Facebook," *Pew Research Center*, July 14, 2015, <http://www.journalism.org/2015/07/14/the-evolving-role-of-news-on-twitter-and-facebook/>.

compared with a “measly \$22.25 million” spent in 2008.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, more than half of that one billion dollar budget will be dedicated to social media sites.<sup>119</sup>

The digital announcements of the 2016 presidential candidates illustrate the considerable influence social media will have on the current electoral cycle. Ben Carson launched a social media campaign on Facebook prior to his formal announcement, letting his online followers know the details of his live announcement: “I wanted to pass along some good news regarding my announcement Monday morning in Detroit. The event will be broadcast on my website,” Carson wrote on Facebook.<sup>120</sup> In more obvious cases, the candidates have even used social media to announce their presidential bids. U.S. Senator Ted Cruz, the first major presidential candidate to officially announce a presidential campaign in 2016, announced his bid on Twitter, tweeting a video accompanied with the caption: “I’m running for President and I hope to earn your support!”<sup>121</sup> Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton officially launched her campaign for president with a two-minute video shared on YouTube and on her campaign website, with a following Twitter announcement that was seen three million times within an hour of being posted.<sup>122</sup> Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush partnered with Snapchat for his live announcement in Miami to document his campaign kick-off, meaning that photos and videos from the

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<sup>118</sup> Issie Lapowsky, “Political Ad Spending Online Is About To Explode,” *Wired*, August 18, 2015, <http://www.wired.com/2015/08/digital-political-ads-2016/>.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Alex Swoyer, “Dr. Ben Carson Launches Social Media Campaign Before Formal Announcement,” *Breitbart*, May 3, 2015, <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2015/05/03/dr-ben-carson-launches-social-media-campaign-before-formal-announcement/>.

<sup>121</sup> Arlette Saenz, “Ted Cruz Announces 2016 Presidential Campaign on Twitter,” *ABC News*, March 23, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/ted-cruz-announces-2016-presidential-campaign-twitter/story?id=29832257>.

<sup>122</sup> Janie Valencia, “Hillary Clinton’s 2016 Announcement Caused Twitter to Freak Out,” *Huffington Post*, April 13, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/13/hillary-clinton-announcement-on-social-media\\_n\\_7057020.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/13/hillary-clinton-announcement-on-social-media_n_7057020.html).

event will be streamed to the network's 100 million active users in real-time.<sup>123</sup>

Furthermore, in announcing their presidential bids directly on social media, the 2016 candidates are showing that their loyalty is to their supporters – not the traditional news media, big money interest groups, or the political elite.

New social media platforms and tools have provided the 2016 candidates new opportunities to campaign online and experiment with digital communications. For example, social media platforms that enable live engagement, such as Snapchat and Periscope, have tremendous appeal and potential to engage voters in a more personal way because of their capability to allow voters to feel as if they were with the candidates in real-time. Because the 2016 election “is about chasing the next big thing,” says Lindsay Hoffman, a political communication professor at the University of Delaware,<sup>124</sup> candidates have to capitalize on new social media and technological developments to gain that online edge over their opponents. To illustrate the growing importance of social media in campaigns, the following research will analyze and evaluate the digital strategies of three notable 2016 presidential candidates.

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<sup>123</sup> Elise Viebeck, “Jeb pursues millennials with social media binge,” *Washington Post*, June 15, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2015/06/15/jeb-pursues-millennials-with-social-media-binge/>.

<sup>124</sup> Jackie Salo, “2016 Presidential Race Unfolds on Twitter, Facebook as New Social Media Trends Shape White House Campaigns,” *International Business Times*, July 14, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/2016-presidential-race-unfolds-twitter-facebook-new-social-media-trends-shape-white-2005726>.

### *Donald Trump and his Sensationalist Social Media Strategy*

Donald Trump, a businessman and political outsider, is currently leading the 2016 Republican presidential nomination polls at 27 percent with an eight percent lead, according to *RealClearPolitics*. His great popularity can be attributed to his ability to dominate the media headlines with his skillful use of social media and his loud and bombastic, yet entertaining personality. According to a broadcast analysis by the Tyndall Report, he accounts for 43 percent of all GOP coverage on network news and has received nearly double the number of broadcast minutes Hillary Clinton has received.<sup>125</sup> Ed Rollins, the Republican campaign consultant and campaign director for Ronald Reagan's 1984 campaign, says the publicity Trump has been receiving would have easily cost \$100 million, of which Trump is getting for free<sup>126</sup> – from traditional broadcast coverage and his personal social media accounts.

Trump "is way better at the Internet than anyone else in the GOP which is partly why he is winning," tweeted Dan Pfeiffer, a former top communications advisor to President Obama.<sup>127</sup> Unlike any other presidential candidate, Trump uses his social media to provoke and insult his critics and challengers. In early November, Trump tweeted a photo of his opponent Jeb Bush with racist and controversial references, including a swastika and Bush dressed up in a mariachi costume.<sup>128</sup> He also attacked Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly on Twitter after her "very unfair" questions directed at Trump

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<sup>125</sup> Mary Kate Cary, "The Master of Manipulation," *U.S. News Opinion*, November 6, 2015, <http://www.usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2015/11/06/trump-is-a-master-at-manipulating-the-media>.

