

Evolution of Online Campaigning: Increasing Interactivity in Candidate Web Sites and Blogs Through Text and Technical Features

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Political candidates have responded to the public's desire to use the Internet as an interactive information source by creating their own online presence. This study is a content analysis of the Web sites and blogs of the 10 Americans vying to be the Democratic candidate for the 2004 presidential election. Focusing on interactivity, data indicated front pages hyperlink to participation areas such as Donation or Volunteer sections and rarely linked to external content. Blogs used hyperlinks at a rate less than Web sites. Interactivity was encouraged through text, as 83.7% of Web sites asked voters to become more involved. Blog posts discussed issues and attacked the opponents, including President Bush. For the most part, blog posts were personal in nature and used direct address. The tactical use of advanced Web site features showed a technological progression of political campaigning and an overall increase in interactivity through technology and text.

Ten Democrats competed for their party's nomination during the 2004 presidential primary cycle. Competitors all of the same party attempted to differentiate themselves from one another and mobilize a support base. In doing so, candidates embraced online tools. Such strategies have grown in importance as the number of U.S. citizens who noted the Internet as a "main source of political campaign news" rose 18% in the past three cycles, whereas the number who said they got "any election news" grew 31% (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2004). The introduction of weblogs, or blogs, by candidate Howard Dean resulted in the quick adoption by other candidates of this more personalized and frequently updated content delivery tool that has been often compared to a diary (Blood, 2002).

Blogs seem to have come to campaigns at the right time. With voters calling for more interactivity in campaign Web sites (Stromer-Galley, 2002), research has shown it behooves a campaign to integrate such features. Gone are the days of passive, brochure-like campaign Web pages (Tedesco, 2004). Research indicates that candidates who offer interactivity on their Web sites may be able to enhance users' perceptions of their sensitivity, responsiveness, and trustworthiness. Furthermore, some argue that the level of interactivity offered on candidate Web sites may influence users' perceptions of candidates and levels of agreement with the candidates' respective policy positions (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003).

The purpose of this study was to examine electronic campaign tools through gauging the level of interactivity offered. In doing so, this study analyzed the Web pages and blogs of the Democratic candidates during the 2004 primary. Specifically, this study reviewed interactivity in electronic tools through user-control techniques, such as hyperlinking, and the textual encouragement of interacting or participating in the campaign. Whereas other studies have examined these operationalizations of interactivity separately, this study investigated the concepts together across two online tools.

An investigation of this sort—separately analyzing and comparing two seemingly similar electronic campaign tools—is warranted as a new technology like blogs is ushered into campaigning. How have campaigns answered voters' requests for increased interactivity online? Do tools such as blogs promote interactivity at a higher rate than traditional campaign Web sites? Noting the importance of interactivity in campaigns, this research asked such research questions.

BLOGGING PHENOMENON

Blogs, known for being highly opinionated and often political, have been on the Internet since 1997. Blogs are Web pages that are frequently updated with posts centered around one topic arranged in reverse chronological order (Blood, 2002). Walker (in press) called blogs a soapbox and notes their attractiveness for voicing political messages. Even though blogs themselves are Web pages, there are some

notable differences between blogs and what is traditionally thought of as a “Web site.” Blood (2002) proposed that the difference lies in the presence of hyperlinking. Trammell and Gasser (2004) suggested several structural differences between blogs and nonblog Web pages, which include the content structure in providing a clear and automated record of changes made to the page.

Regarding interactivity, blogs have been said to offer interactivity at a higher rate than normal Web pages by the greater frequency of hyperlinks and feedback features (Trammell, 2004). These traditional manifestations of interactivity are common on blogs, as many posts are designed around hyperlinks to external information and some bloggers allow readers to comment on posts (Blood, 2002). Additionally, there is a noted higher degree of personalization of content—the illusion that the blogger is writing a note directly to the reader (Blood, 2002). Such conversational style of writing online has been identified as an indicator of interactivity as well (Endres & Warnick, 2004).

Blogs have become a popular tool for politicians to campaign and reach out to their constituency. Though politician-run blogs are more popular and have been in use longer in Britain, the medium was introduced into American politics during the primaries of the 2004 U.S. presidential primaries. Political blogs may be considered to be a manifestation of Habermas’ (1962/1989) notion of a public sphere involving convergence of people or informants from various walks of life who share in discourse. Stromer-Galley (2002) asserted that a key component of such contemporary computer-mediated discourse is equality for those who participate in this type of political talk. Blogs indeed appear to provide such equality.

CONTENT ON CAMPAIGN WEB SITES

Though campaign Web sites have been around since the 1996 campaign (Selnow, 1998), they have evolved from mere “brochure-ware” to more engaging and interactive tools to inform and mobilize prospective voters and the media (Endres & Warnick, 2004; Tedesco, 2004). Traditionally, campaign Web sites focused on the candidate and provided predominantly positive information (Tedesco, Miller, & Spiker, 1999). Sites discussed everything from the candidate’s qualifications in a biography to issue stances. Candidate Web sites, though differing slightly, have been found to be rather uniform in their use of graphics, navigation items, and features (Banwart, 2002). Interviews of campaign staff and analysis of U.S. candidates’ Web sites in 1996 and 1998 showed that direct online interaction between the candidate and the public was avoided (Stromer-Galley, 2002). Instead, candidates in the 1996 U.S. presidential election and 1998 gubernatorial campaign used their Web sites as a public relations means to promote their campaign message.

In studying the content of campaign sites, Banwart (2002) found that candidates in the 2000 election used message strategies differently in their electronic

campaign tools. For instance, candidates were more likely to “call for change,” use endorsements, “address readers as peers,” and “identify with the experiences of others” on their Web sites than in their television ads. Such data illustrates that campaigns use each medium differently and comparisons should continue to chart the differences between strategies employed in a particular campaign tool. Furthermore, those findings suggest a more conversational and personalized approach to communication occurs online.

