

## CHAPTER 53

# NEW MEDIA AND POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

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The 1992 presidential election ushered in a new era of campaign media. Candidates turned to entertainment venues to circumvent the mainstream press' stranglehold on the campaign agenda. This development was marked by the signature moments of businessman Ross Perot launching his third party presidential bid on *Larry King Live* and Democratic nominee Bill Clinton donning dark shades and playing the saxophone on the *Arsenio Hall Show*. Voters became more visibly engaged with campaign media, especially through call-in radio and television programs. Communication researchers speculated about a new era of campaign media, alternately praising its populist tendencies and lamenting the degradation of political discourse. These trends were rooted primarily in old media.

In less than a decade, new technologies had facilitated a major transformation of the campaign media system that has altered the ways in which campaigns are waged by candidates,

reported on by journalists, and experienced by voters. New campaign media have proliferated and become increasingly prominent with each passing election. Candidates employ complex media strategies incorporating an ever-changing menu of new media innovations in conjunction with traditional media management techniques. Campaign reporting is no longer the exclusive province of professional journalists, as bloggers and average citizens cover events and provide commentary that is widely available. Voters look to new media as primary sources of information and participate actively in campaigns through digital platforms.

### 1. The New Media Campaign Environment

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A multilayered communication environment exists for election campaigns. The media system is transitioning from a broadcast model associated with traditional media where general interest news items are disseminated to the mass public to a narrowcasting model where carefully crafted messages target discrete audience segments. On the one hand, the mainstream press maintains an identifiable presence. Much original and investigative campaign reporting is conducted by professional journalists, even as financial pressures have forced the industry to reduce their numbers drastically. Mainstream media still validate information disseminated via new media platforms, such as blogs and Twitter feeds. At the same time, the proliferation of new media has increased the diversification and fragmentation of the communication environment. Media are more politically polarized, as niche sources associated with extreme ideological positions appeal to growing sections of the audience. The abundance of new sources makes it possible for voters to tailor their media consumption to conform to their personal tastes (Sunstein 2000; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Stroud 2011).

The evolution of campaign communication in the new media era can be construed as three distinct, yet overlapping phases as depicted in Figure 53.1.

[Figure 53.1 about here]

### 1.1 Old Media, New Politics

During old media, new politics phase, candidates used established nonpolitical and entertainment media to bypass mainstream press gatekeepers who reduced their messages to eight second sound bites sandwiched between extensive commentary. Candidates sought to reach voters who were less attentive to print and television news through personal appeals in the media venues they frequented. Old media, new politics thrives in the current era, as candidates seek the favorable and widespread coverage they can garner from a cover story in *People Weekly* and appearances on the talk and comedy show circuit (Baum 2005). This type of election media laid the foundation for the personalized, soft news coverage that permeates 21<sup>st</sup> century new media campaigns. While rudimentary websites, or ‘brochureware,’ that served as digital repositories of campaign documents first appeared in 1992 (Davis 1999), old media technologies remained dominant during this phase.

### 1.2 New Media, New Politics 1.0

The second phase—new media, new politics 1.0—witnessed the introduction of novel election communication platforms made possible by technological innovations. By the 2000 election, all major and many minor candidates had basic websites that were heavily text-based (Bimber and Davis 2003). Campaign websites incorporating interactive elements, including features that allowed users to engage in discussions, donate to candidates, and volunteer became standard in the 2004 election. Election-related blogs also proliferated, offering voters an alternative to corporate news products (Cornfield 2004; Foot and Schneider 2006). Internet use in midterm elections lagged somewhat behind presidential campaign applications. Many

congressional candidates had basic websites in 2006, but few included blogs, fundraising tools, or volunteer building applications (The Bivings Group 2006).

