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Candidate Campaign Blogs

Directly Reaching Out to the Youth Vote

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Blogs, Web pages that are frequently updated with posts arranged so the most recent post is at the top of the page, were widely adopted by candidates in the 2004 campaign. These online tools that are popular with young voters, though widely adopted as a “hip” technology, fell short of successfully targeting young voters. This content analysis found only 8% of all campaign posts on the official major-party candidate Web sites targeted youth ($N = 106$). Although Bush published fewer posts overall, he produced more youth-targeted posts than Kerry. The topics of posts, issues, and message strategies used in youth-targeted posts were analyzed. Additionally, the use of images was explored. The article concludes that campaigns failed to fully employ blogs as a strategic tool to reach out to young voters.

Keywords: *online campaign; Web site; blog; weblog; Internet; candidate; election; youth*

With each election, candidates improve their use of the Internet and further integrate online tools into their overall message strategy. As broadcast news media coverage of the candidates is reduced (Lichter, Noyes, & Kaid, 1999), the appeal of a less expensive but unlimited medium has grown, and campaigns have made dedicated efforts to integrate Web sites into their overall strategy (Tedesco, 2004). A unique feature about the Internet is that messages can be targeted directly to subgroups of constituents—men, women, minority groups, or even young people. Because production and placement of Internet content is so inexpensive, a campaign can theoretically produce and deploy an unlimited amount of controlled materials targeted to a specific group, such as young voters, for a fraction of the cost compared to other, more expensive controlled media, such as television or radio advertising.

Given that the Internet is a potentially limitless channel and that young people increasingly report using the Internet for news and political information (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2005), it seems logical that campaigns would embrace the channel as an opportunity to mobilize and engage young voters. During

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the 2004 presidential election, campaigns did make a strategic move online and began writing weblog, or blog, posts within their official campaign site (Baker & Stromer-Galley, 2004; Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, & Landreville, 2006; Williams, Trammell, Postelnicu, Landreville, & Martin, 2005).

Blogs are Web pages that are frequently updated with posts arranged so the most recent post is at the top of the page (Blood, 2002). Primary Democratic candidate Howard Dean is credited with the American induction of the blog into the electronic campaign toolkit (Baker & Stromer-Galley, 2004). The main presidential candidates in 2004 also adopted the blog in their Web presence after seeing how successful it was for Dean (Trammell et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2005).

Even though a mainstream audience is still learning what a blog is (CNN, 2005), young people have been quick adopters of the technology (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2005). Almost half of blog readers are younger than 30 years old, and a strong majority (82%) are Internet veterans that have been online for 6 or more years (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2005). Furthermore, 1 in 10 of those online used blogs to get political information during the 2004 race. In a survey of blog readers, Johnson and Kaye (2004) found readers cite blogs as being more credible sources of information than more traditional media such as print or news broadcasts. As such, it appears blogs have been quickly adopted by the "Internet generation," and these young people have expanded the use of blogs from mere diary-keeping uses to political discourse (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2005).

The current study used content analysis to investigate the use of blogs by both major party candidates during the 2004 general election cycle and the strategic targeting of messages to young people. Given that the mere hosting of a blog is a strategic move to reach out to young people, based on the popularity of blogs with people younger than 30 years old, the study further examined more explicit messages targeted to young people. As such, this study examined how frequently each campaign posted messages targeted to young people and which campaign posted more messages. Additionally, the topics of posts, issues discussed, and message appeal strategies were revealed. Finally, images were analyzed using an expanded version of Banwart's (2002) "webstyle."

The following research questions were posed:

Research Question 1: Which campaign produced a greater amount of blog posts targeted to young voters?

Research Question 2: What topics were discussed on blog posts targeted to young voters?

Research Question 3: What issues were discussed in blog posts targeted to young voters?

Research Question 4: Which appeal strategies were used in blog posts targeted to young voters?

Research Question 5: How did campaigns use images in their blog posts targeted to young voters?

