

# Social Media and the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election

by Dr. Emily Metzgar, Ph.D. and Albert Maruggi

## Abstract

This report is an analysis of social media in the 2008 U.S. presidential election from 30,000 feet. We evaluate conventional wisdom about social media and its applicability to political campaigns in particular and to public relations more generally. We contrast that conventional wisdom with empirical findings taken from the 2008 presidential campaign season, using data collected with Radian6. We place those findings in the context of existing research on political communication, political engagement, and the role of social media in communication campaigns. We conclude with predictions about future developments concerning social media, American politics, and reputation management using social media tools.

## Introduction

The 2008 U.S. presidential campaign offered a unique opportunity to evaluate the usefulness and applicability of social media technology in the American political environment. This assessment of the role of social media during the 2008 presidential campaign confirms some widely held tenets of conventional wisdom about social media, but it also indicates that the role of social media as the new *sine qua non* of American politics is far from certain.

While there is no shortage of examples of ways in which social media such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook played a facilitating role in the unfolding of the 2008 election, there is little evidence that any of these social media venues actually drove discussion, participation, or outcomes. The bottom line is that social media tools are only tools. They are no replacement for message, motivation, or strategy.

Wikipedia defines social media as “primarily Internet- and mobile-based tools for sharing and discussing information among human beings.” Commonly used social media tools include blogs, Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Digg, Twitter, and YouTube. The list grows longer each day, but the fundamental characteristic of each continues to be the ability to share and discuss information within a network.

The Pew Internet and American Life Project reports that “a record-breaking 46% of Americans used the Internet, email or cell phone text messaging to get news about the campaign, share their views and mobilize

others.” That same study indicated that 35% of Americans watched political video online and 10% used social networking sites like MySpace or Facebook to learn more about the race. These and other numbers reflect substantial increases in the number of Americans using social media as part of the election campaign process in 2008 as compared to 2004.

Writing about the 2008 campaign, Peter Daou, one-time Internet advisor for Hillary Clinton, observed, “Virtually every online venue that played a role in the ’08 race provided a platform for public dialogue. Blogs, boards, news sites, YouTube, Twitter, and social networks large and small were inundated with millions of individual comments, the aggregate effect of which was to determine how voters viewed the candidates and the race.” Daou is correct that the aggregate effect of social media helped determine how voters viewed the election. But based on the analysis, presented below, that overall effect was greater than the sum of its individual parts. Indeed, it is difficult to identify any specific case where social media set the agenda for discussion of an issue.

## Methodology

### *An Inspiring Earlier Study*

The methodology is loosely modelled on a 2005 report from the Pew Internet & American Life Project titled “Blogs, Buzz and Beyond.” Researched during the 2004 presidential campaign, that report tracked multiple conservative and liberal political blogs, mainstream media outlets and citizen discussion boards. It “charted the popularity of certain topics,” concluding that “political bloggers were buzz followers as much as buzz makers” (Cornfield et al, 2005, 2). Given conventional wisdom that social media and other interactive online sources drive discussion in more traditional media formats, we set out to find evidence of that in the 2008 campaign. For analysis, we had access to a sophisticated Web-based tool designed for tracking online media.

While the Pew study presented results in the form of correlations of content between online and traditional media, the research presented here identifies similarities and differences between traditional and social media using topic clouds. That is, for each of the key words considered, other words appearing in the vicinity of those words were also presented. To provide a simple example, when considering appearances of “Joe the Plumber” we found that traditional media outlets were more likely to provide Joe the Plumber’s last name than were social media outlets. Traditional media was also more likely to emphasize Joe the Plumber’s Republican affiliation. Radian6 allows quantification of these kinds of differences and, to our

knowledge, this exploratory project is the first time such a tool has been employed for the purposes of conducting political communication research. That said, while some possible explanations are offered for why the results look the way they do, rigorously testing of those explanations is beyond the purview of the research presented here.

## *Radian6*

Using Radian6, a social media tracking tool, we examined major topics of conversation during the general election campaign. Radian6 allows real-time monitoring of social media online. This study used Radian6 to track mentions of candidates and issues during the 2008 general election.

## *Content*

This project was conceived as a means of applying the tools of Radian6 to research in political communication. The ability to track the emergence and trajectory of search terms in both social media and more traditional media outlets during the 2008 general election campaign was an appealing prospect. Conventional wisdom, for example, dictates that in 2004, political blogs played an important role in the political process. However, there was no systematic way to track blog content, readership, and potential influence on more traditional media outlets. With the advent of tools like Radian6, however, it is possible to get a more complete picture of the dynamic political communication environment in which the 2008 presidential election took place.

