

Thomas Houston
Dr. Hollander
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INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The widespread proliferation of media content choices may potentially have destructive short-term effects on the efficacy of political communication. Unable to sway voters through traditional media campaigns as a result of a growing media landscape, especially younger voters, political communication must adapt to the changing environment. The effects of technology and a changing media environment are impacting the ability for political communication to effectively reach and impact an audience, which is leading to a disturbing drop in political involvement and a harmful effect upon democracy.

As Internet video, video on demand, the number of cable channels, and other media options drastically increase, people will be able to micromanage their content to an extreme never seen before. In this new media environment, Markus Prior argues:

“... people with both a preference for news and access to cable and/or the Internet become more knowledgeable over time, while the opposite holds true for people who prefer entertainment programming and can choose between many different channels” (Prior, 580).

With the “politics by default” aspect of the Broadcast era, those who normally would not have sought out political information would have encountered it because of the lack of media choice. Now, those who are uninterested in political information are able to

surround themselves in a media diet of their choice, thus opting out of viewing political content if they choose (Prior, 588). With the expansion of media output catering to every desire, it is now disturbingly easy to avoid political debates, Presidential addresses, and even national disasters. Without exposure to political information, and the resulting increase in political knowledge, voting turnout will decrease (Prior, 579).

Prior argues that increasing media choice widens the gap in political knowledge and turnout as exposure to political information decreases (Prior, 578). Similarly, one would expect to see a negative trend in the effectiveness of political communication. With the expanse of content options and platforms, political communication will have enormous problems in succeeding in the attention economy. With the motive and technological ability of audiences to skip commercials through TiVO, DVRs, DVDs, and the Internet, political advertising may lose effectiveness as a form of political communication. Further, Internet ads increasingly are catered to the likes of the individual consumer, leaving little room for political speech and drastically decreasing the possibility of stumbling upon a political message (Prior, 577).

The effects of these changes in political communication could be enormous. First, candidates may have to alter their approach to attracting supporters. Joi Ito, an advisor to Howard Dean's campaign, explains the drastic change in the concept of politician: "You're not a leader, you're a place. You're like a park or a garden. If it's comfortable and cool, people are attracted. Deanspace is not really about Dean. It's about us" (Wolf). In this search for cool, there may be a movement away from serious issues, as candidates attempt to draw voters that are otherwise politically uninterested. In order to compete with alternative entertainment media, a distinct focus on image may be the only

way to draw support outside of traditional party cores. As the image of a candidate becomes increasingly important in determining the ability to gain attention among entertainment media, celebrity and politics may become inseparable. Furthermore, a successful political campaign may increasingly focus on a strong concept of brand that will be exuded by the politician.

Theoretically, there are two primary ways to increase political viewing. First, expose citizens to political information in their media diets and hope for a result of increased political knowledge and turnout. Second, inspire voluntary participation in the political conversation. Constitutional barriers will probably prevent attempts at mandating political content viewing, especially as consumers move from broadband to cable where State jurisdiction is extremely limited. Similarly, the popular response will be extremely negative towards such actions. Education and a societal focus on the importance of political involvement may be a possible second option for increasing voluntary participation. Though this is not a short-term, a campaign on all platforms to all ages "for the children" may help in the long term. Without a change, trends suggest that the political knowledge and participation gaps may become extremely large, because those interested can become extremely politically informed through the countless content options, the uninformed become increasingly ignorant on political matters as they wrap themselves in an apolitical media cocoon.

Grass roots campaign approaches appear to be somewhat effective, but it is doubtful that traditional, top-down campaigns can be as effective as they were in the past. The rise of social networks may offer a possible solution for the dissemination of political messages. There is obviously an audience for blogs, but

research has yet to show if it is effective on sites such as myspace or facebook. It will be interesting to see if the grassroots success of Howard Dean's political campaign might be able to be expanded from a relatively technologically enabled and sophisticated minority to a mainstream politically involved populace. The hope remains that the human face-to-face interaction created as a byproduct of social networking is enough to interest the politically uninterested.

It appears that the effectiveness of political communication may decrease in the short-term as politicians grapple with technological changes and the resulting increases in media choice. Moreover, there will probably be a lag between the expansion of media content choices and the speed of developing technology and the ability for political communication to keep up and effectively utilize these developments to draw society towards political messages in order to encourage a thriving, participatory democracy.

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