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Politics, journalism and Web 2.0 in the 2008 U.S. presidential elections

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Politics, Journalism and Web 2.0 in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Elections

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Journalism and Media Studies
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Date of approval:
March 25, 2009

Keywords: new media, Internet, newspapers, fact checking,
campaign news reporting, social networks

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Wayne Scott Garcia

ABSTRACT

The explosion of new political speech in digital formats in the 2008 elections, especially those involving social networking, offered new opportunities and challenges for political journalists, campaign participants and voters alike. This review of new political media in 2008 examines how these new methods of political organizing and communications work and provides insights to further understand how media can best cover and participate in them. The thesis details how 2008 was the first fully Web 2.0 election, exhibiting its characteristics of interactivity, use of databases and the "long tail" of microniche Internet websites. Three new media uses — online, database-driven political speech fact checking as exemplified by PolitiFact; the social networking site Facebook; and interactive, no-cost video streaming on YouTube — illustrate where the changes from traditional political communications to new media are most dramatic. A heightened awareness of emerging political communications forms and a new model for political journalists' interaction with news consumers and vastly different skills sets for reporters will be needed for news media to cover and participate in the new digital electorate.

Chapter One

Introduction — The New Digital Electorate

We are in a period of fundamental change in press coverage of (and participation in) politics, one that is seeing an unprecedented pace in adopting new media technologies and uses; blurred lines between professional journalists, citizen journalists, bloggers and activist communicators; and the delivery of political audio and video on demand and virally distributed via the Internet. Examining new digital political communications is theoretically relevant as it mirrors the larger societal move toward technology, new communications forms and social networking on the Internet. "Old Media" theories, constructed to explain and predict phenomena observed in traditional print and broadcast mass media forms, have proven inadequate to the task of understanding how digital media work and how consumers want/need information in forms and formats far different than those present before 1995. How journalism both covers and immerses itself in this new digital paradigm is one key to the survival of news media in the 21st Century, at a time when traditional media forms and business models are crumbling or undergoing transformation. This thesis looks at one of the most vital functions of a free press in a democracy: the journalistic coverage of politics and campaigns. It examines the rise of four important phenomena in a 2008 presidential elections that saw not only the first U.S. African-American president elected but also that candidate's campaign successfully use these new political communications tools. It looks at how the political press covered

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those new communications forms and, in some cases, used those new forms themselves to reach new audiences and attempt to keep or bolster older ones.

Internet use by voters to obtain political information nearly doubled from the 2004 election to 2008, with one-quarter of all voters reporting they use digital media for making their balloting decisions. For young voters, ages 18-29, the Internet is the primary source of information for political news (Pew Research Center for The People & The Press, 2008).

Just how prevalent have digital media become in the reporting lives of political journalists? In a survey of political reporters conducted in 2008, more than 70 percent acknowledged reading political blogs for more than one hour a day (Lidman, 2008). And traditional journalists are not only reading more blogs; they are blogging, as well, and finding their story subjects increasingly in social media networks. One study conducted in 2008 showed 60 percent of the public interacts with companies on social media sites at least once a week, 93 percent said they expect companies to have a presence in social media and 85 percent said they expect companies they do business with to interact with them in social media networks ("Cone Finds That Americans Expect," 2008).

The Top 5 political blogs in 2004 attracted more than a half-million readers a day and were such a potent force in politics that the White House created a position with the title "Internet director" (Drezner, 2004, p. 33). By 2006, political blog readership rose to 9 percent of the total blog readers, which by extrapolation would put political blog readership in the millions of consumers (Graf, 2006).

What's more, the 2008 elections had at its full disposal the increasingly sophisticated digital tools of Web 2.0, described as the second phase of the Internet

revolution. Web 2.0 digital media are characterized by: providing more interactivity, increased use of the world wide web as an open-platform instead of merely as a set of proprietary software applications; increased use of collective intelligence ("the wisdom of the crowd"); a richer user experience via multimedia tools such as Flash; and *cooperating* data sources instead of data sources that *control* (O'Reilly, 2005). To compare the old and the new: Mp3.com was Web 1.0, a sole provider selling and/or distributing music files online; Napster, where users share music files with each other without direction from a central controlling company, is Web 2.0. Personal websites that forced readers to *seek them out* and enter to gain information were 1.0; blogs that *send* their information out to other digital media via automated RSS syndication are 2.0. Web 2.0 companies (or campaigns) look to take advantage not of the biggest collections of users at the top of the Internet hierarchy (the "head" of the web) but from its "long tail," the "the millions of niche markets at the shallow end of the bitstream" (Anderson, 2004).

Research Questions

The embrace of new Web 2.0 media by political campaigns and a growing percentage of the electorate, combined with traditional news media's lack of embrace and understanding of the new technologies has created opportunity and concerns, confusion and more information than ever seen (quantitatively, not necessarily qualitatively).

This thesis seeks to answer the following questions:

Q1: What made the 2008 presidential elections different from those before it, and are those differences significant and longlasting?

Q2: What do new media technologies mean to the future of political journalism?

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Q3: How does social networking online equate to previous notions about society and the formation of social capital? How can/should journalists engage this alternate world?

Q4: Do any examples exist that could be cited as "best practices" for political journalists using new media technologies?

Theoretical Framework

To understand the growing dominance of new media and its pervasive presence in modern lives, we must first accept some outlines of applicable theories that will help make sense out of what was observed in the 2008 presidential elections.

First, I turn to a theory developed for organizational communications and business management purposes by, among others, Daft and Lengel (1986): Media Richness Theory. Also called rich media, it is a framework that delineates and ranks media by looking at its ability to reproduce information. Media "vary in the capacity to process rich information," or information that accurately reproduces the sender's intent (p. 560). The "richest" medium was described as face-to-face discussions, with all their visual and audio cues and nuances reproduced perfectly from the sender to the receiver. In descending order, the other media were telephone, personal letters or memos, impersonal written documents (work memos and notes), and numeric documents. They defined the differences in ranking as follows:

> "The reason for richness differences include the medium's capacity for immediate feedback, the number of cues and channels utilized, personalization, and language variety (Daft and Wiginton 1979). Face-to-face is the richest

medium because it provides immediate feedback so that interpretation can be checked. Face-to-face also provides multiple cues via body language and tone of voice, and message content is expressed in natural language. Rich media facilitate equivocality reduction by enabling managers to overcome different frames of reference and by providing the capacity to process complex, subjective messages (Lengel and Daft 1984). Media of low richness process fewer cues and restrict feedback, and are less appropriate for resolving equivocal issues. However, an important point is that media of low richness are effective for processing well understood messages and standard data." … "Rich information transactions allowed for rapid feedback and multiple cues so that managers can converge on a common interpretation." (P. 560)

Later, Sitkin, Sutcliffe and Barrios-Choplin (1992) identified two more aspects of richness: a medium's ability to carry data and its ability to convey symbols. (We can think of this as *literal-* and *symbolic-*communications carrying capacity.)

Though the theory is aimed at organizational needs and not mass media and pre-dates the widespread influence of the Internet, it still is a valuable evaluative framework for this thesis, and later researchers in education, among other fields, have also used it to help determine the best medium to use in a given communications situation.

A second theoretical framework for this thesis is Discourse Analysis Theory. The study of discursive limits and definitions was first outlined by Foucault, who said there were social boundaries to communications, as well as a specialized knowledge that framed or outlined what could be understood or discussed in society (Rabinow and Rose, 2003). Discursive analysis looked at the relationship between language used and the roles

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of agency and structure. In news media studies, Altheide (1996) suggests the theory as a means of "tracking discourse" across time and different issues, news stories and media:

> "What we call things, the themes and discourse we employ, and how we frame and allude to experience is crucial for what we take for granted and assume to be true. Simultaneously, we experience, reflect on that experience, and direct future experience. When language changes and new or revised frameworks of meaning become part of the public domain and are routinely used, then social life has been changed, even in a small way." (p. 69)

It is possible that new media both must hew to discursive boundaries and also smash some of those same limits because of their different abilities to communicate faster, with greater feedback, with larger numbers of people, even if that communication is more prone to interpretation and less "rich." New media presents us with a dichotomy in terms of richness theory: It is both highly impersonal (at least, in the traditional sense of person or being) and yet also rich in interactivity that could allow the impersonal nature of the media to be overcome. Discourse analysis provides a framework of looking at how issues or stories are handled in new media, and how new media influences or places those same news story frames into society and other, traditional media.

Methodology

To understand better the trends that developed in new political media in 2008, I reviewed and analyzed the contents of key technological media developments (online fact-checking, both independent and partisan; text messaging; micro-blogging tools such

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as Twitter; social networks such as MySpace and Facebook; streaming video delivery sites such as YouTube and political blogs, among others) to examine the breadth and quantity of their content and any new forms of political communication or political journalism arising from that communication.

