

Internet plays wild card into U.S. politics; The Web Election

[ONT Edition]

Toronto Star - Toronto, Ont.

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Date: Oct 18, 2004
Start Page: D.01
Section: Business
Text Word Count: 1784

Document Text

Vermonters Howard Dean's bid for the U.S. presidency let loose a new grassroots force in American

politics - the Internet.

In a democracy that sometimes tilts toward plutocracy, is it the tip

of a peoples' revolution?

If you want to know what the Internet is doing to American politics, head over to Toronto's Duke of York pub Oct. 28.

There you'll find the local outpost of the Kerry campaign a group of exiled Americans and concerned Canadians, doing their part to get George W. Bush out of office.

It's thanks to the Internet that the members of this crowd have been able to find each other - and to link up with 861 other such groups across the United States and around the world.

Now observers are looking to the November 2 election for proof that the Internet's role in creating groups like this one - not to mention its role in campaign fundraising - represents a political transformation. They want to know whether the same innovations that almost kept Howard Dean from losing the Democratic nomination can be applied to winning the White House.

But this transformation isn't about the politics of right and left. It's about the politics of up and down.

Look no further than the leading candidates' Web sites for evidence that power is shifting from the elites to grassroots.

The site www.georgewbush.com has raised \$13 million online, recruited 1.2 million volunteers, and enlisted over 6 million e-mail activists, according to Chuck DeFeo, the Bush-Cheney electronic campaign manager.

And www.johnkerry.com has attracted 750,000 volunteers, 2.5 million e-mail subscribers, and \$82 million in contributions, according to Kerry e-campaign manager Josh Ross.

Those numbers represent a long-awaited shift "It's not like you punch a button and a genie pops up," says political consultant Phil Noble, the editor of e-campaigning news site Politics Online.

"Cavemen burned themselves for years before they understood how to use fire," Noble says. "That's where we are here. The Internet is a new tool, and we're learning how to use it. In some ways we're still burning the meat, but in some places we're getting it out."

If anyone can be credited with snatching the meat out of the fire this time around, it's Howard Dean. Thanks to his savvy online campaigning, Dean broke away from the rear of the Democratic field and emerged as an early frontrunner.

While Dean did not survive the primaries, his Internet campaign innovations did. The two biggest stories of the 2004

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online campaign are directly traceable to the Dean campaign peer-to-peer event planning, and online fundraising.

Peer-to-peer event planning merges the efficiencies of online organizing with the momentum of face-to-face meetings. "Up until the peer-to-peer stuff, we were just doing what we'd always done faster, cheaper, quicker and smarter," Noble says.

"Peer-to-peer is truly a new thing." What peer-to-peer refers to is any system where computer users can connect directly to each other without going through a middleman. When music sharing network Napster was driven out of business, software writers created a decentralized variant known as P2P in order to share music directly with each other, rather than going through a music site. But there are many other uses. For instance, people use P2P to connect with each other to create groups and plan meetings, rather than relying on a central campaign to plan it for them.

The catalyst for the U.S. transformation was a for-profit business, Meetup.com. Created in 2002, Meetup lets people form local meeting groups with people who share their interests - whether that interest is in dancing, dogs, or democracy. The Dean team started using Meetup at the very beginning of 2003, organizing monthly meetings in cities across America, and sending Dean to make in-person appearances on each meeting date.

Thanks to its whole-hearted embrace of the Meetup model, by April 2003 the Dean campaign had over 13,000 supporters on Meetup - compared to about 700 for John Kerry. But that was just the beginning. The Dean campaign soon signed an official agreement with Meetup, and linked its site directly to Meetup's system. By July of 2003, his Meetup network had grown to 61,000 members; by October, to 110,000.

And by February 2004, it reached a peak of 189,000 supporters using the Meetup system.

But when the Democratic candidates finally reached the primary ballot box, Dean's thousands of cross-country gatherings failed to translate. Barely a month into primary season, Dean withdrew from the race without winning a single state - with the exception of his own state of Vermont, which voted after he had already withdrawn.

