

INTERNET & POLITICS

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Introduction

One might easily argue that nowadays the Internet has become a mean of political communication. Suffice it to say that that in 1998 elections, according to many surveys, the vast majority of candidates ran a web site. For example, a survey conducted by the periodical *Campaigns & Elections* on a sample of 270 ongoing campaigns, spanning congressional and local levels, in 1998 elections, showed that 63.3% of the campaigns had a web site and 20.7% expected to have one at some point (Faucheux 1998). Another survey about the same election cycle, but focused on the candidates running for a seat for the House or the Senate only and conducted in October, showed that 75% of the candidates for the Senate and 64% of those for the House had operating a web site (Dulio *et al.* 1999). But the Internet had started being used by parties and candidates in 1996. During 1996 Presidential election, web pages of the candidates and political parties began to multiply in early spring (Rash 1997: 17). We do not have reliable data about the percentage of candidate that had a web site in 1996, but it is certain that most presidential candidates both during the primaries and the general election had one (Selnow 1998; Rash 1997). Andy Brack, an Internet political analyst, has suggested that 85% of House and Senate candidates in the major parties set up a web site (Selnow 1998: 77). This trend seems to be confirmed in the current preprimaries and primaries for the 2000 presidential election: all the mainstream candidates have – or have had – a web site (Lynch 1999).

What these figures suggest is that the Internet, since 1996, has become part of the communication mix of the electoral campaign. In this paper we are going to show the reasons that lie behind the adoption of the Internet as a mean of political communication, the main uses of the new medium, and, finally, some possible effects of these uses upon the campaign process.

1. Why the Internet?

The rapid surge of the Internet in political campaigning is quite surprising. Indeed, candidates are not risk-takers and historically they have not been much inclined to innovation (Selnow 1998). At first sight, the main reason is that the curve of adoption of the medium is simply impressive and the Internet has become a new channel to reach potential voters that cannot simply be ignored. Actually, there are some reasons linked to the qualities of the new medium that should be taken in account in explaining this phenomenon. We will discuss four main reasons lying behind the success of the medium. These reasons can be summarized in four propositions: the Internet appears to be a) economical, b) interactive, c) controllable, and d) modern.

1.2 It is economical

Projecting, developing and maintaining a web site can be terribly expensive. But, as Selnow (1998) points out, “by running a simple, homemade site, a campaign could in 1996 get into this medium for pocket change”. For example, Selnow mentions the campaign of Victor Morales (D-Texas) who in 1996 implemented and ran a successful web site for 49.50 a month, thanks to the work of three volunteers. In 1998, the situation did not change significantly: for most congressional candidates, the Internet were a low-budget medium: according to Faucheux (1998), during 1998 off-year elections, candidates having a web site planned to spend only a minimal part of their budget over the Internet. 80,6% did not plan to spend more than \$2000 and 43% no more than \$500.

1.2 It is interactive

One of the most striking aspects of the Internet is its potential for two-way communication. Unlike the other mass media, the Internet allows electors to send feedback to candidates. However, this characteristic was poorly exploited in 1996. In general, the Internet was seen as an “extension of the other media” (Selnow 1998: 81-83). As a consequence of this view, candidates were restrained from trying new forms of

content and communication. However, there were some interesting exceptions that we are going to discuss.

1.3 It is controllable

With a web site, parties and candidates become publishers. Jeff Meyers, director of information system for Dole Campaign was quoted as saying “the ownership of political sites give the candidate complete editorial control of what to discuss and how to discuss it: a handler’s dream” (Selnow 1998: 85). Graber (1997: 76) has defined this situation as a shift of control of framing away from journalist and has compared it to what happens in radio and TV talk shows. This shift appears to be consistent with a more general trend. Candidates are seeking media spaces in which they may communicate their messages directly to the public, without the mediation of journalists. This explains the success of political talk shows, radio call-in shows, the surge of political advertising, and, along with these lines, of the Internet. The majority of the campaigners interviewed by Selnow (1998: 90-93) agreed on this point: the Internet enabled them to bypass the press, furnish substantive information and put things in their perspective.

1.4 It is modern

Finally, some candidates started a web site just because they wanted to communicate their commitment to the innovation and new technologies through the adoption of this new medium. Web addresses became a part of the rhetoric of political discourse. Soon in 1996, every business card or brochure issued by the campaign committee displayed the magic three Ws and presidential candidate Bob Dole (R) gave his web address on national television, during his second debate with Bill Clinton (D) (Selnow 1998: 88; Dorsey & Green 1997: 62).

2. Uses and publics

So far we have shown that the reasons that we have discussed above have overridden the traditional fears that political candidates feel about innovation. In 1996 and 1998 the

real fear appeared to be being left behind. Now, we are going to show the main uses of the Internet in the campaign process. We will discuss how the Internet was employed in relation to three main slices of the general public: a) electors, b) volunteers and supporters, c) journalists.

2.1 The electorate

The most obvious target of an electoral site is the general electorate that has access to the Internet. In 1996, electors coming across a web site were likely to find an electronic version of a print brochure describing the candidate's issues and personal history. Rash (1997) synthesizes this situation:

The first sites to be set up for active campaigning were Republican... The GOP sites were similar in a number of respects. For example, they showed that some time and thought had gone into their design, that the staffs were interested in using new technologies, such as Java animation, and that the campaigns were making available traditional material, such as video clips, sound bites, and press clipping.

What was missing from much of the Web-based campaign material of candidates was an appreciation for the interactive nature of the nets. For example... these sites typically failed to include even an e-mail address to ask questions (Rash 1997: 17).

