

Modern Election Politics and the Brave New World of the Internet

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Introduction

As with all new mediums of communication, a boundless enthusiasm has developed over the ability of the Internet to effect egalitarian change in the political process. Early proponents of this optimism have asserted that increase in the availability, both financial and technically, of computers and Internet connectivity has the potential to alleviate the class gap that exists in political participation. Fifteen years after the popularization of the Internet browser, we fail to see a meaningful increase in voter turn-out in either Congressional or Presidential elections or a staggering change in American politics.

Still, the some effects of the Internet on politics is undeniable. The presidential campaign of 2008 has been forecast to be the first billion dollar campaign. The Internet has also provided the means for second tier candidates to attract the attention and funding necessary to remain politically viable. The decentralized nature of the internet has the ability to transform users into nodes of political socialization through social outlets such as email, blogs, Facebook, Wikipedia and YouTube. The problem that awaits any attempts to analyze the possibility of the Internet is the dynamic nature of the development of outlets for communication.

To assess the viability of the Internet as a means of political socialization and explore the reasons why early optimism failed to come to fruition, we must first assess the political Internet's history, its current status, the relationship that develops between it and the user and the reasons for the alienation which haunts American politics.

Darwinism in the Political Internet

The evolution of the political Internet is one of optimism, false starts, competition and imitation. We will see through the progression of political utilization of the web that

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several basic but necessary norms arise in regard to interactivity, accessibility, mobilization and fundraising. Many await a moment similar to that of the Nixon/Kennedy debate in 1960 where Internet definitively changes the structure of politics.

The Dark Ages

It is difficult to say who was the first politician in the United States to embrace the Internet as a means of communication with the electorate. As early as 1996, only three years after the initial public release of Mosaic¹, political figures were creating token representations in the newly fashionable ‘information super-highway.’ By mid-summer 1996, twenty Senate and fifty House candidates had set up websites. Even before the primary, most of the presidential campaigns of that year used the Internet as a means of communicating to the public their platforms through webpages and email lists. Both the Clinton and Dole campaigns pushed the meager limits of the Internet through the use of steaming audio of speeches. The Dole campaign went further by user interaction in the form of politically orientated games and trivia, and allowing users to personalize the campaign site.

Still, the majority of the content of the Internet appeared to be an attempt to apply the strategies of older forms of media in the model. For many², the sites of candidates were in effect electronic versions of campaign fliers, lacking the unique qualities of the new medium.

The predominant issue facing the political Internet was one of access rather than content. In 1996, the Internet lacked the wide, captive audience Television of radio possessed. At the time of the election, the voting-age user base of the Internet was estimated at 21.5 million, with only a third only reportedly using the Internet for political information.³ The campaign site of a presidential candidate, even after nomination, would only average around 3,000 to 6,000 visitors a day.⁴ The Internet was not an egalitarian representation of society, the bulk of users being college-educated, middle-class individuals. This was the natural result of the high cost of access to a computer and to the Internet and the generally low amount of computer education for most.

Following a common theme in politics time and local experimentation would result in the Internet’s first visible impact on politics. A former wrestler, navy SEAL, actor and now political candidate was running for governor as an independent. His staff, in an effort to appeal to the younger demographic which had quickly become his popular base of support, set up a website documenting the campaign trail. Its use of the site was extensive, new images were posted nearly daily. The campaign used email to direct support to events where help was needed and mobilize supporters on election day. One of the tools of the campaign was Minnesota’s same day registration, which allowed

¹The first widely-used web browser and the basis for the more well known Netscape

²An archive of these sites is available at <http://www.4president.us/1996web.htm>

³“Politicians Meet the Netizens As Campaigns Come to the Web,” WSJ, August 12, 1996

⁴*ibid.*

them to tap into a notoriously underrepresented demographic with minimal effort and at almost no cost. The result of the effort is well known, Jesse Ventura was elected as an alternative to two campaigns that failed to appeal to independents. The Internet was a fundamental part of this success.

First Tenant The Internet, chiefly through email and webpages, is a necessary means of mobilizing campaign supporters and substantively communicating with the electorate due to its low cost and high availability.

