“When Web 2.0 Meets Politics: The Influence of Social Media in Campaigning”

Terri L. Towner, Oakland University

Key words: Internet, social networking sites, video-sharing websites, Facebook, YouTube,

Due to the aggressive use of social media during the 2008 U.S. presidential elections, Barack Obama’s campaign is considered one of the most successful in history. Social media tools, such as YouTube, Facebook, and MySpace, were employed extensively by the Obama campaign to raise funds as well as to target, organize, and mobilize voters. As a testament to the campaign’s success, social media use spread down the ticket, from governor, to mayor, to assembly member as candidates, in the 2010 midterm elections. Not surprisingly, as the 2012 general election comes into view, social media and other online tools remain a key tenet in campaign strategy. For example, President Obama announced his re-election bid via an online video and Mitt Romney tweeted his intention to seek the presidency. Thus, it is likely that social media will continue to play a formidable role in the 2012 presidential race. Despite the pervasive use of social media in campaigning, scholars know little about how online tools influence political attitudes and behaviors, particularly vote choice and electoral participation. To address this, I propose the addition of five questions regarding respondents’ usage of social media and other online sources for campaign information.

The Influence of Social Media in Campaigning

Recent research shows that the public supplements their television and hard-copy newspaper use with online news, particularly when gathering political information about candidates and campaigns (e.g., Althaus and Tewksbury 2000; Stempel and Hargrove 1996; Tewksbury 2006). For the first time in 2008, a Pew Research Center survey reported that more than half of the voting age population used the Internet during an election (Smith 2009). Since 2008, the popularity of social media have expanded exponentially, with 22% of online adults
using Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace leading up to the 2010 midterm elections (Smith 2011). Then, how does social media use influence political attitudes and behavior? Can attention to campaign information on Facebook or YouTube mobilize the electorate? Does an individual’s age, gender, or party identification matter in the use of social media?

To address the above questions, several scholars have analyzed the causal links between social media tools and offline participation, political knowledge, government cynicism, and political efficacy. Yet, these studies offer a mix of findings. For example, some scholars find that use of social networking sites significantly increases offline civic engagement and political participation (Pasek, more, and Romer 2009; Towner and Dulio 2011a; but see Zhang et al. 2010), whereas others find that those who get news from social networks and YouTube are not more likely to vote, sign a written petition, or boycott (Baumgartner and Morris 2010; Zhang et al. 2010; see also Bimber and Davis 2003; Katz and Rice 2002; Scheufele and Nisbit 2002).

Regarding political knowledge, several studies reveal that younger Americans who obtain news and information from social networks learn very little information about politics and candidates (Baumgartner and Morris 2010; Pasek, more, and Romer 2009; Towner and Dulio 2010). Conversely, Teresi (2010) provides evidence that political information transmitted through social networking sites, particularly Facebook, can increase political knowledge (see also Bode 2008).

Examining government trust, Towner and Dulio (2011a) find that respondents exposed to campaign information on YouTube exhibit more cynicism than those exposed to candidates’ websites, television network websites, or Facebook (see also Towner and Dulio 2011b). Hanson et al. (2010), however, show that using YouTube for political information has no significant influence of cynicism, but using social networking sites results in lower levels of cynicism. Last, Towner and Dulio (2011a) find evidence that exposure to candidate Facebook pages increases
political efficacy whereas others show that social media has no influence (Kushin and Yamamoto 2010).

Problem-Relevance

Based on the above research, it is clear that examining the influence of only print newspapers and television exposure is now an incomplete approach for understanding political attitudes and behavior. Americans are increasingly using social networks and video-sharing websites for political information, which, as the previous literature demonstrates, can affect political knowledge, participation, and efficacy. The mix of findings, however, highlight that the role of social media and other online sources during elections merits more scholarly attention. Moreover, the following shortcomings are apparent: First, many empirical studies focus on the influence of only one form of online media, such as social networks (Pasek, more, and Romer 2009), combine several online sources, such as video-sharing and social-networking sites, into one latent variable (Baumgartner and Morris 2010; Kushin and Yamamoto 2010), or ignore the effects of important online media, such as Twitter and network news websites. These approaches fail to acknowledge that many online sources for campaign information, such as candidate websites, ABCNews.com, CNN.com, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and Twitter, have very distinctive features and tools, which stem from the sites’ unique purposes and services. For instance, YouTube allows users to share videos, Facebook connects people, and Twitter is a micro-blog. Thus, each source can have different effects on political attitudes and behaviors.

