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The Effect of Social Media in the 2012 Presidential Election

Maggie Dalton-Hoffman

Social networking has transformed the way people communicate and has allowed for constant access to each other. The Internet created a new outlet for almost every aspect of life. Not only has the real world been placed right at everyone's fingertips as soon as they go near a computer, but this access has created a perpetual stream of media. These new forms of communication via social networking are not just for reconnecting with old friends. The usage of these social sites provides new, previously unavailable connections of which politicians have begun to take advantage. Social media has required a reconstruction in the way political campaigns are run. Now the campaign can never be shut off. People constantly search for election news and updates and even when they are not, the candidates wish they were. President Obama and former Governor Romney each approached the online campaign with different tactics. The effect of social media in the 2012 presidential election campaigns of President Barack Obama and Mitt Romney showed a sharp contrast in the effective usage of online media and advertising in drawing the attention of voters.

The Kennedy-Nixon Presidential debates of 1960 provided the first opportunity to watch a debate on television. Going into the debate, the candidates were evenly matched except Kennedy had spent the last few weeks campaigning in California and Nixon had been in the hospital. All the people who heard the debate on the radio believed Nixon to be the winner. But the 70 million who viewed the debate on a television saw a sickly candidate in contrast to a stunning, young John F. Kennedy who delivered his lines smoothly and charismatically (Webley, 2012). Those television viewers focused on what they had seen, and not what they had heard. Studies of the audience indicated that, among television viewers, Kennedy was perceived the winner of the first debate by a very large margin (Allen, 1987). Now with online campaigns, perfection is not only needed when appearing on television, but at all times. The modern campaign requires constant composure on the part of the candidate because any slip up will be splashed across the headlines of a website instantly.

Online news has taken over politics and has allowed every voter the chance to become a political analyst. Mitt Romney discovered the instant backlash of online news after he made a comment about the 47% of Americans who don't pay income taxes, as well as his "binders full of women" remark. The immediate response came in tweets, comments, and Facebook posts, but the delayed reaction featured bloggers posting edited images mocking the Romney lines. An entire blog on Tumblr was devoted to featuring joking images of everyone's interpretations of binders full of women. One such image featured the line, "What do you mean he has iPads full of women?" that shines a humorous light on just how far behind the Romney campaign was technologically speaking. But also, the online campaign allows Americans to become more familiar with each of the candidates. Now, the American public gets to see that Ann Romney loves frosted Pumpkin bread and "thinks it's the perfect fall treat" along with a link to a recipe (Pinterest.com/annromney, 2012). Or a picture of an Obama security guard playing Jenga before the first debate. Both candidates tried to make themselves seem relatable by posting pictures of their families, trivial things around them, fans from their campaign stops, and snapshots from their daily lives.

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Both the Romney campaign and the Obama campaign hired third party companies to have data trackers on their prospective campaign websites. Third party sites track a person's Internet usage and curb advertisements to that specific person's online portfolio and consequently deliver a campaign advertisement that strikes home for each different user. These third party sites then generate Internet advertisements to keep reminding those who had visited the site to vote for the candidate whose site they visited. "These are companies, like ad networks and data brokers working on behalf of the campaigns, that collect information about users' online activities to show political ads to people tailored to their own interests and beliefs" (Singer, 2012). The sites collect big data which "involves data-mining tools sifting through mountains of information—in this case, voters' online habits—to find gems of actionable insight" (Cruz, 2012). For instance, a person who does an Internet search for Mitt Romney or his running mate, Paul Ryan, may notice a strategically placed ad or video from the Romney campaign next time they browse the Internet, urging them to donate or persuading them to vote (Petulla, 2012; Cruz, 2012). Researchers found that Obama's campaign site had 79 different third party tracking sites, while the Romney campaign had 40 tracking programs on its campaign site (Singer & Duhigg, 2012). The Obama campaign ran a test on the effectiveness of data-based online advertisements, "sending a traditional fundraising mail request and a tailored data request and found the online effort outperformed by 14 percent" (Gibson, 2012). This use of data allowed the Obama and Romney campaigns to tailor every single online advertisement that appeared in the sidebar of web pages like Facebook and Google.

