

e-Campaigning: The Present and Future

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Abstract. The practices of E-Campaigning are gradually gaining momentum in the world. This paper discusses the Democratic campaign of the 2008 American Presidential Election. It contends that the effective use of E-Campaigning techniques was the key to their success. It also deliberates upon the tremendous increase in public involvement over the Internet during the campaigning period. Also, it predicts the future of E-Campaigning and gives an in depth analysis of what the world can expect to see in future elections. Lastly, it examines the relation between E-Campaigning and E-Democracy in the context of the aftermath of the election.

Keywords: Election, Campaign, Internet, Barack Obama, John Mc Cain, YouTube, Facebook, Web Accessibility, E-Voting, Representative, Interaction, Web 2.0.

1 Introduction

The year 2008 brought with it a multitude of surprises for the American citizens. It will definitely be marked as one of the most volatile periods in American history. Apart from the stock market crash, for the very first time in American history an African American candidate- Mr. Barack Obama was elected president of the United States.

The 2008 Presidential Election was in itself very different from previous elections. For the first time since 1952, there was no president or vice president running for re-election [7]. Also, the Obama campaign was conducted in an unprecedented manner that reflects the true maverick nature of our newly elected president. The campaign unleashed the power of the Internet, making it the primary medium of campaigning. Traditional mediums like the television and radio were completely overshadowed. The Obama campaign was able to gather together an enormous supporter base using the Internet and was able to collect 500 million dollars in online donations from more than 3 million people [11].

There has been a tremendous rise in Internet use over the past decade. When George Bush was running for president in 2000, the use of the Internet was not so widespread. Dial up connections were still being used and broadband was almost unknown [7]. The situation is drastically different today. The Internet is the lifeline of most individuals and organizations. The Obama campaign was smart to notice this change and incorporate it wisely in their campaigning strategy. 'Micro targeting', i.e. reaching out to the voters individually, was made much more effective through the use of the Internet [7]. Another

motivation behind Obama campaign's strategy was the nature of their target audience. The campaign primarily targeted the 'Youth Vote' – a factor which had been overlooked in previous elections. They correctly gathered that in order to get support from the youth, they had to speak to the youth in the language they understood the best, i.e. the language of blogs, forums and social networking sites. This move on the part of the Democratic campaign reaped enormous benefits. Given the tendency of the youth to get hugely influenced by their peers, an enormous supporter base was accumulated for Obama. Those who were a part of the campaign personally advocated Obama to their friends and family. The youth movement became the heart of the campaign and it was undeniably the reason for the Democrats' success.

Another factor that contributes to the 2008 Presidential Election being 'distinct' from previous elections was the tremendous involvement of the public in the democratic process. It is said that this was the election of 'public generated context' [7]. Through the use of blogs, forums, social networking sites and YouTube videos, the public shared their opinions and made their voices heard. Never before was it so easy to get involved in the democratic process. A person just had to make a video expressing her views and upload it on YouTube in order to be heard by millions of people. And the only cost involved was the video production cost [1], which is hardly anything. However, one downside to using this cost effective measure of being 'heard' was that the YouTube videos did not distribute themselves. Instead, they needed to be distributed through email or by links on blogs, forums and personal web sites [1].

In this paper we shall see how the recent American Presidential election of 2008 was a great example of E-campaigning. We shall also see what the world might expect from future elections. Sections 2 to 4 discuss the election whereas sections 5 to 10 discuss possible future trends in E-Campaigning. Lastly, Section 11 discusses the relation between E-Campaigning and E-Democracy in the context of the aftermath of the election.

2 The McCain Campaign

The 'YouTube Effect' was clearly manifest in McCain's campaign. The best example that illustrates this manifestation is the 'Celebrity' series of advertisements. The first 'Celebrity' advertisement made by John McCain's campaign appeared on television. It referred to Barack Obama as a celebrity and compared him to Britney Spears and Paris Hilton. The advertisement further questioned Obama's leadership ability. This advertisement was later pushed to YouTube and a series of accompanying advertisements, all ridiculing Obama's celebrity status and questioning his skills as a leader, appeared on YouTube as well. This 'Celebrity' series triggered the 'YouTube' effect and throughout the campaign, both campaigns were seen to respond to television and radio advertisements via YouTube [1].

