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Candidate Campaign E-Mail Messages in the Presidential Election 2004

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Candidate e-mail messages play an increasing role in online, candidate-controlled media. E-mail messages allow candidates to directly contact voters, serving as political marketing tools. This study content analyzed the universe of campaign e-mail messages ($N = 78$) from the Bush and Kerry campaigns during the general cycle of the 2004 presidential election. Results indicate that as key election events drew near, candidates increased the number of e-mail messages they sent. Direct address (using you) in the e-mail messages occurred at a statistically significant higher level than expected. Candidates used e-mail messages for promotion more often than opponent attacks. The study also investigated issue coverage, message strategy, and interactivity. The findings indicate that e-mail messages are potent instruments because they can be forwarded to myriad nonsubscribers. As such, candidate e-mail messages can be considered a form of viral marketing that offers a unique way to overcome the problem of selective exposure.

Keywords: e-mail; candidate-controlled media; election; Internet; computer-mediated communication

The 2004 presidential election is widely considered to be the first major Internet election in the United States. This campaign was a time when the Web became a dominant medium for both the candidates who sought to communicate directly with citizens and for the public who used the Internet as a primary source of information.

The proportion of citizens who cite the Internet as one of their main sources for campaign news rose from 3% in 1996, to 11% in 2000, and to 21% in 2004. The number of individuals who say they received any election news during the 2004 campaign election this year rose from 10% in 1996, to 30% in 2000, to 41% in 2004 (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2004).

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Campaign Communication Tools

The tools candidates have available to them during a campaign have drastically increased in the past decade. Candidates have been able to go beyond direct mail pieces and provide in-depth, limitless information through modern electronic media, such as the Web. According to Kaid (2002), the Internet offers advantages for disseminating political messages in that it provides more avenues for information and opportunities for interactive communication between the candidate and the voter. Such computer-mediated communication can be used as a mobilization tool for existing supporters and as a persuasive tool for those who have yet to buy into the candidate (Davis, 1999).

In 2004, candidates used the Internet at an unprecedented level and took advantage of many new developments of this medium to communicate with the electorate. From blogs to e-mail messages, candidates have found that the Web is a controlled, nonlinear medium that provides opportunities to connect with citizens in a more personal way.

By taking advantage of the capabilities of the Web, such as multimedia and interactive elements (e.g., hyperlinks), candidates are able to encourage the appearance of two-way communication with voters. Web sites with personalized features and controlled content delivery options are gaining popularity among candidates who are running for office and have become a mainstay in candidates' political marketing tool bags.

In fact, growing numbers of candidates are offering electronic newsletters or candidate campaign e-mail messages. Typically, visitors to a candidate's Web site will see an option to sign up for the service, which delivers e-mail messages "from the candidate," himself or herself. These messages include everything from news on where the candidate will visit in the coming days, to issue stances, to endorsements, to polling data.

Interactivity

Despite being a concept that is difficult to define, interactivity remains the essence of effective Web-based communication. That is, Internet users want to control their access to content through the use of hyperlinks, have the opportunity to contribute to a site, and go beyond passive exposure (Peng, Tham, & Xiaoming, 1999).

Campaign Web sites have not been the place to achieve interactivity in the past. Previously, campaigns used the Web more as a one-way communication vehicle. Stromer-Galley (2000) found that most political campaigns resisted using human-interactive features. Her 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.

Since then, campaigns have increased their use of features. As Puopolo (2001) explained, more recent analysis finds interactivity in sites where "the user can participate by making choices about what he or she will view or read: perhaps send e-mail to the candidate, search for information, see pictures, or even take a virtual tour" (p. 2038).

The 2004 presidential candidates, Democratic challenger Senator John F. Kerry and Republican incumbent President George W. Bush, took advantage of the nonlinear, interactive nature of the Web. For example, candidates improved interactivity during this election cycle by providing hyperlinks that sent users to external media content, creating blogs, allowing readers to contribute to the discussion on the official campaign blog site, and encouraging the distribution of campaign site content. In doing so, candidates increased their use of the capabilities of the Web, such as multimedia, hyperlinks, and interactive elements (Williams, Trammell, Postelnicu, Landreville, & Martin, 2005).