President Obama has spent \$93.4K and Romney has spent \$82.2K on their online advertisements that are data based. The amount of money each candidate has spent for Cost Per Click (CPC) Advertising is relatively close (SEO Vote 2012). CPC advertising is a search engine marketing strategy for generating traffic to a website by paying for clicks (visitors). On average, Romney is spending \$1.32 per visitor, and Obama \$1.15 (Orange County SEO, 2012). Adwords, a program developed by Google, controls ad placements through methods such as location and language targeting, but also enables advertisers to specify IP address ranges where they don't want their ads to appear (Google Inc.). The program also tracks unique site visitors and general pageviews, so that the campaigns could see how many people they were reaching and how many people were coming back. Obama's CPC is lower because his site is attracting more unique pageviews and is accessed from links more frequently than the Romney site is.

By using social media as an integral part of their campaigns, Obama and Romney expanded political membership to the online masses, giving social media users the opportunity to express their ideologies and party affiliation. By liking, retweeting, commenting, and clicking, social networkers were given methods of individually helping to campaign for either Obama or Romney on their own social networking profiles (Blackham, 2012). The Obama campaign made it more attractive to share campaign generated social posts, creating unity resulting in a crowd-sourced support base. This gathered many social media users around common values, counteracting the free-for-all negative, unique posts. For the Republicans, with an uncertain central policy position, the result was decentralization of power. Social media magnified a wide range of views from "right wing" affiliates. This removed power and unity from Romney's message (Mitchell & Rosentiel, 2012).

Of the people who completed an exit poll after voting on November 6th, 69% reported using social media to do something related to the 2012 presidential campaign (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2012). This is a sharp increase from the 37% of adults that reported using social media at all during the 2008 election (Rainie, 2012). The option to "check in" as

having voted on Facebook was used by millions of voters. According to Pew Research data, 55% of all registered voters have gone online this election season to watch videos related to the election (Smith & Duggan, 2012, Online Political Videos and Campaign 2012) . 22% of registered voters have let friends and family know how they voted on a social networking site such as Facebook or Twitter (Rainie, 2012).

There is a difference in the voting tendencies of those who use social media too. 79% of liberals report using social media while only 60% of conservatives do. Also Twitter is reported as 25% liberal and 10% moderate for those voters that frequently tweet their thoughts (Pew Research Center, 2012). The higher presence of Democrats on social media sites means undecided voters will be exposed to a higher concentration of liberally aligned posts than conservative ones.

The Obama campaign was more successful in drawing followers or likes to his social media profiles than the Romney campaign was. A digital comparison shows just how differently the Obama campaign was soaring to attract social media viewers to their online output.



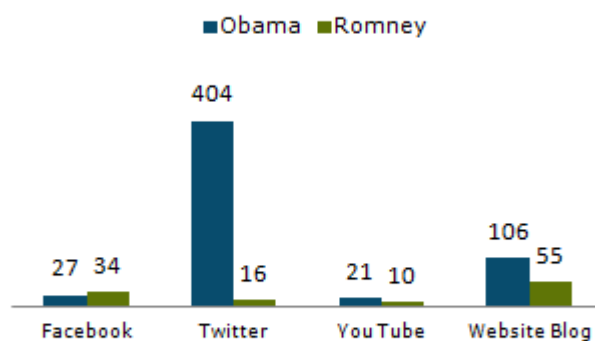
<http://socialmediatoday.com/mewlis1/977296/politics-gets-social>

The depiction was dated at October 25, 2012 and it clearly shows that on all of the sites, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and YouTube, Romney was being crushed in comparison to the views, follows, likes, and pins Obama was getting. Obama having 21,254,754 million followers on Twitter in comparison to Romney’s 1,559,035 million followers in October of the election year is something that the Mitt Romney campaign should have caught in early January and been rushing to fix (Lewis, 2012).

The campaigns output of social media clearly was dominated by Obama. This graph from the Pew Research Center shows just how many areas of the online campaign Obama was controlling. The Obama campaign’s social media output outnumbered Romney’s in almost every category.

Obama Leads Romney in Digital Activity...

