An exploratory study of American youth's political engagement during the 2008 presidential election

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The younger generation has been a concern to academics for years with their contribution to the declining civic engagement in America. Amid attempts to figure out the source of political disengagement among young Americans, the "media malaise" thesis is oftentimes invoked to link this worrisome phenomenon to the emergence of digital media. Of especially great concern to parents and social observers alike, is the overnight popularity and lasting appeal of many social networking sites (SNS) among young people. But in the meantime, the 2008 presidential election has made many interesting innovative applications of SNS. This study is a preliminary exploration of what was actually taking place on the presidential candidates' Facebook pages. "Fan democracy" provides a new but inspiring concept for looking at young people's engagement in SNS in a politically relevant sense. Instead of rushing to the conclusion that it is another front where young people are engaged in illusional social connection, results from this study suggest that more is going on in SNS, and more research should look into such potentials.

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Declining civic engagement has been a concern among many academics for a long time. Common to their concern has been the younger generation, who seem to contribute especially much to the recent decline (Putnam, 2000). In many academic attempts to figure out the source of civic disengagement, the emergence of electronic media, posing challenge to the traditionally lauded print media, has been long treated as the scapegoat for impairing people's ability and intention to be politically involved (Postman, 1986; Putnam, 2000). The same accusation is conveniently applied to explain why the younger generation is even more politically disengaged than their parents or grandparents when they were young. It is often argued that they grow up in a media environment bombarded with entertainment programs, unprecedented speed in technological innovation and social networks that are heavily reliant on the virtual world rendered possible by the Internet. This general media experience is believed to make it more natural for young people today to be even more politically disengaged.

Of especially great concern to parents and social observers alike, is the overnight popularity and lasting appeal of many social networking sites (SNS) among young people. Seemingly all too obsessed with creating and maintaining their online personas and social networks, many worry that today's youth are so deceived by the false sense of social connection that they care less and less about what is going on in the real world. Yet, the year of 2008 witnessed a surprising marriage between the innovative use of SNS and youth voter turnout.

On the one hand, it seems less surprising that a growing number of young people are turning to the electronic media, especially the Internet for political information. Earlier in the 2008 presidential primary election, a Time/Abt SRBI poll noted that among 18-29-year-old registered voters, 63% say that television is their top news source about politics and current events, with 44% citing the Internet (Brohinsky & Schulman, 2008). More interestingly, it has been noted that young people also treat online discussions with friends as important sources of electoral information (Stelter, 2008).

On the other hand, the 2008 presidential election has sparked the young voters' participation to the extent that has not been documented for a long time. In Iowa, as many people under thirty caucused as did senior citizens. In every contest, the youth vote has at least doubled and often tripled previous records (Dickinson, 2008). As it turned out on the election night, youth (18-29 years old) voter turnout reached 51.1%, the third highest record since the voting age was lowered to 18 (CIRCLE, 2009).

These phenomena would seem especially unbelievable if one agrees with the aforementioned accusations placed on the electronic media. As a plethora of counterarguments have been proposed recently in terms of the electronic media's role in general, many new platforms in the electronic sphere have been mushrooming and pushing research forward. This paper presents a preliminary exploration of the central research question: By providing a sphere which the young generation is more familiar with and more invested in, can the untraditional media, beyond their entertaining and networking functions, effectively facilitate political involvement among their young users?

Literature Review

The declining associational life in contemporary America observed by Putnam (2000) is built upon the concept of social capital, which refers to people's connection with others in the society and the general trust in others one can derive from those connections. Born between 1965 and 1978, the demographic group that is generally referred to as "Generation X" (Soule, 2001) has been found to individually possess less social capital than their "Baby Boomer" parents, while the latter presents a relatively worse case than the preceding "Civic Generation," compared at the same life stages of each generation (Putnam, 2000; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). Suggested in this contention is that American youth nowadays are unprecedentedly disengaged.

As much as this phenomenon sounds alarm for social scientists, in general they have placed the blame on young people's media experiences. After succinctly reviewing the major arguments and evidence subsumed under the "media malaise" thesis, Norris (2000) concludes that their common target is the changing political communication environment.