3 The Obama Campaign

As mentioned earlier, the Obama campaign completely unleashed the power of the Internet. It started with Barack Obama announcing his candidacy online[7]. It ended

with Obama being 'Everywhere' in the words of his own website. Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Digg, Flickr, LinkedIn, Eventful, BlackPlanet, Eons, Glee, DNCPartybuilder, Asian Ave : Obama was 'Everywhere' [2].

3.1 Obama on Facebook

Barack Obama has an elaborate profile on Facebook and has 3,377,496 supporters. There are Obama pictures, videos, albums, personal notes and messages. His profile information adds the personal touch. It has information about Obama's favorite movies, songs, hobbies etc.

3.2 Generation Obama

Generation Obama (GO) was the name of the nationally coordinated grassroots movement led by young activists with a simple goal of electing Barack Obama the next President of the United States of America [2]. It operated as follows. Obama supporters logged in to myBO (my Barack Obama) and created their profile. Following this they could enter their zip code and search for support groups near their location. Each group had an activity tracker. Members would receive email updates on the activities of the group. It was a great way to get locally involved in the campaign.

Another way to get locally involved was for the supporters to try and convince the voters living near their location to vote for Obama. Through the website, the supporters could get access to a list of 80 voters near their location. They would also be provided with a script i.e. what they would say when they tried to influence their votes. The supporters would 'knock on doors', say their scripts and report feedback to the website. When the election was approaching very close, the supporters also got the option to 'make calls' to voters on their candidate's behalf. In the final 4 days of the campaign, volunteers on myBO made 3 million calls to voters mainly to ensure that people who favored Obama actually got out of the house and voted [11].

Other aspects of GO that were very enterprising were 'Invite Your Friends' and 'Personal Fund raising'. Supporters would write a personal note to friends and family on why they were supporting Obama. They would load contacts from their personal address book asking them to join the campaign and to donate generously for the cause. Each supporter had a fund raising thermometer on their personal web page that depicted how much money they had raised and what was remaining. MyBO supporters' self directed fund raising efforts resulted in a donation of 30 million dollars from 70000 people [11]. This can be compared to Howard Dean's 2004 campaign in which a large sum of money was collected using similar means [7].

The GO website also helped voters find their early vote or polling location online. The convenience provided effectively increased voter turnout.

3.3 Obama Mobile

The Obama campaign gave supporters the option to join the movement through their personal mobile phones. Supporters could sign up to receive text messages on their phone. Those who had signed up got periodic updates from the campaign as well as advance notices about local Obama events and important updates about Obama's public appearances [2].

The campaign also provided a set of 12 Obama ringtones that the supporters could download into their mobile phones.

3.4 Obama on Twitter

Twitter is a free social messaging utility for staying connected in real-time. Through Twitter, people can frequently broadcast 140 character updates to everyone on their contact list. This is called 'Micro Blogging'. The updates can be sent to the contacts' computers, IM programs or cell phones.

Barack Obama sent regular Twitter updates to all his supporters who signed up for it. The updates reflected what he was doing or thinking.

3.5 Advertising in Video Games

As a part of their plan to target the youth vote, the Obama campaign took out advertisements in online video games. These advertisements were made on Electronic Arts (EA) XBOX 360 games like Burnout Paradise, Skate, Madden NFL 09, and 15 other games [1]. The advertisements were a cheap alternative to the traditional media and provided the ability to target the specific group of males in the 18-34 age groups. They focused mainly on voter registration and early voting.

4 Public Involvement

The 2008 Presidential Election saw an unusual increase in public involvement in the democratic process. Through email, blogs, forums, personal web sites and YouTube videos, people exchanged information, shared their views and made their voices heard. In particular, the campaigning period was marked by a plethora of citizen initiated campaign videos.

4.1 Vote Different

The 'Vote Different' video was put up on YouTube by an activist who wanted to influence people to vote for Barack Obama instead of Hilary Clinton. It became one of the most 'viral' videos of the campaign and was viewed by an estimated number of 5 million people [10].

4.2 Obama Girl

The 'Obama Girl' videos on YouTube were a huge sensation and had an estimated number of 12 million views worldwide [10]. In the initial video 'Obama Girl', wearing hot pants, danced and sang in public streets while proclaiming her undeniable infatuation with Obama and extolling his virtues. This was followed by more than 30 accompanying videos during the course of the campaign[10]. It is needless to say that the videos did wonders for Obama' campaign.