Number of all digital posts studied



Date Range: June 4-17, 2012

PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

<http://www.journalism.org/analysis-report/how-presidential-candidates-use-web-and-social-media>

Obama leads Mitt Romney in posting in every category except for Facebook, but Obama's Facebook posts received a much higher rate of response than Romney's. During this period from June 4th through the 17th, the Obama campaign published 614 posts on social media sites, compared to just 168 from Romney. The digital gap between the campaigns was the greatest on Twitter. The Romney campaign averaged 1 tweet per day while the Obama campaign averaged 29 tweets. Obama also had about twice as many blog posts on his campaign website and more than twice as many YouTube videos (Mitchell & Rosentiel, 2012, *The Web and Social Media*).

The social media studied by the Pew Research Center between June 4th-17th showed that nearly all of the tweets, posts on Facebook, and YouTube videos originated with someone inside the campaign or a well-known supporter. The candidates both seemed to disregard the social interaction aspect of social media, rarely did either candidate reply to, comment on, or retweet something from a citizen. On Twitter, for example, only 3% of Obama's 404 total tweets were retweets of a citizen generated post. Romney produced just a single retweet during these two weeks and it came from his own son (Smith & Duggan, 2012, *The State of the 2012 Election*).

The social media coverage posted about the candidates favored Obama over Romney. A Pew Research Center study measured how many assertions were made about Obama and Romney respectively during the Republican National Convention and the Democratic National Convention and the tone of the post whether it was positive or negative about the candidate. There were 11,179,537 tweets and 442,524 Facebook posts about President Obama, while there were 7,740,992 tweets and 249,567 Facebook posts about Romney counted between August 27th- September 23rd (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2012). On Twitter, 17% of the tweets about Romney were positive and 59% were negative. Tweets about Obama were 25% positive and 44% negative (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2012). President Obama also successfully navigated Twitter and Facebook. Obama never had to deal with as much negative energy surrounding his online presence as Mitt Romney did. Mitt Romney's mistakes rushed to the Internet and continually damaged the public's opinion of him.

Across all social media platforms studied, 55% of the posts from the Obama campaign focused on promoting his record and accomplishments. Similarly, 52% of the posts from the Romney campaign focused on its own candidate. Romney also devoted substantial media posts to discussing Obama. During the month of June, roughly a third of posts from the Romney campaign (34%) were dedicated to Obama-attacking for a policy stance or action. The Obama campaign employed only half as many posts focusing on Romney (14%) (Mitchell & Rosentiel, 2012). That difference held true across all platforms studied, except for Facebook where both Romney and Obama devoted the majority of posts to themselves. 65% of Romney's posts were self-subjected and Obama dedicated 74% of posts to himself (Arkin, 2012).

President Obama's presence on social media websites was so expertly executed and displayed to American voters, but the online Obama campaign knew that an Internet campaign would not attract a spectrum of potential voters unless they used other mediums besides just print and video advertisements. Adam Fetcher, deputy press secretary for the Obama campaign said, "Social media is a natural extension of our massive grassroots organization" (Wortham, 2012). The Obama online presence was felt across not just social sites like Facebook and Twitter, but blogging sites like Tumblr and Pinterest, which are heavily populated by teenagers.

President Obama's Tumblr was filled with pop culture references, witty photos, animated GIFs, videos, and quotes. The Obama campaign has had a good grasp of the kind of content that works well on Tumblr and leverages this for very high user engagement rates five times greater than the Romney campaign achieved over the same time period. In the month of October, Obama posted 191 times on his Tumblr. His posts received 555,700 notes from 319,400 Tumblr users (Comparing Tumblr analytics for Mitt Romney and Barack Obama, 2012). To remind Tumblr users about the first presidential debate, President Obama's team used an obscure clip of Lindsay Lohan saying "It's October 3" from the comedy "Mean Girls." This one post has generated over 69,000 notes to date (Obama for America.Tumblr) (Wortham, 2012). The Obama campaign's Tumblr often featured photos of Obama on the computer replying to tweets and historical photos that emphasized different dates and important moments in our country. Obama's Tumblr featured a highly customized layout, with bright colors, a bold header that made sure visitors knew who owned the blog, and features that made posts simple to share (Obama for America.Tumblr).