Second, much of the recent empirical research examines the relationship between social media and political attitudes among college students or young adults (e.g., Baumgartner and Morris 2010; Hanson et al. 2010; Kushin and Yamamoto 2010; Pasek, more, and Romer 2009; Towner and Dulio 2010; 2011a; 2011b; but see Zhang et al. 2010). This is a serious shortcoming, as scholars are unaware of how social media influence political attitudes among adults. Indeed,
during the 2008 elections, few older adults used social networking sites for campaign information or watched campaign-related video online (Pew Research Center 2008). Recently, this statistic has changed, however. Over the past year, social networking (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter) use has doubled among older adults (50+) (Madden 2010). Considering this, it is highly probable that both young and older voters will turn to social media with more frequency during the 2012 elections. Thus, scholars must broaden their survey sample to include all Americans. The latter has proven difficult, as few national surveys include questions on social media along with questions regarding respondents’ political knowledge, efficacy, and participation. Oftentimes, several elections cycles go by before new questions are added to national surveys. (For example, despite the increasing presence of online newspapers during the 1990s, the ANES did not include a survey question on its use until 2004). Overall, social media continue to revolutionize the way in which we connect, interact, and share information, it is essential that scholars update their survey questions on new media.

To address these shortcomings, I propose a battery of questions on respondents’ use of online sources during the 2012 presidential campaign. Specifically, I further endorse the inclusion of ANES core questions regarding the attention to traditional media sources – television and newspapers. As shown in the Appendix, I believe it is also important to continue to ask respondents about their access to the Internet (Questions 1 and 2). Immediately following Questions 1 and 2, I recommend a new battery of questions (Questions 3 – 7) to determine respondents’ level of attention to Internet sources used to track campaign information, particularly television network websites, micro-blogs, social networking sites, video-sharing websites, and candidate websites. More important, consistent with the primary mission of the ANES, these questions will allow scholars to examine how the use of social media and other
online sources for presidential campaign information influences vote choice and electoral participation.

**Demonstrated Validity and Reliability of Proposed Items**

To assess the validity and reliability of the proposed items, I draw on a recent study conducted by Towner and Dulio (2010). In October 2008, survey data was collected from 228 undergraduate-students from introductory-level political science courses at a medium-sized, public university in the Midwest. The average age of respondents was 19.67 (SD = 2.66). Sixty percent were women, and 80 percent identified themselves as Caucasian. Forty-one percent identified themselves as either strong Democrat or a Democrat. All respondents reported having access to the Internet. The survey assessed attention to traditional media sources (television and hard-copy newspapers), traditional Internet sources (candidate websites, television network websites, online newspapers) and social media (social networking sites and video-sharing websites). The respondents answered the following question: “How much attention did you pay to information on “television” about the campaign for President?” (1 = a great deal, 2 = quite a bit, 3 = some, 4 = very little, 5 = none). In subsequent questions, the word “television” was replaced with the words, “online newspapers,” “hard-copy newspapers,” “online social networks,” “video-sharing websites,” “television network websites,” and “presidential candidate websites.”

The results show that television (46%) continues to be the most frequently (a great deal and quite a bit) used information source for the campaign for president, followed by online newspapers (32%), television network websites (25%), presidential candidate’s websites (19%), video-sharing websites (18%), online social networks (14%) and hard-copy newspapers (13%). To demonstrate the reliability of these seven items, a split-half reliability test was conducted. The

---

1 In this study, blogs and micro-blogs, such as Twitter, were not examined.
Spearman-Brown split-half reliability coefficient is .75, suggesting an adequate reliability. Next, to illustrate that social media, particularly social networks and video-sharing websites, are a unique source of campaign information, a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted. As expected, the factor analysis shows that the seven items load onto two separate dimensions. The Eigenvalue for the first factor is 2.503 and the value of the second factor is 1.086. Specifically, five items load strongly onto the first component: attention to television, hard-copy newspapers, online newspapers, television network websites, and presidential candidate websites. Two items load strongly onto the second component: attention to online social networks and video-sharing websites. This test shows that not all sources for political information are the same. Social networks and video-sharing websites are distinct from traditional sources as well as from other Internet sources. For similar findings, see Baumgartner and Morris (2010) and Kushin and Yamamoto (2010).