5 The Future of e-Campaigning

It is quite probable that novel and breakthrough technology would be invented that would define E-Campaigning in the future. However, it is more probable that existing technology would be put to more innovative uses. This is exactly what the Obama campaign did. They did not reinvent Facebook. Instead they completely unleashed the power of the web as it exists today and used it as the primary force behind their campaign. The future harbingers a complete migration of election campaigning to the World Wide Web. However, before this complete shift can take place, a few accessibility issues need to be taken care of. We need to ensure that each and every person has access to the Internet. Further, we also need to ensure that everyone has access to web content. As we shall see in further sections, Internet access does not automatically imply Web Accessibility.

6 World Internet Usage Statistics

The following statistics have been taken from internetworldstats.com [3]. The statistics are for June 30, 2008. The Internet penetration rate of North America is 73.6%. This is good but not enough to ensure a complete migration to the Internet. However, according to the same source, North America's usage growth has been 129.6% from 2000-2008. On interpolating this, we see that the prospects are good. Internet Usage shall rise further in the coming years and this shall largely increase the scope of E-Campaigning in the United States.

As far as developing countries like India and China are concerned, the future of E-Campaigning is not so bright. Even though the largest number of Internet users are in the continent of Asia, Asia lags far behind North America, Australia and Europe when we look at Internet penetration rates. Usage Growth from 2000-2008 has been 406.1% which is excellent, however there is a lot of catching up to do and people in these countries shall have to wait for years before they experience fully unleashed E-Campaigning.

Meanwhile, they should use the same tactics discussed in this paper for enhancing campaigning but in an offline environment, if possible. For example, many of the myBO methods like 'Personal Fundraising' and 'Invite Your Friends' can be implemented by making use of the cellular network.

7 Providing Web Accessibility for Everyone

The main goal of Web Accessibility is to make it possible for everyone to use, understand and communicate using Web based resources, despite any disabilities or technological restrictions [4]. There are a vast number of web users that have special needs that need to be addressed by developers while making web sites eg. people having motor disabilities and visual or auditory impairments. Older readers are a very fast growing group of such web users. They have to use assistive technology like screen readers and alternative devices in order to comprehend web content. The web sites need to be developed in such a manner that they are compatible with these devices.

In general there is a lack of knowledge among developers about existing techniques for supporting development of accessible web applications. The W3C (World Wide Web Consortium) promotes the development of guidelines for accessible web content. The WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) document contains some such guidelines [9]. However, by and large developers are not aware of them.

A screen reader is a software application that attempts to identify and interpret what is being sent to standard output irrespective of whether a video monitor is used or not [4]. This interpretation is then re-presented to users with text to speech, sound icons or a Braille output device. It is of tremendous use to the blind, visually impaired, illiterate or learning disabled people. But if web pages are not designed properly, they are interpreted wrongly and thus become inaccessible. For example, if a web page consists of images but the images do not have alternative text supporting them to describe what the image depicts. The screen reader cannot read the images, it can only read alternative text. In such a scenario, a lot of information is lost. A screen magnifier used by older readers to magnify the text on their computer screen is another example of assistive technology that does not work with badly designed web page.

Another way of enhancing web accessibility is to provide instructions within a web application for non techno-savvy users [8].

8 e-Voting

E-Voting is the process by which voters can vote via the Internet while sitting in their own homes. If this were legalized, it would be a huge stimulus for people to cast their votes. This process may be advocated by future campaigns in order to maximize voter turnout. However, there are many issues with E-voting that need to be fixed before it can legally be adopted. Some of these are authentication problems, secret ballot support, database security and the prevention of Denial of Service attacks on the Internet [5]. There might come a day when all these issues are effectively addressed and then the world would finally experience the convenience of E-Voting.