To tackle the challenge of somehow quantifying the American political environment during the historic 2008 election, we designed our research to track discussion for seven-day periods following each of the three presidential debates and the one vice-presidential debate. After watching each debate, we compiled a list of the ten dominant themes we identified during the event. We then entered those terms into Radian6 and tracked them for each candidate for the seven-day period immediately following the debate. This approach allowed us to track both the significant policy themes and the political sideshows that emerged in online discourse. For example, not only did we track discussion of Iraq and economic policy, we also tracked reactions to “Joe the Plumber” and to the on-stage exchange between the vice-presidential candidates when Governor Sarah Palin approached Senator Joe Biden and asked “Can I call you Joe?” A complete list of search terms employed in this research is available in Appendix A.

While this method of identifying key terms following each debate did

result in a mix of serious and less-serious subjects for discussion, it did ultimately provide us a relatively accurate portrait of the nature of election-related discourse in the days following each debate. Whether the debates themselves were properly representative of the nation's concerns and of the issues on voters' minds is another question altogether.

## **Mass Communication, Social Media, and Change**

Introductory mass communication texts illustrate the traditional dynamics of mass media using the source-message-channel-receiver (SMCR) model where a message originates with a source, is transmitted through a given channel, and is translated and distributed via a receiver with only limited opportunity for feedback. For many years, SMCR was the model of mass media. It was the foundation on which American media institutions were built and around which U.S. political campaigns operated.

But that one-way model of mass media, in which the voice of one authority is broadcast to the masses who receive it unquestioningly, is fading with the advent of interactive media technologies that allow the audience to play a more active role. In 2006, Jay Rosen, a professor of journalism at New York University, issued a proclamation to traditional media. He wrote, "The people formerly known as the audience wish to inform media people of our existence, and of a shift in power..." He continued, "the people formerly known as the audience are those who were on the receiving end of a media system that ran one way, in a broadcasting pattern, with high entry fees and a few firms competing to speak very loudly while the rest of the population listened in isolation from one another and who today are not in a situation like that at all."

Rosen identified some of the tools responsible for ending that isolation, observing that blogs compete with printing presses, podcasting competes with radio stations, and homemade videos posted online compete with television. Each of those capabilities, now combined with additional social media platforms, is supplanting the privileged position of established, capital-heavy media institutions. This erosion of mass media authority, he said, was happening at the same time that technology allowed burgeoning connections among members of the audience. The implications are felt not just in the media industry, but in the political environment as well.

Several now-famous incidents illustrate what can happen when the people formerly known as the audience commit acts of journalism in the political realm: Dan Rather and "60 Minutes'" flawed reporting on President Bush's military service in 2004; Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott's words in support of Senator Strom Thurmond (and by extension, of segregation) in 2002, and Virginia Senator George Allen's racially-tinged comments at a

campaign rally in 2004.

Coverage of the three incidents mentioned above originated with citizens, not journalists, who observed something they found objectionable and then used new tools available to them to raise awareness about their concerns. Each began online but led to serious, bricks-and-mortar implications – the retraction of the “60 Minutes” story and Rather’s retirement following audience reaction to controversial documents posted online; Lott’s resignation as Senator Majority Leader following blog coverage of his strong words of support for Thurmond; and Allen’s failed bid for re-election following the posting on YouTube of his insensitive remarks directed at a campaign aide of his opponent.

One participant in a pre-election discussion of social media and its potential role in the campaign observed that “what’s different about this [2008] campaign is that people are contributing to a near real-time feedback loop through the Web that’s changing how stories unfold.” Another analyst said it more forthrightly, “People (have the) ability to shape the narrative... and knock them [candidates] off their talking points. We’ll only see more of that.”

Referring to dynamics like these, Clay Shirky observed that people “have always talked to one another incessantly and at great length. It’s just that the user-to-user messages were kept separate from older media, like TV and newspapers.” But with the rise of social media that separation is no longer guaranteed. Just ask Dan Rather, Trent Lott, or George Allen what happens when user-generated media intersects with older media like TV and newspapers. That is the erosion of the gate keeping authority to which Jay Rosen referred in 2006 and the continued erosion of that authority is at the heart of the disruptive nature of these technologies on established social institutions, whether in the realm of media or politics.

In 2008, the implications of this erosion are far more wide-ranging than the bottom lines of storied media institutions struggling to survive difficult financial times. They also affect the dynamics of American politics and how campaigns are both run and covered in the United States.

## **Interactivity and Democratic Discourse**

While social media can successfully introduce stories into the public consciousness and have a direct effect on what news professional journalistic organizations will be forced to focus, social media also have the ability to influence democratic discourse among citizens themselves.

“It would not be an exaggeration,” wrote one scholar, “to argue that a new form of social accountability is emerging in what I am calling the ‘Fifth Estate.’ It is enabled by the growing use of the Internet and related

information and communication technologies... Essentially, the Internet is enabling people to network... This is being achieved in ways that can support greater accountability... in government and politics... I will argue that this could be as important – if not more so – to the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the Fourth Estate has been since the 18<sup>th</sup>” (Dutton, 2007).