### 1.3 New Media, New Politics 2.0

The 2008 presidential election marked the beginning of the third phase in the evolution of election media—new media, new politics 2.0. This phase is distinguished by innovations in digital election communication that facilitate networking, collaboration, and community building as well as active engagement. Campaign websites became full-service, multimedia platforms where voters could find extensive information about the candidates as well as election logistics, access and share videos and ads, blog and provide commentary, donate, and take part in volunteer activities. The most notable development in 2008 was the use of social media, such as Facebook, and video sharing sites, like YouTube, for peer-to-peer exchange of election information, campaign organizing, and election participation. Mainstream media organizations kept pace with these developments by incorporating social media and video sharing features into their digital platforms. These new media innovations were amplified in the 2010 midterm elections, especially as Twitter and microblogging sites featured more prominently in the election media mix.

## 2. The Importance of New Media in Elections

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The new media's influence on elections has been substantial. Campaigns provide a laboratory for the development of political applications that carry over to post-election politics and establish new norms for media politics in subsequent contests. The social media innovations that rose to prominence in the 2008 presidential contest became standard practice in the 2010 midterm elections and set the stage for the development of political applications for handheld devices.

## 2.1 Campaign Organizations, Parties, and Grassroots Movements

Candidates have incorporated new media into their organizational strategies for informing, contacting, and mobilizing voters. Candidate websites have come a long way from the days of ‘brochureware,’ and provide users with the opportunity for an individualized experience that can range from simply access biographical information to networking with supporters from across the country. Campaigns also have developed advanced microtargeting methods, like using focused text messages to reach specific constituencies, such as ethnic group members and issue constituencies (Hillygus and Shields 2008).

The Democratic and Republican parties have developed digital media strategies for enhancing personal outreach to voters. Their websites have become social media hubs that can engage voters during and after elections. The dominant function of the two major parties’ new media strategy is fundraising, and the “donate” button features prominently on all of their platforms. The parties’ outreach to voters continues between elections, especially through the use of regular email and text messages to supporters.

Grassroots political movements have employed new media as a means of getting their message out and mobilizing their supporters. In the 2010 midterm elections, the Tea Party movement used websites, blogs, social media, and email to bring national attention to state and local candidates and to promote its anti-government taxing and spending message (Lepore 2010). Mainstream and new media coverage of the Tea Party was substantial, and resulted in increased public awareness of and momentum behind little-known candidates (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2010).

At the same time, campaigns have had to adapt to a more negative and volatile electoral environment. Candidates are subject to constant scrutiny, as their words and actions are closely

recorded. Reporters and average citizens can compile information and disseminate it using inexpensive technologies that link easily to networks where rumors can be spread instantaneously. New media can sustain rumors well after an election has concluded. Rumors promulgated by the ‘birther movement’ that Barack Obama was not qualified to be president because he was not born in the United States circulated long after he took office.

## 2.2 Media Organizations

The relationship between traditional and new media has gone from adversarial to symbiotic, as new media have become sources of campaign information for professional journalists. Average citizens have become prolific providers of election-related content ranging from short reactions to campaign stories to lengthy first-hand accounts of campaigns events. Mainstream media have tacked new media features onto their digital platforms which have become delivery systems for content that originates from websites, Twitter feeds, blogs, and citizen-produced videos. As a result, messages originating in new media increasingly set the campaign agenda.

New media constitute an abundant source of election information for an increasing number of voters. While television remains the main source of election news for a majority of people, online sources are gaining in popularity (Smith 2011). The internet has gone from a supplementary resource for election information to a main source of news for more than a third of voters during presidential campaigns and a quarter of voters during midterm elections. The use of the Internet as a main source in presidential elections has climbed from 3% in 1996 to 36% in 2008. Television and print newspaper use has dropped markedly over time. Radio’s popularity as a resource for presidential election information has increased slightly since the 1980s and early 1990s, largely due to talk radio’s popularity. (See Table 53.1.)

[Table 53.1 about here]

## 2.3 The Electorate

New media's role in fostering a more active electorate is perhaps their most consequential implication for campaigns. Voters use new media to participate in campaigns in traditional and novel ways. Citizens produce and distribute campaign content, including news stories, short observations, opinion pieces, audio and video accounts, and independent ads. They can access and share information through peer-to-peer networks using email and an ever-increasing array of digital platforms. They can engage in structured activities organized digitally by campaign organizations, parties, and interest groups or organize campaign events on their own using social media.