9 Representative Interaction Websites

Obama's campaign made effective use of existing web technologies to accumulate a large supporter base and collect millions of dollars from online donors. However, what it lacked was an effective method by which supporters could interact with their chosen representative. No such feature exists on the GO website. There is a website called 'community counts' that has been collecting text and video questions for the presidential candidate. People have access to these questions and they can vote these questions 'up' or 'down'. This shall ensure that the most popular questions be answered by the candidate in due time. The idea is good but there are lots of drawbacks to this website. Firstly, it seems like a black hole where questions keep getting posted and voted upon but there is no feedback from the candidate. The 'Questions' tab has over 600 pages. The 'Answers' tab is blank. Secondly, the formatting and layout of the website is very confusing. It appears congested and is complex to comprehend.

A website that shows more promise in this area is 'change.gov' which is Obama's transition web site. It is a part of Obama's team's effort to create an online platform that provides a measure of interactivity. Along with many other features, it has a tool called 'Open for Questions'. It allows users to submit questions and vote on the ones they want answered the most. It is promised that the most popular questions would be answered on a regular basis. 'Open for Questions' is not taking any more questions as of now, i.e. 13th Dec 2008. Also, 'Voting for Questions' closed on 12:00 am on 12th December and will reopen next week. Though this website seems much more reliable than the previous one, it still does not provide a high measure of interactivity. Although it is certain that questions will be answered on a regular basis, there is no guarantee that *all* the popular questions will be addressed. The questions are not there on the site any more with their user votes. When Obama's team releases a list of answered questions, they will have a hard time proving that they have answered all popular questions. Also, the time gap between question submission and answer provision is a bad idea and it gives citizens an impression of unresponsiveness. A better idea would be for the future President to regularly answer one or two questions that he feels are the most important. He could avoid answering the ones that are repeated.

However, whatever its shortcomings are, this tool at least sends the message across that the new government is trying to be interactive and is aiming for transparency. No such tool was present during the campaigning period. It can be that the team recently came up with the idea. However, had the tool been there for the campaigning period as well, it would have definitely added a lot to the force of the campaign.

A better idea of creating an online interactive platform would be to use a forum. An Internet forum is an online discussion site. It is like a message board where users post their messages. Citizens could post their questions for Obama on different threads of the forum. Other people could comment on the question as well and in due course, the question would be answered on that thread itself. It is definitely a much more interactive solution than just putting all questions into a black hole and awaiting replies.

However, there are many maintenance problems in an Internet forum. In 'Open for Questions' the only thing Obama's team had to worry about was the scalability issue, i.e., would the tool be able to handle such a huge number of questions. If they decide to use a public forum, they will have a lot more to worry about. There can be a number of antagonists trying to create mischief on a forum eg. Trolling, spamming, double posting etc. This shall need to be taken care of on a regular basis.

A recent graduate project at Georgia Institute of Technology addresses this problem of creating an effective, self maintaining representative interaction website. The website is called 'SoapBox'. In this website, the notion of self maintenance is achieved by having members vote on the messages as well as on the following comments. The idea is that messages that receive the highest votes automatically trickle to the top thus it achieves auto filtering of irrelevant content. Also, there is a concept of 'User Karma'. Users that receive more votes have higher karma than the ones who receive less. In fact, each user has a profile page that contains various information about the user including his karma. This way, if someone asks a question and user A comments on it, the person can know how reputable user A is by looking at his karma. Future work on this site is to add functionality that gives the users with highest karma administrative powers i.e., they can periodically delete irrelevant messages and comments from the site. Thus the site shall become fully self maintaining.

Another feature of this site that is very innovative is submission to the site via an in browser button, apart from the traditional mode of submission that is logging in to the site and submitting a message eg. If a user comes across some news item in a website that she wants to discuss with a candidate, she selects the text that she wants displayed in her message and clicks on an in browser button. She is redirected to the 'SoapBox' submission page in which the message title and message body is already filled in for her. The message title is the title of the previous page she was at and the message body is the text she selected on that page. All she has to do now is submit. Auto login is done for her so that she might submit. More future work is to enable the user to enter her zip code. This way users will be able to get categorized into their respective constituencies automatically. This will make it easy for the representative to address the questions of people from her own constituency. More future work in this area is to add support for a 'Representative' page where each representative's profile shall be displayed along with the most popular questions directed towards her and her answers to them.

Even though this site is meant for interaction with the 'elected' representative, it can be used for campaigning as well. As we see, the process is completely transparent and it provides an extremely high measure of interactivity.

10 Web 2.0 Technologies

Web 2.0 describes the changing technology of the World Wide Web. The term does not refer to an update to any technical specifications but rather to changes in the ways software developers and end users utilize the web [4]. Earlier, web site users could just view the websites. Now using web 2.0 technologies they can add value to a site as they use it. Web 2.0 technologies refer to the web as a 'participation' platform [4]. We shall see a lot of Web 2.0 technology being used for campaigning and governance in the future. Some Web 2.0 technologies that show a very high promise of featuring in future campaigns are as follows.

10.1 Web Feeds

A web feed is also called a news feed. It is a data format used for providing users with frequently updated content [4]. Web feeds are very useful as they provide users with a summary of the website's latest added content eg. Latest news or forum posts. This shows great promise of being used in future campaigns to keep users updated of the latest campaign activities.

10.2 Wikis

A wiki is a page or a collection of web pages that allows anyone who accesses it to contribute or modify content using a simple markup language [4]. It is used to create collaborative websites and to power community websites. A potential use of this in campaigning can be during fund raising. All the fund raisers can have a shared Excel page among them to which they regularly put their updates. The document shall automatically total the total sum of money raised and maybe it could notify them and other users of updates through RSS feeds. It would be a great way of keeping track of money raised.

10.3 Mashups

A mashup is a web application that combines data from more than one source into a single integrated tool. e.g. the use of cartographic data from Google Maps to add location information to real estate data, thereby creating a new and distinct web application that was not originally provided by either source [4]. Mashups provide a tremendous scope for making very innovative web applications. We may see some mashups in future elections for representative interaction or other such applications.

10.4 Folksonomies

Folksonomy refers to collaboratively creating and managing tags to annotate and categorize content [4]. An example is the very popular website 'Delicious' [6]. Folksonomies are an alternative to searching the web via traditional search engines. The argument in favour of them is that instead of viewing a list of url's that the search engine's algorithm pulls up, one can see the most popular url's matching one's search criteria. It greatly improves how people discover, remember and share on the Internet. A website like delicious that caters solely to political content would be a great addition to the World Wide Web and also to the world of E-Campaigning.

11 e-Campaigning and e-Democracy

Obama's team is continuing its E-strategy for governance as well. Our new President Barack Obama is very technosavvy and firmly believes in the power of technology. It is rumored that he wants to have a laptop in his Oval Office, and if it is true, he shall be the first president to do so. People have already started talking about 'White House 2.0' and what changes and innovations it shall bring.

As mentioned in section 9, before Obama was elected as President there was a website called 'community counts' that was collecting questions for the presidential candidate. The day after he won the election, Obama's transition team launched a new interactive website '-change.gov'. This website was taken down on Inauguration Day, i.e. 20th January and was replaced by a new website- 'whitehouse.gov'. This site does a good job of ensuring transparency of the functioning of the government. Some of its features are as follows. It contains a weekly video address that President Obama intends to publish every Saturday morning. It has a list of legislations signed by the government that is continuously being updated. There is also text and video information about the new legislations. There is a section 'Presidential Actions' that contains the official actions by the President that do not require legislation or congressional approval [12]. There is a list of nominations and appointments made by the president ever since he started his presidency. There is a blog through which ordinary people can express their views and concerns. There is a media center that has videos and slideshows about Obama events and public meetings. Lastly, all Obama speeches, remarks and press briefing are there on the website.

There is another community website-'serve.gov'. It is an online resource by which people can find as well as create volunteer opportunities in their community. It aims to meet growing social needs resulting from the economic downturn [13].

Thus we can see that the E-Campaigning tactics used in the 2008 American Presidential Election have definitely led to the enhancement of E-Democracy in the United States. And this is not the end. Thanks to the efforts of the supporters of myBO, Obama's team has now accumulated a huge database on US voters [11]. This information can be used to involve citizens in the governing process in many ways.

12 Conclusion

Thus we have seen how the Internet played a major role in the 2008 American Presidential Elections. Future campaigns are expected to use this as an example of effective campaigning. Many more innovative E-Campaigning techniques are expected in the future. An in depth analysis has been made of what trends might be manifest in future E-Campaigns. Lastly, the relation between E-Campaigning and E-Democracy has been examined in the context of the aftermath of the election.

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