Prior scholarship indicates that interactivity on a candidate's Web site can enhance user perceptions of the candidate's sensitivity, responsiveness, and trustworthiness and that the level of interactivity can potentially influence perception of candidates and levels of agreement with policy positions (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003). Stromer-Galley and Foot (2002) conducted focus group research regarding the implications of online interactivity and found that participants viewed e-mail, interactive chats, and electronic bulletin boards as ways in which interactions between citizens and candidates could occur effectively. Tools such as these are traditionally thought of as interactive because of the two-way communication involved.

User control of content (i.e., hyperlinks) is another important tenet of interactivity. 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. Such strategic use of hyperlinks can increase the credibility of the information disseminated from that source in that if other people are saying good things about Candidate X, then it must be true.

Candidate E-Mail Messages and Viral Marketing

As researchers continue to understand Internet use as a whole, this study focused on a component of the Internet: e-mail. It has been argued that "The World Wide Web coupled with e-mail may facilitate information seeking and information dissemination" (Stromer-Galley, 2003). However, prior research regarding the use of e-mail by politicians indicates that some make poor use of Internet-based communications on several levels. For example, Sheffer (2003) found that legislators want to effectively incorporate e-mail into their standard communication tactics but claim they have difficulty in integrating e-mail as a political tool. A study of candidate e-mail messages during a gubernatorial campaign asserts that e-mail message strategy was frequently incongruent with the candidates' Web site content and made little use of multimedia or interactive capabilities (Trammell & Williams, 2004).

Not all politicians avoid or find themselves challenged by the medium. Ciolli (2000) of Long Island's *Newsday* described Arizona Senator John McCain as an

example of a candidate who took extensive use of e-mails as a way of directly and personally communicating with more than 43,000 supporters during the 2000 election cycle.

More candidates appear to be moving toward embracing and fully utilizing the technology, as McCain did:

E-mails also advanced during the 2004 campaign cycle with better graphics and presentation, more interactive features, and a stronger tie to the online campaign. Messages often featured direct links to new website features such as updates on fund-raising efforts or new online advertisements. (Wiese & Gronbeck, 2005, p. 221)

Cornfield (2004) argued that candidates will find the strategic use of e-mail more effective than their Web sites for Internet campaigning and noted that e-mail messages deliver information directly to the user, whereas Web sites must be sought out. He also noted that e-mail messages are easily forwarded and may offer immediate source credibility by the information provided in the subject and sender columns. Cornfield asserted that e-mail messages are an integral part of viral marketing strategy. Garret LoPorto, a viral marketing campaign consultant, concurred: "The Internet makes possible a whole new level of viral marketing—putting out targeted messages to a group of like-minded individuals and creating a snowball effect—for political campaigns" (Richards, 2004).

It is argued that one of the most significant advances in Web campaigning in 2004 was the use of viral marketing tactics via e-mail messages:

This spreading of information by average citizens relates to the issue of whether or not users are being pushed or pulled to given content. While much candidate or third-party content on the Web would normally be classified in the pull category—media that is user-driven and for individuals (usually supporters) who seek the site or content because of their own interests or predispositions, such content can now be also classified in the push category—as media that reaches individuals (even nonsupporters) who did not seek out the site or content but are instead drawn to it unwittingly. The blurring of the lines between these two classifications means that Web-based, controlled media such as ads, Web pages, blog posts, hyperlinks, multimedia, and e-mails can potentially overcome selective exposure. (Williams, 2005, pp. 251-252)

This study aims to advance Internet research by content analyzing candidate e-mail messages to identify the types of messages that candidates are sending and the messages' implied purpose, record candidate attributes revealed through the messages, and review the trends in timing of e-mail dissemination. E-mail messages are described as inherently interactive, yet the current research goes beyond the technical structure of the medium to investigate its use and ability to further promote interactivity in the context of a political campaign.

The current research assumes that people who are more actively engaged in politics and/or the campaign are likely receivers of the campaign e-mail messages. This assumption is made based on the active subscription procedure one must undertake to

sign up as recipients of the e-mail messages. It is important to note that these e-mail messages are not spam but are requested e-mail messages that citizens have signed up to receive. Candidate campaign e-mail messages in essence can be considered a new form of direct mail, but with candidate e-mail messages, prospective voters sign up to receive the communication from the candidates. This differs from the traditional direct-mail model where constituents receive unsolicited messages.

