



Technological Change

In the 2008 presidential election campaign, candidate Barack Obama announced his selection of running mate Joe Biden via Twitter. In 2012 use of social media has become central to campaigning for national political office.

Social media sprang from Web 2.0 technology that provides hundreds of millions of users two-way communications. Users share information, opinions, images, audio clips, video clips and more.

The campaigns of President Obama and his potential Republican challengers are already heavily employing the big three social media platforms: Facebook, a website with 845 million users worldwide who can create personal profiles and exchange messages with friends; Twitter, a service with 300 million users worldwide who can instantly send and re-send among themselves text posts of up to 140 characters; and YouTube, a website from which users can upload, view and share videos.

Campaigns before the 2008 presidential race used one-way communications technology, such as websites, mostly to raise money. Campaigns still use websites, just as they still make telephone calls,

send mail, erect posters and distribute bumper stickers. But now political consultants also use data from social media to target their online advertising. One application finds potentially sympathetic voters based on their Facebook profiles, for example.

“If you want to target just Republicans on Facebook, you can do that,” Patrick Ruffini, president of Engage, a political consulting firm, said to Politico.com. “With targeted online advertising, you can get a lot more reach. As social platforms build up, they become ad platforms for politicians.”

Political Friends

With the right data, Democrats and Republicans can try to attract voters from among the Facebook friends of a known supporter (each member of Facebook has, on average, 130 “friends”). With a little more data, candidates can try to attract voters in especially closely divided states or election districts. As one Facebook manager who works with Republican candidates told Politico, “We’re moving away from the wisdom of the crowd and really moving toward the wisdom of friends.”

As they seek to raise money, attract volunteers and persuade voters, campaign organizations can

also now try to identify major influencers in the social media, those people whose opinions have the greatest impact. It is not impossible to find out whose tweets on Twitter are most often re-tweeted, for example.



“Finding them in the haystack of the real world is tedious and extensive,” former hedge fund manager Andy Kessler writes in a WSJ.com opinion piece. “But harnessing fast servers and constantly upgraded algorithms to find them on social networks is already happening—and it’ll definitely sway who becomes our next president.”

Top: President Barack Obama and Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg participate in a town hall-style meeting at Facebook’s California headquarters.



Using YouTube

In March, Obama’s campaign released on YouTube a 17-minute video, *The Road We’ve Traveled*. The video, narrated by actor Tom Hanks, relates the enormous challenges the president faced upon taking office in 2009 and his successes since then.

Visitors to the president’s YouTube page are given many options to donate to the campaign, volunteer, or share the video or other campaign content with friends by social media.

“One of the biggest challenges with YouTube is giving people a clear action to take after viewing,” said Stephen Muller, the Obama campaign’s video director, to the *New York Times*. The campaigns of Obama and Republican candidate Mitt Romney are using videos as a way to meet that challenge.

One casualty of social media’s growth is the sessions candidates used to have with reporters before or after debates or other televised events. Candidates skip those today and, instead, allow supporters on Twitter to carry the message on by tweets.

Obama’s campaign has started using less well-known social media. It has posted some of Obama’s favorite songs on Spotify, posted photos to Instagram, posted images to Pinterest and used Tumblr and Google+. Teddy Goff, the campaign’s digital director, told online columnist Chris O’Brien that his team tries to create a different message for each different social media platform.

“If we strike the right notes, then all these people have the power to do the work for us,” Goff said. “But it’s also risky. Because if we are not authentic on those things, people will not just tune out, they will tweet about how they are tuning out.”

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Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney’s Twitter page invites supporters to carry on his message.

Top: Political activist Dianne Belsom at home in South Carolina consumes election campaign news through social media.

