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The Internet and Political Campaigns: Some Early Considerations

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Title: The Internet and Political Campaigns: Some Early Considerations

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Abstract. This article provides hypotheses on the effects of the Internet on political campaigns. The IBPP staff hopes that researchers among its readers will attempt to evaluate these hypotheses through combinations of empiricism, rationalism, and other epistemological approaches.

More and more political entities--candidates, officials, parties, governmental agencies, non-governmental agencies, special interest groups, and other non-state actors such as political fronts for terrorist groups--are developing web sites for access by the general public. Ascribing some modicum of logic and rationality to these political entities, one might conclude that these entities believe that their web sites are of some use in achieving political objectives. But what characteristics of the Internet might support or detract from such a belief?

First, the Internet is only accessible to certain population fragments. Accessibility seems to be dependent on geographical locale, technological infrastructure, economic factors, technological sophistication of potential users, and the sociocultural context--literacy, values--in which potential users reside. Whether accessibility in a particular case will support, detract from, or have little effect on a political objective may be largely dependent on political process that dictates what segments of an electorate are truly instrumental to securing and maintaining power.

Second, the Internet and various web sites on it are vulnerable to various intrusions from outright destruction of physical and technical infrastructure to modifications of web site content. These security vulnerabilities are analogous to pre-Internet times. Political operatives are confronted with the approach-avoidance dilemma of employing a web site as one medium of agitprop and having the site become vehicle of someone else's disinformation campaign.

Third, unlike many other information sources, web sites afford a significant interactive potential. Site visitors--dependent on motivation and cognitive skills--may actually carry on dialogue with controlled information sources anytime night or day. In fact, site visitors may develop a meaningful relationship with the interactive features--and via these features other features--of the site. Aspects of the site can become virtual authority figures, colleagues, friends, even lovers of a sort. As in pre-Internet times, a potential voter can create a notional bond with the candidate or aspects of a candidate's platform and program. Thus, virtual charisma may not only substitute for the candidate who has none of the "real thing" but actually outdo it. Moreover, the web sites could even become virtual worlds that are preferred by voters to actual ones. One of many ethical dilemmas might involve a candidate who is successful due to delivering the better virtual world even if legitimate problems of the actual world go unmet through seemingly intractable economic and social phenomena or through a political disinclination to meet them.

Fourth, the Internet may--under some conditions--induce antisocial or asocial effects with consequences for political participation. Moreover, Internet consequences for political participation may be different dependent on interaction effects with other media sources. These areas have been little researched and the small research base does not seem to be stopping Internet political applications.

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Fifth, some political operatives may fear that a web site might reveal too much to political competitors. However, one can easily counter the concern by noting that it pales before the extensive and comprehensive vetting through technology and old-fashioned methods to which candidates are subjected.

As with media from pre-Internet times, anecdotes, case histories, and empirical and experimental research will illumine the future through the past. (See Bimber, B. (1998). The Internet and political mobilization: Research note on the 1996 election season. *Social Science Computer Review*, 16, 391-401; Coffey, S., & Stipp, H. (1997). The interactions between computer and television usage. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 37, 61-67; Evan, W.M. (1997). Identification with the human species: A challenge for the twenty-first century. *Human Relations*, 50, 987-1003; Kraut, R., et al. (1998). Internet paradox: A social technology that reduces social involvement and psychological well-being? *American Psychologist*, 53, 1017-1031; Philport, J.C., & Arbittier, J. (1997). Advertising: Brand communications styles in established media and the Internet. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 37, 68-76; Raney, R.F. (December 4, 1998). Scholars weigh Internet's effect on campaigns. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Wheeler, D.L. (1998). Global culture or culture clash: New information technologies in the Islamic world--A view from Kuwait. *Communication Research*, 25, 359-376.) (Keywords: Internet, Perception Management, Political Campaigns, Propaganda.)