My content review specifically measures some key indicators, analyzes the content and defines the characteristics of three leading political new media technologies: the newspaper and nonprofit fact-checking sites (as typified by the *St. Petersburg Times'* PolitiFact); social networking sites (as typified by Facebook's political groups and fan pages); and political actors' ability to bring an unmediated message directly to voters, outside of the traditional mass media (as demonstrated by YouTube's delivery of official campaign videos and advertisements, as well as viral, non-campaign-produced political speech, news and commentary).

Their technology and contents were reviewed for six criteria: richness of media; scope of use by campaign participants; level of exposure to the electorate (measured in terms of page views by users); interactivity, or the ability for the electorate to talk back through the medium; news coverage of the new medium by traditional journalism outlets; and adoption/co-option by traditional news media. They were also reviewed for their relationships to news media coverage and political communications forms that were present in the 2004 election.

I make no claim that this content review is comprehensive or empirical; rather, this thesis is designed to outline a new research agenda into the effects of new media on political coverage in some very specific and influential areas where traditional journalism values seem to be eroding or where traditional media are missing important political

communications. It also highlights the need for traditional media companies to better understand these new media tools and the effects they are having on political news coverage and, by extension, the healthy functioning of democracy. This thesis addresses a basic question: Have new media improved or injured political journalism?

A Review of the Literature

The new digital media have proven to be a conundrum to mass media researchers. They have picked away at the edges of "cyberspace" but have failed to find a theory to unify its many elements or explain and predict its effects on society and how it is affected by society's use of its digital world. The definitions and even the existence of cyberspace (a separate, parallel reality created and sustained by computers all over the globe, often thought of as another dimension) and its resulting cyberculture (which Benedikt called the "common mental geography, built, in turn, by consensus and revolution, canon and experiment" [as cited in Bell, 2001, p. 7]) are hotly debated. Some even see the emergence of new media, its global spread and ability to communicate almost instantaneous with news events as a challenge to traditional mass media theories, that traditional mass media theories aren't up to the task of making sense of these new phenomena (Williams, 2003). Some theorists have attempted to define new media in terms of its global reach and impact, with McLuhan's "global village" theory of a world connected by electronics and involved with each other on a caring, village level despite long distances (McLuhan Fiore and Agel, 1968) reaching pop culture recognition in the 1960s but since proving either to be inaccurate or inadequate.

Surveys done in advance of the 2008 presidential primary elections found a strong

shift to digital media for gathering political news and information. Traditional media sources (nightly TV news, daily newspapers and local TV newscasts) all dropped significantly in use by voters from 2000 to 2008, while Internet use rose from 9 percent to 24 percent of those surveyed. More than half (54 percent) of voters said they used one of three online news resources: MSNBC, CNN or Yahoo News. Even in online new consumption, however, there was evidence of the Web 2.0 "long tail:" the Pew survey found hundreds of political news resources used by less than 1 percent of the voting public, and nearly 30 percent of those surveyed got their political news from one of those long-tail websites (Pew, 2008).

The topic of social interaction and the Internet has produced the largest body of research in social sciences, focusing on its implications for understanding digital interaction and how mediating communications affect the concept of personal identity and impact close relationships:

> Communication on the Internet erases physical and voice cues, allowing users to remain anonymous and to maintain a high degree of control over their side of the communication, all the while interacting with people across the globe. These features allow people to create new identities and roles, and interact in the context of these roles, more so than any other mode of communication. Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) even suggested that people use the Internet as a laboratory to test new identities before embracing them in everyday life. Thus, one question driving many of these empirical investigations is, Do online effects on a person's identity or personal relationships transfer or generalize to offline understandings of self and face-to-face relationships? (Borgida and Stark, 2004, p.

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Social Networking and Related Social Theories

Online social networking has long been one of the Internet's most interesting possibilities, but advancements in databasing and website design in the past five years have made a handful websites devoted strictly to social networking (most notably Facebook, MySpace and ning) enormously popular. Those sites and others like them approximate real-world social relations by allowing users to share information about themselves, select their correspondents and widen their network of social links by receiving information from their correspondents' online social networks. This is accomplished through the power of databases and the automated delivery of shared information in the online social circles. The searchable database allows users to find friends, colleagues, and family by name, or even to search for other long-lost acquaintances that have worked at the same company, attended the same schools or lived in the same neighborhood.

Social networks may be new online, but they are a longtime source of interest for academic researchers in the physical, or non-digital, world. Social networks are the relationships (friendship, esteem, collegiality, etc.) between different actors, either people or companies or other types of socially based groups (Snijders, 2001). Researchers have looked at how the links between the actors in a social network create or dictate behavior, and how those links can create a kind of tangible or intangible social capital between the actors. Social Networking Theory examines nodes (individuals) and the relationships, or ties, between to determine an individual's social capital and was first identified by Barnes

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in 1954. SNT has been used to map the nodes and ties of a group to determine the richness of social interaction and social capital for its individuals.

Many factors in modernity have contributed to a decrease in physical social interaction in civil society, resulting in what some researchers believe are losses in social capital, decreasing trust among people and fewer community bonds. Those factors include the impact of mass media and technology that allowed people to consume only the information and entertainment they want and to consume it at home, alone (Putnam, 2000). Putnam observed that more people were "bowling alone," but his hypothesis about the resulting loss of social capital could simply be a shift from one social activity (families bowling together) to another (youth athletic leagues that gave rise to the political term "soccer moms," for one example).

The rise in popularity of social networking sites on the Internet has been one of the most dramatic phenomena of the digital age. To use Boyd and Ellison's definition (2007), social networking sites are:

> …[W]eb-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site. (para. 4)

These sites not only allow people who directly know each other to share information, views and commentary but connects people who don't even know each other in the non-digital world, their only connection to each other being a third-party, via

various "degrees of separation," i.e. friends of friends of friends. Social networking blurs the lines between a true friend (someone you know and like have an affinity for) and these distantly connected individuals. The ability to network and communicate with people who are not in your immediate circle of family, friends and colleagues is magnified by digital communications, which can marry databases to connect these friends of friends, delivering information about their lives and views to a person's social networking page automatically and without discrimination between real friends and online "friends." These digital acquaintances are even termed "friends" on Facebook, the most visited commercial social networking site in the world. The verb "to friend" someone in this social networking world doesn't mean to gain the familiarity and closeness of a real-world friend: it simply means to add a stranger to your list of "friends," giving them access to your personal information and communications, and you to theirs.

The first online social network is credited to a 1997 launch of a site called sixdegrees.com. Today, the dominant players are the News Corp.'s MySpace and the privately held Facebook. Commercially owned social networking websites are so new to the digital landscape that little scholarly research about them exists. (Facebook, which recently surpassed MySpace in page views, only opened its site to the public — vs. the high school and college students to which it was initially limited — in 2006. It now has 30 million U.S. users.) "Vast, uncharted waters still remain to be explored. Methodologically, SNS [social networking sites] researchers' ability to make causal claims is limited by a lack of experimental or longitudinal studies" (Boyd and Ellison, 2007, para. 76).

Facebook and MySpace both are populated by campaigns and campaigners. It is
Facebook, however, that is the political social network of choice for those inside the
Beltway. Facebook became so politics-friendly by the 2008 campaign season that one
technology news blog that focuses on how high-tech was used in presidential campaigns
wrote, "Facebook has become the tool of choice for political and non-profit organizations
to identify and energize supporters" (Bassik, 2007). There is some preliminary research
showing a relationship between a candidate's use of Facebook and success on Election
Day. One study of congressional races in the 2006 midterm elections found that the level
of support on Facebook for candidates " had a significant effect on their final vote
shares," particularly where there was no incumbent running. Because Facebook's
dominate demographic (18-24 years old) would represent an oversampling in the real
world of voters (where 18-24's vote least often), the researchers concluded that Facebook
support is "an indicator of a campaign resource that does matter:" a campaign's intensity
and its ability to motivate its supporters (Williams and Gulati, 2007, p.2). It may not
represent a causal relationship but instead reflect well-organized, well-funded campaigns
using all the political communications tools available to them.

Video Images and Viral Distribution

In theoretical terms, the viral distribution-interactive nature of YouTube and
similar on-demand streaming video websites (including commercially oriented TV.com,
Joost, Sling.com, Veoh, Fancast and Hulu) serves two audience needs in politics:
cognitive and evaluative. Psychology researchers define cognition as stemming from a
"need to structure relevant situations in meaningful, integrated ways … a need to

understand and make reasonable the experiential world" (Cohen, Stotland, and Wolfe, 1955) and "an individual's tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive endeavors" (Cacioppo and Petty, 1984). Research in mass communications, psychology and political science show that such high-cognition consumers seek out information to evaluate their world and "genuinely enjoy the process" (Holbrook, 2006, p. 344).

Another important component of YouTube is its viral nature. Viral communications are akin to a digital word-of-mouth but operate in a much more complex atmosphere. They are largely without central control, with great determination by the end user of the media. Lippmann and Reed (2003) describe the attributes of a viral medium:

> In its most general form, the implications of a viral system are (1) that it is relatively infrastructure-free and thus can gain grassroots adoption, (2) that it is inherently flexible and open to innovation in that there need be no large-scale deployed core system on which it is based, and (3) it mimics the end-to-end design principle of the Internet that places the intelligence at the user nodes rather than in the network core itself. (p. 2)

Online video such as YouTube would seem to meet both theoretical needs and provide users the ability to self-select: to find and choose their own political information, rather than rely on media gatekeepers or paid political advertising. For the electorate, it is a more efficient and active means of information acquisition, when compared to traditional methods of news consumption that would be better characterized as passive (TV producers select only the handful of political stories that can fit into a 30-minute nightly news network or the hourly news cycle of the 24-hour cable news networks; print

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newspaper editors make the same space-constrained decisions daily as well). The value of an on-demand video political information system was recognized more than a decade ago:

> The new media have freed users from the tyranny of the time clock. Twenty-four-hour news channels and computer news sources now make news available around the clock, rather than at times dictated by media delivery schedules. The rapid spread of home computers has increased the size of audiences who can reach computerized data at times of their choice. (Graber, 1996, p. 33)

But a decade ago, the content lagged the infrastructure; while more people had access to political information, there was not much new information outside of the traditional media sources. "Despite an explosion of politically oriented Home Pages on the World Wide Web, surprisingly little has been added that is genuinely new or that enriches the information supply beyond the offerings of the far smaller circle of 'old' media" (Graber, 1996, p. 33).

Today, that breadth of information sources is wider and extends beyond traditional media, because of sites such as YouTube. In the 1990s, researchers such as Graber discussed homes owning "video recorders" and having the ability to buy political information on "videotapes and CD ROMs" (1996, p. 34). Today's communications channels have made manufacturing and distribution of information cheaper and quicker, from iPhones that incorporate web browsers to telephones that text-message or Twitter. That has allowed political communicators who are not well capitalized to produce low-

cost messages and distribute them to a potentially large audience in a way that was previously only available to media companies or political communications consultants equipped with cameras, gear, studios and an ability to manufacture video tapes, audio tapes and computer discs or possessing enough money to purchase expensive broadcast or cable television advertising time. The effectiveness of this new media pipeline in delivering messages and winning elections remain a subject of much popular debate but little empirical study.

YouTube also provides "an automatic focus group for news content" with its interactivity (Grove, 2008, p. 29). Consumers of the information record their interest in numbers of "views counted" and leave comments that can help guide whether that political message is distributed more widely, refined further or abandoned all together.

The Art and Science of Verification

There has been a rise of systematic political journalism fact checking even as there appears, at times, to be a decline in overall fact checking that may be attributed to the general economic decline of the print news industry, which has left fewer newsroom budget dollars for fact-checking personnel or has left newsrooms so thin of reporters and editors that double-checking facts is sometimes overlooked.

Systematic fact checking has never been a strong suit for traditional newspapers, unlike the function at many magazines. *The New Yorker*'s fact checkers, for example, are legendary for their thoroughness, working on an author's manuscript to verify every single fact before publication. At traditional daily newspapers, such an independent fact checker does not exist. Verifying facts is the job of reporters, supervising editors and

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copy editors but is not done in a systematic way.

Yet verification and the act of presenting "the truth" is at the heart of the public's expectation of the role and responsibility of journalism, especially as it relates to journalism's unique responsibility to providing the important information that citizens need to make good decisions in a democracy. But what is "true?" Does fact checking make something truer than something not fact checked? What role do voters' perceptions and ideologies play in whether they accept fact checking as a tool to determine the truth? Of the challenges that verification and truth faces in a post-modern Internet society, journalist and scholar Bill Kovach (2006) wrote:

> As Walter Lippmann said more than 80 years ago: Citizens in a democracy do not act on reality but on the picture of reality that is in their minds. Most of the guiding principles of journalism are shaped by this concept. As an organizing principle for newsroom values it has served democracy well. But the world has slipped beyond the reach of the light Walter Lippmann once cast. Today we live in a media world in which competing interests are creating realities designed to encourage communities of consumers, communities of belief, and communities of allegiance. It is in this environment that a journalism of verification must find its place by using these new technologies to support communities of independent thought. Journalists must find tools that will enlist a methodology of verification in a more citizen-oriented way and help the public weigh this against what they are told daily by the popular culture and political spin. (p. 40)

Academics have started to try to codify an ethos of fact checking. Jackson and Jamieson (2004) offering seven guiding principles:

> Reporters would serve their readers and viewers well by moving beyond he-said-she-said reporting to embrace their primary role as custodians of fact. In this thesis, we have outlined some principles they might apply in performing this task: Examine the way terms are defined, explore assumptions underlying calculations and projections, do not hear average as typical or as a measure of the effect on an individual, find out who is in the denominator, create context that makes sense of omissions, remember that a vote is not always what it appears to be, and apply the same standards to all sides of an argument. (p. 236)

Finally, a word about the concept that is at the heart of verification: Trust. The concept is much studied in social sciences, especially in political sciences and social psychology and is "a central element in the professional ideology of journalism" (Tsfati, 2004, p. 275). Trust is a form of social capital, and in the study of news media; it represents a perception on the part of the audience and the journalist that trusting each other is mutually beneficial. The news consumer benefits from trusting the journalist by saving time and effort it would take to seek out competing sources of information; the journalist benefits by having a steady, reliable (and paying) audience.

For something to be true, then, it must be demonstrably accurate and recognizable as such to reasonable people (in the aggregate). It must be arrived at through an open process of testing and verification of information.

Chapter Two

Overview

Innovation is always a part of political campaigning; stump speeches gave way to radio addresses, which gave way to televised interviews, which gave way to Madison Avenue-inspired (if not directed) advertising spots on television, which gave way to (by 2004) sophisticated demographic database targeting and automated and annoying "robo-" telephone calls, to name a few.

But 2008 was different in two major ways: First, the level of technological involvement and digital campaigning was unprecedented. Many of the innovations would come from political outsiders or campaign grass-roots activists or simply take on lives of their own as memes (a self-sustaining, viral idea spread on the Internet). They allowed interactivity between candidate and voter, or news media and consumer. They often included a component of social networking, with database searching allowing a person to greatly expand their network of close friends to include distant acquaintances and friends of friends. They were often linked to portable electronics devices, smart phones, iPhones or PDA's.

The second phenomenon, however, represented a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1996) from the linear progression of political communication science in the United States: the news media began mimicking the very types of communications being utilized by campaigners and activists, creating journalist-written blogs, using SMS text messaging to

deliver news, "tweeting" short news bites or headlines on Twitter and producing news video for consumption on YouTube or on their own websites. Traditional media did not start delivering news via direct mail or robotic telephone calls when those campaign innovations were introduced by politicians over the past decades; but in 2008, all sides of the political-news equation ran with equal speed to use (or attempt to use) new media to deliver their information, whether it was news coverage, political speech or third-party political messages.

By the time the election was over, in November 2008, both the political campaign and political journalism worlds were faced with new technologies that (sometimes) neither understood fully. Some candidates and campaigns, just as some news media, embraced these new technologies, giving them prominent places in their communications activities and altering (to whatever degree, big or small, history proves) the future of political campaigns. Others did not. Activists and identity-shielded third-party special interest groups, however, had greater ability to organize and spread pro and con messages to the public over such vehicles as social networking sites (MySpace and Facebook); cell phone SMS text messaging; blogs, or web logs, a diary-like media used by journalists, citizen journalists and party/candidate activists alike; Twitter, a 140-character type of instant message sent over a social network on computers and smart phones that was quickly embraced by Democratic challenger John Edwards to send messages to supporters; online streaming video (such as YouTube); and even more sophisticated e-mail and online fund raising methods, including gaming strategies, giving away dinners or appearances with a candidate or soliciting the recipients' participation in campaign websites' social networks.

By the time the campaign ended, candidates were making major announcements via either YouTube videos or text messages to supporters. Obama named his vice presidential candidate, Joe Biden, in a text message to as many as 10 million supporters of his campaign who had registered their mobile telephone numbers with the Obama campaign. (Only Democratic Party leaks spoiled the surprise, as news stories of Biden's selection beat the text message to the street.) The announcement a month earlier by the Obama campaign that it would reveal its selection this way sent innumerable voters (and journalists) to the campaign's website to register for notifications, adding to Obama's database and allowing him to send other campaign messages to those new texting recruits (Butterworth, 2008). As president-elect and president, Obama continued his use of new media, giving the traditional weekend radio message on YouTube videos and revamping the White House website on his first day in office.

The Obama campaign also ran a sophisticated text messaging system, cross-referencing its various voter-contact databases to target young and persuadable voters. It collected these cell phone numbers in a variety of ways: in neighborhood canvassing, online in social networks and at Obama political rallies, where supporters were often encouraged to text in a message to Obama that would appear on a digital "news crawl" sign somewhere above the stage, to be read by everyone in attendance (by sending the text message, the cell phone user's number was then captured and put into the Obama database.) In a nod to McLuhan, the use of the SMS text messaging technology alone delivered the message to young voters that Obama was one of them, the medium itself providing a much stronger connection to this historically under-voting age group of than any message it delivered in text (McConnell, 2008). Journalism's adaptation was that two

could play at that game. Online newspapers, television and radio stations and other digital news outlets began offering text message news updates, either as news broke or in daily digests. Newspapers started their own blogs: *The New York Times* in 2009 boasted more than 60 blogs on its website, including blogs on breaking political news ("The Caucus"), opinion and lifestyle topics.

All news media blogs have several key aspects in common: They are branded with a name outside of the normal news section names in a print newspaper; they emphasize personality, either of the individual journalist or the group of journalists who contribute to them; they use language and story forms that are much less formal than traditional print media; and they syndicate their blog news stories, called "posts," automatically to consumers via a technology called RSS, or Really Simple Syndication. RSS allows those posts to be automatically received and read by consumers using either RSS reader software or a free online RSS reader, such as Google Reader.

There is no reliable, scientific data on the number of journalists who are blogging, how their posts differ from traditional news stories or the depth and breadth of their consumption by the voting public. Some bloggers, in fact, don't even consider journalists capable of being bloggers, reserving the title for digital authors who work outside the traditional constraints of journalism and traditional news media. While the phenomenon of newspaper blogging has had an especially strong connection to political campaigning, it is not a focus of this thesis because political blogging is largely unchanged (except in scope, or the number of political blogs being published) from its use in the 2004 presidential elections.

Other digital information distribution technologies, however, saw an explosion in

users and consumers in 2008 or have emerged only since the 2004 elections were concluded. Twitter is one of those new media to be introduced since the 2004 elections. It saw enormous growth as a means of distributing everything from personal information to breaking news. It is especially popular among 25- to 34-year-olds. In January 2008, 12 percent of Twitter's users fell into that demographic; for the week ending Jan. 17, 2009, that percentage had risen to 45, according to web metrics company Hitwise. Of the website links embedded into Twitter messages (called "tweets"), 10 percent went to news media online sites (Dougherty, 2009). And news media were not simply the recipient of Twitter-directed traffic; by May 2008, at least 173 U.S. newspapers had Twitter accounts, with an average 171 "followers" (other Twitter members who subscribe to those Twitter accounts and automatically receive the newspapers' tweet messages). That included two well-known newspaper fact-checking sites, the *St. Petersburg Times* (expressed on Twitter as @politifact) and *Washington Post* (@thefactchecker). One graphic designer blogger who tracks newspapers that Twitter measured triple- and quadruple-digit monthly increases in followers for those newspapers in 2008, although that data could not be independently or scientifically verified (Smith, 2008). By Feb. 2009, the number of newspaper-related Twitter accounts had grown so large (1,360) that the blogger who tracked them all announced to her readers that she was "giving up" because the task proved too time-consuming.

The result of this new medium in terms of news delivery is unknown. The medium is too new to measure its impact. Anecdotally, many cable news shows and an increasing number of local broadcast news operations are using Twitter to send and receive messages from viewers as they air news programs, mostly using tweeted

comments as a punctuation or commentary on reported news stories.

A third force emerged to challenge both the news media's and candidates' dominant positions on agenda-setting: activist or grassroots media. These groups and individuals have long worked through traditional methods (fundraising, networking, influencing traditional media, door-to-door canvassing, etc.) to attempt to influence the course of presidential campaigns. New media technologies, however, have leveled the playing field more, to the advantage of lesser-funded grassroots activists. Using the same low-cost technologies as the mainstream media and well-financed candidates, these activists in 2008 could reach wider audiences and drive their agenda into the public arena with greater effect. One example is the digital movement that arose to lift Republican candidate Dr. Ron Paul, a little-known one-time Libertarian candidate for president and a constitutionalist conservative member of Congress. Supporters of the Ron Paul "Revolution," as they dubbed themselves, took actions independent of any central direction from the Paul Campaign, producing and distributing amateurish videos extolling his candidacy and a return to Constitutional basics in the nation. Paul supporters purchased Paul yard signs at their own costs and distributed them on their own timetables, again independent of the campaign's strategists. Paul supporters used social media and new technologies to coordinate their activities both internally (within groups of Paul supporters who shared a common geographic location) and externally (among other Paul groups across the nation). Such low-cost alternative methods of communication proved an ability to be popular (in terms of the number of people it was exposed to) if not able to sway the result of an election (Paul lagged near the bottom of the crowded Republican presidential field for most of his campaign). For example, a

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YouTube-distributed video of a Paul supporting singing "The Ron Paul Song"

accompanied only by an acoustic guitar received more than 472,000 viewings after it was

posted in Sept. 2007.

The Ron Paul Revolution didn't win the election for Paul. But did it alter

mainstream news media coverage of the congressman and his ideas, providing traditional

political journalists news hooks to write about Paul and his digitally organized army? It is

unlikely that Paul would have finished higher in the balloting than Rudy Giuliani in the

Iowa primary and Fred Thompson in New Hampshire without such a technologically

manufactured "buzz" that spread his message well beyond his campaign's financial

ability to purchase traditional media advertising or other campaign resources. Paul had

neither the traditional campaign infrastructure nor the campaign financing to mobilize his

grassroots support. Instead, the digital Ron Paul army led itself without a central

command, passing messages, strategy and get-out-the-vote tactics via the new media

channels. One obvious sign of the impact of the Paul campaign's benefit from new media

is the fact that he finished fourth in a crowded field of GOP heavyweights, his 1.1 million

total primary votes ahead of former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani and former U.S.

Sen. and well-known Hollywood actor Fred Thompson. Paul even finished second in four

primaries where more than just he and John McCain were on the ballot: in South

Carolina, Pennsylvania, Montana and Nevada.

In many instances throughout the 2008 presidential elections, candidates, media

and grassroots activists used new media forms to spread messages and alter the mass

media agenda on issues. It is instructive to examine and analyze in a more in-depth

fashion three specific technologies and uses that came to the fore in 2008: Viral videos on

YouTube, social networking sites such as Facebook; and digitally cataloged and searchable fact checking of candidates' statements and campaign advertising, as demonstrated by PolitiFact.

Findings and Analysis: YouTube

YouTube is part-broadcasting medium, part-social network that allows users to upload and share videos at no cost. It is owned by Google, the Internet's most popular set of websites and services driven by its market-leading search engine.

YouTube's reach into the total Internet audience is impressive. With 42 percent of the total 190 million-person digital audience viewing a YouTube page at least once a month, it ranks higher than social networks MySpace and Facebook; news site MSN.com; and online retailers eBay and Amazon. More significantly for the purposes of comparing its audience to traditional print news media, YouTube has a greater reach for advertisers than the NNN, or Newspaper National Network LP, a print-and-digital marketing partnership between the top 25 newspaper companies in the United States and the Newspaper Association of America. NNN has a 38 percent reach, 4 percentage points lower than YouTube's (comScore, 2008). The top U.S. newspaper website, that of The New York Times, has nearly 13 million unique visitors a month; YouTube has 81 million. (NNN, 2008)

Ten hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute, with a sizable portion of that being related to news and politics. Its use exploded from 2004 to the 2008 campaigns: A search of YouTube for "2004 presidential campaign" videos yielded 1,070 returns, many of them merely copies of advertisements that ran on broadcast television or

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snippets of politically oriented mainstream media news coverage or entertainment parody. That same search for "2008 presidential campaign" produced 18,600 returns, many of them featuring content produced solely for Internet distribution, by campaigns, activists, commentators, citizens, activists, pundits and a variety of other players in the political process. That is an 18-fold increase from one campaign cycle to the next.

All 16 of the major 2008 presidential candidates had their own "channel" on YouTube during the primaries, using them to upload and share both standard broadcast television advertisements and longer, web-only videos that were then shared and spread virally. The Barack Obama campaign uploaded an average 2-3 new videos a day during the general election. YouTube's political director Steve Grove (2008) said such activity fundamentally changed the election process; seven candidates, in fact, announced their candidacy on YouTube, and YouTube was a co-sponsor of a Republican primary debate in St. Petersburg, Fla., and a Democratic primary debate broadcast from The Citadel in South Carolina, at which candidates were quizzed via short videos submitted by YouTube users. In Grove's assessment:

> What this means is that average citizens are able to fuel a new meritocracy for political coverage, on unburdened by the gatekeeping 'middleman.' Another way of putting it is that YouTube is now the world's largest town hall for political discussion, where voters connect with candidates — and the news media — in ways that were never before possible. (p. 28)

YouTube lists 35,000 videos that were tagged "political" in 2007 or 2008. The most-viewed videos fell into several broad categories: adoration ("I've got a crush on

Obama" with 13 millions views); parody ("Barack Rolled" with nearly 6 millions views); and traditional news coverage ("Obama Speech: 'A More Perfect Union'" from CNN, with 5.8 million views).