The spirit of emulation and imitation came into effect the Presidential campaign of 2000, most campaigns had a website which attempted meaningful communication of political platforms and policies. The Internet of 2000 had a more diverse face than the prior election cycle, however, access was still dominated by middle-class caucasians. More than half of households had a computer and the majority (80%) of those homes had Internet access. Only in the cases of Black and Hispanic households was computer ownership under half and Internet access under one quarter. By socioeconomic diversity, the threshold for over half ownership was a total family income over \$35,000 and some college education⁵

In early 1999, writing about the potential created from the legalization of Internet contributions during the nascent presidential campaign cycle, reporter Michael Kranish began his article with this prophetic possibility:

“A presidential candidate with relatively little money stuns everyone by winning the New Hampshire primary. Conventional wisdom says the victory would be fleeting because the winner would have little time to raise money during the compressed primary schedule. But what if, click, click, the under-financed candidate with the moment’s momentum goes on the Internet and collects enough contributions on line in a few days to become viable?”⁶

In less than a year, the presidential campaign of Senator John McCain, polling behind Elizabeth Dole and Governor George W. Bush at 6%⁷, would do just that. After winning the New Hampshire primary with an 18% margin over Bush, McCain saw an influx of \$500,000 dollars, most of it eligible for matching contributions.

Second Tenant The Internet is a consistent, easy and available means of increasing campaign contributions. The speed of donation and the collection of contact information, most importantly an email address, makes it possible to open a dialogue with the supporter and target the right people when more funds are needed.

⁵Census Department data for August 2000

⁶“Presidential hopefuls may soon get a new line on cash,” Boston Globe. May 29, 1999

⁷“Gore, McCain tops in nation’s first Election 2000 primary,” CNN.com. February 2, 2000

Structural Adjustments

The website of George W. Bush was nothing which pushed the limits of the technology of its time. The use of low-quality, streaming video was well accepted by this point⁸, as was the idea that anything of importance had to have a website. The website was a value asset as it converged the successful strategies of interactivity and mobilization of its predecessors. To promote his proposed tax cuts, the website included a simple forms of a few questions that would estimate the savings of the tax cuts implemented by a Bush administration. The form was perfectly targeted at the middle and upper class demographic that was most likely to go to the campaign's website. As for mobilization, the campaign also conducted a large email campaign on election day to remind and encourage voters to turn out.

Bush's Internet success was the result of intelligence in imitating past success, not employing new principles or new technology. The Congressional cycle of 2002 was uneventful in this way as well, going little beyond employing the established standards of Internet use for representation. The stagnation of political innovation that set in following the 2000 election was largely the result of structural deficiencies in American Internet access.

On election day, November 7th 2000, around 51% of American households had a computer and 41% also had internet access.⁹ Despite this seemingly high number, the vast majority were connected on a 56 kbps dial-up connection that was prohibitive in use and incapable of sustaining a bit rate required for streaming video and intensive surfing. While more Americans than ever turned to the Internet during the confusion on September 11th 2001, the capacity¹⁰ and capability to compete with more establish mediums, such as Television and Radio, had not yet spread to most households.

The availability, physically and financially, of high speed broadband is only one piece of the structural puzzle that influenced the direction of the Internet.

Decreases in the price of domain names, data storage, software and Internet bandwidth, along with the increase of competition between hosting providers led to the ability of any individual to establish a web presence for little initial capital. This made the Internet accessible for most as a medium for publishing content. The rise of blogs were a product of this shift.

Additionally, the rise of voluntary standards for development and distribution made communicating content between websites easier and uniform. Syndication standards like RSS¹¹ made it easier for a user to keep tabs on their favorite blogs and stay up to date. Free blogging software like WordPress and Movable Type made it easy to set up a professional-looking blog through which one could quickly post content. Sites like

⁸Pew Time Series on Internet Use; accessible at <http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/UsageOverTime.xls>

⁹*ibid*

¹⁰U.S. definition of broadband > 200 Kbps

¹¹Really Simple Syndication

Technorati and Digg grew to be arbiters of attention, directing attention to interesting content and often deciding so based on democratic principles like voting.