McKenna (2007) categorizes blogs, evaluating them for the political role they play. Concerning the issues discussed here we suggest it is appropriate to apply her typologies to all current forms of social media. She conducts an analysis of blogs focused on specific policy issues and suggests that the role or intent of blogs focused on specific policy issues is six-fold: “filtering information, providing expertise, forming networks, gaining attention, framing arguments, and using windows of opportunity” (3).

The similarities between these roles and the roles of policy entrepreneurs as described by Kingdon in his seminal discussion of agenda development (1984) are apparent. Indeed, one of Kingdon’s primary arguments has been that “The patterns of public policy... are determined not only by such final decisions as votes in legislatures, or initiatives and vetoes by presidents, but also by the fact that some subjects and proposals emerge in the first place and others are never seriously considered” (3). Blogs, McKenna suggests, have an impact, in part, by entering new issues into discussion – issues that, in Kingdon’s model “are never seriously considered.” Blogs, McKenna’s research suggests, can be effective in raising issues for consideration. We add to that argument, suggesting that social media of all kinds can play a similar agenda setting role.

Shirky summarized it thusly, “In changing the relations between media and individuals, the Internet does not herald the rise of a powerful consumer... The rise of the Internet undermines the existence of the consumer because it undermines the role of mass media. In the age of the Internet, no one is a passive consumer anymore because everyone is a media outlet” (Shirky, 2000; cited in Bruns & Jacobs, 2006, 6).

There are implications radiating in all directions in this shift from media consumer to consumer/producer. As Bruns and Jacobs wrote, “[As] blogging and other collaborative media phenomena appear to indicate, there is now an ongoing shift... to produsage-based personal media, where users are active *producers* of a shared understanding of society which is open for others to participate in, to develop and challenge” (Bruns & Jacobs, 7). The public’s active role in creating this shared understanding is at the center of social media’s disruptive nature.

## *Gatekeeping, Framing and the Media*

A 2005 conference on blogging yielded the following statement: “We are entering a new era in which professionals have lost control over information – not just the reporting of it, but also the framing of what’s important for the public to know,” (MacKinnon, 2005, 3). As that statement suggests, discussion of audience production of media content inevitably leads to discussion of gatekeeping and to the traditional media’s long-time role in framing news for public consumption.

In his book examining media coverage of the 1960s student movement, Todd Gitlin described frames as “principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters” (Gitlin, 2003, 6). He observes that “Media frames, largely unspoken and unacknowledged, organize the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for us to rely on their reports. Media frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual” (Gitlin, 2003, 6). The media’s use of frames ensures that all reported news fits established narratives. As Tuchman (1978) suggests, those items that fall outside the established narrative boundaries generally do not qualify as news and thus go unreported. As the Rather, Lott, and Allen examples mentioned earlier suggest, the advent of social media helps ensure that stories, perspectives and interpretations no longer slip through the cracks.

Writing in the 1920s, Lippmann described the public as a bewildered herd and the media as a roving searchlight highlighting some subjects and neglecting others (Lippmann, 1922). This process is at the core of what scholars today term agenda-setting. We argue that the role bloggers and other social media producers are playing serves to guide the mass media in directions they might not have chosen had bloggers and others not had access to the technology to help circulate their opinions.

Concerning the role of agenda-setting online, scholars have considered whether individuals take issue information they learn from the news and pass it along in online forums (Roberts, 2002). Roberts and her colleagues examined the agenda-setting effect of traditional media on Internet-based political discussions. By studying the time lag between appearance of an issue in print or on television and its subsequent reappearance online, they found that the Internet accelerates the process through which the public digests and debates political news from traditional sources.

Roberts and McCombs later examined the intermedia agenda-setting effect between media coverage and political advertisements, finding a strong correlation between political advertisements at time 1 and the resulting media

coverage at time 2 (1994). This type of finding offered further evidence that not only does the media send signals to the public concerning what it ought to be thinking about, but that there is also an agenda-setting dynamic within the media itself, driving coverage in one direction or another. Perhaps more importantly, some studies have concluded that blogs can and often do serve as framers of news and issues (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Cornfield et al, 2005; Drezner & Farrell, 2004).

An article considering the agenda setting effect of blogs in the 2004 presidential campaign found “evidence of a reciprocal intermedia agenda-setting effect between blogs and broadcast news,” (Trammell et al, 2008, 16). Further evidence of the intermedia agenda-setting effect involving blogs also surfaced in a 2005 survey of journalists finding that 51% of journalists reported using blogs regularly, 28% reported using blogs for daily reporting, 53% reported using blogs as a source of story ideas, 43% reported using blogs as fact-checking source, and 33% reported using blogs to get information about developing scandals and breaking news (Euro/RSCG Magnet & Columbia University, 2005). As recent incidents highlighting Twitter’s role in breaking news scenarios have indicated, the connection between social media and traditional journalists is more than just hypothetical, appearing in surveys of journalists. The distinction between the two is fast disappearing, morphing instead into a single information ecosystem.

