MySpace to Your Space: How Celebrity Politics and the Internet are Transforming Political Communication Among American Youth

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The paper provides a unique perspective by discussing the cumulative rather than individual effects of celebrity politics, political fandom, social networking sites, and political blogs. It found that politicians created a greater interest in political communication by using celebrity tactics including an increased presence in popular online forums like social networking sites and blogs. Blumler and Katz' (1974) uses and gratifications theory acts as a base to understand how young peoples' identification with popular culture has led to politicians' increased presence in forums like MySpace, Facebook, the blogosphere, and popular television. Politicians' use of new technology in the 2008 United States Presidential election has been credited with attracting the highest number of young voters in recent history, and its winner, President Barack Obama, is considered by most to have had the most effective online campaign. President Obama had both a Facebook and MySpace page, a regularly updated blog and conducted a number of interviews on popular television programs including Ellen, Oprah, and The Tonight Show. Understanding what motivates young voters is important in the United States where voting is not compulsory and recent elections have been won or lost by controversial margins. Although there is no proven correlation between increased Internet use and increased political participation, early research shows a positive trend in both, and an increasing interest in the topic will hopefully provide more definitive answers and hopefully continue to increase young peoples' interest in political communication.

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Introduction

      Researchers have stated that the Internet, particularly blogs and social networking sites, have played an important role in increasing interest and participation in political communication (Coleman & Moss, 2008; Coleman & Wright, 2008; Erikson, 2008; Kennedy, 2008; Negrine, 2008; Rasmussen, 2008; Sifry, 2009; Tian, 2006; Yahr, 2008).   An understanding of what has caused an increased interest in political communication and the increase in young voters is particularly important in the United States where voting is not compulsory, and recent elections have been won or lost by very small margins. Though the Iraq War, the Global Economic Crisis, and other major global issues have almost certainly played a role in increasing young Americans' interest in political communication, this paper will focus solely on the role of new technology in the recent increase in interest. Getting American youth interested in politics is especially important because young voters tend to become voters for life (Beyond, 2008). While a steady increase in young voters is apparent, the question of why they are returning to the polls has yet to be answered.

      This paper will focus on four perspectives that explain how interest in political communication among young Americans has grown. First, it discusses Blumler and Katz' (1974) uses and gratifications theory with its specific attention to individuals' choice of media. This theory provides a base from which to understand why more and more young Americans are choosing the Internet as their preferred medium to participate in the political process. Second the paper discusses how politicians have changed their image through Internet use so as to achieve celebrity status thereby creating politically active young fans. Third, the paper discusses how the Internet has made political communication more entertaining thereby creating an environment where young Americans are encouraged to participate in political discussions via the Internet rather than just watching them on television (Street, 2004; Erikson, 2008; Beyond, 2008). Finally the paper discusses how political blogs have helped to create online communities that not only satisfy young constituents' desire to have their voices heard, but also create more transparent relationships and provide more intimate knowledge about political officials (Coleman & Moss, 2008). This paper considers each of these perspectives and draws upon examples of Internet use by prominent politicians such as Barack Obama and Bill and Hillary Clinton.

      Before launching into any theoretical discussion about political communication on the Internet, it is useful to look at statistics on Internet usage. Although no direct correlation has been found, statistics have shown an increase in both Internet use and young voter turnout. For example, 87 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 used the Internet in 2008 compared to the 75 percent who used it in 2000 (Pew, 2008; Rainie & Packel, 2001).

      Two-thirds of Internet users in this age group reported having registered social networking accounts (Smith & Rainie, 2008). Of these, half had used their social networking sites to gather or share political information with 12 percent who had either posted their own political commentary, or participated in conversations with online news agents or blogs (Smith & Rainie, 2008). Possibly related to this increased Internet use are the nearly 23 million Americans aged 18 to 29 who voted in the last presidential election (CIRCLE, 2008). This turnout showed an 11 percent increase in young voters since the 2000 election and a five

percent increase since the 2004 election (CIRCLE, 2008). Politicians' recent use of popular social networking sites, which will be discussed later in the paper, supports the idea that increased Internet use may have a positive effect voter turnout.