These tools were all made possible by the proliferation of server platform standards. A developer could reasonably assume that any user of their software could run a web programming language (ASP, but more often PHP) with database software to store content (likely MySQL) running Windows or some version of UNIX/LINUX. With Linux, any intermediately proficient computer user could set up a blog without paying any money for software.

The growth of video of the Internet was much more visible to the end user than issues of hosting. While video had been offered for some time, large obstacles often prevented its use and distribution. The persistent issue was the quality that could be sent to users on low bandwidth connections and the requirements of hosting videos. This problem would only be solved by the growth of broadband and the development of better compression. Almost as significant was Flash being pre-installed and configured on XP and Mac allowing for a standard platform for content distribution that would play on almost all platforms (including now mobile phones). This was a change as did not require the installation of external software like Quicktime, Realplayer or Windows Media Player which generally required expensive server software.

Important for fundraising was the acceptance of security for credit card transactions and personal interactions. This came partially from reassurances of the privacy and the social stigma understood in regard to unsolicited bulk email. It also came from an acceptance of the security of technology like SSL which assuaged fears of hackers gaining access to financial information.¹²

The Social Networking Candidates...

All of these platforms converging at once led to a new environment for politics. While technological growth is certainly never equally distributed, its effects generally permeate throughout of all of society. By 2004, 58% of Americans had a computer in their household. Nearly all of those households had at least some type of internet connection, 46% percent of which were broadband.¹³ These changes created a more egalitarian Internet than before with new competition in the providing news and a new form of grass roots organization.

It was the presidential campaign of Vermont Governor Howard Dean that exploited these changes. Dean's staff used the popular site meetup.com to arrange supporter meetings at no cost to the campaign nor requiring paid staff to host the events. These meetings served as a base for organization and direction of the campaign efforts of volunteers. By distancing themselves from the organizational aspect of the meetings,

¹²Evidence of this is found in the rise in users making purchases online from 49% to over 70% over the past six years.

¹³Pew Time Series on Internet Use

the groups followed a Malthusian type exponential growth in membership and served as incubators of policy and campaign ideas. Success bred more success and a cycle of attention ensued.

... all campaigns depend on a feedback loop, and 3,000 passionate supporters who are connected via the Internet are influential in a way that an equivalent crowd would never be if you had to gather it via direct mail or a telephone survey. . . growth followed an exponential curve; Dean's new supporters contributed money, his piles of money won respect from the media, and media attention pushed Meetup numbers higher.¹⁴

A key figure in the election cycle was the rise of the community centered 527 political action committees. Dean won the support of the liberal leaning MoveOn.org's 'virtual primary' with 43.87% over Kerry's 15.73%.¹⁵ On the conservative side, controversy arose out of the group 'Swift Boat Veterans For Truth's' campaign questioning the war record in Vietnam.

For candidate whom associated themselves with populism and grass-roots support, the large base of well-connected and highly viewed blogs was a boon to communicating potential supporters. However no politician has managed to interact on the level and closeness as the Connecticut Senatorial candidate Ned Lamont. The media attention gained from its grass roots popularity was necessary for the survival of the struggling campaign of Dean. Still, the Dean campaign mysteriously imploded in the primary elections.

Third Tenant The Internet provides the most effort effective means of finding and organizing grassroots support. Mobilization means growth in supporters, increased donor pool and an increase in media attention.

Dean's staff did not invent the use of the Internet to raise funds, instead they reaped the benefits of the public's comfortability with using credit cards online and streamlined the donation process. After John Kerry secured the nomination, his staff expanded on Dean's pioneering in Internet fundraising. The Bush campaign was not without its adaptation to Dean's success, organizing through its website house parties geared towards raising funds for the President's re-election.

As we can see from Table 3, as attention to Lamont from the Internet community and criticism of his opponent increased. Lamont's polling increased significantly, resulting his is victory in the Connecticut primary.