In utilizing new, electronic based communication tools, campaigns do not always get it right (Selnow, 1998). Trammell and Williams (2004) noted that previous attempts at electronic communication resulted in disjointed and improperly integrated message strategy. To avoid this bumpy adoption period for candidate blogs and optimize effectiveness, Garrett (2004) suggested that political blogs for campaigns write posts in a personal voice, update several times a day, encourage comments, moderate comments, hyperlink to internal and external sources, hyperlink to other blogs, and call the readers into action. As such, there is an implicit identification of blogs being interactive—through technology such as hyperlinking and text that encouraged comments and called the readers into action.

During the 2004 general election cycle, use of interactive features—such as providing numerous hyperlinks, allowing users’ to post content in comments and trackbacks, and providing ways for citizens to mobilize—proved ubiquitous on the Kerry and Bush Web sites (Williams, Trammell, Postelnicu, Landreville, & Marin, 2005). It appeared that a modern campaign shifted to not only require current and issue-driven Web sites but also Web sites that offer interactivity and invite user participation.

This study examined the content and features offered in candidate Web sites and blogs regarding interactivity. By investigating the technical and textual manifestations of interactivity on campaign Web sites and blogs, this study provides a single and comparative look at types of interactivity across media. Specifically, this study looked at traditional interactive elements such as hyperlinks and developing concepts of interactivity that concentrate on the rhetorical construction of content posted. Furthermore, this study compared campaign Web sites to campaign blogs, providing an intermedia snapshot of how these two electronic campaign tools are treated in comparison to one another.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In achieving the research goals about interactivity, this study analyzed interactivity in the 10 Democratic primary candidates during the 2004 primary election period. As such, it is helpful to review existing literature regarding interactivity and operationalize the concept.

McMillan (2002) traced interactivity research and identified three forms: user-to-system, user-to-user, and user-to-document interactivity. Blogs represent a unique manifestation where each of these types of interactivity can coexist. For example, user-to-system interactivity occurs when the user interacts with the computer, such as clicking on a hyperlink. Not only is hyperlinking technology supported by blogs, but blogs themselves grew out of being hyperlink lists and continue to be presented as a medium where hyperlinks are a defining feature (Blood, 2002). User-to-user interactivity occurs when one user is able to interact with another, through conversations on a forum or chatroom. Endres and Warnick (2004) posited that the label user-to-user interactivity is a misnomer, especially for campaign Web sites, where this classification of interactivity can actually occur between the user and the campaign in “volunteer” or “contribute” sections of the site. Some blogs host comment features that allow readers to write reactions to posts on the Web site, creating a textbook example of user-to-user interactivity. Finally, user-to-document interactivity occurs when users have the ability to add to or modify a document. Again, blogs have this capability through the comment feature in that some blogs allow readers to post reactions to an item on a blog, thereby contributing to the overall conversation and changing the meaning of the original text as more is added.

Recent thought on interactivity notes its complexity and need to develop further. Bucy (2004) asserted that interactivity has

been stunted by the lack of a coherent *theory of interactivity* to explain how the phenomenon operates in society. Studies of interactivity have been preoccupied with defining the elusive concept and documenting instances of its existence in various mediated contexts (p. 373).

Stromer-Galley (2004) concurred: “The concept of ‘interactivity’ is confusing because it refers equally to different phenomena. One can identify ‘interaction’ between people and computers and between computers through software, hardware, and networks” (p. 391).

Kiousis (2002) attempted to explicate the concept and produce a synthesized definition. To be interactive, the medium must include (a) two-way communication where (b) the roles of the message sender and receiver are equal and interchangeable and (c) the speed of communicating should be close to real-time, and include (d) third-order dependency (Kiousis, 2002). However, such a definition with strict—yet equal—roles for the sender and receiver can be problematic. For example, such a definition seems to exclude experiences in McMillan’s (2002) user-to-user category. Using the example of a campaign Web site offering user-to-user interactivity in a “volunteer” section, it is obvious that the roles of the sender and receiver are not equal. That is, the campaign can ask all users to volunteer but those users do not have the two-way capability to do the same. Even so, if

the user is presented with a form to complete and is later mobilized into the volunteer force it is difficult to argue that this online experience *was not* interactive. Additionally, the Kiouisis definition excludes the notion that text can foster interactivity through suggesting interactions (Endres & Warnick, 2004). Even so, Kiouisis' (2002) definition of interactivity should not be abandoned, but it should be seen as a point from which to move forward.

Beyond the difficulties in constructing a complete and inclusive definition, scholars have consistently measured it by operationalizing the concept. For instance, interactivity has been marked by the degree to which users control content (e.g., hyperlinks), have the opportunity to contribute to a site, and transcend passive exposure (Peng, Tham, & Xiaoming, 1999; Stromer-Galley, 2002).

Regarding campaigning on the Web, Stromer-Galley (2002) reported focus group results that called for an increase of interactivity tools on politicians' Web sites. Having a choice regarding what information to explore made online users feel empowered, which can increase the connections between voters and political candidates. Additional findings confirmed the public's desire for interactivity, citing interactive Web sites as providing enhanced engagement and offering a sense of control of the campaign dialogue (Stromer-Galley & Foot, 2002).

Hyperlinks as Interactive Components

User control of content (i.e., hyperlinks) is an important tenet of interactivity (Peng et al., 1999). McMillan (2002) argued hyperlinks may be viewed as interactive, in that they allow the user opportunities to provide feedback and control access to content.

In the 1996 campaign, Stromer-Galley (2000) found presidential sites only linked to pages within their own site. A later analysis found that 68% of the sites did link to external sources, including special interest groups and media. Foot, Schneider, Dougherty, Xenos, and Larsen (2003) examined linking practices of U.S. Congressional candidates during the 2002 campaign cycle and found that candidates were very likely to link to external information. In doing so, the candidates promoted the interactivity of the Web, and encouraged site visitors to examine external sources of information for a fuller understanding of issues.