Viral videos — spread via blogs, e-mails, text messages, Twitter and other digital media until they were picked up as "newsworthy" by traditional mass media outlets — became crucial tools, by campaigns, activists, social commentators and pop culture artists. The Pew Research Center for The People & The Press documented the flow from digital to mainstream news in 2007 polling:

> Short videos produced for the Internet are becoming an important component of campaign news. In some cases, candidates themselves are producing videos and releasing them on their campaign websites. Candidates also are seeing their own gaffes or embarrassing moments packaged in a brief video and put up on the web for all to see. And while these videos originate on the Internet, more people are viewing them on TV than online. (Pew, 2007)

Take the example of the top-viewed "'I Got a Crush...On Obama' By Obama Girl" video, a production of a website called BarelyPolitical.com, whose slogan is "Making politics sexy again." It was seen more than 13.2 million times by YouTube users since it was posted to the site in June 2007 (BarelyPolitical.com, 2007). The 3-minute, 19-second video was a song parody, with an R&B-style singer intoning that she has a crush on Barack Obama. "So I put down my Kerry sign / I knew I had to make you mine" mirrored the lyric construction of popular love songs, providing an entertaining venue for the subliminal message that Obama was different than other, older candidates:

He was hipper. It was a message written by marketers and artists, not political

consultants; BarelyPolitical's founder was a young college graduate with an MBA and a

background in advertising, and others on its creative team included two comedians, two

theater directors and a web technician (BarelyPolitical.com, 2009).

The Obama Girl video, and its sequels with the same character, had a profound

impact on mainstream media messages about Obama at a time when the eventual winner

trailed Democrat Hillary Clinton in polls and in "conventional wisdom" in traditional

press coverage. In terms of "earned media" (the campaign term for free news coverage,

versus paid advertisements), Obama Girl was featured in more than 460 mainstream news

stories in print and online and numerous 24-hour cable television news appearances

news. (A viral video of one appearance on MSNBC cable television, made two days

before a critical New Hampshire presidential primary, itself garnered more than 1 million

YouTube views.) It helped frame news coverage, as well. Within a month of the video's

release, for instance, *The New York Times* featured a prominent op-ed column mentioning

the viral video, titled "Can he crush Hillary?", its headline a play on words from the

Obama Girl crush video (Dowd, 2007). The viral spread online was aided by traditional

news coverage, in fact. In July 2007, a poll found that three times more people had seen

Obama Girl on television than had seen it online. Even more importantly, twice as many

people said they had heard of the video than had actually seen it, 16 percent having some

awareness of the video versus 8 percent actually saying they had viewed it (Pew, 2007).

Its grassroots impact was strong, as well. More than 70,000 people left comments

on the song's YouTube page. "Obama Girl" was mentioned 402 times in the major blogs

tracked by Lexis-Nexis during the campaign period. Facebook had 176 user-created

"Obama Girl" groups that other users joined and networked, some pro-Obama Girl and some anti ("Forget Obama girl, I'd rather be a Palin Boy").

One last important point on Obama Girl: The video showed the power to reach younger voters, a group with a mixed track record on voting participation and one that turned out in stronger-than-usual numbers for Obama. In its polling, Pew tested three other viral videos along with Obama Girl: a Clinton-produced Sopranos parody, a video of John Edwards brushing his hair set to "I Feel Pretty," and footage of John McCain joking about bombing Iran (almost half of the respondents were aware of at least one of the four videos):

> Although the campaign websites and internet videos are often geared toward younger voters, older people are more likely to have heard about three of the four videos – the Clinton video, the McCain video and the Edwards video. In all three cases, people ages 50 and older are more aware of the video than are those under age 50. The Obama video is the only one that all age groups have heard about in roughly equal numbers. (Pew, 2007)

Obama Girl is an example of a purely viral political video that was unconnected to any official campaign activity, i.e. the Obama campaign did not write, script, encourage or spread the video. While it generally appears to have endeared Obama to younger voters, it also could be viewed as demeaning and as making him appear less-than-presidential. Political videos also were generated from two other distinct camps: viral videos that were designed to benefit a candidate (some of which were eventually adopted as nearly official by a campaign) and those produced directly by the campaigns

themselves.

In examining the use of YouTube by the major presidential campaigns, it is clear that the medium came into its own in the 2008 campaigns. Almost every major presidential campaign uploaded campaign videos to YouTube, with both the most successful (Barack Obama) and among the least successful (Ron Paul) garnering millions of viewings by YouTube users. Obama's use of the Internet, and particularly his high-profile use of YouTube to deliver breaking news outside of the traditional mainstream press, has been singled out as the biggest political innovation of the 2008 campaigns. Arianna Huffington, the editor-in-chief of the online news blogging site The Huffington Post, told *The New York Times* that "were it not for the Internet, Barack Obama would not be president. Were it not for the Internet, Barack Obama would not have been the nominee" (Miller, 2008).
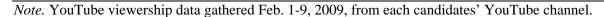
Is this hyperbole? After all, Ron Paul's supporters used the Internet well, and he finished a distant fourth. In analyzing the importance of the Internet, we must take into account causality and the particular details of Obama's path to the presidency. The Internet alone cannot cause anyone to be elected president; it is also likely true that someone can be elected president without effectively using the Internet. Obama's campaign, however, used the Internet for key strategic purposes (to overcome Hillary Clinton's huge financial advantage in fundraising; to punch away at Clinton's aura of inevitability; and to reinforce his message of change and that he was a "new" type of candidate) in cost-effective ways that will undoubtedly provide models for future candidates who will attempt to duplicate the success, as well other candidates who will further innovate with newer new media, using Obama's campaign as inspiration if not

necessarily a blueprint.

Table 1

The use of YouTube as a campaign video distribution channel by leading presidential campaigns, 2007-2008

Video	Views (through 2/1/09)	subject
Barack Obama	**Total videos=1,828**	**http://www.youtube.com/user/BarackObamadotcom**
Barack Obama on Ellen	6,246,728	talk show appearance
Obama Speech: 'A More Perfect Union'	5,862,165	speech on race in America
President-Elect Barack Obama in Chicago	4,617,021	Election night victory speech
Barack Obama: Yes We Can	2,636,248	Night of the NH primary, speech in Nashua
Iowa Caucus Victory Speech	2,327,515	Upon winning the Iowa Caucuses
Top 5 videos total	**21,689,677**	
John McCain	**Total videos=330**	**http://www.youtube.com/user/johnmccaindotcom**
Celeb	2,241,346	:30 commercial attacking Obama's celebrity
The One	1,686,887	:30 commecial attacking Obama
Joe Biden On Barack Obama	1,103,813	:30 commercial using Biden's words against Obama
Ayers	741,192	:30 commercial about Obama's connection to a radical
McCain Is Right	670,198	:30 commercial of Obama debate statement
Top 5 videos total	**6,443,436**	
Ron Paul	**Total videos=136**	**http://www.youtube.com/user/ronpaul2008dotcom**
Ron Paul Courageously Speaks the Truth	1,258,458	Paul from the GOP debate in May 2007
Ron Paul is Bill Maher's New Hero	912,715	Paul talks with the comedian/show host
Going the Distance	817,560	A campaign update to supporters
Progress	667,444	A campaign update to supporters
On the Tonight Show with Jay Leno, Part 1	411,792	talk show appearance
Top 5 videos total	**4,067,969**	
Mike Huckabee	**Total videos=185**	**http://www.youtube.com/user/explorehuckabee**
HuckChuckFacts	1,738,333	Endorsement humor with TV-film star Chuck Norris
What Really Matters	1,347,347	Holiday greeting from the candidate
Want to see the IRS disappear?	305,782	Issue ad: taxes and the IRS
Why Chuck Endorsed Mike - Episode One	265,157	Celebrity endorsement
Believe	148,290	Candidate discusses his religious beliefs
Top 5 videos total	**3,804,909**	
Mitt Romney	**Total videos=676**	**http://www.youtube.com/user/GovMittRomney**
Prank Call from "Governor Schwar...	719,439	Pranked by a Scharzenegger imitator
America's Single Greatest Challenge?	475,110	Candidate asks viewers what they think
Gov. Romney Interview With Jan Mickelson	212,178	Media interview
Roundhouse Kick	135,398	online advertisement
On The Tonight Show - Highlights	133,381	talk show appearance
Top 5 videos total	**1,675,506**	
Hillary Clinton *	**Total videos=92**	**http://www.youtube.com/user/hillaryclintondotcom**
Presents	333,529	A holiday message from the candidate
Hillary Speaks in Washington, DC June 7	257,431	Concedes the race and endorses Barack Obama
Ask Hillary	186,219	Takes questions from young voters
Caucusing Is Easy	174,775	Instructions on how to caucus in Iowa
GOTV 1	107,382	Urging supporters to vote on Nov. 4
Top 5 videos total	**1,059,336**	

(*Official YouTube channel no longer exists and some top-ranked videos may have been withdrawn)

Note. YouTube viewership data gathered Feb. 1-9, 2009, from each candidates' YouTube channel.