¹⁴"How the Internet Invented Howard Dean," Gary Wolf. Wired Magazine. Issue 12.01

¹⁵Numbers directly retrieved from moveon.org's website.

Date	Ned Lamont	Joe Lieberman
May 2	13%	56%
June 8	18%	56%
July 20	27%	51%
August 17	41%	53%
September 28	39%	49%
October 20	35%	52%
November 1	37%	49%
November 6	38%	50%

Table 1: Connecticut 2006 Senate

Modernity

New sets of expectation exist this cycle that did not in the last. Most homes have at least one computer, nearly half have an broadband Internet connection, and 70% of individuals polled respond as using the internet on a daily basis. In contrast to the 1996 attention of a few thousand hits per day, the modern campaign site is expected to serve tens, even hundreds of thousands of unique visitors daily.¹⁶

An overwhelming majority of respondents expect candidates to use online technology as part of their campaign efforts. When polled¹⁷, 87% percent of individuals expect that a candidate will have a Web site and 70% percent expect the campaign will use of email to contact the electorate. Two-thirds expect candidates to use the Internet for fund-raising and post video campaign advertisements. Around half expect campaigns to have blogs and podcasts.

The next pillar of election politics on the Internet has been quasi-direct interaction of a candidate with supporters through blogging and community sites like YouTube. These efforts are no longer networking for the sake of mobilizing existing bases of support. Instead, this is means for a connection of communication between a candidate and the public, skipping past the filter of time constraints and editorial discretion of mainstream media.

During the last primaries, the Dean campaign divorced itself from the meetup groups as a means of letting the groups grow organically and reducing costs. This time, the campaigns are much more adept and hands on with their interaction with the Internet community. Every candidate has a YouTube channel and has participated in a townhall debate fielding questions from the Internet. Most candidates also interact with the blogging community as a legitimate journalistic insitution to communicate with potential supporters. Most also have profiles on the popular social networking sites used exceedingly by younger demographics, MySpace and Facebook.

Some have gone even further. The presidential campaign of Senator Barack Obama incorporated all of tools in its campaign networking feature 'MyBarackObama.com.' The site allows supporters to blog, set fundraising goals, discuss topics with the rest of

¹⁶Exact numbers are difficult to estimate and are subject to disclosure. According to Nielsen//NetRatings and AP, in the month of August, H. Clinton recieved 760 000 hits, Barack Obama recieved 750 000 hits and Mitt Romney recieved 410 000 hits.

¹⁷Pew Internet & American Life Project

(a) Presidential elections						(b) Congressional elections				
Group	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	1990	1994	1998	2002	2006
18 to 24 years	36.2	42.8	32.4	32.3	41.9	39.9	42.3	39.2	38.2	-
25 to 44 years	54.0	58.3	49.2	49.8	52.2	58.4	57.9	57.7	55.4	-
45 to 64 years	67.9	70.0	64.4	64.1	66.6	71.4	71.7	71.1	69.4	-
65 years+	68.8	70.1	67.0	67.6	68.9	76.5	76.3	75.4	75.8	-

Table 2: Campaigns across the post-modern era [1988-2000] (a) and (b)

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the community and meet other supporters.

Penetration

To assess the viability of the Internet as means of democratic participation and communication in competition with media such as television, radio and print media, access must be nearly universal and economical. It is then pertinent to take time out to assess the current demographics on adoption, availability and behavior. It is also necessary in the discussion of effectiveness to attempt to correlate available data on the outlets of political participation to look for the start of trends. Then we turn to the modern expectations of a campaign's presence on the Internet.

Turnout/Attention

The logical inference of claims of an Internet caused revolution in politics is that electoral turnout would rise roughly proportional to the proliferation of computers and Internet access over the past decade. We see, however, from Table that no such correlation can be confidentially exerted. Additional, any increase seen in the 2004 and 2006 elections should be treated speciously as they cannot be extricated from the events surrounding the elections (e.g. war and corruption issues).