Key Terms
To better understand this research it is useful to define some key terms. Following a definition provided by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement or CIRCLE (2008), the term "young" describes individuals between the ages of 18 and 29. Although there are several technical definitions of political communication, Lilleker's (2006) description of political communication as, "the blending of politics and popular culture" (p.9) is best suited to this research. Although blogs come in many forms, this research will focus strictly on political blogs, which are defined as, "regularly updated web pages with information (textual, photographic, or video) presented in reverse chronological order" (Coleman & Wright, 2008, p.1)

Uses and Gratifications
Blumler and Katz' (in Hadriakis & Whitmore, 2006) uses and gratifications theory provides a tool to help explain why people turn to the Internet for political communication. The goal of uses and gratifications theory is described as trying to find,

> the social and psychological origins of needs, which generate expectations of the mass media or other sources, which lead to differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in need gratifications and other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones (p.767).

Uses and gratification theory's specific attention to what draws individuals to choose certain media products is critical to uncovering why political blogs and social networking sites are so popular. It is also instrumental in uncovering what methods politicians are adopting to attract young Americans to their various online forums.

Lilleker (2006) stated that uses and gratifications theory is particularly useful for political communication because of its recognition that media audiences are more than "passive receivers who are easily manipulated" (p.201). Lilleker (2006) described how uses and gratifications is particularly applicable to "floating voters" (p.202), who are those individuals that do not have strong political ties to any party. Many of these individuals, he argued, actively seek as much information as possible to ensure that they are voting for a candidate that best meets their interests. Ohr and Schott (in Lilliker, 2006) explained that

> ...receiving information often provided voters with the incentive to be more proactive about seeking additional information. Therefore modern voters would not simply rely on television for their news but would seek information on parties and candidates from a variety of other sources; including the Internet. (p. 203)

These results indicate how important it is for politicians to participate in a variety of online forums. Ohr and Schott's (2001) findings of increased use of the Internet by constituents to gather political information enforces the idea that politicians should make themselves available via Internet sources to meet their constituents' needs.

Raacke and Raacke (2008) conducted a study that, although not specifically related to political communication, is useful to this research for its application of uses and gratifications theory to social networking sites. Raacke and Raacke were astounded by September 2006 statistics that tallied over 20 million registered MySpace users and an estimated 9.5 million Facebook users. To answer some of their questions about the rising popularity of social networking sites, Raacke and Raacke (2008) conducted a survey of 116 college age students based on uses and gratifications theory. The goal of their study was to find what needs drew students to these websites, and how those needs were being gratified.
The results showed that 87 percent of the students had registered accounts, 75 percent of which had both Facebook and MySpace accounts. In the study, students cited a desire to keep in touch with friends as their primary motivation for using the sites. Other relevant reasons for use were, "to learn about events" (33 percent) and, "to feel connected" (19.8 percent) (p.171).

Raacke and Raacke's (2008) research acts as a framework to understand some researchers' assertion that politicians' use of social networking sites and political blogs has acted to increase interest in political communication (Erikson, 2008; Gray, 2007; Beyond, 2008).   Raacke and Raacke's (2008) research provides an understanding of the popularity of these sites, why so many young Americans use them, and how politicians are using the sites' popularity to their advantage particularly to increase interest in political communication. Their example also highlights the usefulness of uses and gratifications theory to explain the motivation behind individuals' actions and choice of online media products. All of these are important in proving a connection between Internet use and increased political communication.

The Celebrity Politician and Political Fandom

Political fandom, which this paper will discuss later on, is one of the most prominent displays of how the Internet has transformed political communication. To understand how the Internet has helped politicians generate these fan followings, it is helpful to first understand celebrity politics. Street (2004) based his discussion on Marshall (1997) who defined celebrities as,

> People, who via mass media enjoy a greater presence and wider scope of activity and agency than those who make up the rest of the population. They are allowed to move on the public stage while others watch (p. 437)

Street (2004) explained that politicians' transition to the role of celebrity is important because it allows for more intimate relationships with constituents. He explained that while the traditional political structure offers little in terms of personal information, celebrities openly share parts of their personal lives because they understand that the public supports those people with whom they can self-identify. Therefore, by releasing personal information about themselves, politicians can portray themselves as ordinary people who have the same problems as everyone else despite their elevated status in society.