<sup>126</sup> Cary, "The Master of Manipulation."

<sup>127</sup> Ben Schreckinger, "Meet the man who makes Donald Trump go viral," *Politico*, October 1, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/09/trumps-social-media-guy-214309>.

<sup>128</sup> Cassandra Vinograd, "Donald Trump Tweets a Picture of Jeb Bush Next to a Swastika," *CNBC*, November 4, 2015, <http://www.cnbc.com/2015/11/04/donald-trump-tweets-a-picture-of-jeb-bush-next-to-a-swastika.html>.

in the first Republican debate that garnered nearly 10,000 likes.<sup>129</sup> Additionally, he retweeted his online followers who also criticized Kelly's performance.<sup>130</sup> Using his inflammatory statements and attacks as fodder, Trump has been using his social media accounts, particularly Twitter, as the perfect platform to show off his bombastic personality and engage with his followers.

Rather than having carefully crafted and safe social media posts, Trump's tweets reflect his actual personality and rhetoric. According to *Politico*, Trump "functions as his own communications strategist, compos[ing] most [tweets] himself... [and] decid[ing] which of his supporters to retweet."<sup>131</sup> *Wall Street Journal* also writes that Trump "relies on his smartphone to tweet jabs and self-promotion,"<sup>132</sup> confirming that Trump indeed composes his attacks and messages himself. Therefore, Trump's social media account is an honest depiction of his character, allowing his followers and supporters to truly get to know their candidate, as opposed to a candidate's campaign team.

Trump's online rhetoric is completely different from any other political candidate in the current electoral race. "Trump does not use Twitter instrumentally... He tweets as he thinks, which is precisely the way that Twitter is supposed to work," writes Marc

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<sup>129</sup> Deena Zaru, "Donald Trump slams Megyn Kelly," *CNN*, August 7, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/08/07/politics/donald-trump-republican-presidential-debate-megyn-kelly/>.

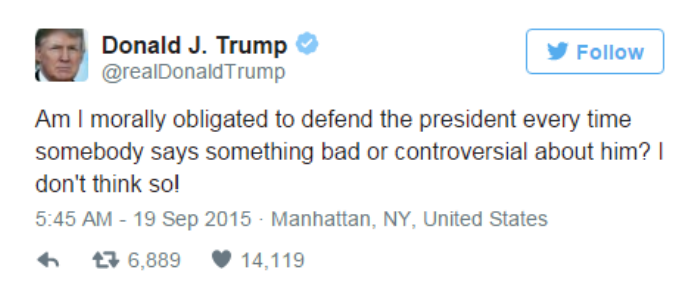
<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Schreckinger, "Meet the man who makes Donald Trump go viral."

<sup>132</sup> Monica Langley, "The One-Man Roadshow of Donald Trump," *Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/donald-trumps-one-man-roadshow-1442165014>.



Ambinder at *The Week*.<sup>133</sup> For example, when Trump did not correct a voter's allegation that Obama is a Muslim, Trump tweeted:<sup>134</sup>



This single tweet was quickly retweeted about 7,000 times, and provoked over 1,000 discussions over the next six hours.<sup>135</sup> Contrast Trump's Twitter reaction to a tweet by Jeb Bush the next day, where the life cycle of Bush's tweet received only about one-twelfth as many retweets and provoked around 200 conversations that ended in an hour.<sup>136</sup> Jenny Beth Martin, chairman of the Tea Party Patriots Citizen Fund, suggests that Trump's appeal comes from his refreshingly blunt statements: "A lot of what Trump is saying is what many outside of D.C. are thinking."<sup>137</sup>

Trump has also gained a huge social media following from his active engagement and emotional connection to his online followers. Rather than simply posing questions on Twitter or liking a few carefully selected photos on Instagram, Trump is popular for

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<sup>133</sup> Marc Ambinder, "Donald Trump is better at social media than any other 2016 candidate," *The Week*, June 29, 2015, <http://theweek.com/articles/563484/donald-trump-better-social-media-than-other-2016-candidate>.

<sup>134</sup> Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), *Twitter*, September 19, 2015, 5:45 a.m. [https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/645217260311855104?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/645217260311855104?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)

<sup>135</sup> Michael Barbaro, "Pithy, Mean and Powerful: How Donald Trump Mastered Twitter for 2016," *New York Times*, October 5, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/06/us/politics/donald-trump-twitter-use-campaign-2016.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/06/us/politics/donald-trump-twitter-use-campaign-2016.html?_r=0).