Still, these numbers cannot be seen as a rebuke of the optimism claim of potential. As we have noted, the environment that could bring about a critical mass of participation has only begun to exist in within the past five years. It would be reasonable further on in the future for one to use the 2004 election as the pivoting point where the influence of the Internet began to be exerted.

If it can be asserted that political awareness is a means of political or electoral participation, then a stronger case can be made for the effectiveness of the Internet. While one cannot reasonable state that the Internet would be the sole cause of change in such polling (factors like war tend to increase awareness), the Internet is not like to be contested as a factor.

Income and Expenditures

An even stronger case can be made for the indirect effects of the Internet on the mechanisms of political machinery. As we have talked about before, any increase in mass involvement should be reflected in fundraising changes. What has not been discussed in great detail is the potential of the Internet to reduce expenses when compared to the mainstream media.

The cost-benefit ratio is significantly skewed in a favorable direction towards Internet video. With the fall in digital camera prices, any medium-range camera is capable of producing a video good enough to be posted on YouTube. For little cost other than time, the Clinton campaign has update to this date, posted 126 videos, ranging from instructional on caucusing¹⁹, excerpts from television interviews, and campaign endorsements²⁰. Six of Clinton's videos have over a hundred thousand views.

One of the interesting things to arise in this election is the similar use of YouTube by independent individuals. The most famous video by an unknown individual depicts Hillary Clinton in the context of George Orwell's novel *1984*, garnered nearly four million views (cumulatively greater than all Clinton views).²¹

The simple issue with the comparison of Internet and Television advertising arises in the participative nature of the two mediums. The Internet is a passive actor in that it relies on the user to seek out information and have a preexisting desire to participate in politicization. Television presents a contrary position, allowing campaigns to reach out to a group at their own discretion, interrupting programming unrelated to politics in any fashion to convey a political message.

The budgets of campaigns have exponentially increased in modern politics. While there is a lack of data to support such a conclusion, initial trends (see Table 3) lead to a departure from the normal growth of raised funds since the popularization of Internet fundraising and mobilization. By third quarter of 2007, the campaigns have already raised about \$420 million dollars. The expectation of most²² is that by the end of the campaign, each campaign will have had to have raised half a million dollars to remain viable. Its evident that the reasons for this need lies in changes of expectation for campaign. Also, changes in fundraising law partially accounts for this difference. However, it does not seem at all possible without the Internet as a donation base.

Research and polling on the the topic paints the picture of an Internet donor list that is heavily skewed towards young Democrats contributing less than a hundred dollars. One thing interesting is that those that donated online were about 40% likely to have done so without being asked by a campaign. Also, in the youngest age bracket, 80% donated through the Internet using a credit card. At the time of the survey, only half

¹⁹<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLxtP2UhSLY>

²⁰<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWUpWfBMslM>

²¹<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6h3G-lMZxjo>

²²Campaign Finance Institute assessment

Year	Receipts
2008	est. \$1000
2004	\$880.5
2000	\$528.9
1996	\$425.7
1992	\$331.1
1988	\$324.4
1984	\$202.0
1980	\$161.9
1976	\$171.0

Table 3: Total Receipts (in millions of dollars)

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had responded that they had recieved an email response whereas 80% of small donors and 90% had received a letter.

Democracy 2.0?

The prospects envisioned by scholars for the future of the Internet and politics have been ripe with excitement and optimism for the feasibility of direct democracy. Sun's John Gage is famous for his statement that "the network is the computer". In the post-modern, Internet Era of politics we are told to expect that the campaign process is little more than setting up a network. In such a vision, we will cease to imagine the construct of the 'user voter', everyone transitioning into a potential node. Some nodes are a hub – bigger, closer to 'a center' – more connected, but no node is alone. A blog, then, is nothing more than a client/server connection and one's mother's address book is peer-to-peer relationship. The exchange of political expression being no more of a sophisticated system than Napster ever was. Is such a utopian vision of total political participation and enfranchisement feasible under current social and technological circumstances?