Although many believe that the celebrity politician is a recent development, Street (2004) argued that politicians have used the power of celebrity since the 1860s. For example, Abraham Lincoln's use of photography to publicise his campaign for the abolition of slavery was compared to modern politicians' use of talk shows and online forums to advance their agendas. Politicians' use of these new mediums was described as a way to combat the low trust and interest levels among their constituents. To gain celebrity status, politicians turn to

experts who market celebrities and adopt their techniques. In recent times, two of the most popular techniques recommended to politicians have been to create blogs and join social networking sites.

Erikson's (2008) research of political fandom responds to Street's (2004) discussion of celebrity politics. Erikson (2008) detected a significant increase in "virtual campaigning" in the 2008 United States presidential election. Virtual campaigning was described as politicians' use of online forums like MySpace and Facebook as a means to garner support for their campaigns. What Erikson found particularly interesting about this sort of campaigning was the kind of response it drew from audiences. He described the political communication posted on these websites as *political fandom* which is "an alternative way in which people make political decisions: one based on affect rather than reason" (p.7).

Political fandom was offered as an alternative to rational choice theory which is the traditional model of political thought. Rational choice theory is defined as how "individuals make political decisions, like who to vote for, based on a cost benefit analysis" (Parsons as cited in Erikson, 2008 p. 6). In contrast to rational choice theory, Erikson stated that political fans based their decisions on how they self-identify with politicians. The described fandom directly correlates to Street's (2004) description of how politicians are joining the celebrity circuit.

To support his theory, Erikson (2008) conducted a semiotic analysis of Hillary Clinton's MySpace page.   Content on the page was reviewed and then separated into sections including comments, videos, links, pictures, and blogs. The content and structure of the MySpace page was then compared to Hillary Clinton's official political website. While the comments on Mrs. Clinton's official website discussed policy initiatives and recent debates, the comments on her MySpace page were less formal, declared love and strong support, and often pledged votes with little or no discussion of the issues. Erikson compared the support found on Hillary Clinton's MySpace page to the kind of support found on American Idol where people support their favourite, but not always the best candidate/contestant for the job.

Street (2004) also recognised a perceived lack of credibility in celebrity politics. While Erikson (2008) questioned the benefits of politicians taking part in these forums, Street (2004) acknowledged that celebrity politics, "may reinvigorate a political process that often stagnates" (p.440). He went on to further defend celebrity politics when he explained how this style of politics not only creates relationships between politicians and constituents, but also creates a way fresh way for people to understand what are often dull policies.

Although Street (2004) and Erikson (2008) explained celebrity politics and political fandom, they did not discuss how important the nature of fandom is to the recent increase in political communication. The key importance of fans was described by Gray (2007) who provided a comprehensive understanding of fans, their motivations, and their role in the political realm. He described fans as disempowered members of society who consume a great deal of media. The importance of disempowerment will be discussed in more detail with the discussion of online communities. Gray explained that contrary to Erikson's (2008) beliefs, fans do not only respond to aesthetic qualities, but often base their fandom on respect for individuals who exemplify hard work and determination. Particularly important to this research was Gray's (2007) discussion about the nature of fandom. He stated that fans rarely just like something; they tend to do something to exhibit their support and gather others to join them. It is this active nature of fans that makes them important in the political arena.

Politicians' use of the Internet to change their image to develop an active fan base is a plausible explanation for the recent increase in political communication.

Gray (2007) explained that politicians see young Americans' increased interest in political communication on the Internet as an opportunity to communicate through their fans, and have increased their presence in print, radio, television, and online media in response to their current fans' needs and to further expand their following. New technologies such as personal data assistants (PDAs), laptops, and ever advancing cellular phone technology, he explained, have allowed fandom and in part, political communication, to be integrated into most parts of everyday life.