Under the thesis, TV was assumed to usher in a mass media environment that is no longer able to facilitate rational-critical public discourse, but more of a harmful or distracting general environment (Postman 1986). Then the Internet has been conveniently criticized for providing unlimited opportunities of diversion, hence carrying on television's role. Guided by this basic idea, Shah, Kwak, and Holbert (2001) find that social-recreational uses of the Internet are negatively related to civic indicators, such as civic engagement, interpersonal trust, while informational uses contribute positively to individual production of social capital.

Similarly, Putnam's attack on TV has also been carried to today's attack on the Internet. While the electronic media are accused of directly diminishing their audience's available time for engagement in the real-world civic activities, they also indirectly tint the audience's view of the big world they inhabit, leading to less trust in others, a significant premise for participation in civic affairs. These arguments have worried many in that the young adults in the digital era grow up in an ever new political communication environment, in which they rely heavily on the digital media to fulfill their informational, recreational, and networking needs. Therefore, voices criticizing the social ills brought about by the Internet have always been accompanying its growth (Kraut et al., 1998).

Based on the "media malaise" thesis, one may get intuitively concerned by the rising popularity of SNS in the 2008 presidential election. A December survey in 2007 reveals that, as the Internet is gaining an ascending role in providing campaign news for the young voters, 27% of those younger than 30 say they get information on the campaign or the candidates from social networking sites (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2007).

While SNS only started to emerge in the late 1990's and have been primarily serving as an online networking tool, Boyd and Ellison (2007) look at past research and summarize major areas of study about SNS, which include impression management and friendship performance, networks and network structure, bridging online and offline social networks, and privacy issues. Probably unforeseen by many critics of SNS, while they are quickly gaining popularity among young people in helping them get connected with others (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), they are also transforming into the youths' major source of political information. Key features provided on Facebook, such as linking, Wall-posting, or resources timely updated on video-sharing websites such as YouTube, have created previously unimagined opportunities for young people to exchange their political views and become

more politically active. It has been noted that young people are pursuing more original materials of election news, such as video or speech transcripts, rather than relying on second-hand analyses of the events. Obama's speech about race on CNN was viewed almost 3.4 million times on Youtube in the several days after it was delivered, and remained among the most shared links on Facebook (Stelter, 2008).

Among the presidential contenders, the Obama campaign obviously very well recognizes the great potential lying in the digital media. Many media observers took notice of his campaign's extensive application of the new media, which has greatly facilitated mobilizing people online to contribute their efforts offline in the old-fashioned ways, such as door-knocking and precinct-walking across the entire country (Dickinson, 2008; von Drehle, 2008). Obama's campaign strategy has been succinctly dubbed as "19th century politics using 21st century tools" (von Drehle, 2008). It was still primarily reliant on ground efforts to mobilize voters in the traditional sense. But running an election in the 21st century, the Internet is undoubtedly very powerful in connecting people, spreading information, and reinforcing beliefs.

Especially interesting for the purpose of this study is Obama's appeal to the young people through the more youth-oriented social networking sites, such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Flickr, etc. Facebook is chosen as the focus of study given its rising popularity over other social networking sites and some unique features it can provide.

First launched in 2004 as a college network, Facebook quickly gained its popularity among the young people. In September 2006, Facebook opened to everyone with a valid email address. Although in this way it is made harder to track the exact number of young users on Facebook, the general consensus is that the majority of active Facebook users are still young people. This idea has in a sense been confirmed by a recent Pew study, which points out that young online adults have a much big portion (75% of 18-24-year-olds versus 7% of those 65 and older) of SNS users than older users (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2009).

When the study was conducted in 2008, Facebook already claimed 100 million active users, but boasts today a total of over 250 million active users (Facebook, "Company Timeline," n.d.). With the online groups centered on different hobbies or undertakings emerging daily within Facebook, the users can very much extend their offline social networks. Gradually, unordinary users are lured to the Facebook arena too, such as pop stars, TV channels, interest groups, commercial campaigns. By setting up a Facebook page, these agents try to penetrate their young targets' much frequented online space, and ultimately enhance their popularity among this group.