## 3. Major Research Questions and Findings

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Research on the new media and elections has been ongoing since the 1992 presidential campaign. Scholarship has address both macro-level issues about the importance of new media for democratic participation as well as more specific questions about the form, content, role, audiences, and effects of new media in particular campaigns. The new media's influence in elections has been dynamic, and research findings should be considered within the context of the phases of new media development. As new media have matured, they have become more integral to the electoral process, and their effects are more pronounced.

### 3.1 Form, Function, and Content of New Election Media

Researchers have addressed questions dealing with the form, function, and content of new election media. What distinguishes new media from traditional media in campaigns? Studies examining the characteristics of new media in elections have provided snapshots of new media developments in specific elections and tracked their progression over time. Dominant

traits that set new media apart from traditional media are interactivity and the ability to dynamically engage audience members in elections. New media also are flexible and adaptable, as they can accommodate a wide range of campaign applications. Some applications have offline counterparts, such as the fundraising, while others are unique to the digital realm, like voter produced election ads.

Research on candidate websites provides an illustration of research on the form, function, and content of new election media. Studies have traced the rising sophistication of websites across election cycles, and have analyzed their changing strategic value in campaigns (Davis 1999; Stromer-Galley 2000; Bimber and Davis 2003; Cornfield 2004; Foot and Schneider 2008; Druckman, Hennessy, Kifer, and Parkin, 2010; Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin, 2007, 2010).

It has become increasingly difficult to draw clear-cut distinctions between traditional and new media. Technology enables the convergence of communication platforms and the formation of hybrid digital media. Convergence refers to the trend of different communication technologies performing similar functions (Jenkins 2006). Video sharing platforms, like YouTube, have converged with television in elections as they host campaign ads (Pauwels and Hallriegel 2009). Hybrid media have evolved as standard formats take on new media elements. Online versions of print newspapers originally looked similar to their offline counterparts. Over time they have come to resemble high-level blogs in style and function. Online newspapers have become less formal and more entertainment-focused, include mechanisms for interactive engagement, and accommodate significant multimedia and user-generated content. Research examining the influence of convergence and hybridity on campaign communication has not kept pace with developments that have important consequences for elections.

### 3.2 Campaign Strategy



Scholars have addressed the ways in which candidates, campaign organizations, and political parties incorporate new media into their strategies. Successful political organizations employ multi-tiered strategies that integrate traditional and new media tactics. Candidate and political party strategies have become more specialized as they take into account the audiences for particular media forms. A strong majority of senior voters rely primarily on traditional print and electronic sources for campaign media, while the youngest voters are inclined to consume campaign information on their smart phones. Digital media have made it possible for campaigns to gather data on voters ranging from their voting history and political leanings to their consumer product preferences. They also can take stock of the electorate's pulse through a wide range of digital polling tools (Howard 2005).

The question of how much control candidates have over their campaign messaging in the new media environment also has been raised. Some candidates are better suited to new media strategies than others (Davis and Owen 1999). Presidential candidates Bill Clinton and Barack Obama were able to negotiate old and new media comfortably. Others, like George H.W. Bush in 1992 and John McCain in 2008 had greater difficulty adapting to the less formal, more relational style of new media.

The number of actors who can actively participate in the media campaign in the new media era has grown massively creating challenges for candidates seeking to control their message. Political organizations, such as 527 groups who are not subject to campaign contribution and spending limits, can run campaign ads and mobilize voters online as long as they do not coordinate with a candidate's campaign committee. The ads disseminated by 527 groups can complicate messaging strategies even for candidates they are meant to help.

### 3.3 New Media Audiences

Another body of research focuses on the audiences for new media in elections. The most basic question is: Who makes up the audiences for new election media? The answer has changed as Internet penetration has become more widespread and people adopt new forms of digital technology. Early political Internet users were younger, male, and educated. The audiences for new election media have been expanding exponentially, and resemble the general population more closely.