If we are not on the cusp of a shift in the relationship between the electorate and the politicians, it is necessary to ask the question of why so many people do not participate in the process. The answers to this question reveal the possibility that the reasons for political participation are not always directly addressable by changes in communications mediums. Further, it is necessary to assess the impact of unequal access to technology on the emergence of the political Internet. By addressing these issues, first philosophically and then more concretely, we can adequately address the true potential of this new medium.

Premises

The implication of initial optimism is a resurgence of politicization in the electorate to the point of full incorporate, bringing about disruptive change to the ideological landscape of the United States. For the Internet to be a truly revolutionary source of

change in the nature of American politics, there must first be a base of citizens that are willing participants, but are either disenfranchised by a monolithic and interest dominated system or are unable to find meaningful political information. Furthermore, this manner of participation must be accessible to all members of society. We will address the former condition in this section and the latter in the next. It is only under these conditions that the Internet can have a direct and substantial influence in electoral politics. While there are indirect effects of the Internet by political socialization, these changes are slow and cumulative.

We start by asserting that the basic situation of the Internet today does not reflex a substantive change in the politicization of the public and that those groups which are most visibly energized by Internet trends are demographics already traditionally predisposed to political engagement. Succinctly, Internet politicization has most effective most effective on those recipient to it. For a revolution, the Internet would have to create from scratch political interest in people not traditionally within the fold.

The problem of alienation in politics is not a modern issue, the literature used in constructing this rebuke goes back to before Television. It cannot be confidentially asserted that the sole cause of non-participation is an inadequacy of information. A brief review of the literature on political apathy brings two general causes pertinent to this discussion: (1) the futility of political involvement (2) absence of incentives to interest or participation.²⁴

A common strategy of political science is the assessment of the rational actor, a theoretical individual that acts based on a cost-benefit ratio. Involvement in politics brings two rewards, a sense of civic duty or propriety and the supporting a favorable leader. However, the impact of one individual's vote in a national campaign is statistically low on the order of one in a hundred million. Furthermore, this sense of propriety dictates that a vote should be seriously weighted and come to in an educated manner. Any degree of seriousness in this task requires a substantial effort. The general opinion²⁵ is that for the rational actor the most logical conclusion is to be a free-rider and not to contribute to the system as long as it remains stable.

The Internet as a revolutionary tool relies on the optimistic assumption that non-voters and independents lie in a dramatically ideological and immoderate political position. One survey of non-voters after the 2000 election indicates that only 13% of individuals failed to vote because disinterest in the candidates. Three-fourths of those asked divided between the two main candidates and only seven percent chose a third party or independent candidate.²⁶ The quarter of those polled that chose to abstain or go third-party is not a mandate for belief in a latent revolution. Little evidence to that

²⁴Rosenberg, from whom these factors are derived, lists a third concerning hostility. This category comes out of the HUAC investigations going on at the time of its writing and generally does not apply today.

²⁵"Rational Actor Models in Political Science," Vani K. Borooah. University of Ulster and ICER; April 2002

²⁶"Study Explores Political Feelings of Non-Voters, Finds They're Like Voters," Spring 2001, Volume 22, Number 1

point exists. Full incorporation would not necessarily swing the balance of ideology in America. Using the rational actor model, little incentive to participate exists for those that are not particularly bothered by the direction of the country. It is in the interest to remain a free-rider and let others make the choices.

Emergent Democracy

*“Emergent democracy is a possible side effect of blogging. The idea is that old media makes societies more aristocratic, since discussions are controlled by whoever controls the media, while blogging, since anyone can do it, turns over control of political discussion to people at large.”*²⁷

The principle of the ‘emergent democracy’ theory is that the rise of decentralized forms of media such as blogging and Internet communities will lead to the increase of democratic representation by the participation of previously alienated portions of the electorate. The implication being that technological proliferation and the associated socialization among all members of society will converge to such a point as to make direct democracy feasible lead to the full politicalization of the masses.

For proponents of the ‘emergent democracy’ model of political growth, initial vindication arises in the success of blogs and new journalism in co-opting the mainstream media in stories that have brought down many prominent public figures. Joi Ito, the author of a treatise which embodies and names the principle, points to the example of Trent Lott’s history of racial comments being exposed by liberal blogs after the story was passed over and dismissed by the mainstream media. Many more examples exist after the publication of Ito’s paper, the such as the refutation of several false documents by conservative blogs which caused the end of Dan Rather’s career. Another is the allegations of racism which brought down the re-election campaign Senator George Allen after a video of the use of a racial epithet was posted on YouTube.

Embedded in the theory is the premise that the failures in old media are the result of corporatism and conspiracy in the mainstream journalism. While criticizing what he calls the ‘poor priorities of an aging and impotent media’, Ito specifically cites ‘distractions’ like the Clinton/Flowers affair. However, he fails to take into consideration the role that the Internet and figures like the ‘father of new media’ Matt Drudge had in pushing the Clinton/Lewinski scandal after Newsweek dismissed it as a non-story. Without the fame gained by Drudge in the Clinton affair, the new media would not be as prominent as it is today. Furthermore, it is not easy to imagine that the myopic issues caused in the battle of partisanship would cease with the removal of investors and editors.

Optimist over-zealously seemed to forget the disproportionate number of misses committed by the new media. The unaccountable and disparate nature of the blogging

²⁷Jochi Ito’s paper accessible at http://joiwiki.ito.com/joiwiki/index.cgi?emergent_democracy

makes documenting these mistakes difficult. However, we can enumerate some examples beyond a general proclivity towards conspiracy (such as the massive community built around 9/11). In one such case, the new media picked up a rumor over John Kerry having an affair with a campaign intern and journalist by the name of Alexandra Polier. A more current and wide spread one regarding the religious nature of Barack Obama circulated through both blogs and email. The rumor stated that Obama was a Muslim and that he was educated in Indonesia in a madrassa²⁸. Both claims were shown to be untrue. In the mainstream media, such failures would involve libel lawsuits or recantation. In the new media, the story is generally dropped and not mentioned again.²⁹

Internet townhalls, such as the YouTube debates, and pandering by politicians to popular bloggers understandably feeds into hopes of decreasing the distance between public figures and the people they represent. Direct interaction through the Internet are not the fresh concept they have been presented as. Instead, they are flashier evolutions of the live chats and live fundraiser that campaigns such as Steve Forbes in 2000 have held.

The next stage for democratization after the destruction of the old media structure, would be the destruction of the old political structure with direct participation in its place. This is optimistically based on the premise that the proliferation of technology and education will continue and level out in an even manner. We have asserted before that politicalization is not a problem solely about access, there must be incentives and interest. The process that would lead to the fruition of 'emergent democracy' isn't a matter of giving a computer to every disadvantaged person and showing them how to use it. There must be an associated importance and relevance to the individual. In the case of Lamont, we again see the case of political revolution only in demographics willing to be hosts. Lamont's appeal did not translate well outside of the technologically-adept, anti-war youth that served as his base and disproportionately turned out in primary elections. The minutiae of modern government and administration is a field which requires a lot of consideration and has high entry costs in terms of education and time. It is not reasonable to expect said person to understand the complexities of trade policy.³⁰

While the allegory of the rising tide raising all ships allude to some political enablement of lower classes, the bulk of any mobilization has been and will likely continue to be focused on the educated, middle class and youth. Disenfranchisement disproportionately perpetuates in those alienated from the political system. Without a concerted effort to incorporate those classes into the benefits of modernity then such concepts as 'emergent democracy' are meaning and only perpetuate fragments of the old system.

²⁸An Islamic religious school

²⁹Matt Drudge did apologize for his part in the Polier story and CNN is credited with the refutation that circulated through the blogging community in video format.

³⁰For the sake brevity, we neglect to open the consideration and slant that such a system would have towards demagoguery and self-interest. Such discussions cannot be more articulately developed by the author than the *Federalist Papers*

Necessary, Not Sufficient

“... a campaign can use internet tools to help create extraordinary successes in fund raising and generating name recognition and getting good poll numbers, can even have its candidate anointed frontrunner before the first vote is cast, and all of that, taken together, is still not enough to get people to vote for a someone they don't like.” ³¹

There is little evidence to suggest that a strong base on the internet is a sufficient condition for success in electoral politics. As we have seen from our historical analysis, every instance of a campaign wholly powered by the Internet community without a sound offline base was shown to deflate in public. As in all forms of media, the ability to adapt to the current technological environment, use its tools in mobilization, funding, publicity and predicting change is necessary to a successful campaign.

Past political disasters do not mean that attention originated on the Internet is a death-mark for a candidate, but that the imperative of any campaign must be to transfer this appeal to the much more broad face of the non-wired community. This trend appears to exist for two discernible reasons. First, studies³² have shown that participation in an electronic community and activism does not always transfer into mobilization outside of the Internet. The ease and anonymity in participation, which is promoted as a strength of the Internet, creates an unfavorable tendency towards isolation and indolence. Also, as we have hinted at before, the political platforms favorable to Internet users do not often reflect on the position of the entire electorate. The largely discussed ‘echo chamber’ effect often leads to prominent figures taking of extremely partisan sides with the community discussions revolving around this opinion. Subsequently, this leads to a unfavorable opinion towards moderate politicians and often extreme animosity towards political opponents.

The Internet is a cauldron of strong opinions and ideology, those that flourish online do not necessarily thrive offline. The cases of Lamont and Dean are both strong reflections of this principle in action. Both nascent campaign only gained attention with promotion by strongly ideological characters (generally the same actors in both cases) for their friendly platforms and willingness to cooperate with the Internet community. With Lamont, this translated into disdain for a centrist politician's closeness to the opposition administration. This focus, epitomized in the attention placed on a friendly peck on the cheek by the President, did not appeal to the general public and Lamont lost the general election.

It is interesting to note one lesson learned from the Ned Lamont campaign. Candidates that are able to hold the attention of the activist audience can often bank on the tendency of primary voters to be activist or in the least, politically informed. By being able to draw out the strongly ideological left on primary day, Lamont was able to force

³¹“Dean and the Last Internet Campaign,” Clay Shirky. corante.com

³²“Analyzing the mobilization of grassroots activities via the internet: a case study,” Hara & Estrada. Journal of Information Science, Vol. 31, No. 6, 503-514

Lieberman to run as an independent.

It is unlikely that Dean was the last internet candidate, Ron Paul and Ned Lamont represent a continuation of this trend. Easy popularity comes to those trendsetters that disrupt the established norms by assimilating new technologies. A proper method of campaigning to use the internet as a tool and not the sole base of organization or source of attention.

Concluding Thoughts

Nothing in this paper should be construed as an argument disparaging the Internet as a mean of conveying political information, nor do we assert that the Internet does not have the means to impact the electoral process. The historical trends described previously prove that this is not the case. What we are asserting is that the Internet as it exists today, does not have the capacity to incite the utopian dream of absolute political incorporation nor is it likely to fulfill the Marxist vision of a populist revolution.

The Internet is, as Television was in the sixties, a disruptive force towards the political and media order of its time. Its constant evolutions assert a shifting and decentralized platform of communication unlike any of its contemporaries. By the virtue of past success and the expectations of modernity, it is necessary for any campaign to be adept at current technological and social trends.

We have learned that there are normative expectations a campaign must adhere to for minimum participation, but we have also learned that these expectations are not comprehensive across time. The most forward thinking individual in 1994 could not have expected the significance of Matt Drudge nor could one in 2000 have expected Facebook, YouTube or the DailyKos. Right now, the average individuals expects a substantive website which accepts donations, that email be used to mobilize support at crucial times, that a campaign posts videos, blogs and interacts with the large number of Americans that participate in social networking. We have already seen webcasts of fundraising dinners, YouTube debates, and text-chat sessions with politicians. Are webcam sessions with candidates on the horizon? Policy Wikis? To assert that progress has ended in integrating electoral politics into the Internet assumes a disastrous stagnation in the means in which we interact on the web. Thankfully, there is little evidence of this, which means there is little evidence that these principles will stay the same in the next election cycle.