Most interesting among them are politicians, who according to traditional notions, should stand far from the line between entertainment and politics. As all the frontrunners in the 2008 primary election have their personal Facebook pages, they certainly have recognized the significance of this platform to reach out to their young voters, regardless of its originally entertaining or frivolous innuendos. Like other unordinary users, they know that existence itself is meaningful. And like pop stars, what they do is no big difference—building their fan base. This echoes the idea of "fan democracy" proposed by van Zoonen (2005). Through getting in touch with their constituencies, the young voters in this case, where they are most active, the candidates are making efforts to establish affectional connection with them.

Van Zoonen discerns three fundamental similarities between fan activities prevalent in the entertainment sphere and the constituencies' endorsing and following of political figures in the real world. "First, both fan communities and political constituencies come into being as a result of performance… Second, fan groups and political constituencies resemble each other when it comes to the endeavors that make one part of the community… Finally, both rest on emotional investments that are intrinsically linked to rationality and lead to 'affective intelligence' " (van Zoonen, 2005, p.53).

She observes that rather than distancing themselves from popular culture, politicians oftentimes borrow the narrative structures prevalent in the latter field to construct their performances around the likeable images as capable, responsible, and approachable characters. On the other hand, based on the alignments with their favorite characters, both fan groups and political constituencies make essentially similar efforts to promote those whom they support, such as promoting them in diverse social circles, mobilizing others to vote if there is competition for selection involved, exercising media surveillance, intervening in selection processes, and most important of all, using their own votes to make a difference. Last but not least, motivated by their own strong emotional investment, fans would actively construct and look for forums in which they can discuss their media consuming experiences and inspirations hence rendered, which naturally extend beyond the media content in and of itself.

According to these similarities, Facebook supporters of Obama may be less of passive audiences acted upon by the Obama campaign messages. Because of their familiarity with Facebook and the general ease they have established with the idea that it can serve as a fan community, Obama supporters can quite possibly use the platform provided by Facebook to share their common support of Obama through their evaluation of his performance, undertake activities to enhance his chance to win, and conduct rational discussion of relevant issues.

Facing all the possibilities lying in Facebook use, doubts are naturally raised about how substantial the democratic implications of one's involvement in the page can get. Essentially unfolding in the digital spheres where social identity formation and social networking are the primary purposes, information and opinion exchanges here are expected to be superficial and loosely linked to the political realities they intend to touch on. Simply attaching oneself to a particular political figure within a virtual social network may just serve as part of social identity construction and suggest the kind of unseriousness that is usually associated with fan activities centered on the entertainment industry. In this sense, the notion of "fan democracy" may provide some particularly fresh insights into young people's politically relevant activities on Facebook.

Through this exploratory study, I want to focus on the Facebook use by Obama supporters, who are said to be well mobilized and united by an unprecedentedly innovative campaign. Given the aforementioned characteristics of "fan democracy," a number of research questions can be posed.

The first similarity between fan communities and political constituencies posits that both groups derive their support from the actual performances of whom they choose to support. So it bears special interest to ask whether Obama supporters on Facebook simply express their support here without the intention to justify it.

Research question 1: Do Obama supporters just view his Facebook page as a place to voice their exclamation or do they base their public endorsement on his performance?

Both the second and the third similarities point to a major issue about SNS use in general, Facebook use more specifically. Many people tend to assume that by providing networking opportunities for its users and a support community for Obama, Facebook use does not go beyond these purposes, while van Zoonen suggests that "affective intelligence" oriented towards real-world issues can be encouraged.

Research question 2: Are the posts centered on issues or are they simply expressions of support and attempts at networking?

Another purpose many people assume about Facebook use is that it is mainly about identity construction and maintenance. If, as van Zoonen suggests, the supporters' interest can also be fostered about real-world issues, they need to more actively respond to others' opinions than just displaying one's own opinion unilaterally.

Research question 3: Do Obama supporters actually involve themselves in public debate or do they just express their opinions as a demonstration of unique personality without seeking dialogues?

