

Looking across the pond: A viewpoint on developments arising from the US Senate and House elections 2006

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November 20, 2006

1 Introduction

The Internet and its latest social networking tools such as Flickr and YouTube have drastically changed the form and structure of electioneering within the US. In this article, I'll outline some of the recent changes and give some examples of technology being applied to aid in campaigning.

In order to help those not familiar with the concept of social networks or the many tools now available for this paradigm, I'd suggest a basic introduction in the form of Julie Germany's book¹. There are three particularly notable contributions in this book:

Call In Now! Chuck De Feo, TownHall.com, which discusses how they use cross media promotion using radio and Internet advertising combined with an incentive program to keep their members involved and active in their online community.

Building a Blog Network Michael Kremppasky, RedState, which discusses the lessons they learned from building their social network such as leading by example, granting members responsibility within the community and not to undervalue your members.

¹Person-to-Person-to-Person: Harnessing the Political Power of Online Social Networks and User-Generated Content

Video-games are Political Tools Nicco Mele and David Cohen, EchoDitto, which provided an introduction into the use of video-games for informing people and their perception of issues as well as a list of some of the more well known campaign-type games.

2 Political Parties

Both the Republicans and Democrats continued their heavy investments in new technologies and sought to leverage them to GOTV (Get Out The Vote) as well as using them to push campaign advertisements using new distribution mediums such as YouTube and further refining the personalisation features on their portal sites for members.

2.1 Campaign Advertisements

Every election one campaign tool that finds use is the shock campaign ad or negative ad and in the last election it was no different. The Republicans went for the heavy handed approach. The now famous playboy attack ad run in Tennessee by the Republican Party against Democratic candidate Harold Ford Jr. was surely something that added to his 48% to 51% loss to his Republican opponent Bob Corker. The line from the blonde actress “I met Harold at the Playboy party.” and the ending line of the advert from the same actress saying “Call me Harold” where used to play the race card and to exploit old-style fears about interracial couples and relations. The Democrats took a subtler approach with actor Michael J. Fox showing very visible and obvious symptoms of Parkinson’s disease whilst he urged support for stem cell research. Negative campaign advertisements are sure to continue as they tend to be more substantive than positive ads as they specify and elaborate upon the issues providing a detailed view many voters prefer. Ireland is governed by strict media laws regarding the use of the radio, print and television mediums but the Internet seems to have slipped by the current legislation so given these types of advertisements in US Elections, one asks the question how long before Google Video and YouTube change from hosting the current

positive advertisements run by Irish politicians such as Brody Sweeney (on YouTube) to the more darker shade of negative advertisement.

2.2 Voter Microtargeting

Knowing something about who you are canvassing in an election is useful knowledge, being able to apply that knowledge both tactically and strategically can easily swing campaigns. A major effort over the last number of years has been put into collecting voter information by both of the major parties in the US as this can allow for voter micro targeting. The databases (Republicans - VoterVault and Democrats - Demzilla) are used mined for issues and used in conjunction with geographical information systems (think Google Maps or Google Earth) to provide the very latest in “silver bullet” technology.

2.3 Personalisation of Portals

In order to help in fighting the elections both the Republicans and Democrats launched major revamps of their web portals in September. The Republicans launched their MyGOP and the Democrats launched PartyBuilder. MyGOP has a selection of tools including Precinct Organizer, a Google mashup allowing you to discover fellow Republican activists in your area and Neighbor to Neighbor, a page which offers a list of nearby register Republican voters and suggested talking points. MyGOP also includes the ability to send private messages to other users, upload and share photos and post fundraising goals as the idea is not to fundraise directly but to allow for the recruitment of other users with the aims of registering voters and fundraising. Blogging is barely present in the MyGOP blog as its functionality is minimalistic at best.