Gray (2007) discussed how fandom is often disregarded by the intellectual community because of its emotional basis, but argues that this emotion may be what prompts fans' actions. Gray (2007) discussed fandom's long standing role in politics particularly in the form of political rallies. He stated that these rallies exemplify how fans are motivated by a mixture of emotion and critical analysis of issues. Gray's (2007) statements strengthen Street's (2004) argument that the political celebrity plays an important role in politics today by explaining how an active fan base can act to increase political communication. Gray's (2008) discussion also validated Erikson's (2008) assertion that use of celebrity tactics like new social networking sites generates political fandom and also legitimises the role of fans in politics today.

This discussion is particularly relevant to how uses and gratifications theory applies to these new political formats. Erikson's (2008) example of Hillary Clinton's popularity in the MySpace community, and his comparison of it to American Idol, highlights young Americans' desire to tie politics into pop culture which, he stated, they relate more closely to than traditional politics. Politicians' use of talk shows like Barack Obama's appearances on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Tonight Show with David Letterman*, and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* as well as their participation on websites like MySpace and Facebook show that they recognise their constituents' needs, and are generating new formats for political communication as a response. By making use of the plethora of available online forums, politicians allow their messages to be sent to a wider variety of audiences. By making themselves available in every media medium, politicians greatly improve their chances of engaging young America.

Political Participation: Engrained in Online Politics

It is not just fans who are active in politics. Negrine (2008) discussed how the structure of the Internet itself promotes participation. He described the Internet as a "pull" technology, one that requires users to retrieve the information they desire. He described how the Internet amplifies traditional media sources by allowing users to actively discuss issues rather than just listening to them. This function of the Internet was described as an extension of traditional media sources like print or television. Negrine also explained that these discussions provide feedback to politicians, which gives them a clearer view of what their constituents want.

The new online political community has clearly voiced a desire to make politics more entertaining (Beyond, 2008). The Internet has played a key role in making political communication more entertaining and interactive. Politics were first seen as, "infotainment" in 1992 when then presidential hopeful Bill Clinton answered the question, "boxers or briefs?"(p. 14) during a televised question and answer session with a group of college

students. These types of sessions were described as "town hall discourse", (p.15) a format that became more popular in the 2008 election than ever before. This brand of political discourse was considered to provide a more intimate knowledge of the candidate and allow ordinary citizens to ask questions that would not be appropriate in a stricter political setting. The aforementioned factors combined with new technologies that allow for real-time participation are credited with making this type of political communication popular among young Americans (Beyond, 2008).

With new technology simply watching politicians speak to a group of college students on television has become a thing of the past (Beyond, 2008). Modern technologies allow speeches to be streamed online, allow viewers to ask questions via instant messenger, and participate in real-time polls. MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube also allow for online participation and are primary sources of youth-generated political communication. The advantage of these new technologies is that young people often don't even realise that they are participating in political communication because they enjoy using social networking sites and discussing issues relevant to them with their peers (Beyond, 2008).
Also important to consider are social networking sites' and politics' similar goals of building groups (Beyond, 2008). Social networking sites expedite the group building process for politicians by reaching thousands of individuals where traditional methods may have only reached hundreds. Young Americans' recreational use of these websites provides politicians with free advertisement and increased support. Although television is still the primary source of media in politics, the Internet's influence has grown and online formats allow for more, "natural" (p.16) participation in politics (Beyond, 2008).

Rasmussen (2008) discussed another of the Internet's roles in generating a greater interest in political communication. He stated that the Internet allows for discussion of more topics than traditional media like television because it does not have to be streamlined for a general audience to be more cost efficient. While he admitted that the Internet does complicate political communication because it allows for a greater breadth of topics to be discussed, it also encourages people to discuss issues that are particularly relevant to them.