The second similarity between fan communities and political constituencies also suggests that both groups are essentially involved in quite similar activities in promoting the people they support. These possibilities may include media surveillance, promoting, mobilizing, etc.

Research question 4: Do they engage in traditional forms of political engagement, such as sharing and seeking information, promoting Obama and mobilizing others to enhance his chance to win the election?

Research Design
This study mainly uses the method of case study by focusing on the actual use of Facebook by Obama supporters through examining his page. Not only did he have the biggest group on Facebook among all presidential candidates, but as noticed during the election, the initial establishment and the maintenance of Obama's momentum had been largely attributed to his special appeal to the young voters (Dickinson, 2008). In the months before the election, there were over 2 million supporters of Obama on Facebook, which was growing all the time. A majority of his Facebook supporters are believed to be young people. A special feature of Facebook is the "wall post," which is for others to talk to the owner of the page. After Obama was elected into office, the "wall post" function was quite interestingly taken off the page. Instead, there is a discussion section provided today, which is the closest to a "wall" but presents a very different dynamic from the earlier wall posts. By focusing on the wall posts, this research caught a historical glimpse of Obama's Facebook page when he was still running for the presidency.

The research questions are raised in correspondence to the three similarities between fan activities and political constituencies raised by van Zoonen. To explore them in a more systematic manner, one random hour of posts (or 100 posts starting from the hour) on a random day during each month from January to September 2008 were sampled. This decision was made due to several reasons. First, there was a huge bulk of wall posts (almost 500,000)

at the time of research that made it basically impossible to exhaust all of them. Second, the major challenge in studying such an ongoing phenomenon is that the pool of data was being updated every second, which made it very hard to keep watching everything that was going on. Thirdly, long-time observation before sampling confirmed the general pattern found in this study, which suggests that random sampling would help to avoid only handpicking those discussions that display a certain dynamic.

As a result, 942 posts were sampled for the analysis. In avoiding a major pitfall in content analysis (Graham & Witschge, 2003), a pilot study of posts from Dec.28th, 2007 to Jan.3rd, 2008 was conducted in order to develop the coding system.

Based on the research questions, each post is coded for the following:
- Exclamation: expression of support for Obama.
- Issue mention: expression of opinions on certain social or political issues.
- Responding: talking back to other posts instead of merely expressing one's own opinion for display.
- Media surveillance: reference to media sources.
- Networking: intention to network with others.
- Mobilizing: intention to mobilize peers to take actions.

Accordingly, a certain post can be coded more than once, if it displays more than one trait. For example, a post can both express one's support for Obama and talk about one's opinion on a certain issue. Therefore, it is coded under both exclamation and issue mention.

Results
Suggested by van Zoonen, Obama supporters would not just express simple exclamation on his Facebook page, but would further try to link it to his personal traits and achievements. Mixed results are observed for the first research question. Many posts can be as simple as "Fired Up! Ready To GO!" or "Brilliant Barack, we love you!" in expressing how inspired and motivated the supporters personally feel.

However, many others try to base their affiliation with Obama on what distinguishes him from traditional politicians, that is, where his performance excels other politicians, as the following detailed post exemplifies[1]:

> Sharon Smith (VCU) wrote
> at 9:00pm on January 23rd, 2008
> I watched the South Carolina Debate which was sponsored by the Congretional Black Caucus. Instead of Senator Clinton responding to the question that was asked in the beginning, she initiated attacks on Senator Obama. Therefore, he had to start the debate fighting back. Therefore, I must say I'm proud of his performance. Although, I didn't enjoy all of the squabbling, I do understand Senator Obama's need to defend his record in response to all of the attacks from the Clinton camp. Senator Obama really answered all of the questions very well and he described his plans for funding and implementing policies. I applaud him for trying to run a clean campaign and I applaud him addressing the religious community because I agree with his point that Democrats often shy away from religion while campaigning. As a result, Christians and folk of other religions never have a clear picture of where candidates stand. I now feel informed and am ready to support him.

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[1] Original wording and typos are retained.

