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Internet and Politics 2008: Moving People, Moving Ideas

Essay by The Berkman Center, December 9, 2008

A Working Hypothesis

For this year's Internet and Politics Conference: Moving People, Moving Ideas, participants submitted Publius pieces evaluating some of the technological innovations of this year's election cycle. Anchored by this Working Hypothesis, these responses surface various questions and issues concerning the impact of the Internet on the 2008 US election, and ask whether this year was a turning point in terms of the relation of technology and political and civic activity.

INTRODUCTION

Internet technologies—whether deployed to entice voters, raise money, recruit and organize campaign workers, or coax voters to the polls—now infuse every step of the electoral process.

This year's edition of Internet & Politics, Moving People, Moving Ideas, will examine how digital technologies reshape the practice of campaigning and the movement of political information. We are bringing together an exceptional group of participants from various constituencies working at the intersection of technology and politics: campaign strategists, political activists and organizers,
independent analysts, members of the media, academics, students, and more. Our goal is to meld theory, data, and practice, synthesizing diverse perspectives and experiences in order to facilitate learning and collaboration. In doing so, we will draw upon the unique expertise of the Berkman Center community, the Harvard University Institute of Politics, and the accomplished group of conference participants.

Have digital information and communications tools enhanced critical elements of political strategy, such as leadership formation, community-building, and coordinated action? Are digital technologies influencing offline actions (for example, the ways campaigns contact and interact with potential constituents)? Some observers argue that technologies have enabled the transformation of relationships and created different forms of political participation. Others maintain that social networks, user-generated content, and voter databases are merely the newest ways of achieving old goals.

PEOPLE AND IDEAS

The recent presidential contest has integrated formerly peripheral and experimental "virtual" aspects of political campaigns into core areas of organization, messaging, fundraising, and strategy. Conference participants will consider this shift via two overlapping thematic areas.

Moving People: New Forms of Political Organizing

> We will examine the emergence of the Internet as a means to strengthen relationships, organize effectively, and coordinate distributed collective action. How are virtual technologies employed for real-world action? Are they transforming the way people work together to achieve common goals? Or are they fostering a sense of community that

doesn't necessarily lead to results? What are the biggest barriers to the success of technologically enhanced organizing?

Moving Ideas: Political Information in the Networked Public Sphere

We will explore the effects of the Internet on political communications and the flow of information. How do new participants, messages, and formats influence the movement of ideas? How do key messages filter up (or down) and gain traction? Are digital networks enhancing political strategies, transparency, and democratic debate? Or are they leading to information overload, undermining legitimate authority, misrepresenting reality, or polarizing the electorate?

IS 2008 A TURNING POINT?

In convening this conference, we endeavored to illuminate the role that technology has played in this year's presidential election, from the "air wars" of campaign messaging to the "ground wars" of canvassing and voter registration. Following the 2004 presidential contest, the defi ning technology story was the emergence of the Internet as a major fundraising tool. While the capacity to finance campaigns on the Net has grown, the role of the Internet and digital media in U.S. elections now encompasses a range of broader, more complex issues. We will seek to evaluate the technological innovations of the 2008 election cycle in this new landscape.

GOALS

Four years ago, the Berkman Center convened a similar gathering to help separate reality from hype in the wake of the 2004 election. We emerged with new insight and a practical agenda for further research. With *Internet & Politics 2008: Moving People, Moving Ideas*, we will bring a fresh perspective informed by recent elections and developments since 2004. We will assess experiences from the field, narratives from the media, and data emerging from empirical research. The event will provide scholars with theoretical and empirical insights to enrich their analyses. It will also be an opportunity for practitioners to evaluate their recent experiences within a broader context. The
conference will offer a unique nexus for both reflection and the frank exchange of ideas.

Throughout, we will focus on the core tensions and synergies among new technologies, organization and mobilization, and the fl ow of political information. We will ask participants to consider how innovations that emerged in the 2008 election cycle might shape the future of American democracy, and discuss the implications of these developments for political and governance agendas across the world.

All Spotlight Essays

Free Culture Research Workshop

- Free Culture Research Workshop 2009 at Harvard Law School
  by Berkman Center

IDRC Forum

- Understanding our Knowledge Gaps: Or, Do we have an ICT4D field? And do we want one?
  by Michael Best
- Open ICT ecosystems transforming the developing world
  by Matthew Smith and Laurent Elder
- ICT Diffusion: Have we really made any progress?
  by Sabri Saidam

Internet and Politics Conference

- The New Activism: Why Volunteering Declined in Campaign 08
  by Ari Melber
- Participation and Polarization in the Networked Public Sphere
  by Henry Farrell
- A Response to Working Hypothesis: Internet and Politics 2008
  by Sunshine Hillygus

Youth and Media Policy Working Group Initiative

- Moving Beyond One Size Fits All With Digital Citizenship
  by Matt Levinson, Deb Socia
- The Future of Internet Safety Education: Critical Lessons from Four Decades of Youth Drug Abuse Prevention
  by Lisa M. Jones
- Online Safety: Why Research is Important
  by David Finkelhor, Janis Wolak, Kimberly J. Mitchell

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