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Langley, "The One-Man Roadshow of Donald Trump."

frequently responding to tweets and retweeting supportive posts.<sup>138</sup> *NPR* noted that “retweets from fans and voters constitute a large chunk of Trump’s Twitter output.”<sup>139</sup> He also references pop culture, celebrity gossip, and glimpses into his personal family life on his social media feed. In using social media the same way the average millennial does, Trump is successful in relating to his audience and followers in an authentic and effective social media voice. Perhaps his success is because of his “innate understanding of [the current media] environment and the skill to act on it,” writes Van Jones in a *CNN* opinion piece.<sup>140</sup>

Donald Trump has also experimented with new social media tools. Instagram recently launched the use of short 15-second videos that are the perfect length in today’s hyper-saturated media environment. Not only can they hold the attention of a constantly distracted constituency, the videos can cross over multiple social media platforms, providing a candidate maximum coverage online. Trump began to use these popular 15-second Instagram videos as free campaign advertisements and negative attack ads on his opponents. One of his videos mocked Jeb Bush as “low-energy,” which received over 19,000 likes on Instagram.<sup>141</sup> *Gizmodo* hailed Trump’s Instagram attack ads as the future of digital political advertising,<sup>142</sup> since every modern presidential candidate can just as

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<sup>138</sup> Michael Barbaro, “How Donald Trump Uses Twitter (Hint: Impulsively),” *New York Times*, October 5, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/06/us/politics/how-donald-trump-uses-twitter.html>.

<sup>139</sup> Scott Detrow, “Donald Trump, Retweetin’ Like It’s 2008 – But How?” *NPR*, October 25, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2015/10/25/451513032/donald-trump-retweetin-like-its-2008-but-how>.

<sup>140</sup> Van Jones, “Trump: The social media president?” *CNN*, October 26, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/26/opinions/jones-trump-social-media/>.

<sup>141</sup> Carrie Dann, “In Another Instagram Video, Donald Trump Mocks ‘Low Energy’ Jeb Bush,” *NBC News*, September 8, 2015, <http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/another-instagram-video-trump-mocks-low-energy-bush-n423616>.

<sup>142</sup> Matt Novak, “Donald Trump’s Instagram Attack Ads Are the Future of American Politics,” *Gizmodo*, August 31, 2015, <http://gizmodo.com/donald-trumps-instagram-attack-ads-are-the-future-of-am->



thing I've learned about the press is that they're always hungry for a good story, and the more sensational the better... If you are a little different, or a little outrageous, or if you do things that are bold and controversial, the press is going to write about you."<sup>148</sup> Fast forward to the advent of social media, where Trump's sensationalist, outrageous, and sometimes controversial tweets get picked up by the Twitter reporters and then the traditional news media.

### *Hillary Clinton's Meticulous Social Media Use*

Hillary Clinton provides a contrasting and more traditional digital strategy than of Trump's. Clinton is meticulous and careful in her social media campaign, avoiding potential gaffes and mistakes. Clinton routinely posts on all of her social media accounts, ensuring that she remains relevant in the online political discourse. Unlike Trump, Clinton projects the exact message that will please everyone and creates the perfect moments of connection with her supporters.<sup>149</sup> Although her strategy is seemingly safe, many critics argue that Hillary's tweets *show* how much labor and time went into carefully constructing the post that "calculates what needs to be said (topic) with the maximal amount of safety (substance, tone)."<sup>150</sup> Her social media voice does not accurately reflect her personality, and is instead superficial and shallow as if her posts were taken out of a politician's handbook.

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<sup>148</sup> Cary, "The Master of Manipulation."

<sup>149</sup> Katherine Miller, "Donald Trump and the Actual Reason We Hate Politicians' Bad Tweets," *Buzzfeed*, August 6, 2015, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/katherinemiller/donald-trump-and-the-actual-reason-we-hate-politicians-bad-t#.vrrlvzx0EZ>.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

Her extremely safe and calculated social media presence translates into an uninspiring and identical Facebook and Twitter feeds. In attempting to stay relevant, especially with the younger generations, Clinton has given off the impression of trying too hard. Back in June, her campaign released a Spotify playlist containing uplifting songs of positivity and resiliency. But all of the songs on her playlist were released after 1999, including popular female artists such as Katy Perry, Ariana Granda, and Kelly Clarkson.<sup>151</sup> Rather than songs that reflected her personality, the playlist was an anachronism in her campaign: music suited for teens, not a 67-year-old candidate. Similarly, Hillary was mocked for an awkward Vine video, where she was “chillin” with a local craft beer.<sup>152</sup> Her online voice and social media presence is so apparently not a reflection of her personality that Clinton risks coming across as superficial and too calculated.

Hillary Clinton and her campaign have pulled off strategic campaign stunts that effectively connected her to her supporters. For example, her campaign selected an individual “to operate [her Instagram] account because his experience coincides with Clinton’s focus on college affordability as a key part of her economic agenda,” said a Clinton aide.<sup>153</sup> On another occasion, Clinton allowed a female small business owner to take over her Twitter account for the day to highlight her small business platform.<sup>154</sup> These social media takeovers exemplify Clinton’s engagement with her supporters, while spreading her message and platform.

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<sup>151</sup> Danielle Diaz, “Hillary Clinton releases Spotify playlist,” *CNN*, June 13, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/13/politics/election-2016-hillary-clinton-spotify-playlist/>.