To its credit, Kerry's team heeded the lesson of Dean's success rather than the warning of his defeat. The Kerry campaign signed its own agreement with Meetup in July 2003, at which point it had only about 2,400 Meetup supporters; by the middle of this month, that number had grown to over 130,000 people using the Meetup system.

And the Bush camp has made its own foray into the fusion of Internet and in-person. Rather than embracing Meetup, which had become a virtual Democratic colony, the Republicans developed their own Meetup equivalent. Called "Party for the President," the Bush campaign's proprietary software gives Bush backers the tools to host their own parties or canvassing walks an online invitation system, downloadable flyers and a zip code lookup that lets you find parties in your area. The site sells "party packs" that include the Bush- Cheney buttons, bumper stickers and drink cups that remind your guests of their purpose at every turn.

In a predictable cycle of one-upmanship, the Kerry campaign has supplemented the Meetup network by creating its own party hosting system on JohnKerry.com, in response to comments that came in on the campaign Web site. "One of the biggest things that we saw was [supporters'] desire to be able to host their own events," says Ross.

"In response we built in a big event planning tool and have had 30,000 house parties planned through the Internet."

If peer-to-peer event planning is bringing in more supporters, it's also changing how those supporters relate to politics. A survey of 820 Meetup participants published this spring showed that with every Meetup attended, supporters become more committed, more likely to volunteer for the campaign, more vociferous in their support and likely to give money.

That linkage explains how Dean's Meetup success set off a record year for online fundraising. Dean turned his Meetup network into a tide of small donations - demonstrating that small online donors could replace the big corporate donors of pre-reform days.

Kerry took that lesson and ran with it. When he became the presumptive nominee, he had only \$86 million in the bank, compared to Bush's then-\$215 million. Political observers wondered how the imbalance in funding would affect the race, without ever considering the possibility that Kerry could close the funding gap.

But with the Internet's help, Kerry proved them wrong. By the time July's Democratic Convention rolled around, Kerry had raised \$82 million on the Internet alone - not including the millions collected at parties that were organized through Meetup and his party hosting system.

Those fundraising efforts combined to take the Kerry war chest to a total of \$248 million - within easy reach of the Bush campaign's funding levels.

The Bush campaign, in contrast, can thank the Internet for only \$14 million of its \$260 million in funding.

That \$68 million difference in online fundraising reflects dedicated effort and innovation in the Kerry camp. As consultant Noble notes, "one of the things that Kerry has done is combine online advertising and fundraising. It's the first time it's really been done. They've figured out where and how to buy ads that will promote fundraising."

The significance of the Democrats' online fundraising success could go far beyond simply closing the funding gap in this election. "The Democrats have been out-networked on small donations by the Republicans for 30 years," notes Michael Cornfield, a political scientist and expert on e-campaigning with Pew Internet and American Life Project.

"If Democrats after 30 years of depending on large donations are now developing their own network of small donors and activists, they close a gap at the national level that has existed since Ronald Reagan rose to power in part through small donations through the mail."

But the art of the online dollar is still relatively new. The Democrats' online advantage this time out could spur the Republicans to rattle their digital tin cups a little louder in 2008. If so, the newly-level playing field of small donations could once again tilt in the Republicans favour.

"If the Democrats win, the Internet is part of the story," according to Cornfield. "It's the place where they found each other and generated money. It's less a part of the story if the Republicans win."

But that's not to say that the Internet can be left out of the Republican equation. "It's like the old arms race," says political consultant Phil Noble, comparing the two Presidential campaigns. "One side has more warheads but the other side has more powerful ones."

Whichever way the field tilts in 2008, it's clear that the field itself has shifted. After decades of concern about the influence of big business, the small donors are now the ones who define fundraising success.

Campaign finance laws laid the groundwork by limiting large donations, but it was the Internet that made the favour of small donors into the most crucial form of political currency.

And the impact of the little guy is only magnified by the emergence of peer-to-peer event planning as an organizational powerhouse. The shift to mass-driven, decentralized organizing combines with the shift towards small-scale donations to give grassroots volunteers a far bigger role in the 2004 election than they've had in any campaign in recent memory.

It's enough to make even a professional campaigner like Ross sound awed when he talks about "how many new people have been brought into the process, people who've never made a contribution or volunteered before."

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