Based on previous research on the use of the Web in political campaigns and the limited scholarship on candidate e-mail messages, the study was guided by the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Candidates will send more e-mail messages as key dates near.

Hypothesis 2: Candidates will speak directly to the reader in the e-mail messages.

Hypothesis 3: Candidates will use the e-mail messages to self-promote at a higher rate than attack the opponent.

The present research also investigates the following research questions:

Research Question 1: Will candidates construct e-mail messages as interactive tools?

Research Question 2: How often will candidates discuss issues?

Research Question 3: What message strategies are used most frequently by candidates in their e-mail messages?

Method

This study investigated campaign e-mail messages sent during the hot phase of the 2004 U.S. presidential election through the use of quantitative content analysis. The e-mail messages included in this study were official campaign communication-controlled media sent to subscribers from Labor Day through Election Day. The subscriber signed up to receive these e-mail messages from both Kerry and Bush on the candidates' official campaign Web sites.

Sample

The universe of campaign e-mail messages from the U.S. presidential candidates was analyzed here ($N = 78$). The campaign of incumbent Republican President George W. Bush sent 28 messages, whereas challenger Democrat John F. Kerry sent 50. The collection of e-mail messages began on at the start of the general election cycle, Labor Day, and continued through Election Day 2004. The e-mail message was the unit of analysis.

Categories

First, basic demographic information regarding each unit was recorded. This information included the campaign from which the e-mail messages were sent, the date,

and the type of author (candidate, campaign staff, politician, celebrity, family member, or other). Tone (positive, neutral, or negative) of the e-mail message was also recorded, as was the presence of direct address (e.g., referring to the receiver as *you*).

The strategy of the e-mail messages was reviewed through several variables. A general classification, or theme, of each item was examined and determined to be campaign strategy/horse-race coverage, issue coverage, or personality/attribute information to familiarize the public with the candidate or his character. In addition, Kaid and Davidson's (1986) identified "message strategy" variables were used.

Several aspects regarding the mention of issues in campaign e-mail messages were identified. Issues were coded as a dichotomous variable as being absent (0) or present (1). These issues were war, defense or national security, economy, social issues (e.g., welfare and social security), environment, education, crime, and health care.

Interactivity and multimedia were measured by recording the presence of graphics, Flash movies, audio files, video files, hyperlinks, encouragement of feedback, and viral marketing tools. Graphics were operationally defined as the presence of banner or header graphics, photographs, collages, or icons/logos for special events featured within the body of the e-mail (excluding e-mail software icons). Hyperlink destinations were examined for user's control in accessing early voting information, donations, media articles, volunteering, and so on.

Viral marketing tools refer to those that encouraged the original e-mail recipient to forward the content on to another, such as icons or fields that enable the user to "send this to a friend" or "forward this to your local media." In addition, textual encouragement of sharing the content with someone else was recorded. Finally, interactivity was examined for the presence of encouraging or providing mechanisms for two-way communication or user control. Items that encouraged two-way communication contained text that asked the reader to interact, contact the campaign/candidate, or request feedback. Items that provided the mechanism to do these things would have hyperlinks or icons built in through which one could easily accomplish these activities.

Coding Process and Reliability

Two trained coders analyzed the text, interactivity, and multimedia present in each e-mail message. Differences were reconciled in training, and reliability was measured using Holsti's formula¹ for intercoder reliability. The intercoder reliability was .89 across all 90 variables.

Results

Through the use of quantitative content analysis, this study analyzed the universe of campaign e-mail messages sent from the Bush and Kerry campaigns during the general cycle of the 2004 U.S. presidential election. E-mail messages sent from Labor Day through Election Day 2004 were considered, and the e-mail message was the unit of analysis ($N = 78$). Democratic challenger Senator John F. Kerry sent nearly twice as

many e-mail messages ($n = 50$) as Republican incumbent President George W. Bush ($n = 28$).

Upon arriving in the subscriber's e-mail inbox, one could find a new message that appeared to be from "GeorgeWBush.com," Laura Bush, Mary Beth Cahill, or "Kerry for President." With such varying attributions, the e-mail messages range from looking like mass distributed messages resembling spam (e.g., "GeorgeWBush.com") or being from someone whom one would recognize (e.g., Laura Bush or Mary Beth Cahill).