<sup>152</sup> Megan Specia, “Bernie Sanders’ supporters are winning at social media,” *Mashable*, July 20, 2015, <http://mashable.com/2015/07/21/grassroots-social-media-efforts-bernie-sanders/#cubqzJUsmgqZ>.

<sup>153</sup> Issie Lapowsky, “Hillary Clinton is Letting this Guy Take Over Her Instagram,” *Wired*, August 21, 2015, <http://www.wired.com/2015/08/hillary-clinton-instagram-takeover/>.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

When she announced her presidential bid, her tweet received more than 36,000 retweets in thirty minutes. According to *The Hill*, she generated 10.1 million interactions from 4.7 million unique users within 24 hours, compared with Rand Paul's 1.9 million interactions from 865,000 individuals.<sup>155</sup> But her greater exposure can have that much more of a negative public effect – a greater chance to go viral from her wider audience. For example, when Clinton announced that she was running, her opponents started a derogatory hashtag campaign (#WhyImNotVotingForHillary) that soon trended on Twitter as the most popular topic. Her popularity and brand name has the potential to garner a huge response from supportive social media users, but has the same potential from critics as well.

Although the 2016 candidates are emphasizing digital communications and experimenting with social media platforms, Clinton simply seems out-of-touch and does not appropriately control her digital campaign strategy. Furthermore, too much experimentation and online efforts can backfire against a candidate for trying too hard. Clinton's team engaged in a newly developed mobile messaging platform called Snaps, of which Snaps coincidentally announced their launch of an emoji "HillMoji Keyboard" dedicated to Clinton. Snaps founder Vivian Rosenthal stated that "the Clinton campaign is not officially involved in the keyboard," but added that she has spoken and cooperated with Clinton's team.<sup>156</sup> This emoji keyboard and Clinton's involvement in these burgeoning social media platforms not only seem unnecessary and futile, but are also

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<sup>155</sup> David McCabe, "Clinton makes bigger splash on Facebook than Cruz or Paul," *The Hill*, April 13, 2015, <http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/238580-clinton-makes-bigger-splash-on-facebook-than-cruz-or-paul>.

<sup>156</sup> Issie Lapowsky, "Now you can get an entire Hillary Clinton emoji keyboard," *Wired*, September 22, 2015, <http://www.wired.com/2015/09/hillary-clinton-emoji-keyboard/>.

forced and unnatural to Clinton. Jill Sherman, senior vice president of social strategy at DigitasLBI North America, explains the disconnection: “You have this powerful, older woman trying to sound like she’s hip to emoji culture.”<sup>157</sup> Regardless of whether the effects of her excessive social media efforts will actually help her campaign, Clinton may be taking advantage of untapped potential and covering all of her bases.

Despite Hillary Clinton’s meticulous use of social media, political pundit Nicholas Carr believes that Clinton is not tapping the full potential of her digital campaign because she views “social media as a complement to TV coverage, a means of reinforcing [her] messages and images, rather than as the campaign’s driving force.”<sup>158</sup> Perhaps if Clinton focused more substantive efforts on social media and attempted to connect with her supporters in a more authentic voice, she would have greater popularity and success from the online community.

### ***Bernie Sanders and his Energetic Social Media Followers***

Bernie Sanders’s digital campaign provides a unique and different perspective than the two previous candidates because his success comes mostly from his dedicated and digitally connected followers, who have been driving his campaign and popularity on a truly online grassroots level. CNBC reports that Bernie’s “followers are the ones who are creating the viral moments.”<sup>159</sup> The hashtag campaign #FeelTheBern was created by Sanders’s Twitter followers, and CNBC reports that it has been used more than 401,000

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<sup>157</sup> Michelle Castillo, “When candidates try too hard on social media,” *CNBC*, August 13, 2015, <http://www.cnb.com/2015/08/13/when-candidates-try-too-hard-on-social-media.html>.

<sup>158</sup> Nicholas Carr, “How social media is ruining politics,” *Politico*, September 2, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/09/2016-election-social-media-ruining-politics-213104?o=1>.

<sup>159</sup> Sarah Whitten, “Can 140 characters affect the 2016 presidential election?” *CNBC*, November 5, 2015, <http://www.cnb.com/2015/11/05/can-140-characters-affect-the-2016-presidential-election.html>.

times within 30 days,<sup>160</sup> in contrast to Clinton’s #Hillary2016 being mentioned only 156,000 times in the same time span.<sup>161</sup> Liane Caruso, president of the marketing firm Crush Agency, wrote: “Bernie’s campaign was community driven... His followers and fans created that for him.”<sup>162</sup>

Bernie’s slogan represents the community-driven, grassroots energy behind the social media campaign of Bernie Sanders. Kenneth Pennington, digital director of Sanders’ campaign, agreed: “The slogan represents the energy that you are seeing, especially among millennial voters and younger social media supporters behind Senator Sanders.”<sup>163</sup> In more tangible benefits, Bernie’s powerful and dedicated online base of supporters show up in physical attendance to his campaign events. He drew in the largest crowd of all of his challengers with roughly 10,000 people showing up to his event in Madison, Wisconsin.<sup>164</sup> His campaign is unique in that his fan base started on a grassroots level, and his online supporters essentially organize and drive his campaign. Between April 30 and July 1, the Federal Election Commission reported that more than 75% of the \$13.7 million in contributions he raised were from small donations of under \$200.<sup>165</sup> Bernie’s “grassroots supporters mobilize around social media, which is a revolutionary and democratizing influence on American politics and media,” writes political pundit Brent Budowsky.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Specia, “Bernie Sanders’ supporters are winning at social media.”