PartyBuilder is the portal built under the chairmanship of Howard Dean who is no stranger to Internet campaigning. The PartyBuilder is a custom platform designed to offer all the services of existing social networking sites and tie them together into an integrated platform. It uses the best features of MySpace and Facebook, allowing users to find friends and create groups. There is a much greater degree of freedom given to users when posting their

content in comparison to the MyGOP portal. Micah Sifry has written a comparison of these systems at Personal Democracy Forum with more details on the functionality of the systems.

3 Mainstream Media

The major media organisations in the US whether television or dead-tree press proved that innovation is definitely alive and well. The three areas I found the most interesting where the use of mappings and new visualisations, the continuous coverage of the unfolding situation and the personalisation of coverage for the media outlets viewers or subscribers.

3.1 Mapping and Visualisations

The visual aspect of any election coverage is always a critical factor in the television or Internet coverage of any election. Informative and well designed graphics help in conveying the unfolding election to the viewer. This election was no different with several new additions and several old favorites. The post mortem on these visualisations across the blogosphere reached the following consensus:

- Simple concert hall style maps of both houses worked best to represent both the overview of the House and Senate elections.
- CNN's signal strength bar (which was similar in design to those found on mobile phones) was useful and informative for displaying the percentage of precincts reporting for a particular race.
- Internet sites which used constantly updated graphics to represent the overall picture, where the best. CNN's election page map and the New York Times map were good examples of this. The New York Times map was slightly better as it offered three dynamic maps or views of the election. You could look at the standard map drawn by geographical state boundaries, could look at the map drawn by congressional district boundaries or you could look at the states according to their

populations. The second approach makes the state of Massachusetts appear ten times larger than the state of Montana. This is similar to the work on “Diffusion-based method for producing density equalizing maps” by Michael T. Gastner and M. E. J. Newman as shown for the 2006 results.

3.2 Continuous Coverage

Syndication of news is part of all the major news portals and political party sites. RSS or Atom subscriptions where available allows the use of a feed reader program which displays the synopsis of the article or press release and the related hyperlink for the full length version of the item. This allows the feed reader program to collect the information of many tens to hundreds of subscribed to sites easily. I highly recommend this type of tool as information overload is becoming a serious issue especially considering the growth of new media sources.

The counting in the election continued throughout the night but for many smaller media organisation this was far beyond their capability to cover and so they turned to another Internet technology, web streaming. This allowed them to push content to their Internet listeners or viewers. Two examples were:

WTVF Nashville who streamed live election coverage on the Internet even though the station had they had stopped broadcasting for the night.

WSB-TV Atlanta used video blogs or vlogs from journalists at various count centers once the station had stopped broadcasting to continue its election coverage.

3.3 Personalisation of Coverage

Many of the media outlets have subscriber based services and probably the best use of personalisation by the media was in offering a custom tailored viewpoint to users for results tracking.

CNN's **AmericaVotes2006** allowed for an overview of all the races in a single page as well as offering functionality where a user could track up to 20 races automatically. Projections were listed chronologically placing the newest ones at the top which was a nice touch.

4 Citizen Reporting

This election saw an explosion of citizen reporting tools and sites. These projects and organisations concentrated on using and extending the existing social networking tools available to cover a particular aspect of the election. The most notable of this new approach include:

VideotheVote.com was aimed at collecting videos taken by ordinary people on election day from across the US. It was a smart use of tagging which combined with automatic YouTube uploading was able to offer an aggregated view of the videos uploaded. A similar scheme has already been suggested for next year's General Election.

The Blog Party was hosted by CNN and was an open bar with a host of bloggers who spent all election blogging and included many of the big name American political bloggers

The Polling Place Photo Project a participatory panopticon project that sought contributions from active citizens who were asked capture and share photos of democracy in action on election day. It's part of a large project called Design for Democracy who according to their website "help government agencies find either national or local professional designers and researchers within its membership, who, on a for-hire basis, will test and implement designs".

The Springfield Blogging Network were part of a larger national wide organisation who facilitated local bloggers across parties publishing news and local stories. There is a Limerick equivalent of this type of reporting by the Limerick Blogger project who fulfill a similar local news niche.