Thus, the first sites were characterized by a lack of interactive features, but there were a few exceptions. One of the most interesting was the web site run by the RNC. Rash reports that the site "displayed a number of interactive features, such as chat rooms and public forum, e-mail addresses of key staffers and even a link to the DNC site (Rash 1997: 18-19). According to both Rash (1997: 37) and Selnow (1998: 83, 99), by the time of New Hampshire primary, the most interactive sites belonged to Ted Buchanam: it solicited name of potential donors and volunteers and provided a search engine inside the site. Bod Dole went further: it created a customizable starting page with content tailored on the preferences expressed by the single visitor in an on-line form (Selnow 1998: 100; Rash 1997: 36). To sum up, in 1996 web sites were divided between those simply

offering information and those trying to get the electors involved in the campaign. However, Selnow (1998: 97-99) shows to what extent e-mail feedback, even from certain fancy sites, was used poorly or was not used at all.

In 1998 most of the interactive features that distinguished Buchanam's and DNC's site had become more popular. According to Faucheux (1998), in 1998 we could find these features in a web site:

Biographical information:	97,1%
Issue papers and policy statement	89,9%
Links to other web sites	78,2%
Feedback or polling mechanism	54,4%
Electronic volunteer recruitment or fund-raising form	38,2%
Audio or video content	6,5%
Chat room	4,1%

It is difficult to gauge to what extent sites became more interactive. The main innovations regarded fund raising and electronic recruitment.

Duilio *et al.* (1999) have noted that many campaigns started using the Internet as a fund raising tool massively. According to their survey, nearly 73% of House and Senate candidates with web sites in 1998 off-year elections solicited contributions through the Internet, and nearly a third of these sites allowed the users to make on-line contribution through a secure server. This is a big step ahead when compared with 1996 when, according to the authors, only one single congressional candidate, Torricelli (D-NJ), employed secure on-line connections to process credit card payment.

As for volunteer recruitment, the findings of a study conducted by a consulting firm, Campaign Solutions, are extremely interesting. They surveyed volunteers who signed up online with 18 Republican campaigns nationwide and found that 55% of the 900 respondents said they had never volunteered to help in a campaign before and 91% of

them said they had not been recruited directly by the campaigns (Campaigns Solutions 1998). This seems to be important evidence that in 1998 web sites started to get electors involved.

2.2 The campaign organization

The interactive features of the Internet, in many cases, in 1998 were fully exploited to mobilize and organize volunteers and supporters. One could argue that the Internet became a tool of internal communication for campaign organizations. In this respect, it is very significant the role played by electronic mail. According to Faucheux (1998), e-mail was not used to reach mass-voters, but rather it was employed to reach existing supporters and as a tool of internal communication. This use of e-mail has been reported for 1996 elections as well (Selnow 1998).

The Jesse Ventura's gubernatorial campaign in Minnesota illustrates this point. Phil Madsen, director of the campaign web site was quoted as saying that the "Internet for us served as the nervous system of the campaign. The Web site was the difference; it was the mobilization" (quoted in Beiler 1999). Beiler (1999) describes what Madsen meant speaking of mobilization and "nervous system":

Much of Ventura's use of the Internet was as a behind-the-scenes coordinating tool. The campaign's big closing event, a 72-hour final drive through the state, was organized and coordinated entirely by e-mail through its Web site. Madsen sent out an e-mail to his 3,000 member list, called "JesseNet," inviting volunteers to a meeting; more than 250 people showed up to help organize the tour.

This episode communicates an important lesson about the Internet: web sites can be successfully used to create a community of supporters, like with JesseNet. At the same time, web sites can be used to fuel the sense of community of and organize existing members of the campaign organization.

2.3 The press

Since 1996, journalists have been one of the most important publics of parties' and candidates' web sites. The reason is quite simple: in today's journalistic practices, the Internet has become a common tool for gathering information quickly and effectively. As a consequence, web sites are used to convey information to the members of the press. For example, in 1996 "the Internet Operations at both conventions were areas of deep media interest, and both parties routinely referred reporters to their Web sites when they requested information... Media usually preferred getting the information from the convention Web page if they could, rather than walking to the distant media center" (Rash 1997: 48). The journalist' interest for candidates' web sites is also shown by the fact that many web sites, since 1996, have become the object of news stories (Rash 1997: 124).

3. Conclusions and suggestions for further research

So far we have shown that the Internet, although it has become a mean of political communication, remains a medium underutilized. However, We have found a moderate evolution from 1996 to 1996 election cycle: the Internet has become a little bit more interactive, but there is no evidence that the campaigners have ceased to use web site as a simple extension of traditional broadcast media. Beside these points, we also have argued that, even if there is no evidence that "the Internet is currently a medium that can help determine the outcome of the election" (Duilio *et al* 1999), candidate's web site may have an effect on campaign activities such as fund-raising, volunteer recruitment, and internal communication. In this final section, we are going to highlight other two possible effects of the Internet upon the electoral process. In the first place, we must remember that users interested in political communication on-line appear to be part of the so-called attentive public (Bencivegna 1999). They seek information willingly and are ready to face a cognitive burden in order to deal with huge amount of information. In addition, many surveys point out that they are among the most affluent and educated member of our society. As a consequence, it is entirely logical to suppose that they can represent

opinion leaders capable to influence others electors. If the Internet can influence this kind of elector, it is likely to play an important role in future races. In the second place, it is well known that the Internet is able to convey targeted messages – the early experiment of the Dole’s site is a good example. As a consequence, as Selnow (1998) notes, the use of the Internet could, in theory, lead to a fragmentation of the electorate. In particular, web-based messages, combined with strategic polls, could enable candidates to send different messages to every slice of the electorate. These final points are only theoretical implications of the use of the Internet and have not been supported by any empirical evidence yet. However they should be taken in account for future researches.

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