The Romney campaign did a horrible job of representing the presidential candidate on social media sites. The Romney campaign's presence on Tumblr was more subdued, sticking largely to posterlike photos with slogans like "No, we can't." The Romney Tumblr posts rarely generated more than 100 notes and were all made by Romney, never shared content from other blogs (Wortham, 2012). During the month of October, Mitt Romney had posted 33 times to his Tumblr. Collectively, his 33 posts received 17,800 notes from 15,800 Tumblr users. His posts average 339 reblogs per post and 199 likes per post. (The average number of notes per post was skewed because one post received over 15,000 notes while his other posts went virtually ignored) (Comparing Tumblr analytics for Mitt Romney and Barack Obama, 2012). Romney's Tumblr was also set up remarkably poorly. Instead of using a "theme" from Tumblr- a customizable layout that allows the user to control the entire look of the blog, his Tumblr was set up in basic html format. His campaign's custom html layout featured a white background, a small image of the Romney campaign logo that wasn't aligned properly, an also uncentered headshot of Mitt Romney, and in a tiny, grey font, centered on the page, was the text "Paid for by Romney for President, Inc." (Mitt Romney.tumblr.com).

Romney's Twitter never updated past saying "Former Governor of Massachusetts" during his presidential campaign (Twitter.com, Romney). The Mitt Romney Twitter account also retweeted only one follower's tweet to the Romney page over a month long period and replied to zero tweets sent from possible voters. Twitter users passed along 150,106 Obama messages to their own followers, compared to 8,601 retweets of Romney tweets. Due to Romney's horrible public social media relations, his campaign failed to interact with many potential voters. Those who did support Romney were of a much older demographic and less inclined to use social media in the first place. The younger demographic of voters that actively use social media were fed so much more information by the Obama campaign, who successfully got their message out to their voters.

The functionality of the campaign websites also differed. Visitors to Obama's website are offered opportunities to join 18 different constituency groups, among them African-Americans, women, LGBT, Latinos, veterans/military families, or young Americans. If you click to join a group, you then begin to receive content targeted to that constituency (Barack Obama.com). The Romney campaign offered no such groups in June, but added a Communities page that by early August featured nine groups (Mitt Romney.com).

Smartphone usage also had a strong influence over how many people used the Internet and social media to follow the presidential election. 45% have used their smartphone to read other people's comments on a social networking site about a candidate or the campaign in general. 35% have used their smartphone during this election campaign to look up whether something they just heard about a candidate or the campaign in general was true or not. 18% have used their smartphone to post their own comments on a social networking site about a candidate or the campaign in general (Smith & Duggan, 2012, The State of the 2012 Election). In general, the campaigns both effectively allowed themselves to be available for mobile political researches. Both had mobile versions of their websites and Twitter is now predominantly operated on smart phones. In June of this year, the Federal Election Commission for the first time allowed political campaigns to accept campaign contributions via text message, but only 1% of Americans donated from a cell phone (Smith & Duggan, 2012, Presidential Campaign Donations in the Digital Age).

Online campaign contributions can show just how heavily the influence of social media was on the campaigns. Ten percent of 2012 presidential campaign donors have contributed via text message or cell phone app. Democrats are more likely to contribute online or directly from their cell phone, while Republicans are more likely to contribute in person, by phone call, or via regular mail. 13% of the American adult population donated to a campaign. 67% donated in person, over the telephone, or through the mail. 50% donated online or via email. 10% donated by sending a text message from their cell phone or using a cell phone app (Smith & Duggan, 2012, The State of the 2012 Election).

The Obama campaign clearly made better usage of the Internet during the 2012 presidential election campaign. Social media posts flew out of the Obama campaign while the Romney campaign seemed to be posting at the same pace as snail mail. There are always advantages to being an incumbent, but social networking is something the Obama campaign had revolutionized during the 2008 campaign. Now the 2012 campaign featured both candidates employing the usage of third party data and trying to specialize their Internet ads for each type of voter. The jump in Internet users in four years was felt through a sharp increase in the social networking population and by 2016, it stands that almost every single voter will be using social media. The candidates put so much of their campaigns online that the next thing to go online

seems like it would be voting. The social media influenced vote would create an entirely different campaign and create an entire different Internet. Barack Obama and Mitt Romney both used social media to efficiently advertise their campaigns, but Barack Obama brought his campaign into the entire online experience. Through President Obama's broad usage of user-friendly social media and high volume of campaign controlled posts, his online image was self created, unlike Mitt Romney whose online presence was generated more by the voting population than his own campaign.

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