Fifty-five percent of voters in the 2010 midterm contests used Internet media for some election-relevant purpose (Smith 2011). Still, younger and more educated people are the most inclined to use the most pioneering platforms. Enthusiasm over new media developments in campaigns can at times overshadow the reality that the audiences for all but a few political media sites are generally small (Hindman 2009), and use of the most innovative campaign applications can be slight (Owen 2011a, 2011b).

Related research examines the extent to which new media supplement or supplant mainstream media for voters. The dynamics underlying audience media use differ for presidential and midterm elections. Voters are gravitating away from traditional television and print sources and moving to the Internet for presidential campaign news (Owen and Davis 2008). People are adding Internet media as a new source of information during midterm elections rather than abandoning traditional sources (Smith 2011). Local television news, in particular, remains important for midterm election voters (Owen 2011b).

Audience uses of campaign media is another research focus. Scholars have addressed the key question: What motivates voters to use new election media? Studies have employed uses and gratifications frameworks to examine the motivations underpinning voters' media use. Most studies rely heavily on lists of media motivations and uses that were developed in the pre-new

media era (see Blumler 1979; Owen 1991). Studies adopting these frameworks indicate that voters use new campaign media for guidance, surveillance/ information-seeking, entertainment, and social utility (Kaye and Johnson 2002) as well as to reinforce their voting decisions (Mutz and Martin 2001).

These standard uses and gratifications have been supplemented by campaign media motivations and uses that take into account digital media's interactivity, networkability, collaborative possibilities, ability to foster engagement (Ruggiero 2000), and convenience. New media use involves a litany of experiences that are more active and goal-directed than those associated with traditional media. These include problem-solving, persuading others, relationship maintenance, status seeking, personal insight, and time consumption. There are uses and gratifications that are linked to specific aspects of new election media use (Johnson and Kaye 2008). Gratifications are derived from participating in virtual communities, such as establishing a peer identity (LaRose and Eastin 2004). Social media use fulfills needs including enhancing social connectedness, self-expression, sharing problems, sociability, relationship maintenance, and self-actualization (Shao 2009; Quan-Haase 2010).

### 3.4 New Media Effects in Elections

Scholars have investigated the relationship between voters' use of new media and their levels of political attentiveness, knowledge, attitudes, orientations, and engagement. Early studies of the effects of new media on voter's campaign knowledge acquisition are mixed, while newer research reveals more consistent evidence of information gain (Norris 2000; Bimber 2001; Weaver and Drew 2001; Drew and Weaver 2006; Wei and Lo 2008). Scholars also have examined the influence of new election media use on the development of political attitudes and

orientations, such as efficacy and trust (Johnson, Braima, and Sothirajah 1999; Kenski and Stroud 2006, Wang 2007; Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, and Bichard 2010).

Some studies have found a connection between exposure to online media and higher levels of electoral engagement and turnout (Johnson and Kaye 2003; Tolbert and Mcneal 2003; Wang 2007; Gueorguiva 2008; Gulati and Williams 2010). However, the effects may not be overwhelming (Boulianne, 2009). The online environment may be most relevant for people who already are predisposed toward political engagement (Park and Perry, 2008, 2009). The use of social media does not necessarily increase electoral participation, although it has a positive influence on civic engagement, such as community volunteerism (Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, and Bichard 2010; Baumgartner and Morris 2010).

### 3.5 Young Voters

Young voters, those under age 30, came of political age during the Internet era. Unlike older voters who established their campaign media habits in the print and television age, this generation has embraced the election online from the outset. A growing body of literature focuses on the ways in which young voters are using new election media and its effects. Studies indicate that young voters are out front in terms of using new media for accessing information (Lupia and Philpot 2005), and many ignore traditional print and broadcast media and rely exclusively on digital sources (Owen 2011b). Young people also are at the forefront of new election media innovation and participate in campaigns through new media venues (Owen 2008-2009; Baumgartner and Morris 2010)

## 4. Unanswered Questions and New Directions

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Research to date has established useful baselines for understanding new media and elections. However, many of the questions that have guided research remain contested or only

partially addressed. Much research has employed well-worn theoretical frameworks that are not entirely appropriate for the new media age and has relied heavily on orthodox methodological approaches, such as survey research and content analysis. Theories explaining new media's role in elections should be refined or recast and creative research methodologies employed.