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Brent Budowsky, “BREAKING: Bernie Sanders Grassroots Planning Huge March on Washington,” *Observer*, August 24, 2015, <http://observer.com/2015/08/breaking-bernie-sanders-grassroots-planning-huge-march-on-washington/>.

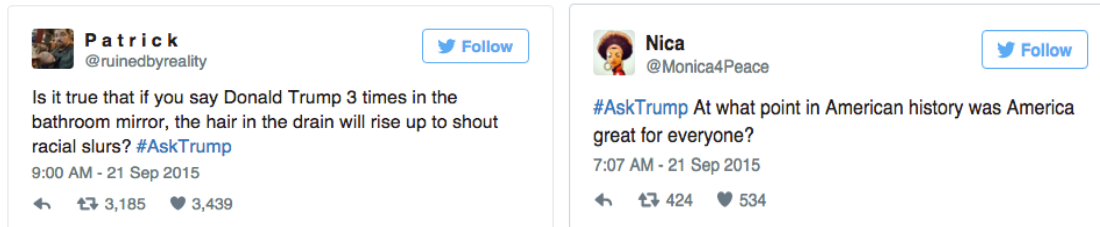


## CONCLUSION

Social media platforms supply presidential candidates the tools to control their messaging without the filter of the press. Because of social media's many positive effects on campaigning, presidential candidates have been harnessing the world of social media to gain an upper edge online, hoping that their digital campaign strategy will translate to offline votes. Nevertheless, social media can have dangerous tendencies on both campaigns and the electorate precisely because of the exact democratizing effects for which it is praised.

Facebook, Twitter, and all social media platforms constantly develop new content and tools to simplify and improve their websites for easier usage. The hashtag has helped campaigns organize their messages, essentially creating an online forum for political dialogue on that subject. The hashtag is theoretically used to engage the public not only among voters, but also between candidate and voter. In practice, however, the hashtag easily ushers in trolling posts, trivializing the exact purpose and positive intention. When used positively, the hashtag can inform, raise awareness, or mobilize online users, such as the #WhyIWontVoteForHillary. On the other hand, the hashtag can backfire on a campaign, receiving unintended and opposite responses. For example, Donald Trump hosted a Q&A session on Twitter, organized around #AskTrump, in the hopes that constituents can have a personal and legit dialogue with Trump or that Trump can convince or at least sway some on-the-fence voters. At the very least, the Q&A would bring about positive attention and this would be live engagement with his supporters.

Despite receiving legitimate and serious political questions, Trump was soon bombarded with trolling responses:<sup>167</sup>



As with any activity that relies on public participation, campaigns cannot expect a certain outcome and instead must learn to account for unintended responses that can arise from such a participatory platform. Because social media are new and will continue to develop new content, more elections in the future will provide campaigns clearer guidelines on how to navigate social media to use to their maximum advantage.

Before the advent of social media, campaigns relied on outside organizations to identify the public's perception and interests, and the traditional media to disseminate the results. The Internet, however, created a new world of polling, with the development of automated polls, Internet surveys, and interactive social media platforms to engage and survey voters online.<sup>168</sup> Campaigns can now track their progress and survey the public on their own without the help of polling experts and the media. Social media, specifically, provides campaigns not only an online forum for public discussion on the political landscape, but also valuable analytics to track website traffic and user engagement from the online users. The number of followers, as well as the frequency and tone of response,

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<sup>167</sup> Issie Lapowsky, "Yep, #AskTrump Backfired," *Wired*, September 21, 2015, <http://www.wired.com/2015/09/asktrump-backfire/>; Patrick (@ruinedbyreality), *Twitter*, September 21, 2015, 9:00 a.m., [https://twitter.com/ruinedbyreality/status/645991117327101952?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/ruinedbyreality/status/645991117327101952?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw); Nica (@Monica4Peace), *Twitter*, September 21, 2015, 7:07 a.m., [https://twitter.com/Monica4Peace/status/645962526853865472?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/Monica4Peace/status/645962526853865472?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw).

