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The Revolution of the Online Commentariat

Essay by Peter Daou, December 9, 2008 in response to Internet and Politics 2008: Moving People, Moving Ideas

Additional responses include: *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 for Internet and Politics 2008*, by Sunshine Hillygus, *Not the Digital Democracy We Ordered*, by Matthew Hindman, and *From the Bottom-Up: Using the Internet to Mobilize Campaign Participation*, by Dana Fisher.

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The pyramid of Internet political functions consists of message (communications), money (fundraising) and mobilization. Atop that pyramid sits communications. Message drives money and triggers mobilization. Devoid of a compelling message to spur their use, the most advanced web tools will lie fallow. The impetus to use technology is always external to the technology; the impulse to connect and contribute begins with the inspiration to do so and the inspiration derives from the message.

Notwithstanding that hierarchy, the wave of Internet acclamation in the aftermath of the 2008 election has been focused primarily on mobilization and money, on networking tools and techniques, their effect on governance, and on the medium's capacity to generate eye-popping revenue. Less noted is the impact of the ever-growing online commentariat whose pointed opinions shape our worldview and whose influence on the 2008 election was nothing short of decretive.

Virtually every online venue that played a role in the '08 race provided a platform for public dialogue. Blogs, boards, news sites, YouTube, Twitter, and social networks large and small were inundated with millions of individual comments, the aggregate effect of which was to determine how voters viewed the candidates and the race. The democratization of opinion-making that began with the rise of the blogosphere reached a new level of maturity, the global discourse a new level of complexity.

It's hard to know how many members of the online commentariat participated in other political activities this cycle, how many formed or joined networks, canvassed, phone-banked, organized and donated using the web. It stands to reason that many did. But while the latter activities are justly heralded as evidence of a political/technological coming of age, the true revolution goes largely unmentioned, namely, that the sheer magnitude of publicly expressed opinions is changing the way we see the world – and as such, changing the world itself.

For the first time, we are thinking aloud unfettered and unfiltered by mass media gatekeepers. Events, information, words and deeds that a decade ago were discussed and contextualized statically in print or through the controlled funnel of television and radio, are now subjected to instantaneous interpretation and free-association by millions of citizens unencumbered by the media's constraints, aided by the optional - and liberating - cloak of anonymity.

This is transformative, not just because it is a web-driven enhancement of traditional political and social mechanisms (as we've seen with organizing and fundraising) but because it is a

radically different way that the world processes information and understands itself. If there's one thing that makes the 2008 election an inflection point, it is this: that the context, perception, and course of events is fundamentally changed by the collective behavior of the Internet's innumerable opinion-makers. Every piece of news and information is instantly processed by the combined brain power of millions, events are interpreted in new and unpredictable ways, observations transformed into beliefs, thoughts into reality. Ideas and opinions flow from the ground up, insights and inferences, speculation and extrapolation are put forth, then looped and re-looped on a previously unimaginable scale, conventional wisdom created in hours and minutes. This wasn't the case during the last presidential election — the venues and the voices populating them hadn't reached critical mass. They have now.

The contrarian (and even cynical) view is that this is just technological triumphalism, that all the articles and blog posts celebrating the web-fueled campaign greatly overstate the role of the Internet in the final outcome. Some writers have bucked the web-centric trend and published entire post-campaign analyses with barely a reference to the Internet. Even this die-hard Internet evangelist acknowledges that the web's role can sometimes be overstated, or at least misconstrued. The truth is that the Obama campaign was a triumph of integration more than technological innovation. It was the wildly successful marriage of time-tested political strategies and tactics, executed with acumen and discipline, seamlessly combined with cutting-edge technology and tied together with an empowering grassroots message. With a brilliant candidate at the helm. That, in itself, was innovative.

But even if we accept the fact that old-fashioned campaign machinery still matters – and it does – it would be a serious mistake not to recognize that political communication is forever altered. Never before have so many people conversed publicly and never before has the global discourse been so accessible, recursive, and durable. The impact is real: it is now axiomatic that the greater the number of online commenters discussing an event or issue, the more unpredictable its unfolding. The days following Sarah Palin's VP announcement illustrate the point.

How does this affect the triangle of media, political establishment, and online community? For the press and punditry, an important reversal: their agenda-setting role is eroded and they are now compelled to partner with the online commentariat for validation and legitimation. For the political establishment, the standard methodology - where strategists and pollsters conjure and test messages to be disseminated by media teams and press shops through traditional channels - is inadequate. Politicians and public officials must now contend with higher levels of risk and uncertainty that confound traditional communications strategies. They must posses the awareness and agility to navigate a churning ocean of opinion where every word, every press release, every policy paper, every speech, every document, every surrogate remark is recorded, magnified and repurposed by the online community. Image making and message crafting, enduring political arts once the back-room purview of a select few, are now in the public domain.

What is unclear is how the online activist community benefits. Bloggers - the heart and soul of the online commentariat - continue to be troubled by the chasm between their oversized real world impact and their disproportionately limited insider clout. Part of the challenge is figuring out how to leverage unpredictability, no easy task. And part of it is to distinguish between the community's active and passive power, John Locke's useful distinction between the power to receive change and the power to make it. I suspect the gap will close as the online community further expands and its emergent self-knowledge deepens. I certainly hope it does, since the community's overall thrust is progressive.

So, from my perspective, while it's intriguing to see how the new administration utilizes social networks and email lists to foster transparency and interactivity, it's even more fascinating to see how the online commentariat ultimately processes and influences future events and defines – and changes – them.

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