Going forward, scholars should critically and creatively address the basic question: How can new media's influence in elections be identified, measured, assessed, and explained in the current environment? This is a challenging proposition given that the new media environment is mercurial, and tracking developments is difficult. New media applications are introduced, modified, and sometimes, disappear. Audiences' new media tastes shift, and their engagement with particular platforms can be volatile. Candidates, parties, media organizations, and average citizens experiment with new media and introduce new scenarios in virtually every campaign.

Theoretical frameworks should consider the unique characteristics of new media, with their inherent multi-path interactivity, flexibility, unpredictability, and opportunities for more active engagement. Theories should promote better understanding of the challenge new media present to entrenched media and political hierarchies and their consequences. They also should address the manner in which new media are influencing campaign logistics and strategies. Audience dynamics are becoming increasingly complex along with the campaign media environment, and scholarship developing analytical categories beyond demographics and basic political orientations would be beneficial. There has been much excitement generated by the prospect of using new media for electoral engagement, but the substance and significance of these forms of activation are barely understood. Studies might more deeply assess whether or not this engagement constitutes meaningful and effective political activation.

Standard methodological approaches should be updated for the new media age or used in conjunction with cutting edge methods. Some of the very same tools that are employed by users of digital media can be used by scholars to collect and analyze data. Electronic sources, such as blogs, discussion forums, and email, can function as archives of material that can be automatically searched, retrieved, extracted, and examined using digital tools. Audience analysis also can benefit from fresh methodological approaches. People do not consume news online in the same linear fashion that they read the morning newspaper. Instead, they explore news offerings by following a series of links to particular content. Web crawler techniques can be used to examine online election communities. Digital utilities, such as online timeline creators, visually chart the development of new election media and serve as research tools (Owen 2011a). Journals that can handle digital scholarship using multimedia graphics and interactive exhibits should be developed.

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Figure 53.1

Phases of New Media in Election Campaigns

	Characteristics	Examples
<b>Old Media, New Politics</b> 1992-1994	Established nonpolitical and entertainment media formats accommodate election communication; web campaigning is primitive	Call-in Radio and Television Late Night Television Shows News Magazine Programs Music Television (MTV) Print and Television Tabloids 'Brochureware' Websites
<b>New Media, New Politics 1.0</b> 1996-2006	Internet technology facilitates the development of new forms of campaign communication with interactive capabilities	Websites with Interactive Features Email Discussion Boards Blogs Meetups
<b>New Media, New Politics 2.0</b> 2008-2010	Expanded and sophisticated use of digital technology for campaign applications characterized by higher levels of interactive information sharing, networking, collaboration, community-building, and engagement	Full-Service Websites Social Media Video Sharing Sites Twitter Microblogging Sites Mobile Device Applications iMedia Applications

Table 53.1  
Main Source of Election News

<b>Presidential Elections</b>					
	<b>Television</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Radio</b>	<b>Magazine</b>	<b>Internet</b>
<b>1992</b>	82%	57%	12%	9%	---
<b>1996</b>	72%	60%	19%	11%	3%
<b>2000</b>	70%	39%	15%	4%	11%
<b>2004</b>	76%	46%	22%	1%	21%
<b>2008</b>	68%	33%	16%	3%	36%
<b>Midterm Elections</b>					
<b>2002</b>	66%	33%	13%	1%	7%
<b>2006</b>	69%	34%	17%	2%	15%
<b>2010</b>	67%	27%	14%	2%	24%

Source: Pew Research Center, November 13, 2008; Pew Internet and American Life Project, March 17, 2011

Note: Respondents could volunteer more than one main source