Yahr (2008) described another response to constituent needs in her discussion of new fact checking websites. She described how many voters felt overwhelmed by the conflicting political messages during the 2008 campaigns, and were wary of false promises and lies after the doubt-inspiring Bush administration. In response to Internet users' complaints about the lack of transparency and honesty in political journalism, newspapers decided to create fact checking websites. These sites allow anyone to check the validity of nearly any public statement made by politicians. The statements are dissected and any mistruths are picked out and corrected. Yahr (2008) discussed that these websites are not only drawing in large numbers of users, but they may also have the added benefit of having politicians think twice before they make false declarations. These websites are yet another example of how the Internet not only encourages political communication, but helps to create a more transparent political environment for constituents.

Uses and gratifications theory is also present in this discussion. Politicians' use of social networking sites and their shift into "infotainment" are responses to their constituents' needs. Politicians understand that American youth do not use the same mediums as their parents to get the news and have made efforts to be present in mediums that appeal to a younger constituency. Creation of fact checking websites is another example of how the political environment is changing itself to meet the needs of a wary and technologically

advanced society. While there is no way for politicians to know exactly what each of their constituents want in terms of political communication, their efforts to be present in all facets of media indicates that politicians understand that the needs of their constituents are important, and an increase of political communication and in turn increased votes has been a reward for their efforts.

Political Communication and Online Communities

While social networking sites' ability to form online communities was briefly discussed earlier in the paper, Kennedy (2008) provided a more in-depth discussion of the importance of these online communities. Kennedy (2008) explained that in a time when traditional geographic communities are on the decline, the Internet creates different kinds of communities. He explained that although people in these online communities may never meet or know each others' names, they often share common views and opinions about the world.

Kennedy (2008) stated that blogs are particularly important for groups in the political minority who often lack representation in the media. This idea of a need for representation relates to Gray's (2007) discussion of fans as those individuals who are disempowered members of society who consume a great deal of media. For those individuals who are part of the minority and feel that they are powerless in the political sphere, online communities can create places where voices are heard and opinions are supported.
One of the most common misconceptions about political blogs, Kennedy (2008) explained, is that only non-educated people participate in these online discussions. Kennedy (2008) refuted this criticism and explained that although blogs are often used by minority groups to voice their political opinion, a groups' minority status does not equate with a lack of education. While he agreed that discussions on blogs have a tendency to be biased because similarly-minded people tend to gravitate towards certain blogs, he argued that many educated people including journalists, blog. Kennedy (2008) contended that the benefits of blogs greatly outweigh the negatives particularly because they create interest in politics and fulfil a need for community in a fragmented society.

Coleman and Wright (2008) discussed four benefits of blogs in political communication. The first benefit they discussed was how blogs create more responsive relationships between message senders and receivers. This is not only important for a person communicating with a politician who wants a closer relationship with their elected official, but it is also important to the concept of the online community. The Internet has made it possible for people to develop relationships based on common interests without geographic boundaries. The ability to develop relationships with like-minded people regardless of their geographic location, they explained, would be particularly important for young Americans who don't always identify with their family or community's politics. Blogs provide support and information for people from a variety of backgrounds and orientations.

The second benefit discussed by Coleman and Wright (2008) was how blogs enhance two-way communication because receivers respond directly to questions or comments posted on their blog. This was regarded as particularly important for those people who wanted closer relationships with politicians. While they admitted it would not be realistic to expect politicians to be able to respond to every comment they receive, the fact that there is any sort of two-way communication was seen as an advantage over television and print media which only allow constituents to receive information.

The third benefit Coleman and Wright (2008) discussed was how blogs make people feel like their opinions matter and that they are being listened to. This again tied into the idea of community. Political blogs' ability to provide a place for people to discuss issues that are relevant to their lives, to ask questions and receive a variety of answers, and to feel like they are contributing to the political society highlights how blogs act to increase political communication.

The last benefit Coleman and Wright (2008) discussed was how blogs make political communication more user friendly by breaking down complex issues into easy to understand concepts, and encouraging everyone to participate. This, they explained, is important because many people find politics daunting. Politics are correlated with complicated language and policies which are often difficult for people to understand. The researchers explained that blogs allow people to discuss issues in terms that they can understand. Coleman and Wright (2008) explained that people would be more likely to participate in politics if they felt that they clearly understood the issues.