<sup>168</sup> Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro, "Polling Politics, Media, and Election Campaigns," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69, no. 5 (2005): 635-641, doi: 10.1093/poq/nfi068.

gives campaign teams a relative guideline on the next steps of their campaign strategy, such as whether Trump should continue insulting his critics or whether Clinton should pose questions asking her followers to describe their emotions on student loan debt with emojis. Although these social media analytics cannot substitute polls or accurately measure a candidate's success, the analytics still serve as a valuable supplement in gauging public opinion. *Breitbart's* Patrick Courrielche anticipates that the winner of the 2016 presidential election will also win the social media race because "in today's hyper-connected world, the candidate that inspires enough of the population to eventually win the election will likely also have excited enough of the public to 'follow' him or her on their various social media networks."<sup>169</sup> Donald Trump has been leading the *Real Clear Politics* polls for the 2016 Republican nomination, as well as the number of likes and followers on the Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Courrielche says that Trump has a "considerably larger [digital] platform than all of his competitors to distribute his message directly to the public."<sup>170</sup> But, "just because you have a follower doesn't mean you have a vote," says Brigitte Majewski, research director at Forrester.<sup>171</sup> Whether Trump's social media dominance will translate into concrete victories can only be answered in the upcoming primaries and caucuses. The outcome of the 2016 presidential election will provide further evidence as to the extent of social media's influence on a campaign and if social media analytics can be a leading indicator of elections in the future.

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<sup>169</sup> Patrick Courrielche, "The Republican Social Media Race: Guess Who's #Winning," *Breitbart*, September 10, 2015, <http://www.breitbart.com/big-journalism/2015/09/10/the-republican-social-media-race-guess-whos-winning/>.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> Whitten, "Can 140 characters affect the 2016 presidential election?"

The political influence of social media remains hard to measure, but there is little doubt that social media allow campaigns to reach a wider audience. According to the Pew Research Center, a growing number of U.S. adults are using social media platforms and getting their news from those websites.<sup>172</sup> Additionally, because 35 percent of all digital news consumption comes from the simultaneous usage of TV and a digital device, social media platforms that engage in real-time interactions become extremely popular.<sup>173</sup> Amanda Bloom, Media Director at Bask Digital Media says, “Twitter [becomes] the go-to for people looking for as-it-happens news.”<sup>174</sup> Candidates, then, are capitalizing on social media to reach their supporters and expand their social networks by asking their sympathetic followers to influence their friends through sharing, posting, and retweeting campaign communications. Eric Laurence, who is in charge of political advertising on Facebook, says: “Campaigns are designing marketing strategies to reach and mobilize all the supporters and voters that they need to win an election – and those voters are on [social media].”<sup>175</sup> Kenneth Pennington, Bernie Sanders’ digital campaign director, summarized the importance of social media: “We wanted to make sure the major issues facing our country were being discussed online if not on stage at the debate. Twitter is a good way to talk about all the issues the candidates didn’t touch during [public broadcasted events.]”<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Monica Anderson and Andrea Caumont, “How social media is reshaping news,” *Pew Research Center*, September 24, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/24/how-social-media-is-reshaping-news/>.

<sup>173</sup> Jenna Golden, “#GOPdebate: 9 tips from top advertisers,” *Twitter Blog*, September 3, 2015, <https://blog.twitter.com/2015/gopdebate-9-tips-from-top-advertisers>.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Mario Trujillo and David McCabe, “Social media ready to cash in on 2016 election,” *The Hill*, September 7, 2015, <http://thehill.com/policy/technology/252797-social-media-ready-to-cash-in-on-2016-election>.

<sup>176</sup> Golden, “#GOPdebate: 9 tips from top advertisers.”

Not only can social media disseminate a campaign's communication to a greater audience, the online medium can also target specific demographics with customized advertisements by tracking the online activity of voters.<sup>177</sup> Campaigns then "can customize ads for voters based on the digital trails they leave as they visit Internet sites," reports *The New York Times*.<sup>178</sup> According to a 2012 report from the Interactive Advertising Bureau, "Political campaigns... can actually reach out to prospective voters with messaging that addresses *each person's* specific interests and causes."<sup>179</sup> Customizing campaign communications for a targeted audience yields a greater return on investment for campaigns because those targeted users are more likely to respond positively to a campaign communication aligned with their interests. For example, Facebook's targeting features allow a campaign to specifically disseminate gun control ads to Facebook users who show interest in gun control activity based on a user's Internet history or demographic characteristics.<sup>180</sup> Twitter, as well, developed an advertising feature called promoted tweets, where a campaign can pay Twitter to place a campaign's tweet in the home timeline of targeted users.<sup>181</sup> Jack Barger of communications firm Tiber Group states that the targeting features save a lot of money, time, and energy,

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<sup>177</sup> Gubaksh Chahal, "Election 2016: How Big Data + Social Data Will Determine the Next President," *Be Limitless*, <http://belimitless.com/gchahal/news/election-2016-how-big-data-social-data-will-determine-the-next-president>; Natasha Singer and Charles Duhigg, "Tracking Voters' Clicks Online to Try to Sway Them," *New York Times*, October 27, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/us/politics/tracking-clicks-online-to-try-to-sway-voters.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/us/politics/tracking-clicks-online-to-try-to-sway-voters.html?_r=0).

<sup>178</sup> Singer and Duhigg, "Tracking Voters' Clicks Online to Try to Sway Them."