The snapping the leaflets project aimed to document what propaganda voters were subjected in the run up to the election itself.

5 Commentators on the Internet and the developments of the 2006 campaign

Dan Gillmor penned an article ‘*A couple of post election thoughts*’ and discussed his view on political advertising:

More than ever, campaigns used the Net to communicate with the faithful and especially to raise money. They did so eagerly and successfully in many cases, having seen how well the technique worked in the 2004 elections. But they were less eager to use technology to reach out to the already unconvinced, it seems to me. By far the bulk of political advertising remained in the traditional media, for example. I also suspect, however, that the poisonous spewing of lies, deceptions and other garbage may have reached a point of diminishing returns. (One hopes that people are studying this in a scientific way.) If so, look for the politicians to move a lot more of their advertising to the Net in the next cycle.

Colin Delany blogged about ‘*What we can learn about online politics from the 2006 campaign*’ and discussed his view on political advertising:

What the internet excels at is relationship-seeking and relationship-building. Your website (or your MySpace site, blog, search advertising or blog advertising) lets you catch potential supporters at a moment when they're interested in you. If the site is designed right, it makes it easy for them to establish a relationship with your campaign by signing up for a list or RSS feed or even making a donation. Once they're in, they're in - you can use email and other tools to leverage that initial relationship to encourage them to volunteer time or donate money and to reach out to their network of friends and acquaintances. But even an email list

is still essentially a series of one-to-one communications, not a mass medium in the sense that television is.

6 Conclusions

Cross over between citizen and media organisation is occurring and offers interesting future possibilities. In the US dead-tree media, USA Today is leading the way into crowdsourcing (some commercial examples) where it is 'citizen sourcing' many of its news-gathering functions. Traditional functions normally performed in-house by employees are outsource using the Internet to a global pool of people. The charge is generally substantially less than what it would cost for an employee to perform the same task. Stock photographers are familiar with this model as the arrival of iStockphoto has drastically changed their work landscape. As an aside and an introduction to this type of business for any Limerick based people, the next Kemmy Business School Distinguished Lecture² will feature Jerry Kennelly, founder of Stockbyte which is the Irish version of iStockphoto. Several other well-known examples include Wikipedia, Elance and Amazon's Mechanical Turk. In the Irish context, one only has to look at the examples of Sarah Carey or Richard Delevan where blogging lead to notice (and employment) by major media organisations, logically the next follow on to this stage is where the IrishElection.com or Politics.ie sites and their kin be credited with providing a lot of the material for the forthcoming election. Currently, many stories may begin in the cyberspace world but they are unfortunately not credited to their original sources.

This folds neatly into Professor Glenn Reynolds' argument (see his blog, instapundit.com and especially his book, An Army Of Davids) that: technology is radically shrinking the sphere of activity that is, or ought to be, the function of governments and big corporations. He concludes for the majority of cases that the benefits of technology will far outweigh their problems. Readers other than technological futurists who are interested in this view and

²*Stockbyte: Start-up to Exit in a Decade*, 18:30 on Monday November 27th 2006 in the Jean Monnet Lecture Theatre, University of Limerick

other issues related to the “Singularity” are directed to Dr. James Hughes book, *Citizen Cyborg*. Bloggers and those interested in using these new technologies are highly recommended to read Reynold’s book and I would like to thank Guido Fawkes, the UK’s number one political blogger who first pointed me to this book at the ‘*Blogging the Election*’ conference.

The technological changes seen in the US 2006 elections are not that far over the horizon as many of the major Irish political parties are now using the services of such US political/technology gurus such as Zack Exley (bio / blog). Many of the social networking tools freely available on the Internet offer most if not all the capabilities required for particular tasks and whilst it is unlikely we will see any Irish political party offering a PartyBuilder-type system, its not hard to see how they could use the freely available Internet tools.

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