Method

This study used the webstyle content analysis method (Banwart, 2002) to review the blog posts of the two major-party presidential contenders during the 2004 general election. The blog post was the unit of analysis. Blog posts from Labor Day through Election Day in 2004 were collected and archived for analysis ($N = 1,190$). Democratic Senator John Kerry posted more frequently ($n = 694$) than Republican incumbent President George W. Bush ($n = 496$). From this sample of blog posts, items that were targeted to young voters were identified ($n = 106$). Items were identified on the basis of keywords and intended audience of the post; items discussing youth issues (draft, education costs, etc.), mentioning visits or campaigning on college campuses, and those written by young people (typically university campaign coordinators) were coded as being "targeted to young voters." Although it is understood that other posts may have appealed to young voters, the ones meeting the selection criteria were considered explicitly targeted to young voters.

The categories in this content analysis identified the campaign that published the post, topics or themes of the posts (Trammell et al., 2006), political issues discussed in the post, message strategy of political statements (see Kaid & Wadsworth, 1989), and coding of graphics according to webstyle (see Banwart, 2002).

Three trained coders analyzed the items. Intercooder reliability was established using Holsti's formula and was .94 (or better) across all categories.

Results

This study focused on candidate campaign blog posts explicitly targeted to young voters published during the general election cycle. These posts were identified through keywords, such as *youth*, *student*, *college*, *campus*, and *university*; having been authored by student campaign groups; or posts about "youth issues," such as the draft, cost of education, and the availability of jobs. Kerry's blog hosted a "comment" feature, where readers could leave messages in response to posts published on the blog by the campaign. Supporters brought up youth issues, especially discussion of the reinstatement of the draft, in the comment feature; however, these items were not analyzed because they were not official campaign messages and there was no equivalent to this type of user-created message on Bush's blog.

Research Question 1 asked how often candidates were writing posts specifically targeted to young voters. Only 8% of the total combined campaign blog sample was explicitly targeted to young voters ($n = 106$). Bush's campaign blog targeted more of its posts to young people ($n = 77$; 15.5%) than Kerry's ($n = 29$; 4.2%).

Research Question 2 asked what topics were discussed in these youth-targeted posts. Campaign blogs discussed the day's event to the greatest extent (62.3%), supporters (53.8%), feelings or thoughts (52.8%), and campaign rallies (49.1%) in about

Table 1
Topics of Posts Targeted to Young People on the
Official Campaign Blogs (in percentages)

Topic	Total (<i>N</i> = 106)	Bush Posts (<i>n</i> = 77)	Kerry Posts (<i>n</i> = 29)
Description of day	62.3*	67.5	48.3
Supporters	53.8**	64.9	24.1
Feelings or thoughts	52.8**	62.3	27.6
Campaign rally	49.1**	55.8	31.0
Thanks for support	36.8	40.3	27.6
Political statement/issues	27.4	27.3	27.6
Schedule of events	26.4*	20.8	41.1
Media coverage	22.6	23.4	20.7
Celebrity endorsement	16.0	19.5	6.9
	100.0	100.0	100.0

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

half or more of the items targeted to young voters. Table 1 outlines the topics discussed in these posts targeted to young people.

There were distinct differences in topic by campaign as well. For example, the posts from Bush's blog discussed supporters—actual young voters that young readers could relate to as peers—far more frequently than Kerry's blog, $\chi^2(1) = 14.10$, $p < .001$. Typically, these posts on Bush's blog were written by campaign leaders on a particular campus, and the young supporter would discuss his or her thoughts and feelings. These were often retrospective posts where the guest blogger would recount his or her day of campaigning for the candidate. On the other hand, the Kerry posts targeted toward young people typically announced events on campuses where the readers could attend to show support. Additionally, Kerry's campaign announced upcoming media appearances on shows popular with this age group, such as *Late Show With David Letterman*. Bush's posts focused on what was being done by young people in the campaign by modeling actions by young supporters, whereas Kerry's approach was to announce in advance ways young supporters could connect with the campaign.

Both campaigns actively used the young adult children of the candidates to hit the campaign trail. For the Republicans, Barbara and Jenna Bush wrote a segment on the blog called "Barbara and Jenna's Journal," where they described first-person accounts of campaign rallies they attended across the nation and on college campuses. The Democrats posted similar reports (written in third person) of campaign rallies attended by Kerry's two daughters, Vanessa and Alex, Andre Heinz (Kerry's stepson), and John Edwards's daughter, Cate.