"Clean campaign" resonates the mentality of many young voters in seeking an untraditional leader at a time when 72% of young people believe the country is on the wrong track, while 83% believe it will have an impact on the future of the country (Brohinsky & Schulman, 2008). Obama's rhetoric of "hope," "change" and his general rhetorical style agree especially well with the psychology of young people. "His is the language of possibility, which is the native tongue of the young" (von Drehle, 2008, p.36). Through their posts, the young Obama supporters sound really thrilled that such a charismatic personality as Barack Obama whom they can relate to and trust is running for the presidency, and deeply believe in his capability to reform politics, to bring change to Washington DC. Some say that Obama has reinvigorated their interest and hope in politics again.

Obama's performance is not just evaluated in its own terms, but oftentimes more specifically in comparison with his Democratic competitor Hillary Clinton earlier in the primary race, or his Republican competitor John McCain and Sarah Palin. "Dirty politics by the Clinton campaign," "same old politics by the McCain campaign," and "Sarah Palin has no real experience" were all hotly debated topics. Obama's debate performance in contrast to his opponents' also attracted great interest.

Beyond being positively supportive, the Obama supporters also use their critical evaluation, and offer suggestions to Obama in hanging on to his ideals and how to fight back. This following excerpt from a longer post indicates this potential:

> Sean Nichols (Bard) wrote
> at 6:43pm on January 23rd, 2008
> … Please take a stand, put an end to the Clinton squabble by being the bigger man and refusing to take part in this futile exchange. We already know you're a better candidate than Clinton, now prove it by freeing yourself from their political trap…

Admittedly, there are at times posts that simply voice one's support for Obama out of some ridiculous reasons, but most often they would be picked up and turned into meaningful discussion about why Obama should be supported. Interestingly enough, heated debate about issues, such as that about religious tolerance and respect in light of how the Muslim issue has been mishandled by campaigns, would also evolve into discussion about whether the candidates have sacrificed much of their principles just for the chance to win. On the flip side, debate over the controversy about whether Obama is patriotic has spurred much enthusiasm in discussing what is true patriotism.

This latter transition reminds one of the suggestions made by van Zoonen that neither fan communities nor political constituencies are just emotionally excited and involved. From their strong affective affiliation, the supporters may well be instigated to engage in rational issue discussion. The second research question asks about the distribution among exclamation posts, networking posts and issue discussion posts. Table 1 shows that among all 942 posts, the percentage of issue discussion posts more than doubles that of exclamation posts. In its absolute percentage, 57.2 is a quite high number and indicates a positive picture in that Obama's Facebook page serves more than a place where support and praises are voiced, but more meaningfully, the young users channel their enthusiasm into rational dialogues about key issues.

Category of Posts	Number of Posts (N)	Percentage of Posts (%)
Exclamation	219	23.2
Issue Mention	539	57.2
Networking	143	15.2
Responding to Other Posts	534	56.7
Citing Media Sources	112	11.9
Mobilizing	34	3.6
Total	942	

Recently occurring events oftentimes trigger long lasting issue discussion, which engenders their own attention span that runs through all the other miscellaneous topics. They range from the news that Hillary Clinton had lied about her visit to Bosnia, the situation of the primary election, vice presidential candidate pick, FISA bill, the sensational controversy over Obama's former Pastor, Reverend Wright, etc. And because of Reverend Wright's controversial words about Israeli-Palestine relation, many of the posts get off the focus on the influence of the Pastor in and of itself at times and devote attention to foreign affairs.

Even when there are no immediate events, looming issues are still brought up and passionately talked about on a daily basis. For example, one discussion centered around the concern that by wrongly labeling Obama as Muslim, hence distancing him from misinformed voters, smear campaigns are essentially disrespecting the Islamic religion. Entangled together with the thread are many comments about whether it is right for candidates to shun away from specific religions and religious issue in general. The topic on democratization of other terrorist regimes also triggered heated discussion, which was initiated by a casual comment.

Despite the major fact that Facebook is mainly a social networking site, most Obama supporters seem not to utilize his page for the purpose of pure networking. Overall, networking only constitutes 15.2% of all posts. This is not an impressive number given that people in general expect networking in their use of these sites. But it indicates that some people know each other before entering the page, or mostly get to know others through participating on the page. The networking posts can be as simple as greeting somebody. More often, networking on Obama's page is achieved through sharing their common support for Obama, or sharing one's experience of attending his rally and shaking his hand. So, to a large extent, even networking among Facebook users is highly tied to building a support community for Obama.