<sup>179</sup> Nathan Abse, "Big data delivers on campaign promise: Microtargeted political advertising in Election 2012," *Interactive Advertising Bureau*, October 2012, [http://www.iab.net/media/file/Innovations\\_In\\_Web\\_Marketing\\_and\\_Advertising\\_delivery.pdf](http://www.iab.net/media/file/Innovations_In_Web_Marketing_and_Advertising_delivery.pdf).

<sup>180</sup> "Easier, More Effective Ways to Reach the Right People on Facebook," *Facebook*, February 20, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/business/news/Core-Audiences>.

<sup>181</sup> "Promoted Tweets," *Twitter*, accessed November 24, 2015, <https://business.twitter.com/solutions/promoted-tweets>.

particularly when mobilizing those who actually participate in the political process and make a difference in the election cycle.<sup>182</sup>

Additionally, investing in targeted features on social media and the Internet is profitable, especially during the early stages of a campaign because “voters are still learning about a candidate and looking for information online,” said Lee Dunn, Google’s head of elections.<sup>183</sup> Most recent campaigns have already taken advantage of targeted searching for self-promotion on the Internet. For example, when one is searching for a candidate, the first link that pops up is usually a sponsored link to his or her campaign website, and the subsequent links are to the social media platforms and to related pages where voters can volunteer, donate, or learn more about the candidate.

Candidates can also use the targeted features to attack opponents. Obama during his 2012 reelection campaign launched an effective and brutal social media attack campaign to criticize Mitt Romney’s record at Bain Capital, as well as sponsored links that connected Google searches for “Romney” to “Bain,” noted Dunn.<sup>184</sup> *Politico*’s Alex Burns revealed the exponential increase of Google searches for “Bain Capital” since the attack campaign started.<sup>185</sup> Because targeted advertisements yield a greater return on investment, Dunn points out that campaigns are increasingly providing “their own data about specific voting groups and working with Google to determine which websites

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<sup>182</sup> Golden, “#GOPdebate: 9 tips from top advertisers.”

<sup>183</sup> Trujillo and McCabe, “Social media ready to cash in on 2016 election.”

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> David Graham, “The Scariest Chart for the Romney Campaign on Bain Attacks,” *The Atlantic*, July 26, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/07/the-scariest-chart-for-the-romney-campaign-on-bain-attacks/259869/>; Alexander Burns, “Bain catches on, cont’d,” *Politico*, July 16, 2012, <http://www.politico.com/blogs/burns-haberman/2012/07/bain-catches-on-contd-129033#.UAQYyUsRTic.twitter>.

would be the best place to target them.”<sup>186</sup> The targeting options provided by social media and online platforms allow campaigns to disseminate a message to a targeted audience for maximum visibility and results.

Candidates are now refocusing and emphasizing much of their campaign efforts online, largely on account of targeted advertising and other such digital developments that can be used to their political advantage. With its growing popularity, social media are positioned to become the smarter and cheaper alternative to traditional media advertising. Although television continues to reach 87 percent of American adults and is still a centerpiece of an American home,<sup>187</sup> buying 30 seconds of commercial time in primetime broadcast TV would cost a campaign \$112,000 versus \$30 for a thousand impressions on a Instagram sponsored video.<sup>188</sup> Moreover, Columbia University Professor Donald Green explained that “TV ads are not as effective as they once were” because of the ability to change the channel, fast-forward, or simply use a smartphone during commercials. Additionally, when studying the 2012 presidential election, UCLA Professor Lynn Vavreck found that the measurable effect of political TV ads on voter attitudes is small and remarkably short-lived.<sup>189</sup> Therefore, candidates are now shifting away from broadcast and print media towards social media for its targeted digital advertising.

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<sup>186</sup> Trujillo and McCabe, “Social media ready to cash in on 2016 election.”

<sup>187</sup> Derek Willis, “Why Television is Still King for Campaign Spending,” *New York Times*, June 30, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/01/upshot/why-television-is-still-king-for-campaign-spending.html?abt=0002&abg=1>; “The Total Audience Report,” *Nielsen Company*, Q1 2015, <http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2015-reports/total-audience-report-q1-2015.pdf>.

<sup>188</sup> “What It Costs: Ad Prices on TV’s Biggest Buys to the Smallest Screens,” *Advertising Age*, April 6, 2015, <http://adage.com/article/news/costs-ad-prices-tv-mobile-billboards/297928/>.

<sup>189</sup> John Sides, “How Much Did the 2012 Air War and Ground Game Matter?” *The Monkey Cage*, May 8, 2013, <http://themonkeycage.org/2013/05/how-much-did-the-2012-air-war-and-ground-game-matter/>; Danielle Kurtzleben, “2016 Campaigns Will Spend \$4.4 Billion on TV Ads, But Why?” *NPR*, August 19, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2015/08/19/432759311/2016-campaign-tv-ad-spending>.

The turn towards social media is also beneficial to the public by producing a positive democratizing effect, where constituents are more involved in the political process. Because social media constitute an interactive and inclusive platform, users are encouraged to like, share, and comment on posts to express their views, creating somewhat of an online forum for political discourse not just amongst voters, but also with candidates, politicians, news reporters, and experts. According to the Pew Research Center, 64 percent of Americans own a smartphone, compared with just 35 percent four years ago,<sup>190</sup> meaning that more citizens are increasingly acquiring the tools necessary to become citizen reporters and engage in the political process. *Politico*'s Dylan Byers wrote, "The rise in mobile usage will increase the number of citizen reporters, whose influence on recent political campaigns has been quite significant. Video footage of an errant remark... can have more influence on a political campaign than any traditional news report." Furthermore, there is sufficient anecdotal evidence that social media strengthens and encourages citizen engagement in the political process. A 2012 Annenberg Innovation Laboratory study found that "Twitter traffic often balloons during big events (e.g. televised debates or primary election days)."<sup>191</sup> For example, Obama's 2012 State of the Union address garnered 1.37 million total tweets, causing the largest Twitter traffic in a single day up until that year.<sup>192</sup> Social media then has a democratizing and participatory effect, where interested citizens can have their voices heard. Therefore, in a platform where all participants are considered equals and encouraged to express their

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<sup>190</sup> Aaron Smith, "U.S. Smartphone Use in 2015," *Pew Research Center*, April 1, 2015, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/01/us-smartphone-use-in-2015/>.

<sup>191</sup> Hao Wang et al., "A System for Real-time Twitter Sentiment Analysis of 2012 U.S. Presidential Election Cycle," *Association for Computational Linguistics* 50 (2012): 116, <http://www.aclweb.org/anthology/P12-3020>.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.



opinions, social media engenders a deeper political conversation without the filters of the traditional media gatekeepers.

Although social media could potentially increase participation, they can degrade the quality and political complexity of conversation as well. Because social media posts are expected to be concise, a campaign message must attempt to engage and sway a voter in a restricted word count, or 140 characters on Twitter. Social media is a platform originated and appropriate for social engagement amongst friends, not political discourse. When the rules and norms of social media are applied to political speech, political discourse becomes limited and superficial. “Political discourse rarely benefits from templates and routines,” says Politico’s Nicholas Carr.<sup>193</sup> Furthermore, to capture and hold the attention of a perpetually distracted constituency in a hyper-saturated environment, candidates must now be succinct and entertaining to garner the most positive reaction. Carr argues, “the presidential campaign is becoming just another social media stream” of fragmented and excitable messages,<sup>194</sup> as opposed to informative engagement with online supporters. Focused on translating positive response into votes, candidates adjust their social media posts into trivialized and sensationalist campaign messages because “you’re only as relevant as your last tweet,” writes Carr.<sup>195</sup> Political Science Professor Doctor Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha writes, “If [summarizing] the 2012 presidential election, it would likely reference Big Bird, binders, horses, bayonets, and

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<sup>193</sup> Carr, “How social media is ruining politics.”

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

other debate comments that were accentuated through social media.”<sup>196</sup> Social media might increase the volume of political discourse while diminishing its depth.

Additionally, while social media theoretically comprises inclusive and engaging qualities, in practice, online participants tend to form ideologically homogeneous communities rather than deep diverse political discourse. In 2009, George Washington University Professors Eric Lawrence and John Sides released a study arguing that citizens usually seek information that reinforces their perspectives rather than finding an objective and unbiased account of the news: “Blog authors tend to link to their ideological kindred and blog readers gravitate to blogs that reinforce their existing viewpoints.”<sup>197</sup> Rather than fostering diverse dialogue, social media instead increased polarization among online participants.

Social media increasingly eliminates the need for the traditional news media by replacing the industry with citizen reporters, direct candidate communication, and online editions of news coverage from professional reporters. Social media’s democratic nature allows any online participant to hold the same weight as that of a journalist or expert in an online political discussion. Without a gatekeeping authority to check the credibility of sources, social media runs the risk of disseminating an undesirable flood of unedited, unchecked information.

Since the Internet itself is constantly changing with new social media platforms and content, the future of digital campaigning remains unclear. However, Obama’s 2008

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<sup>196</sup> Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha, “Traditional Media, Social Media, and Different Presidential Campaign Messages” in *Controlling the Message* 2015, ed. Victoria Farrar-Myers and Justin Vaughn (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 136, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ett15r3xsj.11](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ett15r3xsj.11).

<sup>197</sup> Eric Lawrence, John Sides and Henry Farrell, “Self-Segregation or Deliberation? Blog Readership, Participation, and Polarization in American Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 1 (2010): 141, <http://home.gwu.edu/~jsides/blogs.pdf>.

and 2012 social media campaigns and the current 2016 presidential race prove that candidates should adopt a digital campaign strategy to best engage with the increasingly wired electorate. Despite the unforeseeable results and many variables that can backfire, candidates should still attempt to master social media for its growing popularity and advanced features that can translate into offline advantages. Ultimately, social media is a relatively recent and uncharted medium that will continue to develop and thus, change the political landscape and influence the future of campaigning.

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