Again this subject matter is related to the tenets of uses and gratifications theory. Kennedy's (2008) discussion of the popularity of blogs in relation to a need for community directly correlates to Raacke and Raacke's study of the theory. Just as the members of social networking sites wanted to keep in touch with friends as found in Raacke and Raacke's (2008) study, Kennedy's (2008) bloggers participated in blogs to fulfil their need for community. It seems that in both cases users fulfilled specific needs with their media choices. The principles of uses and gratifications are also present in Coleman and Wright's (2008) discussion of the benefits of blogs. Uses and gratifications theory states that individuals choose media sources according to a variety of their own needs. Coleman and Wright's (2008) discussion of the several benefits of blogs including making people feel like their opinions are not only heard, but valuable, illustrates how a variety of needs could be fulfilled by blogs.

Conclusion

Although it is likely that there are a variety of reasons why young Americans' interest in political communication has increased, the Internet's role in this increase should not be ignored. The Internet has become an important part of everyday life in modern society. As was discussed earlier in the paper, increasing interest in political communication among American youth is important because young voters tend to become voters for life. Although the last American election drew in more young voters than other elections in recent history, there was no clear explanation for the increase and no definitive way for politicians to continue to attract young voters.

Celebrity politics, political fandom, active participation, and online communities are plausible explanations for why young voters have shown an increased interest in political communication and seem like viable ways for politicians to maintain the momentum they have gained with this audience. Politicians' use of formats like talk shows and popular websites create a presence in forums where the average viewer or user may not be looking for political information, but may become interested because politicians have made themselves available in forums that the user finds enjoyable. As a result of the use of these forums politicians have released increasing amounts of personal information and have as a result transformed themselves into celebrities with whom their fans can identify.

The Internet's ability to cover a wide range of issues without the time and content restrictions of traditional media has also plays a major role in the increase of political communication. Blogs particularly allow constituents to discuss their specific concerns in an online community that shares their point of view. These online communities create a sense of belonging and understanding to populations who often do not receive much attention in traditional media.

Although this paper presented a variety of perspectives on how the Internet has acted to create an increased interest in political communication, further research, particularly about the educational value of modern Internet forums, would be beneficial. Street (2004) and Erikson (2008) briefly questioned whether the Internet educates users or simply relies on politicians' celebrity status to incite an interest in politics. Street (2004) argued that the importance of an increased interest in politics was benefit enough to warrant continued use of political celebrity and fandom as a means for political communication. While this argument may satisfy some, other researchers still believe that attracting voters who have been educated on unfiltered opinions and are biased by fandom does little to improve the political process.

Researchers who question the legitimacy and effects of online political communication question whether these forums are creating ill-informed voters. Research to prove or disprove the Internet's ability to provide adequate knowledge about political issues would be difficult to conduct. Studies like Raacke and Raacke's (2008) with small samples of college students would be one way to track this information, but would provide an unrealistic sample as all participants would be educated college students, and this is not an accurate representation of all young Internet users participating in online political communication. Using social networking sites and blogs to have people voluntarily fill out questionnaires about prevalent issues could be one way to measure users' understanding of their preferred candidate's stance on those issues. Answers to these questionnaires could be compiled to see how effectively Internet media sources like social networking sites and blogs educate the public.

Regardless of whether the websites proved to be educational or not, researchers' argument that these websites may be detrimental to the political process because they generate ill-informed voters is problematic in two ways: first, because it implies that all previous voters in the United States were well informed of the issues, and second, because it ignores the fact that legal-aged Americans may exercise their right to vote regardless of their educational background.

This research has supported the idea that celebrity politics, political fandom, and popular online forums like social networking sites and blogs have worked together to create an increased interest in political communication among young Americans. Although further research on this topic is necessary to prove any definitive correlation between Internet use and increased interest in political communication, the current research shows promise that young Americans are taking an interest in political communication, and politicians have taken an interest in their young constituents' needs.

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