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Old-Line Media, Voters In Cyberspace Disconnect

Posted April 24th, 2008 - 6:15 am by Diane Mermigas

What began as an enterprising interface between politics and new media this election year has collapsed into a more pedestrian relationship. There is a stubborn disconnect between the presidential primary election process now unfolding across the media spectrum and the electorate's wild enthusiasm for all things interactive. The issues and sentiments flooding chat rooms, blogs, social networks and alternative Web news sites run parallel to—rather than in concert with—mainstream media coverage.

The media and the presidential candidates selectively utilize interactive tools when it suits their interests, treating digital connections as a novelty. It is a lost opportunity to establish the use of digital interactivity to further the democratic process, especially for tech-savvy and younger voters.

It also represents a gross miscalculation by old-line media about the rapidly growing number of influential voters who view the world through a cyberprism. Their standard political news filters are The Drudge Report, MySpace and YouTube. Their water-cooler conversations occur in instant messages, social network chats, and text messages. They are engaged in a highly personalized, peer-driven interactive world that many media and political institutions talk at—but not with. The radically different litmus test for many voters using their digital social filter, as described by MSNBC's Chris Matthews rather than the usual qualifications checklist: "Is the candidate one of us?" and "Is this candidate OK?"

That is a far cry from the Democratic slugfest that is incessantly pumping broadcast and cable television ratings and selling daily newspapers. The ongoing primary election drama is the live event stuff that traditional media—TV in particular—thrives on. On the digital front, CNN.com's spiffy, oversized, in-studio interactive primary map and real-time blogging are about as good as it gets.

All of the major television news organizations have pages on MySpace, Facebook and YouTube. The YouTube/CNN debates and the Facebook/WMUR/ABC debate were worthy exercises that were not without controversy. The dozens of other partnerships include NBC News powering MySpace's Impact Political Channel (owned by rival News Corp.) which mirrors a Facebook-ABC News partnership, while CBS News has teamed up with Digg.com open election coverage.

The hotly contested Democratic presidential race has inspired an unprecedented wave of new voter turnout and involvement that has not translated into the digital media scene. Hillary Clinton, who announced her candidacy online,



now primarily resorts to using her Web site for fund-raising and as a more conventional outpost for supporters. The same is true of Barack Obama, whose campaign is energized with a bit more interactivity, Web video and the use of online phone banks (as well as pre-recorded robo-calls). Both candidates maintain pages on leading social networks. Such interactive Web tools are a politician's dream, providing candidates with the appearance of being everywhere with everyone.

Obama had the most unique online video viewers among the presidential candidates in March, representing a small but engaged group of decided voters for all of the leading presidential candidates, according to the Nielsen Co. Obama was the subject of more online searches than other candidates primarily from news and social media sites—although television remains the top source among all age groups for obtaining political information, eMarketer reports.

The Pew Research Center predicts that the Internet will be the deciding medium in the 2012 election. A Pew survey and study earlier this year found that MSN, CNN and Yahoo News topped a list of the 13 most-frequented site sources of campaign news. The long-tail list included online extensions of top newspapers as well as the Net aggregators YouTube, MySpace, and Google. Fox News is the only one of the Big Four on the list. A more recent Pew study reveals that as national discontent approaches a 20-year high fueled by a weak economy, credit crisis, rising prices and unemployment, consumers are seeking out more election-related information on the Net and elsewhere.

Still, the political and media establishments have paid little attention to the desire of digital interactive consumers for personal relevance and customization—even in a presidential election. As a result, some of the most novel election-year functionality has emanated from the Net's long tail: Wikinews has allowed contributors to participate in a virtual campaign for U.S. president, and zdNet offers "a desktop tracker on steroids" tracking candidates with real-time blogging, podcasts and news. A clever grassroots take on the brutal primary battle can be found on Fix8.com, where Clinton, Obama and CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer appear as animated debate avatars that can be manipulated by users and shared with friends in places like YouTube.

Current election-year ad spend will find new homes for political pitches once the candidates and traditional media feel as comfortable with new media as the under-30 electorate. The disparity between heightened public engagement and interest in digital-styled national politics and the failure of traditional media to capitalize on it may become an economic issue. The tense entanglements of many TV commentators and the candidate's orchestrated pontifications cannot hold a candle to the impassioned debate of engaged voters in a chat room.

Cyberspace might just be the best place to resuscitate a truly remarkable exercise in democracy.

This entry was posted on Thursday, April 24th, 2008 at 6:15 am and is filed under [Diane Mermigas](#), [Politics](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.

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