THE INTERNET AND CAMPAIGN 2004:
A Look Back at the Campaigners

Commentary
By Michael Cornfield

The Project report confirms that the internet has become an essential medium of American politics. It has done so gradually, like other media. Yet, the internet's distinctive role in politics has arisen because it can be used in multiple ways. Part deliberative town square, part raucous debating society, part research library, part instant news source, and part political comedy club, the internet connects voters to a wealth of content and commentary about politics. At the same time, campaigners learned a great deal about how to use the internet to attract and aggregate viewers, donors, message forwarders, volunteers, and voters during the 2003-2004 election cycle.

The Dean Campaign's Innovations

Campaigning on the internet took a great leap forward with former Vermont Governor Howard Dean's long-shot bid for the Democratic nomination for the presidency. It was the first presidential campaign to stake so much on the new medium. Manager Joe Trippi's strategy was to brand Dean as the candidate who would use the internet to revive democracy. "When you looked at him," Trippi wrote in his campaign memoir, "you were going to think Internet and personal empowerment in the same way you thought Vietnam hero when you looked at John Kerry, or Southern optimism when you looked at John Edwards."[1]

Trippi possessed a rare combination of expertise in both presidential politics and high-technology enterprise. Together with a cadre of young talent, Dean and Trippi created a campaign eager to experiment with the internet. The discoveries they made together with the hundreds of thousands of Americans who became active in the Dean network during 2003 revolutionized online campaigning. Five innovations stand out:

1. News-pegged fundraising appeals. Campaigns typically play to three motivations when they solicit donations. Potential contributors want access to decision-makers, to please a friend (or get rid of a pest), and to advance shared policy goals. The Dean campaign, taking a cue from the online advocacy group Moveon.org, demonstrated that candidates can raise money a fourth way, on the strength of the internet's instant turnaround capacity: by promulgating short-term goals which immediate donations can help the campaign attain.

Such goals often flow out of a campaign's daily battles to win media attention. Contributions are sought to finance ads that will let a campaign respond fast and

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[1] Joe Trippi, The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Democracy, the Internet, and the Overthrow of Everything (New York: ReganBooks 2004), p. 100.

prominently to an opponent's assertion, or to stage an event that will attract news coverage. The campaign can then thank the donors with evidence of the media play their dollars made possible. And it can count on the ensuing week to bring fresh news and new goals to set.

For example, in July 2003 the Dean campaign took advantage of news reports about an upcoming $2,000-a-plate Republican luncheon featuring Vice-President Cheney. Up, out, and around the Dean network went word of "The Cheney Challenge" -- could Dean supporters raise more money than the luncheon by the time it took place?-- accompanied by a web video of the candidate munching on a "three-dollar" turkey sandwich. Cheney's lunch raised $250,000 from 125 guests. The online fundraising gimmick netted the Dean campaign $500,000 from 9700 people, and great publicity about its grassroots enthusiasm and prowess.

Before long, every television appearance by a presidential candidate, from the Sunday talk shows to the conventions and debates, was seen by netwise campaigns as an opportunity to rake in money. In July 2004, Kerry asked his online supporters to make a statement to the nation on the day he accepted the party nomination, and pulled in $5.6 million.

2. "Meetups" and other net-organized local gatherings. Early in 2003, Trippi put a link on the home page of the Dean campaign to the web site of MeetUp.com, a company which helps individuals arrange to get together with others in their area who share an interest in something. The something can be a hobby, sports team, television program, or a campaign, as the Dean team discovered to its delight. The Dean Meetup population eventually constituted a virtual mid-size city, with several hundred thousand activists situated across the nation and beyond. Monthly Meetups among Dean campaign veterans were still attracting people in January, 2005.

3. Blogging. A blog is an online diary posted in reverse chronological order, sometimes with room for reader comments, usually with links to blogs run by people the reader may also find interesting. The social bonding and grassroots organizing which occurs in and around Meetups also occurs through clusters of blogs. In 2003, the Dean campaign posted 2,910 entries on its "Blog for America" and received 314,121 comments, which were also posted there. As the result of one of those comments, 115,632 handwritten letters were sent from supporters to eligible voters in the upcoming Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary. (MeetUp captains were issued lists, stamped envelopes, and a sample text for the letterwriters to follow.) A blogger also came up with the Cheney Challenge. Among the hundreds of blogs and web sites listed in the Blog for America home-page directory, or blogroll, were Deanybopper, which clipped articles for major newspapers, and Dean Defense Forces, which organized calls to talk shows to correct what the network perceived as unfair media coverage.

4. Online referenda. When the Dean campaign considered opting out of public financing, it decided to put the question to its network for an online vote. The overwhelming positive response affirmed to the Dean supporters and the political world that the move was worth it; indeed, those who voted "yes" received back a thank-you email with a request for money. Two other 2003 online referenda provided its backers with political cover, resources, and momentum: the drive to recall California Governor Gray Davis, and the draft Wesley Clark for President movement.

Technically speaking, these were not actual referenda; no one was legally bound to abide by the majority choice. The voting population was self-selected, and thus not an accurate reflection of any portion of the electorate. But as a tool to engage public support, online referenda can be handy to campaigns regardless of how much is known about the participants, and how the voting population is constructed.

5. Decentralized decision-making. Dean's slogan was "You have the power." His campaign put something behind the rhetoric (populist, but also libertarian) through the four techniques listed above, and more generally by leaving local supporters to campaign as they saw fit. Balancing the positive energy flow of a movement with the precise coordination of an organization presents the next generation of campaigners with perhaps their greatest challenge. Some have argued that one reason the Dean campaign collapsed in January 2004 was for want of better organization. The internet makes the movement-organization balancing act a matter of software configuration as well as political management.

After several months of stitching online connections through Meetups, blogs and other web sites, and email, the Dean campaign won respect from political insiders in late June and early July of 2003. Presidential politics in the year before an election year is largely the province of a clique highly sensitive to signs of potential electoral strength. Well before the first actual votes in Iowa and New Hampshire, Dean finished first in a "virtual primary" staged on June 24 and 25 by the online advocacy group MoveOn.org, with 317,647 votes (44%). One week later, Dean won another artificial event scrutinized by the campaign establishment, the "money primary" constituted by the reporting of fundraising totals to the Federal Election Commission for the second quarter of 2003. George W. Bush had burst to the front of the Republican pack in the comparable report in 1999. Now it was Dean's turn on the Democratic side. The internet was seen as the primary instrument through which his political power was accruing. If one had to single out a shared moment of realization among political professionals that henceforth they had to take the internet seriously, this was it.

Conventions, Videos, and Blogs

The 2004 national conventions were the first in which both presidential candidates invited viewers to visit their Web sites during their acceptance speeches (neither did so in 2000, and only Dole did in 1996). Neither party displayed the URLs throughout the arenas, so that television viewers would see them constantly; this shortcoming was emblematic of how the presidential campaigns did not promote their web sites as much, or as well, as they could. Nevertheless, the number of Americans visiting presidential campaign Web sites nevertheless rose sharply for the cycle: from 9 million going to Bush 2000 to 16 million to Bush 2004, and from 7 million going to Gore 2000 to 20 million going to Kerry 2004.[2]

An even bigger political web site "ratings winner" featured a made-for-internet video which thumbed its nose at both candidates. The JibJab cartoon "This Land" (at www. jibjab.com) drew over 10 million unique visitors in July alone. Although it was intended as entertainment, its popularity illustrated the utility of web videos as a campaign tool. A campaign can test a video online before buying time for it to be shown as an ad on television. It can sent a video to its email list, who can then be asked to contribute funds to place it on television. A video can also attract attention through the blogosphere and the rest of the web, eliminating the need to distribute it as an ad. More people saw the ads produced by the anti-Kerry advocacy group Swift Boat Veterans for Truth as a result of them becoming a political hot topic through the internet then through their paid placement in television markets. Americans Coming Together (ACT), a Democratic advocacy group launched a web video featuring comedian Will Ferrell impersonating the president; it was downloaded more than a million times, with more than 30,000 viewers clicking through to the site to enroll as volunteers in ACT's grassroots campaign.

But the bloggers, not the video makers, were the new stars of the quadrennial convention shows. During the 2000 conventions, a collection of booths for web site interviews had been dubbed "Internet Alley;" in 2004, the talk was about "Blogger Boulevard." Convention bloggers, like political bloggers in general, linked to each other's sites and cross-referenced each other's comments. They put a burr under the saddle of some conventional journalists, who criticized them for a lack of professionalism. However, a blog scored what may have been the only scoop associated with the 2004 conventions when someone posted word that the Kerry campaign was painting the word "Edwards" on its plane, a sure sign that John Edwards would be the vice-presidential nominee.

Targeted Grass Roots

The Kerry and Bush campaigns built on different aspects of the Dean for President campaign's online experiences. Kerry focused on fundraising. Bush focused on grass-roots organizing and mobilization. These different emphases are illustrated in their appeals to the millions who subscribed to their email lists. Between March 1 and

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[2] Figures for 2000 derived from Bruce Bimber and Richard Davis, *Campaigning Online: The Internet in U.S. Elections* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 102.

November 19, 2004, three out of four Kerry campaign emails to its list contained an action box to contribute money, compared with fewer than one in five (18%) Bush campaign emails. During the same time period, 78% of Bush campaign emails featured a box to forward the message to a friend (Kerry 5%), and 22% had a box to create or contact an online team of supporters (Kerry 0%).[3]

After decades of mass-media domination, interpersonal campaigning has undergone a renaissance in the early years of the millennium. The resurgence of the so-called "ground war" entails canvassing citizens to discern their preferences, engaging them to persuade and mobilize supporters, and finally, getting out the vote (GOTV), both on election day and before through programs aimed at taking advantage of the burgeoning early and absentee voter programs in many states. As the survey notes, nearly two-thirds of the adult population (64%) was contacted directly by political actors in the final two months of the 2004 campaign. Republicans and Democrats reached roughly the same number of people, and relied on the four same interpersonal channels in about the same proportions: regular (or "direct") mail remained the top channel of contact (reaching 49% of the public), with phone calls second at 40%, emails at 14%, and home visits at 9%.

But these numbers say nothing about the efficacy of the contacts. The internet made a difference in helping campaigns decide who to contact, what to say, when to say it, and, crucially, who to send to say it. The Bush-Cheney campaign planned, tested, refined, and committed itself and its allies to a program which fused the basics of old-fashioned canvassing, marketing, and proselytizing with the latest in data acquisition, analysis, and distribution –targeted grassroots politicking. The campaign determined which segments of the voting population it wanted to contact, installed a rewards program to motivate volunteers (notably, choice seats at events featuring the president), equipped volunteers with customized talking points and contact lists so as to make the most of existing relationships (and supplied home door-knockers with downloadable maps spelling out estimated walking times), and kept track of every action taken to increase efficiency and output. The campaign encouraged online volunteers to head up "virtual precincts," assuming responsibility to create their own email list and ensure that those on it turned out to vote.

The House Party for the President initiative constituted another aspect of this targeted grassroots operation. Starting on April 29, 2004, the BC04 campaign relied on the internet to organize and coordinate simultaneous team-building sessions across the country --MeetUps without the company as middleman. The July 15, 2004 parties featured a 30-minute conference call with Laura Bush, who answered six questions selected earlier from submissions and then brought her husband to the phone for a surprise cameo finish. There were 6,920 parties that day; in all, over 30,000 would be held, with over 350,000 participants.

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[3] The figures come from a forthcoming Pew Internet & American Life Project Data Memo on campaign emails.

Democrats mounted a targeted grassroots which matched the Republicans in sophistication, but they started later, and did not coordinate as well. Like Dean, they hired recruits and bussed college students to faraway states, where the GOP relied more on the stronger ties inherent to local congregations, neighborhoods, and (under the aegis of the "Prosperity Project" spearheaded by BIPAC, the Business Industry Political Action Committee) employer-employee and business–stakeholder relations. The Democratic field team was also hampered more by the rules of the recently enacted Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act. Under its restrictions, field operatives working for one of the 527 groups could neither coordinate with the Kerry campaign, nor advocate voting for him.

Conclusions and Implications

Did internet use make a difference in the 2004 presidential race? Yes. The most successful campaigns relied on it to gain advantages over their competitors. The numbers of adult Americans who relied on the internet to learn about the campaigns, to help make up their minds, to help others make up theirs, and to register and vote is simply too large relative to the final margin to think otherwise.

The numbers of American citizens who turn to the internet for campaign politics may dip in 2005 and the off-year election in 2006, in the absence of a presidential election. But a return to pre-2000 or even pre-2002 levels of engagement seems unlikely. As broadband connections proliferate and hum, the old mass audience for campaigns is being transformed into a collection of interconnected and overlapping audiences (global, national, partisan, group, issue-based, candidate-centered). Each online audience has a larger potential for activism than its offline counterparts simply because it has more communications and persuasion tools to exploit. This transformation makes life in the public arena more complex.

> The more citizens use the internet, the more they might expect from campaigners and political journalists: rapid responses to information searches; a multiplicity of perspectives available on controversies; short and visually arresting promotional messages; drill-down capacities into referenced databases; more transparency from, and access to, institutions and players. Meanwhile, on the supply side of the political equation, candidates, groups, and parties now have models for how to use the internet to raise money, mobilize voters, and create public buzz. The new benhcmarks established in 2004 could well be matched and surpassed in 2008.

In the coming months, well before net-guided election mobilizing recommences in earnest for the 2006 midterm elections, the online citizenry will continue to make donations to campaigns, sometimes in a big rush triggered by a news event. Political organizations with email lists ranging from the millions to the dozens will continue to urge citizens to give money, sign petitions, and tell friends to join. The definition of "activist" might continue to loosen, to include people who do little more than what ten minutes a month at their computers enables them to do; parties and groups will devote more energy and creativity to aggregating these actions into grassroots power. The

definitions of "newsmaker" and "news" will also loosen, both because of what grassroots campaigners can do with the internet, and what bloggers, web video-makers, and others with things to say to the public can do through the internet to distribute their messages. These changes could herald a major reconfiguring of the most public aspects of the American political process. Its contours are as yet unclear. Perhaps one approach to campaigning will dominate in the age of the internet –but it may be the case that several models compete over a period of time, or that each election cycle and political situation summons a unique configuration from each major player. Furthermore, there are innovations yet to come as more internet tools (for advertising, polling, and knowledge-creating) make it out of the lab and early adoption phase.

The only change that would surprise us would reverse the fundamental trend underwriting all the other changes: the cycle-by-cycle expansion of the population of the online citizenry. 75 million Americans at the last election-day peak, and counting.