As discussion of the second research question already hints at the need for participants on the page to talk to each other quite frequently in exchange of opinions, the third research question asks how often they actually talk across each other. According to van Zoonen's notion of "fan democracy," Obama supporters would not just view their own posts as a demonstration of unique personality and worldviews. Rather, they would be driven by their emotional investment in the community and actively seek out communication with other

supporters. Reading through the posts, one can hardly gather the impression that Obama supporters merely post their opinions as a display of personal front. Indeed, they care more about talking to Obama or with their peers. Shown in Table 1, participants on the page respond to each other almost 60% of the time.

So regarding the third research question, Obama supporters come to his Facebook page not to just display their viewpoints, but also seek exchanges of opinions. This can also be discerned by taking off people who only post once on the page, because in order to fully participate in a discussion thread, one needs to at least post more than once. There is a core group of people who in general participate more actively than others, and contribute to the majority of all posts. 112 participants post more than once, contributing 614 posts altogether and more than 5 posts averagely by each of them. In total, there are 391 individual participants for all 942 posts. So on average, each person contributes at least 2 posts.

Furthermore, the second similarity between fan communities and political constituencies suggests that both groups are essentially involved in quite similar activities in promoting the people they support. So the fourth research question inquires beyond opinion exchange, whether Obama's Facebook page also provides a platform for other related activities that resemble fan communities, such as media surveillance, mobilization, etc. Coming into the page, one would be impressed by all the video clips, speech transcripts and media links being shared here. But since the focus of this study is on the wall posts, only media surveillance conducted on Obama's wall was coded for mentions of media sources or specific links. As Table 1 suggests, sourcing happens around 10% of the time. This count does not yield a very high percentage because many comments only make passing reference to some sources of information without providing an explicit way to verify them. Paraphrases are not counted for the same reason that it is hard to verify them.

As another possibility, mobilizing efforts constitute the smallest percentage (3.6%) among all coded activities. But in general, they present a spectrum of possibilities, such as making commitments online in urging Al Gore to endorse Obama, contributing letters, making phone calls, rallying voters, organizing special campaigns, donating, and of course, most importantly, voting.

Discussion
In answering the central research questions raised in this study, one would find "fan democracy" a very thought-provoking idea for looking at young people's engagement in the social networking sites in a politically relevant sense. The picture generalized on Obama's Facebook page has confirmed the notion of "fan democracy" and the potential that SNS can offer a platform for purposes beyond networking. Obama supporters on the page not only justify their support by Obama's performance, but they are also motivated by the strong affective association to exchange information, opinions and mobilize actual actions among their peers. These activities, in a sense, are all meaningful forms of political engagement. Looking at Facebook posts provides a curious window through which the patterns of young people's political engagement can be better understood.

Therefore, this research bears some important implications for future theory development and actual campaign practices. It contributes to the dialogue about youth and the Internet in terms of how technology is able to provide motivation, opportunity to the young people, and hone their abilities in getting more politically engaged (Delli Carpini, 2000). It enriches possible

perspectives through which social networking sites can be examined (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Intuitively, the great potential lying in SNS for wide youth community organization will be largely applied by future political campaigns.

However, there are people on the page who simply come and go, and future research needs to look for ways to see whether they are learning from the dialogues. Graham and Witschge (2003) suggest that interview with the participants should be conducted in addition to reading the texts posted online. Meanwhile, the sample size can be enlarged to see whether the same observed patterns still hold. More qualitative readings of online posts can also look more deeply into how substantial the dialogues actually get. Beyond "affective intelligence," do the participants actually involve in quality rational-critical debate? As results in this study present a general positive picture in that young people are actively participating in the online sphere in a highly political light, there remains doubt about how these activities can be transferred into real votes and commitments. In that sense, contribution of efforts is entailed from all major groups, including parents, political administrations, and our education system.

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