The introduction of blogs into the campaign Web presence allows researchers to further track the use of hyperlinks on candidate Web sites. Furthermore, one can compare intermedium use of the hyperlink between Web sites and blogs. As such, the popular press claims about the hyperlink being such an important aspect of blogs can also be examined in relation to hyperlinking on traditional Web sites. Therefore, the following research questions are posed:

- R1a: How are the front pages of candidate Web sites using hyperlinks (media articles, special interest groups, pages within the candidate site, etc.)?

R1b: How are candidate blog posts using hyperlinks (media articles, special interest groups, pages within the candidate site, etc.)?

A Spirit of Interactivity Fostered Through Text

Though most studies measure interactivity through technical features and the taxonomy set forth by McMillan (2002), it seems possible to expand the measure and view actual content as an indicator of interactivity (Endres & Warnick, 2004). That is, fostering an environment of two-way communication through text by asking for readers to respond or inviting participation can be considered a new form of interactivity even if the technical mechanisms to do so are not provided.

Scholars have begun to expand the classification of interactivity to include this construct and call it “text-based interactivity” (Endres & Warnick, 2004). In their rhetorical review of several 2002 campaign Web sites, Endres and Warnick (2004) built on McMillan’s (2002) accepted taxonomy of interactivity and argued that the construction of the text can foster interactivity and enhance user engagement with the site (Endres & Warnick, 2004). For example, the researchers note that direct address, calling a candidate by his or her first name, or posting of content written by the candidate (rather than the campaign staff) on a Web site contributed to text-based interactivity. This type of interactivity is said to be more conversational and promote immediacy, personal presence, and multivocality (Endres & Warnick, 2004). The researchers proposed that text-based interactivity, when used correctly, would reinforce other and more technical manifestations of interactivity (such as user contribution features, hyperlinks, etc.).

Newhagen, Cordes, and Levy (1995) would define the textual encouragement of interacting as “perceived interactivity,” meaning that the message receiver might have some experience with the medium (Web page, blog) and, based on those experiences, interpret the current experience as being interactive. The receiver has a sense on how any invited feedback might be used by the initial sender. Indeed, Kiouisis (2002) suggested that interactivity is, in part, a perception held by the individual. It is important to underscore that, though this study did not analyze the perception of the receivers, it recorded the presence of textual requests for interactivity. In doing so, this study examined appeals in the text asking readers to get involved in the campaign or provide feedback.

In looking at text-based interactivity in online campaign communication, traditional political communication measures can be helpful. Candidates have been known to use a variety of message appeal strategies. Kaid and Davidson (1986) defined a number of possible appeals calling for change and inviting participation, among others. Some of these strategies are interactive on two levels: the technical manner in which they are displayed and the spirit of the text. For example, the “inviting participation” strategy is essentially a request for the reader to interact. If this strategy is teamed up with a technical means to make it happen (i.e., a form the user can fill out to volunteer), the interactivity in that item increases (Endres &

Warnick, 2004). As such, the examination of message strategies in this study provided an added opportunity to investigate interactivity through analyzing message content—not just technical capabilities.

Based on the work to extend scholarly understanding of interactivity, this research explored text-based interactivity in campaign blog posts and Web sites. The traditional conversational text was examined for appeal strategies that could be interpreted as a message to mobilize or create interaction between the campaign. The following research questions were asked:

R2a: Which appeal strategies will candidates use on the front pages of their Web sites?

R2b: Which appeal strategies will candidates use in their blog posts?

Then, this study explored the text-based interaction construct that content from the candidate, rather than the campaign staff, is a sign of increased personal presence that contributes to text-based interactivity. As such, this study asked the following:

R3: Will candidates use the blog to speak directly to their supporters or will they rely on campaign staff to communicate messages?

In asking these questions, this research further develops the construct of text-based interactivity and examines if interactivity can be fostered through text. Additionally, the data here can answer important questions further exploring the differences between the two electronic campaign tools of campaign Web pages and blogs.

METHOD

This study used the webstyle quantitative content analysis method to review the Web site front pages and blog posts of the 10 Democratic presidential primary candidates in the 2004 election. Webstyle is a method of content analysis that has been used to examine Web site content of campaigning politicians (Banwart, 2002; Bystrom, Banwart, Robinson, & Kaid, 2004). The method is a direct adaptation of videostyle (Kaid & Davidson, 1986), which is a “systematic instrument for analyzing self presentation style” for analyzing candidates in advertisements (Banwart, 2002, p. 10). As such, the method is grounded in Goffman’s (1959) ideas of self-presentation and applied to review how candidates seek to “personalize” themselves in their presentation to the voter. Use of webstyle allowed this study to examine interactive capabilities and appeal strategies on candidate Web sites.

An expanded version of webstyle has been used to analyze political and nonpolitical content on blogs (Trammell, 2004). This extension of webstyle to analyze blog content included a section coding for the “topic” of a blog post. Coding the topic mentioned in a blog post allowed the researchers the opportunity to quantify how often a particular subject is mentioned (issues, campaign schedule, advertisements, endorsements, etc.), thus providing a richer understanding of the content therein.

Using a stratified sampling method, 10% of the days spanning the beginning of the primary season (Labor Day 2003) through the Iowa caucuses (January 2004), 14 target days were identified for analysis. From these selected dates, content that was collected on or nearest to these dates was analyzed. Front pages were downloaded manually of each candidate site as close to the selected days as possible. All blog posts published on the sampled days were analyzed. For the candidate Web sites ($n = 86$), the front page was the unit of analysis. For the blogs, the post ($n = 356$) was the unit of analysis.

Categories coded in this study included basic demographics of the item (e.g., author, date, title, word count), hyperlink destination (e.g., media article, poll, special interest group), topics discussed on blogs (e.g., speech, debate, ads), political statements, and appeal strategies.

Political statements are defined as those that contain political content. For example, a traditional issue statement is as much of a political statement as a partisan one, such as Dennis Kucinich’s blog post on January 22, 2004, which said, “Republicans rule by fear, Democrats lead with hope.” If a political statement was made, it was determined if the statement was made in support of the topic/issue or against it. Additionally, the mention of the party’s overall competition, incumbent Republican President George W. Bush, was recorded as a dichotomous variable being either preset (1) or absent (0).

Appeal strategies were based on those laid out by Kaid and Davidson (1986) and incorporated into webstyle. Strategies were recorded as dichotomous categories as being present (1) or absent (0). Strategies included candidate use of “calling for change,” “inviting participation” in the campaign and democratic process, “emphasizing hope for the future” or “yearning for the past,” containing “traditional values” such as religion or mention of morality, or the positioning of a candidate as being at the “philosophical center” of the party. Some strategies were used as a means to support the candidate or position, and in these cases the messages were examined for the use of “statistics” or “expert sources or officials” to support one’s position. Attack strategies were examined by looking for candidates “attacking the record of another politician”—either in the same political party or in a different one—as well as “attacking the personal qualities” of another politician. Other appeal strategies include “identifying with the experiences of others” where candidates imply that they can relate to the everyday citizen and “emphasizing po-

litical accomplishments” where a candidate discusses previous legislation introduced or public service.

Five trained coders analyzed the items for this study. Coders were given CDs of the items to code and used an online code sheet. Intercoder reliability was established by randomly selecting 10% of the items (Web sites, blog posts) of this study’s sample for every coder to analyze. The percentage of agreement was tested in the coder training session using Holsti’s formula,¹ and was .82 (or better) across all categories.

RESULTS

All of the Democratic candidates had Web sites. However, only six candidates had blogs: General (RET) Wesley Clark, Governor Howard Dean, Senator John Edwards, Senator John Kerry, Congressman Dennis Kucinich, and Senator Joe Lieberman. The front page of candidate Web sites ($n = 86$) and the blog posts on campaign blogs ($n = 356$) were the units of analysis.

Web Sites

The standard navigation items present in previous candidate Web site studies were found in this sample. Candidates provided issue sections, contact information, volunteer and mobilization options, and donation or fundraising links in their main navigation. Hyperlinks were often repetitive.

As the race went on, some candidates redesigned their site, presumably in an attempt to better present their message. All candidate sites had short news announcements or other such summary statements listed on the front page where site visitors could click to access more information. Only 65.1% of the pages analyzed specified the sponsoring candidate’s political party affiliation and nearly all (90.7%) specified the office sought by the candidate.

New to this election cycle was the term “Meet Up” on candidate Web sites. Meet Up is a Web-based service where strangers with similar interests in close geographic proximity to each other can connect and agree to meet as a group. For campaigns, Meet Up became a way to organize grass-roots rallies where supporters could go to talk about the campaign and undecided voters could go learn about the candidate. This can be considered a high tech way (use of Internet to group together) to encourage low tech interactivity (face-to-face meetings). Meet Ups were mentioned on more than half (58.1%) of the front pages of the candidate Web sites.

¹The formula used to compute reliability is a formula given by North, Holsti, Zaninovich, and Zinnes (1963). It is given for two coders and can be modified for any number of coders. $R = 2(C_{1,2}) / C_1 + C_2$, $C_{1,2}$ = # of category assignments both coders agree on $C_1 + C_2$ = total category assignments made by both coders.

Blogs

Blogs were another noticeable evolution in the campaign site during the 2004 primary season. Campaign blogs posted at different rates in this sample: General (RET) Wesley Clark ($n = 38$), Governor Howard Dean ($n = 173$), Senator John Edwards ($n = 40$), Senator John Kerry ($n = 59$), Congressman Dennis Kucinich ($n = 24$), and Senator Joe Lieberman ($n = 22$). Four of the sites incorporated the campaign blog into the main navigation. All of the blogs allowed comments, which enable the reader to respond (unmoderated) directly to the post or another comment. Only three blogs had the trackback feature, which links references to the campaign blog post on other blogs (not run by the candidate) on the actual campaign blog. All of the blogs had archives dating back to the first post, and three blogs also categorized their archives into topics. Every blog could be “subscribed to” through RSS or XML syndication. Five of the blogs hosted blog rolls (lists of other blogs, noncampaign run) or unofficial/supporter blogs not run by the campaign.

The conversation, or topics in posts, varied (see Table 1). Most frequently, blog posts discussed the way supporters helped the candidate (36%) and thanked the audience for support (30.9%). The campaign staff used the blogs as a means to achieve three main goals: (a) to make the readers feel part of the campaign by directly communicating with them (25%) and providing daily updates on the candidate and his campaign staff (record-of-the-day type of stories, 22.2%); (b) to publicize the candidate’s media appearances (25.8%), speeches (20.8%), and endorsements (22.6%); and (c) to encourage donations (15.7%) and involvement on part of the public (12.5%). The political content of the candidates’ blogs was limited. A third (34.3%) of all the posts expressed a political statement, with Kerry (57.5%) and Kucinich (54.2%) having the biggest amount of political content.

Hyperlinks

The hyperlink attributes for the front pages of candidate Web sites and blog posts were analyzed. This analysis investigated linking practices on a systemic level as well as item-to-item differences.

The first set of research questions asked how candidates used hyperlinks on the front pages and in blog posts. More than 9 in 10 (96.5%) of all hyperlinks placed on the candidates’ homepages pointed users to the *Contribution* or *Donation* and to the *Volunteers* sections of the site, transforming the candidates’ Web sites in a tool for fundraising and gathering campaign resources (see Table 2), while encouraging interactivity through text and action.

Beyond the internal linking practices in navigation and front-page features, external linking was analyzed and found to be limited (see Table 3). The average number of hyperlinks to external sites for all candidates was 5.74 ($SD = 5.42$), but there is a significant difference in the number of external hyperlinks between each

TABLE 1
Attributes of Candidate Blog Posts During the 2003–2004 Primary

	All (N = 356)	Clark (n = 38)	Dean (n = 173)	Edwards (n = 40)	Kerry (n = 59)	Kucinich (n = 24)	Lieberman (n = 22)
Directly addresses audience	48.9%	36.8%	67.1%	45.0%	23.7%	12.5%	40.9%
Supporter's personal story	14.0	10.5	17.3	5.0	16.9	8.3	9.1
Candidate spot or ads	3.1	—	5.8	—	1.7	—	—
Candidate speech	20.8	34.2	18.5	30.0	20.3	8.3	13.6
Download multimedia	6.5	—	12.7	2.5	—	—	—
Record of the day	22.2	13.2	23.7	20.0	25.4	20.8	22.7
Memory	6.7	2.6	7.5	—	11.9	12.5	—
General news	10.7	10.5	8.7	7.5	16.9	16.7	9.1
Family or friends	9.8	2.6	13.3	5.0	11.9	4.2	4.5
Supporters of candidate	36.0	7.9	54.9	10.0	32.2	8.3	22.7
Schedule or calendar	20.5	10.5	26.6	32.5	11.9	—	13.6
Meet-up	12.4	2.6	22.0	12.5	—	—	—
Donations	15.7	5.3	24.9	7.5	10.2	8.3	—
News coverage of candidate	25.8	13.2	26.6	42.5	11.9	54.2	18.2
Debate	4.8	—	2.3	12.5	8.5	4.2	9.1
Feelings or thoughts	28.9	34.2	25.4	12.5	42.4	37.5	31.8
Citizen endorsement	9.0	5.3	8.7	7.5	11.9	8.3	13.6
Citizen group endorsement	7.6	2.6	8.7	5.0	13.6	—	4.5
Celebrity endorsement	7.6	—	8.7	7.5	11.9	4.2	4.5
Media outlet endorsement	2.2	—	—	2.5	5.1	8.3	9.1
Thanking for support	30.9	44.7	32.9	20.0	30.5	12.5	31.8
Political statement	34.3	21.1	29.5	22.5	57.5	54.2	31.8

Note. Percentages are the number of times a candidate used that feature on their blog.

TABLE 2
Attributes of Hyperlinks on the Front Pages of Candidate Web Sites During the 2003–2004 Primary

	<i>All</i> (<i>N</i> = 87)	<i>Braun</i> (<i>n</i> = 8)	<i>Clark</i> (<i>n</i> = 10)	<i>Dean</i> (<i>n</i> = 9)	<i>Edwards</i> (<i>n</i> = 10)	<i>Gephardt</i> (<i>n</i> = 2)	<i>Graham</i> (<i>n</i> = 2)	<i>Kerry</i> (<i>n</i> = 9)	<i>Kucinich</i> (<i>n</i> = 10)	<i>Lieberman</i> (<i>n</i> = 10)	<i>Sharpton</i> (<i>n</i> = 10)
Contain link to .com	89.6	100.0	60.0	88.9	70.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	90.0	100.0%
Contain link to .gov	5.8	100.0	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	50.0%
Contain link to .org	36.2	25.0	—	22.2	70.0	87.5	—	—	80.0	—	50.0%
Link to biography	83.7	—	90.0	100.0	90.0	100.0	50.0	100.0	100.0	90.0	—
Link to issue section	90.7	100.0	90.0	100.0	90.0	100.0	50.0	100.0	100.0	90.0	100.0%
Link to calendar	83.7	87.5	70.0	55.6	90.0	100.0	50.0	100.0	100.0	80.0	50.0%
Link to contribute	96.5	75.0	100.0	100.0	90.0	100.0	—	100.0	100.0	90.0	100.0%
Link to contact campaign	79.1	100.0	100.0	88.9	80.0	100.0	50.0	88.9	100.0	—	70.0%
Link to volunteer	96.5	100.0	100.0	100.0	90.0	100.0	50.0	100.0	100.0	90.0	100.0%
Link to breaking news	48.8	87.5	100.0	—	40.0	75.0	50.0	44.4	100.0	—	—
Link for media use	64.0	100.0	90.0	100.0	80.0	100.0	—	77.8	90.0	—	50.0%
Link to links section	30.2	100.0	80.0	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	100.0%
Link to party site	—	—	10.0	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Link to special interest group	34.9	12.5	—	11.1	—	75.0	50.0	22.2	—	90.0	—

Note. Percentages are the number of times a candidate used that feature on their Web site.

TABLE 3
 Number of Hyperlinks to External Sites on Candidate Web Sites
 and Blog Posts During the 2003–2004 Primary

	<i>Web Sites</i>			<i>Blogs</i>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Braun	8	1.50	.93	—	—	—
Clark	10	2.00	2.00	38	1.47	1.50
Dean	9	3.44	1.74	173	1.27	2.05
Edwards	9	4.11	2.52	40	.70	.99
Gephardt	8	13.63	5.78	—	—	—
Graham	2	2.00	1.41	—	—	—
Kerry	9	4.44	3.58	59	.47	.70
Kucinich	10	14.80	2.97	24	.88	.45
Lieberman	9	5.22	1.48	22	.36	.58
Sharpton	10	3.40	3.60	—	—	—
All	84	5.74	5.42	356	1.01	1.63
One-way analysis of variance	$F = 21.80, p < .001$			$F = 3.98, p = .002$		

candidate's Web site (analysis of variance F test, $F = 21.80, p < .001$). Special interest groups supporting the candidate were highly visible (34.9%), as well as pointers to the *Links* section (30.2%), as seen in Table 2.

The Web sites of all candidates offered a very homogenous content across the board. The Web sites of Dean, Gephardt, Kerry, and Kucinich are almost identical in the content they display on the home page, as were the Web sites of Clark, Edwards, and Lieberman. Although the number of hyperlinks per home page was high, the content diversity was low. Hyperlinks were repetitive, directing people to the same locations (mainly to contributions, volunteering, candidate's position on issues, candidate's calendar, and media materials).

Regarding the candidate blogs, only six of the Democratic candidates for nomination had a blog, and four of them used it as a tool to promote the rest of their Web site (see Table 4). Most of the links from the blog posts sent visitors to pages within each candidate's campaign Web site (42.1%)—including to other posts within the candidate's blog (10.7%) and to news media Web sites featuring articles about the candidate (28.1%). Only Kucinich (79.8%) and Edwards (30.5%) practiced linking from blogs to their own sites on a small scale, preferring to link predominantly to articles published by mass media about the candidates instead.

The data indicate multiple differences between the hyperlinks on the candidates' Web site and blog. Though all front pages of the candidates' Web sites featured hyperlinks, more than half (52.2%) of all blog posts did not contain any link at all, 25.6% contained one link only, and a mere 22.2% blog posts contained two

TABLE 4
Candidate Blog Post Hyperlink Attributes During the 2003–2004 Primary

Link To ...	All (N = 356)	Clark (n = 38)	Dean (n = 173)	Edwards (n = 40)	Kerry (n = 59)	Kucinich (n = 24)	Lieberman (n = 22)
Internal blog post	10.7	7.9	18.5	2.5	3.4	–	–
External blog post	4.2	5.3	7.5	–	–	–	–
Media article	28.1	7.9	30.6	30.5	22.0	70.8	9.1
Donations	12.9	5.3	20.2	7.5	8.5	4.2	–
Government	2.0	2.6	0.6	2.5	5.1	4.2	–
Elected official	1.1	–	0.6	–	5.1	–	–
Other candidate	0.8	–	1.7	–	–	–	–
State party	0.6	–	0.6	2.5	–	–	–
Special interest	9.6	2.6	15.6	–	6.8	4.2	4.5
Page within site	42.1	42.1	61.3	15.0	25.4	4.2	27.3
Local information	8.7	2.6	17.3	–	–	–	–

Note. Percentages are the number of times a candidate used that feature on their blog.

hyperlinks or more. The Web sites focused on enticing visitors to donate or to get involved. As such, the home pages primarily pointed visitors to the *Contributions* and *Volunteer* sections, followed by hyperlinks to the *Issues* sections and hyperlinks for the press. Donations and fundraising only rank third in blog hyperlinking practices (12.9%), after links to pages in the candidates' Web sites (42.1%) and links to media articles (28.1%). Candidates' Web sites and blogs are very oriented on the candidate himself and keep the users within their boundaries, without sending them to external resources.

Candidate Appeal Strategies

The second series of research questions asked what type of message appeal strategies candidates used on their front pages and blogs. In answering this question, the appeal strategies identified in webstyle were used (Banwart, 2002; Bystrom et al., 2004).

In asking for the public's support for their nomination as the 2004 Democratic presidential candidate, all candidates used a call-for-change appeal on the Web site (90.7%), as seen in Table 5. The second most frequent appeal strategy was inviting the voters to become more involved in the election process (83.7%). Most candidates would also emphasize hope for the future (69.8%) and position themselves as a voice for the masses (48.8%) in trying to convince the public that they are the best suitable alternative to the current president. Attacks on other politicians' records appeared with a one-in-two frequency (50%), whereas personal attacks were occasional (14%) and used only by Clark (30%), Dean, Edwards, and Gephardt.

TABLE 5
 Appeal Strategies on the Front Pages of Democratic Candidates' Web Sites During the 2003–2004 Primary

	All (N = 87)	Braun (n = 8)	Clark (n = 10)	Dean (n = 9)	Edwards (n = 9)	Gephardt (n = 2)	Graham (n = 9)	Kerry (n = 10)	Kucinich (n = 10)	Lieberman (n = 10)	Sharpton (n = 10)
Voice for masses	48.8%	37.5%	10.0%	77.8%	10.0%	75.0%	50.0%	66.7%	100.0%	—	70.0%
Calling for change	90.7	100.0	90.0	100.0	80.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	60.0	90.0
Inviting participation	83.7	100.0	90.0	88.9	80.0	87.5	50.0	100.0	90.0	40.0	90.0
Emphasizing hope for future	69.8	50.0	100.0	88.9	80.0	87.5	50.0	55.6	80.0	10.0	80.0
Yearning for past	8.1	100.0	—	11.1	10.0	25.0	—	—	30.0	—	—
Traditional values	11.6	100.0	—	11.1	50.0	12.5	—	—	20.0	10.0	—
Party philosophical center	10.5	100.0	—	—	—	25.0	—	—	—	70.0	—
Statistical support	20.9	62.5	—	—	—	75.0	—	55.6	10.0	10.0	—
Expert support	4.7	12.5	20.0	11.1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Identify with experiences	20.9	—	—	11.1	—	25.0	—	22.2	30.0	30.0	70.0
Emphasize political accomplishments	32.6	—	20.0	22.2	20.0	62.5	50.0	77.8	70.0	20.0	—
Attack record of politician	50.0	—	20.0	66.7	20.0	100.0	100.0	77.8	90.0	70.0	—
Attack politician personal qualities	14.0	—	30.0	22.2	20.0	25.0	—	—	—	30.0	—

Note. Percentages are the number of times a candidate used that feature on their Web site.

With two slight differences, the candidates' blogs mirror the same message strategies as the candidates' Web sites (see Table 6). The call-for-change appeal ranked first in posts on all candidates' blogs (59%), followed by the hope-for-future appeal (41.8%) and by attacks against other politicians' records (40.2%).

The two differences between Web sites and blogs regarding the type of appeal strategy are the following: Blogs carry a higher number of personal attacks on opponents (18.9%), even rant (9.8%), and they allow for a more diversified message strategy in supporting the candidates' positions on issues (logical appeal through use of statistics or the party's philosophy; emotional appeal, through identifying himself with the readers, as one of the many; or source credibility appeal, through either positioning himself as an expert or quoting an expert). Regarding interactive appeals, candidates invited participation on blog posts at a lower level than was found on the front page of the Web site. However, in considering the rank order of appeals, the interactive appeal "inviting participation" only slides two places from two on Web sites to four on blog posts.

Two trends emerged in analyzing the reasons for a candidate to make a political statement in the blogs. The most frequent political statement in blogs occurred when candidates differentiated themselves or critiqued Bush (61.5%); second, candidates sought to promote their own campaign agenda in their online presence (43.4%).

Out of the total number of blog posts in the sample, 34.2% incorporated explicit political statements and clear explanations of the candidates' positions on various issues. However, when this was the case, the blog post was rather critical of the topics discussed and, in 61.5% of the cases, would include an attack on Bush. Judging by the high frequency of attacks against Bush, one could conclude that the Democratic candidates for nomination saw the incumbent president as their major opponent. Attacks against one another were much less frequent (28.7%). This finding helps confirm speculations by the media and by some political analysts that the strategy of the Democratic candidates was to win public support and the nomination by positioning themselves as the best alternative to Bush, rather than promoting their vision and platform for election.

Direct Communication With Readers

The third research question asked if the candidates used their blogs to speak directly to their supporters. This question was asked under the premise that posts written by candidates would foster a feeling of greater perceived interactivity in that the reader would feel more connected with the blogging candidate and be able to respond directly, in the unmoderated comments section (Endres & Warnick, 2004; Newhagen et al., 1995).

TABLE 6
Political Statements Candidate Blog Post Attributes and Appeal Strategies

	<i>All</i> (<i>N</i> = 122)	<i>Clark</i> (<i>n</i> = 8)	<i>Dean</i> (<i>n</i> = 51)	<i>Edwards</i> (<i>n</i> = 9)	<i>Kerry</i> (<i>n</i> = 34)	<i>Kucinich</i> (<i>n</i> = 13)	<i>Lieberman</i> (<i>n</i> = 7)
Political stance made	97.5%	100.0%	96.1%	100.0%	100.0%	92.3%	100.0%
Item against political issue	58.2	62.5	56.9	55.6	61.8	69.2	28.6
Item for political issue	22.1	12.5	25.5	22.2	20.6	7.7	42.9
Item discussed Bush	63.1	37.5	31.4	77.8	73.5	53.8	71.4
Voice for masses	16.4	—	23.5	22.2	8.8	15.4	14.3
Calling for change	59.0	25.0	66.7	55.6	52.9	61.5	71.4
Inviting participation/action	27.0	25.0	51.0	11.1	11.8	—	—
Emphasizing hope for future	41.8	62.5	39.2	55.6	32.4	46.2	57.1
Yearning for past	4.9	—	9.8	—	2.9	—	—
Traditional values	8.2	—	9.8	22.2	2.9	7.7	—
Party philosophical center	4.1	12.5	—	11.1	—	—	14.3
Statistics support position	13.1	12.5	17.6	11.1	8.8	15.4	42.9
Experts support position	17.2	12.5	31.4	11.1	8.8	—	—
Candidate as expert	13.9	—	19.6	—	17.6	—	14.3
Identify with experiences	14.8	—	15.7	11.1	23.5	7.7	—
Emphasize political accomplishments	17.2	—	15.7	11.1	26.5	7.7	28.6
Attack record of politician	40.2	25.0	35.3	11.1	58.8	38.5	42.9
Attack personal qualities of politician	18.9	12.5	19.6	11.1	26.5	15.4	—
Rant	9.8	12.5	51.0	11.1	8.8	7.7	14.3

Note. Percentages are the number of times a candidate used that feature on their blog.

The candidates themselves very rarely authored the blog posts; Kucinich wrote one post (4%) and Dean wrote four posts (2%) in the sample, whereas the other candidates did not write any of the posts in their campaign blog themselves. This shows a trend of rarity for candidates personally composing their blog posts for the Web site.

All candidates relied on their campaign staff to provide content for the blog, and occasionally on guest writers or messages from supporters. Nevertheless, blogs were used as a personal way to talk to and, often, to send mobilization messages to the audience (see Table 1). Almost half of them (48.9%) directly addressed the readers, using words like “you” or “you all” or imperative verbs, and about a third (28.9%) included the author’s personal feelings and thoughts. Deviating from this direct address approach are Kerry (direct address in only 23.7% of all posts) and Kucinich (12.5%), who preferred a more objective and journalistic style focused on providing readers with information. This suggests a high degree of personal presence and text-based interactivity.

DISCUSSION

The candidate Web site has become a ubiquitous campaign tool since its first noticeable use during the 1996 election. Candidates have developed standard navigation and content offerings. Entering the online campaign space this election cycle was the blog, which was immediately incorporated into the navigation, signaling the importance and permanence of the communication tool.

Though blogs have been touted as a very participatory and interactive forum, such claims receive mixed support here. Indeed, it appears that, in their inaugural run on the campaign trail, blogs promoted interactivity more through text than technology. Regarding technology, all blogs promoted the perception of involvement through the presence of the comment feature and four also included trackback. Yet, the prevalence of hyperlinks within a post has been overstated. With such confounding results regarding the technology, it seems evident that one should look to the text. The message strategy in blog posts focused predominantly on the campaign message—however, inviting participation did develop as a major strategy. Furthermore, personal presence and conversational style of writing in blog posts provide classic examples of text-based interactivity.

With so many candidates vying for their party’s nomination, candidates fought to distinguish themselves from their opponents. As such, many candidates underwent frequent overhauls of their Web site design look and feel. Indeed, the candidate sites even looked different this year in that they resembled the en vogue layout formats made popular by the blog structure (Papacharissi, 2004). Even so, the candidate Web sites looked very similar, by way of color choice, icons, graphics used, and page structure.