Joe Trippi, an online political innovator who guided the first digital campaign for Howard Dean in 2004, likewise lauded Obama's use of YouTube videos: "The campaign's official stuff they created for YouTube was watched for 14.5 million hours. To buy 14.5 million hours on broadcast TV is $47 million" (Miller, 2008). Obama's

campaign videos on YouTube received more than 26 million views (Table 1), with the most popular, a clip of him appearing on The Ellen Degeneres Show, receiving 6.2 million views, four to five times the number of viewers who watch a typical Degeneres broadcast.

Findings and Analysis: Facebook

In October 2007, 200 young, tech-savvy people sat in a room in Washington, D.C., to hear a lecture from Facebook's senior products developer, Ezra Callahan. The 200 were campaign workers attending the first Facebook Political Summit. On the agenda: how to use the social networking website for raising campaign money, organizing volunteers and "connecting with your supporters on a deeper and more personal level." Facebook's director of sales, Josh Rahn, told the gathering, "Our goal is to make you win" (Freire, 2007).

Facebook has 175 million users who spend a total of 3 billion minutes on the website every day, according to the website's self-reported statistics (Facebook, 2009). That translates to more than 17 minutes on average each day for every user on the social networking site.

Facebook began allowing politicians to create Facebook pages during the 2006 midterm election cycle. By early 2009, the number of political pages in the site topped 500. Barack Obama's Facebook page has more than 5.7 million supporters signed up; Republican presidential challenger John McCain has more than 584,000, and his running mate, Sarah Palin, had more than 518,000.

Facebook fills both an organizational and a message delivery category for a

political campaign. Users who sign up as "supporters" of a politician's Facebook page can volunteer to help the campaign, leave messages or questions on a bulletin board-like Wall, or see listings of campaign events in their areas. The political messages delivered include biographical information about the candidates, e-mails and uploaded campaign videos. A Facebook policy change in 2008 also helped large-scale political campaigns by lifting a 1,000-supporter e-mail limit that was in place for groups formed on the social networking site, allowing presidential campaigns to send unlimited e-mails to their supporters.

Even better for political campaigns, however, is Facebook's open-platform architecture, another Web 2.0 precept. The website's software source code and details of its computer platform, servers, etc. is open for anyone to design applications that will run within the Facebook site, providing the opportunity for politicians to expand exponentially their message delivery. Obama's Facebook page shows an example of such leverage: Obama's campaign developed an application that supporters could (with just a click of a checkbox when they signed up as supporters) have displayed on their own Facebook page. Every visitor to the supporter's page, in turn, saw messages from the Obama campaign that changed often, growing the number of people who were exposed to Obama campaign messaging. Even better for the politician, the message came with the imprimatur of a trusted friend whose page was hosting a political pitch — and hosting what amounts to a political advertisement for free.

In comparison, traditional news media attempts to tap into social networking sites for 2008 presidential coverage met with mixed or uncertain results. Where political campaigns garnered millions of supporters, newspapers that dabbled on Facebook had

thousands, if that (*The New York Times* had 362,000 "fans" linked to its Facebook page in March 2009; the *St. Petersburg Times*, just 278).

The New York Times, in fact, developed one of the more interesting attempts to adapt old-fashioned news writing with the possibilities inherent in new media. It created an application on Facebook called *The New York Times* News Quiz, five current events questions updated daily. Users took the quiz each morning and found their score posted on their own Facebook page, compared with any friends they have who likewise took the quiz. Interesting, yes, but effective? It is clearly not a mass media news delivery vehicle yet, as the application shows only about 3,200 monthly active users.

In another attempt at news media social networking innovation, Facebook and ABC News were partners in 2007 on a section of the social networking site called "U.S. Politics," allowing Facebook members to receive information about chosen presidential primary candidates that did not run on ABC's nightly newscast, as well as the opportunity to align themselves with a candidate. As Facebook executives explained in a news released in 2007: "This first-ever partnership seeks to empower voters with more information, both by bringing issues from the campaign trail to their lives in real-time and by surfacing the ideas and opinions of the people that matter to them the most. Together, ABC News and Facebook aim to mobilize active political engagement" (Facebook, 2007). Facebook users could subscribe to the profiles of ABC News reporters embedded with presidential campaigns and were promised "up-to-the-minute news stories, blogs and photographs documenting the behind-the-scenes action from the road directly onto Facebook" ("ABC News joins forces," 2007). The ABC News-U.S. Politics site also contained an application that Facebook users could add to their own personal

web pages that allowed them to track their friends' political preferences, share political information with them and "Take a position" on various issues in unscientific polling, the results of which were instantly available to the Facebook user in easy-to-consume graphics.

The ABC News-U.S. Politics section on Facebook was quietly retired in mid-2008, after the primaries were decided, however, with ABC News explaining that its primary coverage infrastructure wasn't applicable to the general election and declining to discuss any user statistics (Weprin, 2008). Facebook likewise provided no statistics or analysis of how popular the ABC News-U.S. Politics page was. Its U.S. Politics section became a simple set of links to existing Facebook political pages/groups.

If traditional news media companies have struggled in trying to figure out how social networking could be harnessed to report or distribute news, individual journalists seem to understand Facebook better. It has become a world of virtual schmoozing and information horse-trading:

> …For an increasing number of people in politics it's turned into a sort of "shadow" Washington. It's now a place where hundreds of journalists, politicians, political operatives, think tank people, lobbyists and advocates create pages — and spend parts of their days "friending" one another, trading messages, alerting their friends to favorites news stories and sharing photos and even video. (Wasserman, 2008)

Findings and Analysis: PolitiFact

PolitiFact was founded in 2007 as a partnership of the *St. Petersburg Times* and

Congressional Quarterly, both owned by the privately held Times Publishing Co. It uses

newsroom resources (reporters, editors and researchers) from both publications.

PolitiFact distinguishes itself as the most strident of fact-checking operations ("bolder,"

in its own terms), willing to "make a call, declaring whether a claim is True, Mostly True,

Half True, Barely True or False. We even have a special category for the most ridiculous

claims that we call 'Pants on Fire'" ("About PolitiFact," 2008).

PolitiFact stories run in both the print daily newspaper and on the PolitiFact.com

website, accompanied by a VU meter-like "Truth-O-Meter." PolitiFact tells its readers

"the Truth-O-Meter is based on the concept that – especially in politics - truth is not black

and white. Depending on how much information a candidate provides, a statement can be

half true or barely true without being false" (PolitiFact, 2008).

It also gives a detailed description of its six gradients of truthfulness-falsity.

PolitFact checks only claims that can be verified, in other words, questions of fact and

not of opinion. Its editor also says that it selects its fact checking subjects if the claims

pique reporters' curiosities or if the claim seems questionable.

PolitiFact continued its fact checking beyond the 2008 elections, announcing on

Nov. 12, 2008, that "The Truth-O-Meter is out of commission for routine maintenance,

but we'll bring it back in January to fact-check the White House and other players in

Washington." Upon PolitiFact's re-launch, the Truth-O-Meter had been renamed the

"Obameter," measuring the progress of 512 campaign promises that Barack Obama

made.

The difference between past fact-checking efforts at newspapers (normally done

by individual reporters on their own stories, but not done in a systematic way on entire

subjects such as a political campaign) and PolitiFact was its Web 2.0 use of databases and its design in a rapid-to-develop software platform called Django. The Times' investigative reporter/computer-assisted journalist who designed the site, Matt Waite, wrote of PolitiFact on his own personal blog:

> The site is a simple, old newspaper concept that's been fundamentally redesigned for the web. We've taken the political "truth squad" story, where a reporter takes a campaign commercial or a stump speech, fact checks it and writes a story. We've taken that concept, blown it apart into it's fundamental pieces, and reassembled it into a data-driven website covering the 2008 presidential election.

> The whole site is inspired by Adrian Holovaty's manifesto on the fundamental way newspaper websites need to change. Adrian's main theme was that certain kinds of newspaper content have consistent pieces that could be better served to the reader from a database instead of a newspaper story. I built PolitiFact with that in mind. (Waite, 2007)

The use of a database-driven platform allows the journalists to quickly and easily include several key pieces of information with each fact check "statement" online, including: all of the sources cited with hyperlinks to those sources for readers who want to see the primary research resources; the reporters, researchers and editors who produced each fact check, with each named linked to more information about the journalist, other fact checks he/she has done and an e-mail address for contacting them; and the exact date the fact check was posted. Such linking (providing a de facto publishing of the original data source) is not possible in print but is an integral part of Web 2.0's depth and

richness. The PolitiFact finding is then linked to any traditional print news stories that were based on that fact check, directly illustrating the fundamental difference between the print "story" and the digital fact check "statement."