Research Question 3 asked which issues the campaigns talked about in posts targeting young citizens. Prior to answering this research question, it is important to

Table 2
Issues Discussed in Items Targeted to Young
People on the Official Campaign Blogs

Rank	Bush (<i>n</i> = 21)		Kerry (<i>n</i> = 8)	
	Issue	%	Issue	%
1	War	61.9	Dissatisfaction with government	75
2 ^a	Economy	52.4	Economy	50
3	Security/Defense	52.4	Education	50
4	Satisfaction with government	47.6	Health	50
5	International issues/ Foreign policy	28.6	War	25
6 ^a	Education	19.0	International issues/ Foreign policy	12.5
7	Health care	19.0	Security/Defense	12.5

Note: Spearman's rho correlation ($r = -.29, p > .52$, two-tailed).

a. Issue rank order tied with issue beneath it; issues arranged alphabetically.

note that only 27.4% of the items targeted to young people even made political statements ($n = 29$). Of these political statements, more were published on Bush's blog ($n = 21$) than Kerry's ($n = 8$). From these items, a rank order issue agenda for each campaign was determined (see Table 2).

The issue agendas of the candidates examined here were not significantly correlated, $r = -.29, p > .52$.

Research Question 4 asked which appeal strategies were used in campaign blog posts targeted to young voters. The incumbent and challenger appeal strategies identified by Trent and Friedenber (2003) were used here. Table 3 outlines the appeal strategies present in the items targeted to young voters that made political statements.

Candidates made use of 13 message strategies when targeting young people. Overall, the most frequently used strategy was an attack on the opponent's record. Kerry used this strategy (100%) more often than Bush (38.1%), $\chi^2(1) = 8.97, p < .01$. The appeals were logical (attacking opponent's record, use of statistics to support position), built on source credibility (use of expert to support position and emphasizing political accomplishments, positing of the candidate an expert authority), and emotional (candidate as voice for the people, emphasizing hope for the future, and traditional values).

Research Question 5 asked how blog posts targeted to young people used images. Candidates featured graphics more often in their posts targeted to young people than in their overall set of posts ($M = 0.37, SD = 0.72$). An independent samples t test found that Bush posted graphics more often ($M = 0.47, SD = 0.80$) than Kerry ($M = 0.10, SD = 0.31$), $t(104) = 2.36, p < .05$. Of these images ($n = 32$), the majority of them

Table 3
Message Strategies in Political Posts Targeted to
Young Voters on Campaign Blogs (in percentages)

Strategy	Total (<i>N</i> = 29)	Bush Posts (<i>n</i> = 21)	Kerry Posts (<i>n</i> = 8)
Attack opponent's record	55.2*	38.1	100.0
Candidate as a voice for people	51.7	42.9	75.0
Attack opponent's personal qualities	48.3	52.4	37.5
Use experts to support position	44.8	47.6	37.5
Invite participation	41.4	38.1	50.0
Emphasize hope for future	41.4	38.1	50.0
Use statistics to support position	37.9	38.1	37.5
Emphasize political accomplishments	37.9	52.4	—
Traditional values	20.7	19.0	25.0
Call for change	13.8	—	50.0
Candidate as philosophical center of political party	10.3	9.5	12.5
Identify with others' experiences	6.9	4.8	12.5
Candidate as expert authority	3.4	4.8	—

*Difference between candidates is statistically significant, (< .05)

appeared to be natural snapshots (66.7%). Very few of these shots included the candidate (8.8%), and most of them instead featured the candidate's family (38.2%), supporters (26.5%), supporter groups (20.6%), or racial minorities (26.5%). Half of the images contained campaign merchandise or showed an item with the campaign brand affixed to it (50%), and other graphics featured patriotic symbols (53.1%).

Discussion

The quick adoption of blogs as a medium for campaign messages could be interpreted as a move for campaigns to reach out to young people. After all, people younger than 30 years old make up the majority of blog users. Even so, in the beginning this research suggested that merely operating on a medium preferred by young people does not constitute a complete or, by itself, successful strategy. As such, this study set out to determine the frequency and characteristics of blog posts explicitly targeted to young voters.

For any other channel, 106 items targeted to young people might be considered an extraordinary accomplishment. However, in the context of the resources needed and overall number of posts published during the general election cycle, the targeting of a mere 8% of items published to young people is scant. After all, blog posts are quick and easy to create (Trammell, 2004). It is interesting that a number of the youth-targeted posts published by the Bush campaign were not even written by the

official campaign bloggers. Rather, these were “dispatches” submitted from supporters on the ground who wanted to share their story and excitement about the campaign with others. Such illustration outlines the paradigm shift in what is needed to construct campaign messages for a limitless medium.

Overall, Bush published fewer posts. Yet he published more than twice as many items targeted to young voters. In the greater context of the production of posts, the Bush campaign clearly showed a more explicit attempt to reach out to young voters via blogs. The explicit personal references to young voters appear consistent with Bush’s overall blog strategy. For example, Trammell (2004) outlined the different approaches of the two candidates in their blogs and determined that Bush’s was more personal whereas Kerry’s was more professional.

Although one may initially be troubled that fewer than a third of the youth-targeted blog posts made political statements and discussed issues, this ratio is consistent with other general analysis of campaign blog posts (Trammell, 2004). Blog posts, it seems, are not meant to be one-shot communication messages tasked with conveying the entirety of a candidate’s platform, qualifications, and issue stance. Rather, it appears blog posts make use of subtler opportunities to build relationships over time through personal anecdotes, interaction, and issue discourse. For example, Trammell (2004) found that in general, the campaign blog posts discussed the day’s events (51.7%), feelings or thoughts (47.6%), and rallies (20.8%) and announced a schedule of upcoming events (12.9%).

A closer analysis of the issues discussed causes concern that campaigns are not giving young people the information on the issues most relevant to young voters. For example, Bush mentioned the reinstatement of the draft in one post as a rebuttal attempting to dispel a rumor that he supported a military draft. Kerry published one post attacking what he called Bush’s “failure” regarding Pell Grant college funding for qualifying students. Aside from these anecdotes, issues in the posts relevant to young people were not truly targeted to this voting subgroup. Instead, issue statements appeared to be hastily repurposed to ambiguously introduce general issues in a way that only nominally related to young people. It is interesting that although previous research shows statistically significant correlations for issues on opposing candidate blogs (Williams et al., 2005), that was not the case with the issues addressed in the youth-targeted posts. Of additional note is the finding that issue rankings in these youth-targeted posts are not consistent with overall issue rankings for the entirety of official campaign blog posts in 2004 (Williams et al., 2005). Future research should continue to explore issue strategy comparisons within candidate blogs for youth and other target groups.

The strategies used to discuss issues presented interesting differences. Although Kerry did engage in negative message strategies, he focused on messages communicating hope and inclusion for young people. Bush’s strategy, which was negative in a more personal way, focused on using experts, statistics, and his qualifications.

Limitations and Future Research

This research is limited in that it merely represents a case study of one election encapsulated within the cultural context of the American political system. Generalizations outside of this context to other situations should be made with the understanding of these limitations. Future research should examine the comments on Kerry's blog, as readers were allowed to go off topic and engage in deeper discourse on youth issues. The actual effects of exposure to the two styles of campaign blogs should be examined. Do young people want to see others like themselves and hear their personal stories on the campaign trail, or do they prefer receiving information before an event so that they can connect with the campaign?

Conclusion

This study does not mean to propose that only the items examined here would be interesting to young people. Rather, of all the items posted on the campaign blogs, these were the ones that were most relevant to them. These posts were similar to the overall posts in many ways yet distinct in others.

Given the low number of overall items published that were relative to young people and the missed opportunities to initiate discourse on youth issues, the success of this endeavor as it relates to young voters is limited. It is not enough to publish content on a medium preferred by young people—the content has to be substantive. Even so, it is not appropriate to completely condemn campaigns here, as many are still grappling with finding the best strategy for blogs. Future campaigns can move forward—not just for young voters but for all special groups of constituents—by leaving behind old ideas of message production and deployment strategies.

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