Chapter 3
One of Many Tools to Win the Election: A Study of Facebook Posts by Presidential Candidates in the 2012 Election

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ABSTRACT

Presidential campaigns today are increasingly integrating social media such as Facebook as an efficient tool to communicate with the public and organize their supporters. In a bid to explore how the Facebook is used by the politicians during election campaigns, this chapter explored official Facebook posts by two presidential candidates ahead of the 2012 US presidential election. The findings suggest Facebook was used in the campaign as a platform to organize like-minded voters, and reporting a virtual presence to the voters. Facebook was used strategically to resonate with the real-life campaign, and disseminate instant messages, rather than engaging in discussion with the public. The two candidates had only minor difference in the characteristics of their Facebook contents. The implication of the research for the online political agenda-building tactics is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

New media have profoundly changed the nature of political communication. Online and wireless communication has allowed an abundance of virtual political activities with high interactivity and instantaneity, which has altered the way politicians used to plan and build their campaigns. Scholars have studied the impact of new media in political campaigns and looked at the use of social media by politicians and the public (Vitak et al., 2011; Quintelier & Theocharis, 2013; Heaney, Newman & Sylvester, 2011). Politicians were quick to adapt to the environment of new media communication in the early 2000s, as
the Internet spread as a major form of mass and interpersonal communication. Politicians have been found using various types of social media as a part of their election campaigns (Heaney, Newman & Sylvester, 2011). As scholars have investigated the content and rhetoric of social media messages by politicians (Parmelee, 2014; Vital et al., 2011; Campbell & Jamieson, 2008), the strategic use of social media during elections deserves further attention. This study explores Facebook posts by Mitt Romney and Barack Obama during the 2012 election campaign and relates the findings to agenda-setting theory and the concept of agenda-building. The findings underscore the importance of looking at the role of social media as a part of larger political campaigns. This chapter emphasizes that the Internet can be used by politicians and elites as a top-down, center-to peripheral channel of mass communication, besides its use by the audience as a mass user-based network.

EMERGENCE OF ONLINE POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

Since the advent of television, political campaigns in the US have relied on two major components as ways of avoiding what 2008 vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin derided as “media filters”: advertisements and televised debates (Craig & Hill, 2010). The massive expansion of the Internet in recent times has added online outlets as a third arena in which campaigns can spread their messages without their being reshaped by journalists. Online political activities include information consumption and sharing on social networks, website publishing, online advertisements, email marketing and online fundraising. Online political activities came to public attention for the first time in the 1996 presidential election, when political parties opened their official websites and quickly rose to popularity (Heaney, Newman & Sylvester, 2011).

The Pew Center for Internet Research found that 4% of the public visited online sources for political information in 1995, but that number reached 18% in 2000, 37% in 2004 and 46% in 2008 (Raine, Horrigan & Cornfield, 2005; Raine & Smith, 2008; Kohut & Raine, 2000). Voters used the Internet to seek information online, donate electronically, share political thoughts among their virtual networks, campaign in social and user-generated media, and discuss politics on online forums. During the 2012 US presidential election, around 22% of registered voters let others know how they voted on a social networking site, 30% were encouraged to vote by their friends or families, and 20% encouraged others to vote by posting on social networking sites (Raine, 2012). Scholars have concluded that politicians in the US since the 1990s have been using the Internet as a vital tool to disseminate their messages, contact the voters and the campaign team, influence mass media and mass-interpersonal media, collect funds and organize supporters (Heaney, Newman & Sylvester, 2011).

Among different Internet platforms, social networking sites (SNS) have become notable due to their features of interactivity, immediacy, convergence across various platforms and ability to host large number of users. Facebook has become the most popular social networking site for political campaign because of its immense number of users. As of March, 2013, 1.11 billion people reportedly used it every month, 665 million people logged in every day, and 751 million people accessed it via mobile devices (Facebook, 2013). Its size, spread and ease of access have attracted scholars to explore Facebook as an arena of political communication.

A number of studies have explored political use of social media. Most have explored the content of social media messages (Vergeer, 2013; Heaney, Newman & Sylvester, 2011), the rhetoric in the communication (Gurevitch, Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Williams & Gulati, 2013) or social network activi-