It was easily noticeable that the use of e-mail messages as a campaign tool has evolved since the midterm elections in 2002. The e-mail messages sent to subscribers in the 2004 election contained more interactivity through the presence of hyperlinks and conversational appeals to "get involved," "send this message to a friend," or even contact the campaign with feedback. Another evolution in this campaign cycle was the use of graphics, such as a banner at the top of the e-mail message (97.4%), branding it as being an official campaign communication. Furthermore, graphics such as photographs (17.9%) and special event icons (6.4%) (e.g., Bush's "Walk the Vote" event) were embedded in the e-mail messages. Multimedia within the e-mail messages was introduced, but only a few messages contained (or had links to) Flash movies (1.3%) or video (5.1%), including ads (1.3%). Within the multimedia examined, Kerry offered all three of these multimedia items, whereas Bush only posted video.

Even though these e-mail messages could be construed as an e-mail message from the candidate himself, very few are presented as being penned by the candidate. Overall, the campaign staff wrote 60.3% of the e-mail messages. The candidates (14.1%), other politicians (6.4%), family members of the candidates (2.6%), and even celebrities (1.3%) were among the authors of the e-mail messages examined.

In an effort to classify the premise behind—or the theme of—an e-mail message, each e-mail message was categorized as per its meaning. Predominately, these e-mail messages discussed the strategy and progress of the campaign as 76.9% were classified as horserace. E-mail messages also focused on issues (12.8%) and the personality or attributes of the candidate (10.3%). Kerry's e-mail messages especially followed this trend by focusing on horserace (84.0%), issue coverage (8.0%), and candidate personality or attributes (8%). Bush's e-mail messages had a slight degree of variance, as only approximately two thirds focused on horserace (64.3%), whereas the rest focused on issue coverage (21.4%) and personality (14.3%).

Frequency of E-Mail Messages

The first hypothesis posited that as key election dates, such as debates or Election Day, drew near that candidates would increase the number of e-mail messages they sent. Indeed, this appeared to be the case, and this hypothesis was supported (see Table 1). In fact, more than two thirds of the e-mail messages (67.9%) were sent during these key weeks. The key dates defined here included the first presidential candidate debate on September 30, 2004 (Week 4), followed by the vice presidential candidate debate on October 5, 2004 (Week 5), the remaining Kerry-Bush debates on October 8, 2004

(Week 5) and October 13, 2004 (Week 6), and Election Day on November 2, 2004 (Week 8). Because Election Day was at the beginning of a week, 3 more days were added to Week 8 to include Election Day (Week 8 ran from October 24, 2004, through November 2, 2004).

More than a quarter of the e-mail messages (25.6%) were sent in the days immediately preceding the election. Even though Bush's overall e-mail message frequency was substantially lower than Kerry's, Bush's campaign sent e-mail messages at a consistent rate during the last half of the hot phase. Conversely, the Kerry camp's dissemination of e-mail messages noticeably declined the second-to-last week of the campaign (when there was no key event) but then increased to a flurry of messages during the final days of the campaign. In fact, Kerry sent twice his campaign's normal level of e-mail messages during these last 10 days (30%).

Direct Address

The second hypothesis posited that e-mail messages would use direct address, meaning the e-mail message would appear as if it were written only to the reader, giving an illusion that it was not a mass communicated message. The analysis to test this hypothesis dealt strictly with the text of the e-mail messages and looked for items signaling direct address, such as referring to the reader as *you*. Items were reviewed and coded as a dichotomous variable for the presence (1) or absence (0) of direct address in the text.

This hypothesis was supported. Direct address (using *you*) in the e-mail messages occurred at a statistically significant higher level than expected, $\chi^2(1) = 46.15, p < .001$. There was not a statistically significant difference between the candidates' use of direct address. Bush used direct address in 82.1% of his e-mail messages, and Kerry used it 92.0% of the time.

Self-Promotion Versus Opponent Attack

The third hypothesis posited that the candidates would use e-mail messages for self-promotion more often than to attack their opponent. In testing this hypothesis, several variables were coded that indicated either promotion of the candidate or attack of the opponent.

This group of dichotomous variables formed the constructs of promotion and attack. Items featuring candidate promotions were those that (a) mentioned an event, (b) pointed readers to the campaign Web site or blog, (c) requested the readers' vote, (d-f) contained an endorsement (celebrity, politician, or other), or (g) mentioned political accomplishments of the candidate.

Items featuring opponent attacks were those that (a) had a negative tone, (b) contained an attack or rebuttal, or (c-e) attacked the record, stands, or personal qualities of the opponent. Based on the presence of these variables that formed a construct, a new variable was created indicating whether an item contained promotion only, attack only, or both promotion and attack.

Table 1
Frequency (%) of E-Mail Messages Each
Week During the General Election Cycle

Week (Significant Event)	Total (<i>N</i> = 78)	Bush (<i>n</i> = 28)	Kerry (<i>n</i> = 50)
1	2.6	3.6	2
2	10.3	10.7	10
3	10.3	10.7	10
4 (Presidential debate)	11.5	7.1	14
5 (Presidential and vice presidential debates)	15.4	17.9	14
6 (Presidential debate)	15.4	14.3	16
7	9.0	17.9	4
8 (Election)	25.6	17.9	30
	100	100	100

This hypothesis was supported but with mixed results. Promotion alone was the most prevalent ($n = 34$) construct, $\chi^2(3) = 23.84$, $p < .001$. Items containing only an attack on the opponent ($n = 13$) fell beneath the expected number, therefore occurring at a lower rate than expected, $\chi^2(3) = 23.84$, $p < .001$. Interestingly, more items than expected contained both promotion and attacks ($n = 25$).

The candidates' use of promotion and attack was not statistically different from each other. E-mail messages sent by Kerry's campaign used promotion only 44.6% of the time, along with attack (24.4%) and the combination (31.1%). Bush's e-mail messages used promotion 51.9% of the time, along with attack only (7.4%) and the combination (40.7%).

Interactivity

The first research question asked how candidates used interactive tools as a part of their e-mail message strategy. Interactivity was measured through several dichotomous variables to record the presence of encouragement for two-way communication, viral message strategies, interactivity, and hyperlink destinations (Table 2 lists the variables and provides frequency for each).

In addition, an interactivity index was created by summing interactivity variables. The index provided this study a relative measure to compare the candidates' e-mail messages. This 12-item index included the following variables: (a) mention or link to additional content on Web site or blog, (b) encouragement to pass on or forward e-mail messages, (c) invitation of two-way communication, and links to (d) making donations, (e) contacting the campaign, (f) volunteering, (g) event information, (h) media articles, (i) "send to a friend," (j) forward to local media functionality, (k) early voting information, and (l) clickable images. Overall, candidates only exhibited a quarter of the interactivity measured ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.54$). An independent samples t test revealed that Bush's e-mail messages ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.29$) contained twice the interactivity features of Kerry's ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.27$), $t(76) = 6.09$, $p < .001$.

Table 2
Interactive and Multimedia Features Provided
and Encouraged in E-Mail Messages (%)

Interactive Tool	Total (<i>N</i> = 78)	Bush (<i>n</i> = 28)	Kerry (<i>n</i> = 50)
Inviting two-way discussion	23.1	32.1	18.0
Encouragement to forward message	33.3 ^a	64.3	16.0
Mechanism to "send to a friend" in e-mail	35.9 ^a	100	0
Mechanism to forward to media outlets	12.8	21.4	8.0
Link to content on Web site, blog in e-mail	25.0	10.0	15.4
Link to early voting information	14.1 ^b	25.0	8.0
Link to provide feedback to campaign	12.8 ^a	17.9	2.0
Link to upcoming event information	14.1	14.3	26.0
Link to media article	3.8	7.1	2.0
Online donation request	57.7 ^a	14.3	82.0

a. Difference between Bush and Kerry is significant, $p < .001$.

b. Difference between Bush and Kerry is significant, $p < .05$.

Issues

The second research question inquired into issue coverage within e-mail messages. Using a list of issues commonly reported as being "the most important issues facing our country," coders analyzed each item for the presence of an issue. Some e-mail messages contained more than one issue, whereas some did not even discuss any issues at all.

Overall, candidates discussed issues in 38.5% of the e-mail messages. Bush's campaign focused on issues (66.7%) at a greater rate than Kerry's (33.3%), $\chi^2(1) = 20.05, p < .001$ (see Table 3). War, national defense, and economy were the main issues discussed by Bush. Kerry focused his issue coverage on war, economy, and health care.

Message Strategy

The third research question asked which message strategies candidates employed in e-mail messages. To investigate message strategy, the 24 strategies from candidate televised advertising identified by Kaid and Davidson (1986) were used. Previously, Banwart (2002) used these message strategies to analyze candidate Web sites (Table 4 identifies the strategies and the frequency each was used in the e-mail messages).

A key finding is that candidates focused their e-mail message strategy in efforts to communicate a partnership. That is, there was a high degree of asking the reader to participate and take action (85.9%), candidates addressed the readers as peers (uses *we*) (41.0%), and emphasized hope for the future (41%). In addition, candidates used the medium as a place to discuss their opponent, often in a negative light. Little attention was paid to a more "logical" appeal by providing facts or statistics (9%) and using experts to support the candidates' stance (11.5%).

Table 3
Issues Discussed in E-Mail Messages (%)

Issue	Total (<i>N</i> = 78)	Bush (<i>n</i> = 28)	Kerry (<i>n</i> = 50)
War	29.5 ^c	46.4	20
Defense	20.5 ^a	42.9	8.0
Economy	24.4 ^b	42.9	14.0
Health care	16.7 ^c	28.6	10.0
Social issues	11.5	21.4	6.0
Education	7.3	14.3	4.0
Environment	1.3	0	2.0

a. Difference between Bush and Kerry is significant, $p < .001$.

b. Difference between Bush and Kerry is significant, $p < .005$.

c. Difference between Bush and Kerry is significant, $p < .05$.

Discussion

The 2004 candidate e-mail messages analyzed in this study showed an overall advancement from those examined during the 2002 midterm campaign. Indeed, e-mail is a potentially personal form of communication with a structure that is inherently interactive. By building on the structural qualities of the medium through integrating more mechanisms to enhance interactivity and fostering an environment of interactivity through the text, candidates have made great strides in their use of this Internet campaign tool.

In analyzing the candidates' use of e-mail messages during the 2004 campaign, it became evident that each candidate had his own distinct style. Kerry's campaign e-mail message distribution was nearly twice that of the Bush campaign. However, despite this fact that Bush's e-mail messages were disseminated less frequently, Bush's controlled media appeared to be more deliberate—both in terms of their message strategy and their use of interactive features. For example, Bush's e-mail messages typically provided a more detailed explanation of issue stances and how he differed from his Democratic challenger. Conversely, Kerry's e-mail messages frequently provided only a mere list of issues that were deemed important and indicated that Kerry could do a better job than the incumbent, but these communication efforts rarely provided specific information as to how he would do so.

The main issue for both candidates appeared to be the war with Iraq and on terror. Whereas Bush's e-mail messages were consistent in the reinforcement of the president's assertion that the country must be resolved to fight this war for a long time, Kerry's e-mail messages were less congruent and typically dealt with this issue on a superficial level—calling the war a mistake and indicating the situation was a mess. Only a few of the Kerry e-mail messages went into detail about these claims: Most just mentioned broadly how the war and other issues were major problems facing the nation and repeatedly made vague statements such as “it's time to take back the White

Table 4
Candidate Message Strategy Used in E-Mail Messages (%)

Issue	Total (N = 78)	Bush (n = 28)	Kerry (n = 50)
Candidate as a voice for the people	23.1 ^c	35.7	16.0
Incumbency stands for legitimacy	23.4 ^a	67.9	—
Calling for change	30.8 ^b	10.7	42.0
Invite participation or action	85.9 ^a	67.9	96.0
Emphasizing hope for the future	41.0 ^c	57.1	32.0
Yearning for the past	1.3	—	2.0
Traditional values	5.1	10.7	2.0
Represent philosophical center of party	7.7	14.3	4.0
Use of statistics to support argument	9.0	17.9	4.0
Use of expert authorities to support argument	11.5 ^c	21.4	6.0
Candidate positioning himself as expert authority	11.5	14.3	10.0
Identifying with the experiences of others	2.6	3.6	2.0
Emphasizing political accomplishments	9.0	21.4	2.0
Attacking record of politician	28.2	28.6	28.0
Attacking personal qualities of politician	24.4	28.6	22.0
Attack opponent on his stands	17.9 ^c	32.1	10.0
Compare candidate stands with stands of opponent	14.1	21.4	10.0
Compare personal qualities with personal qualities of opponent	10.3	14.3	8.0
“Above the trenches” position	7.7	21.4	—
Use of personal tone (<i>I</i>)	32.1	32.1	32.0
Address readers as peers (<i>we</i>)	41.0	35.7	44.0
Use of political experience, anecdotes to support positions	5.1	14.3	—
Using endorsements by party and other leaders	10.3	7.1	12.0

a. Difference between Bush and Kerry is significant, $p < .001$.

b. Difference between Bush and Kerry is significant, $p < .005$.

c. Difference between Bush and Kerry is significant, $p < .05$.

house” or “make sure the Democratic Party has the means to hold George Bush and the Republicans accountable.”

Even with these criticisms, e-mail messages are typically short and seem to be more palatable when they are succinct. So, although the Kerry campaign e-mail messages seemed to lack substantive content, they did an excellent job in driving home its fundamental argument and called for a change by emphasizing that the country could do better. These arguments are typical for a challenger and can serve the purpose of rallying the candidate’s base.

Perhaps the two most noteworthy differences found in this study are those between the two candidates’ e-mail message strategies in terms of how each dealt with supporter participation and viral marketing. These two areas are striking examples of how the e-mail subscriber, one who is typically already invested enough to sign up for the messages in the first place, can be mobilized and act as a conduit for the campaign as a result of these direct candidate-controlled communication efforts.

Although fund-raising appeals were frequently used by both candidates, fund-raising tended to both be the most prevalent topic and the major way in which the Kerry campaign indicated citizens could make a difference, and it was the most consistent call for action. The Bush campaign also made numerous fund-raising appeals, but the key difference was that these requests for donations were typically subservient to other content and were not the dominant e-mail message theme.

Further examination of the message strategy indicates the candidates were attempting to create a culture of partnership. That is, the candidates were reaching out to the reader—in many instances addressing the e-mail recipient as a peer (*we*) and asking the reader to get involved or to undertake a specific task. Along with this proposed partnership, which would indelibly advance the goals of the campaign, a distinct optimism about the future was often offered.

It seemed that the candidates were taking time to ask the reader directly to do a small task (e.g., encourage early voting among friends, contact local media to disseminate campaign message, or host a debate party) to work with the campaign to make it successful. The purported benefit for taking such action was that the United States would be a better nation. This sense of partnership—that the candidate and the reader could make a difference together—was a key strategy observed.

Another notable finding deals with the concept of viral marketing: the encouragement that a potent message be forwarded around the Web to reach those who are possibly not yet familiar with the candidates' campaign stances. The logic behind viral marketing in this context involves a multistep process. First, an invested supporter will receive an e-mail message, and it will have a limited impact on that citizen's vote. In essence, that supporter is already onboard. However, if that supporter is encouraged to send the item to a friend, someone who may not be as familiar or invested with the campaign, then the original receiver becomes a channel through which candidates may reach untapped citizens. The recipient of a forwarded candidate communication will most likely open the e-mail message and read it because it was sent from someone that person knows, as it is not initially interpreted as spam. Thus, e-mail messages may overcome selective exposure, similar to the numerous findings about televised political ads.

In terms of viral marketing, the Bush 2004 e-mail messages were clearly superior in their use of technology. Nearly every Bush campaign e-mail message provided recipients a way to forward the content simultaneously to five other people. Kerry's e-mail messages did not provide such a feature and rarely pushed the idea or mechanism to forward messages. Even though one Kerry e-mail message asked recipients to forward it to 10 friends, it did not provide any mechanism by which to do so, thereby putting the onus on the reader to do so.

Overall, it appears that political candidates are becoming more proficient with the use of electronic communication and are interested in finding ways to maximize their communication efforts. However, interactivity as a whole during the 2004 campaign cycle was still limited. For example, out of the 12 possible interactivity variables measured, candidates only used slightly more than 3 on average. As such, the candidates only tapped into a quarter of the possibilities that were available to them.

This study's findings indicate that although candidates have made strong strides toward adopting a better model for electronic communication and engagement, there is still much room for improvement. The researchers stress that the interactivity that is afforded through the Internet is not merely a feature or a tool present within the medium but an overall environment that may be fostered.

Note

1. The 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.

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