To test the predictive validity of the proposed items, hierarchical OLS was regression analyses were conducted to examine how attention to these seven media sources influence respondents’ political factual recall knowledge, candidate issue-stance knowledge and candidate like and dislikes. These empirical tests produce several statistically significant findings in the hypothesized directions. For example, the results show that respondents paying

---

2 The items measuring factual knowledge included a battery of four true/false factual statements. These asked respondents whether Dick Cheney was the current Vice President, if it was Congress’ responsibility to determine a law constitutional, if the Republican Party had the most members in the House of Representatives, and if the Republican Party was more conservative than the Democratic Party. These were subsequently recoded into an additive knowledge scale ($\alpha = .77$), coded zero for respondents who answered all four questions incorrectly, 1 for one correct answer, 2 for two correct answers, and 3 for three correct answers, and 4 if all answers were answered correctly.

3 Three items were also selected to measure candidate issue stance knowledge, including those on increasing the military commitment in Iraq, requiring universal health care coverage, and lifting the federal moratorium on offshore drilling. Respondents were asked to identify which of the two presidential candidates promised each of these proposals. These items were recoded into an additive knowledge scale ($\alpha = .80$), ranging from 0 (all incorrect answers) to 3 (all correct answers).

4 To measure candidate like and dislikes, respondents were asked to indicate how much they liked or disliked each presidential candidate on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly dislike) to 11 (strongly like).
attention to social networks are significantly less informed about factual ($\beta = -.202, p < .01$) and candidates issue-stance knowledge ($\beta = -.123, p < .05$). Those paying attention to campaign information on video-sharing websites ($\beta = .213, p < .10$) and social networks ($\beta = .259, p < .05$) have significantly higher Obama likeability. However, these predictors are not significant for McCain. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Bimber and Davis 2003), attention to campaign information on presidential candidate websites significantly increases candidate issue-stance knowledge ($\beta = .097, p < .05$). Last, attention to campaign information on television significantly increases factual knowledge ($\beta = .206, p < .05$). For a more detailed description of the empirical results, see Towner and Dulio (2010).

**Breadth of Relevance and Generalizability**

The proposed questions will be useful to scholars from a wide range of disciplines, particularly political science, communications, sociology, psychology, marketing, and information technology. These scholars can tackle new research questions and, most important, build on established media theories, such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model, reinforcement, minimal effects, agenda-setting, and uses and gratifications. In addition, the proposed items are potentially relevant for a wide range of analyses, ranging from frequencies to multivariate regression. Along with ANES’s core questions, scholars can examine how social media sources influence attitudes toward parties, candidates, issues and social groups, political knowledge, political participation, turnout, voter registration, efficacy, and government trust.

**Appendix:**

Questions 1 and 2 are included in the 2008 ANES Default-core. Following Questions 1 and 2, I propose to include Questions 3–7 below.

1. **QUESTION:** Do you have access to the Internet or the World Wide Web?

   **CODES:**
   
   1. Yes
5. No
8. Don't know
9. Refused

2. IF R HAS ACCESS TO THE INTERNET:

QUESTION: Have you seen any information about this election campaign on the (Internet/Web)?

CODES:
1. Yes
5. No
8. Don't know
9. Refused

IF R WATCHED OR READ INFORMATION ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN ON INTERNET/WEB:

3. QUESTION: How much attention do you pay to information on ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS, such as Facebook or MySpace, about the campaign for President?

4. QUESTION: How much attention do you pay to information on VIDEO-SHARING WEBSITES, such as YouTube, about the campaign for President?

5. QUESTION: How much attention do you pay to information on PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE WEBSITES about the campaign for President?

6. QUESTION: How much attention do you pay to information on TELEVISION NETWORK WEBSITES, such as ABCNews.com or CNN.com, about the campaign for President?

7. QUESTION: How much attention do you pay to information on MICROBLOGS, such as Twitter, about the campaign for President?

CODES (for Questions 3-7):
1. A great deal
2. Quite a bit
3. Some
4. Very little
5. None
8. Don't know
9. Refused

References:


