

Expanding the Public Sphere: The Impact of Facebook on Political Communication

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As they launch their 2008 presidential campaigns, candidates from both major parties are trying to define their campaigns as “conversations” with the American people. For the most part, these campaigns will follow traditional communication strategies that include television ads, campaign rallies, direct mail, and press coverage. Most of their efforts will be focused towards trying to control the message and tone of the campaign through one-way methods of communication.

It used to be that the only way campaigns could effectively obtain feedback from the public was to use an opinion poll. Beginning with the Howard Dean campaign in 2004, political strategists realized that the Internet could provide additional methods of gauging the interest and opinion of the public as well as engaging community members in the political process. A new social networking Web site called Facebook provides campaigns with the ability to organize and communicate with supporters in a very efficient way. At the same time, it provides members of the public with the ability to voice their opinions and organize independently.

In the following pages, I will lay out what it takes for a community to facilitate positive political communication and evaluate whether Facebook meets these criteria. In doing so, I will examine the features of Facebook that can be used for political communication and their effectiveness for political actors and community members. Finally, I will discuss whether Facebook will have a lasting impact on the ways that the American public engages in politics and the ways that political campaigns approach their communication strategies. Throughout, I will contend that, while it may not revolutionize campaign communication, Facebook has the potential to expand Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the public sphere by allowing the public to engage in political action both in conjunction with and independently of political campaigns.

Defining good political communication in a community

A good starting point for defining a positive arena for political communication is Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the public sphere. Habermas envisioned a place where community members could collectively form public opinion in an environment removed from the government or economy.¹ Although Habermas’s public sphere model provides an excellent outline for political communication among citizens, it does not explain how politicians and organizations should fit into the mix. For a community to really encourage political communication, it has to be more inclusive.

¹ Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere,” 1974, printed in *The Information Society Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 350-353.

A community that exemplifies good political communication requires participation from political actors, the media, and the public. Politicians should be able to get their message to community members both directly and through mediated sources. At the same time, the news media should be acting to bring information to the public, as well as providing a check on government by investigating and validating that information. Community members should take an active role in the media as well by questioning sources, responding to journalists, and passing along relevant stories to their peers.

If a community member would like more information on a topic of public policy, it should be relatively easy to acquire that information. Community members should have an opportunity to respond to their representatives at times and places outside the polling booth. Representatives should ideally then respond to that input. The barrier to entry for political participation should be low. A lack of connections or resources should never keep community members from voicing their opinions. Even someone who has never seriously participated in politics before should be able to take part in the conversation. Of course, some community members will have a stronger political interest and devote more time and resources to making their views heard. This is acceptable, so long as anyone has the opportunity to become one of these opinion leaders.²

Along with a low barrier to entry for political participation, there should be a low barrier of entry to political organization. A community that facilitates good political communication will allow citizens to organize, plan events, and form groups in order to give their opinions more weight. The community will provide the soil for grassroots organizing to grow a movement from an idea.

The Facebook community

Facebook.com is a social networking Web site that allows members to share personal information, opinions, and media. When it launched in February 2004, Facebook began as a community solely for college students. Membership has since been opened to anyone with an e-mail address and members can affiliate themselves with an ever-increasing number of networks – from academic institutions to cities to employers. Each member has a home page to post information such as birth date, interests, employment, and favorite books. Members can communicate privately with each other via “messages” or publicly via posts on another member’s “wall”.

² This is a description of an ideal community that may be impossible to develop if only for the fact that the American political and economic system does not allow for of equal participation in its purest form. However, equal opportunity for participation, not equal participation, is the goal of the ideal community.

Other features include “groups” and “events”, each with a home page displaying descriptions, pictures, and a message board. Groups can be public with open membership, public with closed membership, or private. Group administrators can send out messages to all members of a group. Events are almost like temporary groups with the same options for membership criteria. Events allow members to invite others to participate in activities such as rallies, parties, meetings, or even simultaneous, but distant, celebrations. Both groups and events allow members from different communities to come together for a common cause, interest, belief, or gathering. Facebook members can support a political candidate, but they can also show their stance on a particular issue. For example, thousands of Facebook members have joined pro-choice³ or pro-life⁴ groups.

Facebook’s features facilitate political communication

Facebook may be a better means of achieving a true public sphere than anything that has come before it, online or otherwise. The sheer fact that over half the student population at most universities is part of the network as well as millions of other people around the world demonstrates the utility of Facebook as an arena for communication.⁵ There is no other online community that connects members of real-world communities (geographic, ideological, or otherwise) in such an effective way.

Facebook combines the best features of local bulletin-boards, newspapers, and town hall meetings and places them in one location that is available at any time in practically any location. Unlike a town hall meeting, Facebook allows all members of a geographic community to have input on a topic while giving them the flexibility of deciding when and how they contribute to the conversation. Politicians can use Facebook to communicate with community members who are willing to listen, but they can not actively impose their messages on anyone. At the same time, community members have the means to express their opinions to political actors and organize to create their own voice if they feel no candidate yet represents their stance.

This does not mean that Facebook is the perfect or that it should be the sole environment for political communication. Facebook only works to supplement existing real-world communities, real-world political issues, and real-world news stories. The vast majority of information on Facebook comes from some other location. What Facebook does is bring members of a community together and provide a means to share information through a single network.

³ “Support a Women’s Right to Choose,” *Facebook Group*, 10 April 2007, <http://wisc.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2208211036>.

⁴ “Pro-Life, *Facebook Group*,” 10 April 2007, <http://wisc.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2207986099>.

⁵ Ellen McGirt, “Hacker. Dropout. CEO.,” *Fastcompany*, May 2007, p. 74.

The strengths of Facebook lie in its ability to allow members to connect and organize. It also provides political actors with an effective means of reaching constituents and voters. It takes interaction between community members and political actors one step further than most communication venues by providing a public “wall” where members can write responses, either positive or negative, to politicians.

What Facebook cannot do is force politicians to read, acknowledge, and react to those responses. Response to public opinion has always been a challenge for politicians. Do you respond to each community member individually? Do you respond to polling results that reflect mass public opinion? Can you really extrapolate the opinions of your constituency from those who take the time to interact? Political actors have their own styles when it comes to engaging in a dialogue with the public and Facebook gives them another tool with which to measure public opinion.

Political communication among Facebook members

The Facebook feature most often utilized for political communication is the “groups” function. Members can create their own themed groups on any topic and invite other members to join. In groups, members can post to message boards, add pictures, and post news and links.

Some political groups are partisan, such as the “University of Wisconsin College Republicans”⁶ or “Russ Feingold for President”⁷. These groups provide ideal settings for like-minded members to discuss issues, but they, like most partisan organizations, run the risk of narrowing the discussion and ignoring opposing viewpoints. Very few groups that invite open debate of controversial issues currently exist on Facebook. At the same time, very few groups in real-world communities really invite open debate of controversial issues. Facebook is really only a structure for communication among members and the diversity of political communication is a function of those who populate the community, not necessarily the structure of that community. As will be discussed in later in this analysis, the Facebook structure is well-suited to communication intended to organize and rally members to action around a common goal.

There are some groups intended as general discussions on politics, but they often emphasize discussion of political strategy over policy. The Hotline, an online political news Web site published by the National Journal, as a

⁶ “College Republicans,” *Facebook Group*, 10 April 2007, <http://wisc.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2200014487>.

⁷ “Russ Feingold for President,” *Facebook Group*, 10 April 2007, <http://wisc.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2200304157>.

Facebook group that invites members to engage in discussion on current political issues. Hotline editor Marc Ambinder regularly contributes to the discussion boards, posting questions like the following:

Basically, John Edwards says: Hillary, your cautious vote on a meaningless resolution about Iraq is insulting. It's time to actually do something to stop this war.

Basically, Hillary Clinton says: John, you abandoned the Senate (and gave your seat to a Republican, incidentally,) and suddenly, you presume to tell US about the Senate? This is a meaningful resolution that will make it impossible for Bush to expand the war any further.

Who's right?⁸

These sorts of groups are extremely valuable, giving political junkies around the world a forum to come together and share insights into the mechanisms controlling American politics. Similar discussions have taken place for years on blogs and message boards, but the Facebook format gives a more personal flavor to the debate.

Another Facebook feature relevant to political discussion is the ability to “share” a news story, video, or Web page with other members. Along with the link and a short summary, members can include comments. Other members can then comment on the “share” and give their own opinions or provide supplemental sources of information. This is a newer feature for Facebook and it has the potential to move stories around a network of people in a viral manner.

Political communication between Facebook members and real-world politicians

For the 2006 mid-term elections, Facebook administrators created an “Election Pulse” section by creating profiles for all candidates running for federal or gubernatorial office. Each campaign was then provided with a password and login that allowed them to update their candidate’s profile. In the profile, candidates could add information such as their alma mater, interests, contact information, qualifications, and blog posts.

By the end of the 2006 campaign season, 45 of the candidates for the U.S. Senate, or 32 percent, had personalized their Facebook profile, according to a study by Bentley College political science professors Christine Williams and Jeff Gulati. Sixty-three of the candidates for Governor, or 50 percent, did the same.⁹ In 2006, every campaign for statewide office in Wisconsin had an active presence on Facebook. Facebook members have the ability to list themselves as supporters for any candidate running for public office.

⁸ “The Hotline’s Wall”, *Facebook Group*, 10 April 2007, <http://wisc.facebook.com/wall.php?id=2236360109&page=3>.

⁹ Jeff Gulati and Christine Williams, Study on Candidates’ use of Facebook, referenced in “Bentley College Professors Update Data on Candidates’ Use of Facebook as Campaign Heads Into Final Days,” *AScribe Newswire*, 2 November 2006.

Some candidates, such as now-Senator Jim Webb (D-VA)¹⁰ included extended biographies and resumes on their Facebook pages, while others, such as Webb's opponent, Sen. George Allen (R-VA)¹¹, included only basic contact information. Candidates who took the effort to post information in their profiles garnered much more support in the Facebook community. U.S. Senate candidates who posted content on their profile had an average of 2,429 supporters, while those who did not had an average of only 429.¹² In addition to providing short biographical sketch of candidates, campaigns can use Facebook to contact supporters and organize events. They are able to use blog-type posts and receive feedback from supporters (or critics). Candidates who already had support among college students had more support in the Facebook community. By the end of September 2006, Rep. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), whose district includes the University of Wisconsin, had more support than any other candidate for the House of Representatives.¹³

For most members, participating on Facebook is a very personal activity, but just because a candidate has a Facebook profile does not mean they are themselves involved in the community. Upon a first look at his Facebook profile, it would appear that 2008 Presidential Candidate Mitt Romney has spent plenty of time on the site. Romney's Facebook profile has detailed information on his interests, favorite music (he's a Roy Orbison fan), favorite books, and biography. The Romney Campaign has posted several photo albums from recent events and links to videos and newspaper articles. Romney's official Web site even features a link to his Facebook profile.¹⁴ However, when asked by a reporter about his participation on Facebook, Romney was unaware he had a profile. An aide assured him that he did.¹⁵

Candidate profiles remain on Facebook after the election is over and campaigns retain the ability to edit them, but most public officials do not maintain contact with their constituents through Facebook. This result is similar to the severe drop in updates to campaign Web sites after an election. Once the election results are determined, there is not much value in consistently updating campaign materials. Unless they are preparing for a future election (like the current presidential candidates), most politicians prefer to use their official Web sites and offices as their main means of communicating with constituents.

Although elected officials do not currently seem to be taking advantage of Facebook as a means of communicating with constituents, the option is there for the future. Project Manager for Facebook's Election 2006

¹⁰ Jim Webb's Facebook Profile, 10 April 2007, <http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=500063554>.

¹¹ George Allen's Facebook Profile, 10 April 2007, <http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=500072833>.

¹² Gulati and Williams

¹³ Gulati and Williams

¹⁴ Official Mitt Romney for President Campaign Web Site, <http://www.mittromney.com/>, 10 April 2007.

¹⁵ Donna Cassata, "Enthusiasm doesn't translate to votes," *Associated Press*, 3 March 2007, sec. A, p. 9.

Network, [Ezra Callahan](#), wrote on the official Facebook blog, that “Any politician who wants to maintain an ongoing relationship with their younger constituents will be able to on Facebook.”¹⁶ Communication with constituents via Facebook could go beyond the information currently available on a politician’s official Web site.

Feasibly, politicians could send out updates on legislation or important government news to constituents. One hurdle to official constituent communication may be the strict rules in place separating campaign activity with official government business. It would be complicated to work out a system where candidates could use Facebook both for campaign and official communication. Keeping the Facebook connection with constituents on a campaign basis frees politicians to highlight their accomplishments, inform constituents, and solicit support while following rules for campaign finance and use of government resources.

One of the most significant advances in political communication provided by Facebook is the ability of members to send messages directly to candidates. Members can post a message with almost any sort of content on a candidate’s “wall”, a message board located at the bottom of a candidate’s profile that is viewable by all members. Many messages express approval or request action on a specific issue. Others contain negative, sometimes harsh, criticism. Candidates are able to delete any wall post, but with the large number of messages some candidates receive (sometimes in the thousands), it would be time-consuming to vet every comment. Another option would be to turn off the wall feature entirely, but doing so would eliminate the only direct means of communication from Facebook members to the campaign.

Even though Facebook provides the means for members to send messages to candidates, that does not mean those messages are read by the campaigns. Typically, campaigns use mass media (newspapers and television) or their own resources (official web sites and direct mail) to communicate with constituents. Although candidates may respond to hand-picked questions from voters in video or blog posts, it does not make political sense to respond directly to individual comments. There would be a greater opportunity for candidates for local office, such as alderman, to make direct responses, but Facebook currently only supports candidate-specific profiles for federal or statewide offices. Still, local candidates can create groups or use their personal profiles for campaign communication.

In 2006, Kathleen Falk’s campaign for Wisconsin Attorney General used Facebook in the same way most campaigns did, by sharing information about the candidate and providing additional information on upcoming events, important campaign announcements, and news stories. According to Communications Director Adam

¹⁶ Ezra Callahan, “Consider the Vote Rocked,” *Facebook Blog*, 17 November 2007, <http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=2219007130>.

Collins, “Facebook was more beneficial in gaining earned media than it was as a tool of recruiting supporters, maintaining contact with supporters, or activating supporters.” Journalists are always looking for new ways to cover campaigns and Facebook allowed them to write about a fresh means of campaign communication. Collins views Facebook as an additional way for campaigns to communicate with supporters, but he does not consider it to be more effective than creating an e-mail list for contacting students and young professionals.¹⁷

Large campaigns still focus most of their energy on paid and earned media, but third party candidates running a small campaign are more likely to take advantage of personal communication on Facebook. In addition to posting biographical information and campaign updates, Wisconsin Gubernatorial Candidate Nelson Eisman of the Green Party responded personally to a comment from a supporter in Whitewater, Wisconsin.¹⁸ Still, most politicians use Facebook more as an additional means of one-way communication than a forum for political debate.

Facebook as a mobilizing tool

The greatest benefit that Facebook has provided to candidates thus far is the means to mobilize and organize thousands of supporters. Even before Barack Obama announced his candidacy for president, the Facebook group “Barack Obama for President in 2008” had accumulated over 50,000 members. Another group, “Barack Obama (One Million Strong for Barack),” gathered 200,000 members in less than three weeks.¹⁹ That same group had almost 325,000 members as of April 16, 2007. To put that number in perspective, Gov. Howard Dean ended up with over 190,000 members in his Meetup.com²⁰ group at the end of his 2004 presidential primary campaign.²¹ It should be noted, however, that the intent of Meetup.com groups is to organize real-world meetings to discuss a topic whereas Facebook groups often do not have a mobilization component.

Some of the most effective organizers on Facebook are not directly affiliated with any campaign. An event called “Barack Obama in Cleveland”²² contained information regarding the time, date, and location of a Barack Obama campaign event. Created by several students at Case Western Reserve University, the event page included directions to the event and even provided contact information for organizing car pools. The page also included pictures from the event and attendees discussed their reactions to the speech. A Facebook group also helped

¹⁷ Falk Campaign Communications Director Adam Collins, interview by author, Madison, Wisconsin, 24 April 2007.

¹⁸ Nelson Eisman, “TV Ads!,” *Facebook Note*, 23 October 2006, http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=2212872668.

¹⁹ Zachary A. Goldfarb, “Facebook flexes political might,” *The Washington Post*, 3 February 2007.

²⁰ Meetup.com was one of the first social networking sites. After the Dean campaign began using it to organize supporters, many of the other 2004 primary campaigns did the same. Meetup.com organizes “Meetups” for all people interested in all sorts of topics, not just politics.

²¹ Joe Trippi, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 86.

²² “Barack Obama in Cleveland,” *Facebook Event*, 10 April 2007, <http://wisc.facebook.com/event.php?eid=2244018090>.

organize several thousand people for an event at George Mason University in February 2007. Joe Trippi, campaign manager for Howard Dean in 2004, said there was no way the Obama campaign alone could have organized an event that drew 3,000 at such an early stage in the campaign.²³

There are several ways that members can utilize Facebook's functions to organize political events. Facebook group administrators (usually the creators of the group) can send out messages to members regarding meetings or campaign updates, creating a de facto contact list of voluntary supporters. Members can invite friends to join a group, or forward on messages from campaigns. Political organizers for college groups will troll through Facebook profiles, looking for students who list themselves as "liberal" or "conservative" and then contacting them to volunteer for campaigns.²⁴

The majority of Facebook support for 2008 candidates has been built through grassroots efforts thus far, but as the 2008 presidential campaign heats up, campaigns will likely play a more active role in the Facebook community, possibly encouraging supporters to attend campaign events and donate money or time. Campaigns can also use Facebook features in unique ways to convey a message to a specific community. In the 2006 referendum on the definition of marriage in Wisconsin, the pro-gay-rights group Fair Wisconsin asked supporters to change their profile pictures to an image reading "A Fair Wisconsin Votes No" in an effort to peak interest among college-age voters.

Facebook's features make it an excellent tool for informing, mobilizing, and organizing political supporters. The one aspect of campaigning that is missing is fundraising. There is no means of directly fundraising via Facebook. Still, it is possible for a candidate to distribute a link to supporters that would take them directly to a Web page where they could make a financial contribution. Thus far, no candidate besides Barack Obama²⁵ has solicited Facebook supporters for campaign contributions. Calls for contributions will likely pick up as the primaries progress and I would not be surprised to see direct requests for donations on the Facebook pages of the major 2008 candidates.

The Future of Facebook Politics

According to Jeff Gulati, political science professor at Bentley College, "the real benefits of social networking sites will be felt in the future for those candidates who continue to engage their supporters after the

²³ Cassata

²⁴ Stacy Forster, "Taking politics to the people on Facebook," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 10 September 2006.

²⁵ Cassata

election is over by promoting a genuine sense of community among them."²⁶ From what I have observed, candidates are only likely to continue actively using Facebook if they anticipate running for office again in the future. Like it does in the general population, political participation for Facebook members will likely ramp up as elections approach and ease off as soon as they are over.

Few of the features instituted by Facebook are completely original, but their combination is what makes Facebook effective. MySpace, Meetup.org, photo-sharing sites, e-mail, and other tools for electronic communications all have value in political communication, but the significance of Facebook is that it combines all of those services together with a network of members. Campaigns need to remember that Facebook markets itself as a hub for social interaction, but it does not emphasize political communication. Just like with any medium, if campaigns want to attract the attention of the general population they are going to have to provide unique and dynamic content.

Beneva Schulte, a spokesperson for Connecticut Sen. Chris Dodd's Democratic presidential campaign, said, "We're not waiting for them to come to us; we're finding them where they live. College students, unless they're overtly political, don't go to political Web sites and attend political rallies, so we're meeting them on college campuses at Harvard and Howard -- on Facebook and YouTube."²⁷ Facebook's ability to integrate political communication into a broader social network is what separates it from a campaign web site or Howard Dean's online organizing efforts. If a candidate's Web site is like a campaign rally that college students can drive to, then a candidate's Facebook page is like a campaign rally held right in the middle of campus. The campaigns are bringing their message to where college students live and an increasing portion of the general population is already interacting online.

Even if millions of young Americans are identifying themselves with political groups and taking their political discussions online, none of it matters if they do not take the next step and participate in the real world. Real world political participation can include making financial contributions, participating in political rallies, and, most importantly, voting. Historically, young Americans are the least likely to vote. In 2004, only 46.7 percent of eligible voters ages 18-24 cast ballots, compared with 63.8 percent of all eligible voters.²⁸ Whether increased political communication on Facebook will actually increase voting rates among younger demographics remains to be seen.

²⁶ Gulati and Williams

²⁷ Cassata

²⁸ Current Population Survey, *U.S. Census Bureau*, November 2004, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p20-556.pdf>.

By providing an outlet for young Americans to interpret political information and participate in political discussions, Facebook has become a positive addition to the world of political communication. On television, in newspapers, and on most Web sites, the less-engaged are essentially told to choose from a limited number of political choices, or not participate at all. On Facebook, members choose which political messages to view. If they do not see their own views represented, they can take action and create a new group or organization and encourage others to join. As Communications Director Adam Collins pointed out, Facebook is not about to become the primary means of communication for political campaigns. The majority of communication between candidates and members is still primarily one-way, but the value of Facebook comes from its members' power to organize and respond in a public setting. As far as a community that encourages and assists political communication, Facebook has the potential to actually exceed Habermas's expectations of a public sphere and become a major hub for political action among community members.

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