PolitiFact's use of a database platform also allows readers to sort fact checks in many ways: by candidate, by issue or by truthfulness.

PolitiFact benefits from the Web 2.0 "long tail," linked to from more than 650 other websites, according to web metrics company Alexa. This is evidence that PolitiFact was spread virally (the site did little to no traditional marketing, only handing out PolitiFact T-shirts at a few political events, as well as web banner ads on tampabay.com and print "house ads" in the *St. Petersburg Times*, none of which would demonstrate enough exposure to earn that number of site links). In another nod to its Web 2.0 orientation, PolitiFact also produced a music video of its promotional rock song, "Gimme the Truth (The PolitiFact Song)," and it garnered more than 229,000 views on YouTube.

Powered by only its viral spread through news websites, political blogs, campaign websites and other digital media, PolitiFact grew a respectable audience. In October 2008 — at the height of political interest just before the presidential balloting — PolitiFact averaged more than 666,000 page views per week, with more than 800,000 unique visitors to its website in that month. During the 2008 presidential campaign, PolitiFact posted more than 750 "Truth-O-Meter" statements that checked on a political claim or statement. Its editor, Bill Adair, said of that number, "That is, I believe, the most fact checking ever done by a news organization in a campaign" (B. Adair, personal communication, March 4, 2009).

Finally, there is the possibility of a multiplier effect from the prominent type of

fact checking that PolitiFact did. Adair (who has covered numerous presidential

campaigns as a journalist) believes, anecdotally, that more newspapers did online fact

checking in some form or another during the 2008 election than ever before. (Adair,

personal communication, 2009) *The New York Times* was among those news media that

introduced a fact-checking element. It is this collective fact checking, and not the work of

any one organization, that may have impacted public opinion about the candidates and

their claims. There is (at least) a superficial relationship between exit polling about

whether the two major presidential candidates unfairly attacked each other and the

candidates' actual truthfulness, as determined by PolitiFact's fact checks (Table 2): 49

Table 2

PolitiFact Findings in the 2008 Presidential Race.

John McCain	Statements examined	%	
True	31	20%	
Mostly true	29	18%	
Half true	28	18%	
Barely True	27	17%	**62%**
False	35	22%	
Pants on fire	7	4%	
Total	**157**		
Barack Obama	Statements examined	%	
True	51	31%	
Mostly true	33	20%	
Half true	35	21%	
Barely True	19	11%	**49%**
False	26	16%	
Pants on fire	2	1%	
Total	**166**		

Note. Data gathered March 2008 from www.politifact.com

percent of those surveyed in a CNN exit poll said Obama unfairly attacked McCain, while PolitiFact found 49 percent of its Obama statements were rated half true or lower.

For McCain, exit polling showed 64 percent of voters thought he attacked Obama unfairly, and PolitiFact found that 62 percent of McCain's statements were half true or less (CNN, 2008). Even Adair doesn't claim cause-and-effect from PolitiFact's work alone but wonders if the spread of fact checking through more and more news media is responsible for voter perceptions of political truthfulness in 2008. It will take a great deal more scientific inquiry of voter perceptions and the impact of fact checking upon them to declare the two linked or to establish causality, but the seeming relationship (or even coincidence) points the way to future research.

Chapter Three

Conclusions

If 2004 was dubbed "The Internet Election" (Williams and Tedesco, 2006), then

2008 surely must have been "The Web 2.0 Election." Each of the three new media

examined in this thesis showed strong characteristics of a highly interactive, user-friendly

means of delivering political messages and/or political journalism outside of traditional

channels and on a very different paradigm than the traditional "objective gatekeeper"

model.

So what makes these technological advances so different from past advances in

political communications and political journalism? Their relative low cost for publishing

or broadcasting information, for one. Just about anybody can distribute their version of

the news or political messages all over the world, at instant speed and with very little

training or special ability. Another difference is their ability to recreate social networks

over long distances, a vast peer-to-peer connection where someone's mood and the day's

breaking news compete for the consumer's attention.

These are not just the latest fads or a simple evolution in political communications

or political journalism. They represent a fundamental shift in both politicking and

covering campaigns. Old models of communication were one-way streets: information

went from campaigns or newspapers to voters or readers. The information wasn't open to

change or addition or subtraction based on the perceptions or information of the people

consuming it; letters to the editor, for example, were not interactivity but a method of maintaining what was deemed as inclusivity. Old Journalism was declared as straight-forward, objective, gatekeeping news coverage; New Media Journalism is more subjective, more opinionated, more social, interactive and more egalitarian in who is allowed to report "news" or give viewpoints. It is crowd-sourced, like the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. It is less about narrative and more about linkages: connecting numbers in databases with user-friendly interfaces; linking people with common interests in social networking sites; hooking up friends of friends of friends to spread videos virally or short messages on Twitter.

For traditional journalists, the attributes of New Media Journalism can be foreign or even scary. Take this example from January 2009 on Twitter, when someone sent a message to the Miami Herald's Twitter account, "@miamiherald - your tweets are depressing." The Herald's non-traditional response: "Some days are happier than others Tweet at 17:47 has word happy in the headline … it's a start" (Holy Moly, 2009). It is hard to imagine seeing that verbiage in the newspaper's print editions 10 years ago.

Underlying these changes appears to be an unquenchable thirst to recreate traditional social capital that has been lost (or perceived by the public, via nostalgia, to be lost) in the postmodern, globalized world. Daily newspapers used to be part of that social capital, a one-stop source for all the news that was needed, its columnists trusted friends and valued voices. The three nightly network news shows made icons out of their anchors: Walter Cronkite, David Brinkley, Chet Huntley, Dan Rather, to name a few. New media news expands the village to take in more voices and has fewer single authorities. The current and emerging new media technologies are enabling the shift to an

online social networking world, but they are not driving demand for it. Consumer desire is the cause; new technologies fill that social void. We don't have time any more to share news or a story over the back fence with the neighbor as we work longer hours or take second jobs. It is easier to check the neighbors' status updates on Facebook while at work, even if that is a less authentic experience than a face-to-face conversation.

So, these are important and unique developments in media. But while politicians, grassroots organizers and special interests were quick to embrace these technologies, the structure and mores of traditional news media made journalism move slower to the growing communications options. Writing a blog, for instance, calls for putting the writer's personality front and center along with the information. That means a change from the faceless objectivity model that has ruled journalism for a century. Putting a reporter's personality (and possibly even personal life) into a news blog takes a significant change in the standard operating procedures for journalists.

Journalism is falling behind in adapting to new media, especially in the area of political news coverage (it seems, in contrast, to have the celebrity news aspect of new media covered much better, with untold hundreds of celeb-news sites and sources of new media information about Lindsay Lohan or Britney Spears). While tens of millions have embraced social networking online in sites such as Facebook, it is campaigns that understand the dynamics of these networks, not political news media. Campaign pages on Facebook draw millions of supporters; political journalism (in the guise of traditional print newspapers with a Facebook page) draw, at best, one-tenth that number. While some individual political journalists have made Facebook a virtual back hallways of political power — using it to stay in contact with sources, trade knowledge with other

reporters and market their news stories to people who become their Facebook friends —
news organizations have yet to tap the ability of social networking software to actually
deliver the news. Social networking sites could provide an ideal platform and model for
the next generation of general-interest daily newspapers, which could exist in online
social networking communities as the "friends" that deliver news and information from
"trusted sources" in much the same way that daily print newspapers once were viewed in
the mainstream United States.

Social networking has provided a powerful new outlet for political
communications, but it is a tough "beat" to cover, a difficult phenomenon to make sense
of and too new to be ubiquitous in the voting-age population. As my review has shown,
mainstream news media have struggled to find a foothold in social networks online even
as campaigns garner millions of "friends" who are digitally hooked up to their
information streams. News stories about politics in social networking sites tend to skew
either to the novelty or likely overstate the impact. Few, if any, look at how online social
connections translate to real-world actions, i.e. voting, or volunteering for campaigns, or
undertaking political activities.

In those areas where political news media are experimenting with the new
technologies, it is not clear that the experience is enhancing journalism or giving
consumers better, quicker information. In 2008, for instance, the traditional news media
began to mimic digital political communication forms such as blogs, Twitter messages
and cell-phone text messages containing news updates, among other new media. Almost
by definition, some of these new forms are harming the depth of news coverage; Twitter
limits its "micro-blog" messages that are sent via SMS technology to cell phones to just

140 characters per message. Not much depth there. But that new media is not about depth; it is about immediacy. In that context, Twitter could prove a viable news platform for breaking political news, leaving depth reporting as a follow-up matter on a different medium. But this thesis' preliminary review of these "news tweets" finds most giving minimal, headline-like news bites with links to fuller, traditional news stories instead of using the advantages of the technology to, perhaps, give the news serially, in several messages quickly as stories develop.

But are Web 2.0's new media degrading the credibility of political news and political journalists? This is a larger question than can be answered in this thesis' content review. Certainly traditionalists bemoan the use of new media at the expense of in-depth narrative or investigative journalism. Certainly the speed of publication required by some new media technologies has led to glaring mistakes or missing context. But there is evidence that some political journalism is adapting well to Web 2.0 capabilities. PolitiFact's history shows that a database-driven website used to test political speech for accuracy and veracity can draw a significant reading audience and could correlate to public perceptions about candidate truthfulness. By using new media technologies and platforms, PolitiFact is filling an important void. Brooks Jackson, a former Associated Press, CNN and *Wall Street Journal* reporter who serves as the director of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Political Fact Check, said:

> ""The press ought to be much more aggressive than it is. For a very long time, the press had been doing a lousy job of covering this main avenue of communication between a candidate and the voters. … When I first started [fact checking] ads, I was very surprised at how little pushback I was getting from

campaigns. I came to the conclusion that they were almost relieved that someone was keeping an eye on them. They'd been rugby-without-a-referee for so long they needed somebody to step in and make them play by the rules. It's just not good when Americans go to vote that they do so with their heads full of disinformation that has gone unchecked by the only entity that has a special protection under the Constitution of the United States to investigate it." (Chamberlain, 2008)

Even in its seeming success, PolitiFact remains susceptible to spin, both from within its own newsroom and from political operatives without. Its choices of what to fact check and what not to are likely more influenced than its final decisions, but if its agenda is chosen by outside forces (the prominence of a story or fact in mainstream media coverage, or pressure from one campaign to check a disputed fact from another) it is still falling short of measuring candidates' overall truthfulness accurately. Even with that limitation, PolitiFact (and some other journalistic fact-checking operations) would appear to be the closest the profession has come to a best-practices use in new media.

Other Web 2.0 new media have also filled a political void, even if they carry lots of meaningless chatter that tends to make serious journalists turn up their noses. It is hard to imagine a young, attractive woman intoning her desire for, say, Grover Cleveland or even, more recently, George W. Bush. But in 2008 on YouTube, it made sense in terms of Barack Obama and delivered the subliminal message to young voters that Obama "is one of us." By the end of the campaign and into early 2009, news media such as the Associated Press began distributing both packaged video news stories and raw video

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feeds on YouTube, clips that could be embedded via software code into blogs and websites to extend their reach in a viral distribution.

The question for political news media is: Can we have it all in this new era? Can we merge the ideals and mission of journalism in a democracy from its 20th Century zenith into a fragmented 21st Century new media, while letting go of the limitations of the previous traditional media? The changing dynamics of politics would seem to call for a hybrid model, one that leverages all the speed, interactivity, reach and database-capabilities of Web 2.0 while still maintaining the depth, objectivity, storytelling and professionalism of traditional journalism. While that seems an unimaginable goal in the current collapse of the print journalism business model and an economic recession that has seen a 20 percent drop in the journalism work force in the United States, it is a hurdle that news media must clear if it wants to be relevant in the 2012 presidential elections.

For Future Study

This thesis is an overview of new media innovations in politics and political journalism and is limited in terms of its depth as it aspires to bring the breadth of the topic to readers. This thesis is also limited in terms of theory by the lack of solid scholarly research into new digital media and social networking online. I propose a new line of research in news media, one that marries the cyberworld of Web 2.0 with the needs of democracy filled by political journalism.

First and foremost, people and companies in the business of doing journalism must understand the online social networking model better. Websites such as Facebook and MySpace are not simply becoming digital town squares; they are becoming part of

people's lives, a digital annex to the way they live, the people they socialize with and old friends they keep in touch with. The line between the real world and the online social network world are blurred. Media researchers need to continue to examine how social networking impacts voters' lives, and news media researchers must start to drill down into how social networking "news" — the peer-to-peer information sharing that goes on in social networking websites about anything from politics to sex to trivial daily personal events— relates to journalistic news and, to whatever degree, is replacing the need for mainstream journalism for some people. And journalism researchers need to learn empirically if digital social network members want the sites only for social recreation, as some have insisted, or if they see it as a legitimate means of gathering political news and information.

As for systematic political fact checking, it is still in its infancy and questions remain about its efficacy. Is fact checking "cleaning up" political speech? Do candidates who are caught lying suffer at the ballot box? What level of awareness do voters have of fact-checking efforts? Likewise, research needs to be done to examine how non-aligned media political fact checking differs from partisan fact checking that was aggressively pursued by presidential candidates' campaigns, and how the public views each in relation to the other. Only once we fully understand how lying is perceived by the public in political terms can we best construct the ideal fact-checking operation and fully protect the public from being unfairly swayed in an election.

A new political news media research agenda must reconcile cybertheories with traditional news theories that seem to best describe political media, including agenda-setting and cultivation. This research agenda is crucial if we are to shrink the transition

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time (which could stretch decades) from traditional, trusted sources of political news to the emerging new media sources so that consumers can measure and gauge for accuracy in some way. Those intervening decades of transition could prove harmful to democracy and perhaps fatal to political journalism if voters no longer trust or need its information.

It is especially important because mainstream political media has been overwhelmingly focused for at least the past four decades on "inside baseball" and so-called horse race journalism (who's ahead and who's gaining). These are matters more important to the parties and campaigns/campaigners than to voters; they are stories about the mechanics of running and not the issues important for decision-making in a democracy. A 2000 study showed that 80 percent of early campaign coverage discussed "tactics of the candidates and parties, fund raising by the campaigns, and internal organizational problems. Only 13% of the stories were about the candidates' ideas, their honesty, or what they had done for their constituents while in public office" (Skewes and Plaisance, 2005, p. 142).

In a Web 2.0 world, with the Internet's "long tails" and increased interactivity, mainstream political news organizations find themselves without a monopoly on their previous roles, as do candidates' campaigns. The lines are blurred; activists can act like campaigns and journalists; journalists can write in blogs like activists or distribute political videos like campaigns; and campaigns can benefit from non-centrally directed grassroots activists' messages — but can also be hurt by them.

New media in its Web 2.0 incarnation has allowed political campaigns and voters to move seamlessly and effortlessly outside the spectrum of political journalism to receive information and messages they need or want. Political bloggers filled an

information void; social networking tools allowed campaign supporters to spread those alternative news and opinion sources to each other with ease and at practically no cost; and political journalists were left chasing those new campaign resources in an attempt to understand their meaning, role and impact, as well as mimicking the new digital media forms to try to retain (or regain) their audience. In the process, traditional political journalists have shown they are will to blur the standards of journalism (in blogging and tweeting) and invent new, important tools for democracy that leverage the database abilities of the Internet, such as PolitiFact.

In comparison with a growing swath of the public and the most sophisticated campaigns, traditional political journalists and news media have almost no awareness of the changes that Web 2.0 has wrought and could be woefully unprepared for the 2012 presidential campaigns. That election will undoubtedly see all major presidential campaigns attempt to duplicate the Obama formula of online organizing and fundraising, viral distribution of messages and powering connections between campaign and voters with heavy use of databases. But new innovations are also likely. Super-fast messaging with social networks via Twitter will spread political news and campaign organizational details. Special interests, political parties and campaigns will be more aggressive about using PolitiFact-like, database-driven fact-checking operations to provide supporters and detractors their own "spin" on what is factual and what is not. Independent political news operations such as the online-only Politico will provide rival coverage to the mainstream news organizations, which due to changes in the public's taste for printed daily newspapers and network newscasts will be forced to cut back further on staffing devoted to covering politics.

In this environment, political journalists on the campaign trail in 2012 must be well versed in not only gathering information from new media but participating on it, as well. They must be quicker, better able to multitask and more at home with new technologies than their colleagues who covered previous elections. They also must make distinctions between the kind of information they are reporting and which media is best for it: print, video, online text, interactive databases for campaign contributions, short news blasts on Twitter or putting the news into a social setting on Facebook or MySpace for some crowd-sourcing. Editors and producers must not only guide and edit the news but must also create new avenues for that information to reach consumers. Increasingly by 2012, news stories will automatically aggregate other pertinent stories, either those running in other news media or older stories on the same subject. The consumer will find a sort of "mini-wiki" at the bottom (or end, if video) of news coverage giving a broad supply of alternative or complementary news accounts that give context to the one they are reading or viewing. The 2012 political journalist must consider not only that day's news but also the news that stretches out into Web 2.0's long tail, but into the past and out onto thousands of other newsgathering websites.

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