Hyperlinking Strategy

Hyperlinks represent a large portion of Internet interactivity research. The mere process of clicking a link allows the user a choice over information presentation (McMillan, 2002). Though interactivity from hyperlinking can be considered simplistic, it remains the benchmark for establishing the level of interactivity in a Web site.

The surprising findings here deal with hyperlinking on blogs. Hyperlinking on candidate front pages was much more frequent than within the candidate blog posts. Such findings are contrary to the popular claims often made about blogs in that posts revolve around the hyperlink (Blood, 2002). Such is likely the case because the front page is the initial gateway to all content within the site. Therefore, there must be a greater push to content. Links to pages outside of the campaign (on front pages and in blogs) remain limited. In discussing the reason why campaigns would be reluctant to link to outside material, the authors here submit that campaigns do not have control over what other, external sites post. Therefore, a link to an external site not only takes the reader away from the site, but possibly leads them to material that negates or compromises the candidates' message.

Considering the newness of blogging, especially as a campaign tool where the stakes are so high, it is not surprising that campaign blogs move with trepidation in garnering the power of the hyperlink. The primary hyperlink destination from blog posts brought readers back into the site. This is presumably as a means to promote issue stance and further familiarize the reader with the candidate. Blog posts can be easily transformed into viral communication, shared across the Internet. For example, if someone reads a post on a candidate blog, it is possible that the person will e-mail the post to a friend or even write about it in one's own blog linking back to that candidate post. Certainly this is a speculative assertion, but Kerry's blog featured a "forward this to a friend" button on each blog post. Therefore, this narcissistic self-linking in candidate blogs can be interpreted as a helpful tool in bringing people who are unfamiliar with the campaign into the fold. This self-linking could speak to the extended and referred audience the campaign sees as reading the blog. This research did not set out to investigate the viral nature of these blogs, but in noting the possibility for such to occur, it encourages future social networking research to further investigate.

Appeal Strategy

Message appeal strategies provide a new way to examine the encouragement of interactivity in the text presented in blogs and Web pages. As such, this study argued that research interactivity is not confined to technical mechanism such as hyperlinks, but can be fostered through the text. Indeed, the use of particular mes-

sage strategies and personal language are argued here to be indicators of interactivity (Endres & Warnick, 2004; Newhagen et al., 1995).

The way these different strategies were combined is very different from candidate to candidate. Some strategies, such as those used by Mosley-Braun, fostered more interactivity than others. Mosley-Braun yearned for the past and for the reinstatement of traditional values, so she urges voters to become more involved in the political process to achieve this change. Clark, Edwards, and Dean want change too, but instead of yearning for the past they emphasized hope for the future. The latter also relies heavily on attacking his opponents' record (66.7%), whereas the first two use attacks sparingly (20% each).

Direct Communication With Readers

Not surprisingly, this study found that the candidates themselves rarely wrote blog posts or spoke to the Web site visitors through their Web site. Instead, campaigns relied on official spokespeople to construct and deploy messages through the various online tools. Here, blog posts can be seen as a microscopic message, meaning it is a message that is intended for a small audience. Such messages typically result in a higher degree of perceived interactivity (Newhagen et al., 1995).

Though the audience perception of these messages was not investigated, it is evident that these messages were written from the campaign/candidate directly to the reader. Through the use of imperative verbs, a more personalized discussion "behind the scenes" view of the campaign, and the encouragement of participation through the strategic use of message strategies, it is evident that campaigns deployed an "interactive dialog" strategy on the blogs. That is, campaigns went beyond providing the mechanical tools to promote interactivity and fostered an environment of interactivity through the messages posted on the blog. These additional indicators of interactivity should be further developed and analyzed.

Limitations and Future Research

This research is limited in that it analyzed candidate posts and did not review the comments left on the blogs in response to the post. Additionally, the analysis only reviewed the front pages of the candidate Web sites, thereby limiting the generalization of these findings.

Future research should further investigate the types of message the candidates communicate in the blogs and how those messages fit into the overall campaign message strategy. Specifically, studies should further examine content for issue coverage and compare content among the candidates' Web sites and blogs to examine what Tedesco (2005) has labeled as "inter-candidate" agenda setting. Furthermore, the role of the reader and impact on the voter should be analyzed. Such could include the analysis of comments left in response to posts and a survey of cam-

paign blog readers. Finally, the viral marketing notion of posts discussed here should be analyzed as well. Researchers should attempt to assert just how viral these messages are by tracking how frequently candidate posts are mentioned on other blogs, thus being recycled and introduced to a new audience. Continued research is needed to ascertain not only how campaigns are using such online media, but to identify the desires and uses of the voting public.

Conclusion

Campaigns embraced interactivity in this cycle. In doing so, they attempted to engage voters not only through mechanisms like user control, but also through fostering a spirit of interactivity through the content on campaign sites and blogs. Though blogs introduced unprecedented and streamlined features of interactivity, such as the ability to leave comments and contribute to campaign discourse, this was not done at the level purposed possible by popular press accounts.

Grassroots politics have moved to a national level. In the 2004 primary season, people were presented with the tools needed to be mobilized and organized at the national level while asked to engage locally. Online tools like the blog and Meet Up, which are endorsed at the campaign level, trickled down to the local level and provided outlets for everyday citizens to get involved in their own neighborhoods. Web pages and blogs were able to use technology to promote this more traditional, face-to-face operationalization of interactivity. That is, candidates promoted interactivity online through technical means such as enabling asynchronous feedback in blog comments as well as fostering an environment of participation through textual appeals and strategy.

The outdated model of avoiding direct contact and active engagement with the public via the Web is gone. Additionally, campaigns showed signs that they began to understand the viral nature of the Web and embrace it by creating posts that can be easily shared with others (nonreaders)—who may have been sent to the site by a friend (a regular reader). In 2004, there was a noticeable shift in online campaigning, encouraging more interactivity through the frequent textual requests for participations and by allowing supporters to place their mark on the campaign by use of the feedback mechanisms of the blog.

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