As one scholar observed in 2006, “The parameters of agenda setting research have expanded from the question of who sets the public agenda to that of who sets the media agenda.” (Lim, 2006, 299). Indeed, it was questions about social media’s influence on traditional media that led us to undertake this research focused on the 2008 election.

The material we discuss in this report considers the question of **blogs’ and other social media formats’ ability to set the media agenda.** We approached this study of with the assumption that there would be direct evidence of that connection. What the findings below indicate, however, is not unlike Shirky’s “information ecosystem” where a number of different producers and consumers create the overall media environment. To our surprise, we were able to identify few examples of social media sources driving traditional media discussion. In general, the emergence of issues from either traditional or social media sources was balanced enough as to leave no indication of one leading the other. This is in direct opposition to conventional wisdom that social media was a significant driver of traditional media coverage during the presidential campaign. This suggests that drawing the distinction between origins of a story or issue may be of secondary importance when compared to the nature of the discussion itself.



## *Democratic Discourse, Knowledge and Participation*

Of course neither the American system nor any other is a perfect deliberative democracy, and no technology can independently improve the state of citizenship. But shortcomings in the communication of information are often identified as a primary reason for failure to attain the ideal (Delli Carpini, 2004). So, too, is the failure of the public to engage given the information it does have. As one scholar observes, “When we talk of improving deliberation, it is a matter of improving the completeness of the debate and the public’s engagement in it, not a matter of perfecting it...” (Fishkin, 1995, 41).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, questions naturally arise about whether the Internet has a positive impact on deliberative democracy in a place like the United States. Although Bimber (2003) cautions against suggesting a new era of democracy has arrived, he does suggest that the Internet is “accelerating the process of issue group formation and action, leaving the structure of political power in the U.S. altered” (18). This is a theme seconded by Shirky (2008) in his discussion of people’s increasing ability to organize without the benefit of formal organizations.

Dutton thinks similarly, arguing that the Internet changes dynamics of access to information in two ways. “First, it can change the way we do things, such as how we get information, how we communicate with people and how we obtain services and access technologies.” This is the condition of information abundance to which Bimber refers. But there is another consequence of this heightened access to information: “Secondly, and perhaps more fundamentally, the use of the Internet can alter the outcomes of these activities” (Dutton, 7). And that possibility has been at the core of discussion about blogs in the political context since 2004.

If, as Rosen (2006) suggested, the “people formerly known as the audience” now have a voice and participate in the conversation through the use of interactive media, then that has implications for the dynamics around which current understanding of media and democratic accountability is built. It raises questions about what agenda is influencing voters at what times. It also raises questions about the validity of the central role political communication continues to give traditional media formats such as newspaper and television. It is not necessarily that those media formats are no longer relevant. It is just that those traditional media formats are no longer the only politically relevant forms of media.

Since the 2004 election, the act of blogging has become synonymous with political activism in media and political contexts. As the most recent election cycle suggests, it is also true of other social media. This leads to questions about who participates in politics and why. Scholars of American

political behavior have long sought answers to these questions. Verba et al argued that socio-economic status and access to resources over the course of a lifetime are strong predictors of political participation. They wrote, “both the motivation and the capacity to take part in politics have their roots in the fundamental non-political institutions with which individuals are associated during the course of their lives” (1995, 3).

In terms of political knowledge, communication scholars consider whether newer technologies lead to increased fragmentation of the voting public and even to the demise of civic society (O’Rourke, 2004; Tewksbury, 2003). The implication is that having a range of media content options - some professionally produced, some not, some providing balanced perspectives, some not - can have a direct effect on political discourse. Theoretically this has repercussions with voters having less and less contact with people and arguments with which they disagree. A recent book considers this dynamic in detail, expressing concern about the alienation (Bishop, 2008).

Armed with the technology to disseminate opinion, bloggers and other social media users have stepped easily into the role of opinion leadership, a role previously held only by media outlets. One study (Shah, Kawk & Holbert, 2001) suggested “that information uses of the Internet are positively related to individual differences in the production of social capital,” (141).

Similarly, Shah and Scheufele (2006) find that this “opinion leadership is a consequence, rather than a cause of civic participation... These data also reveal a reciprocal relationship between opinion leadership and political efficacy, indicative of a mutually reinforcing cycle of relational dispositions and political competence” (1). Those dynamics appear in the blogger data presented in this research. Individuals with a strong sense of political efficacy and a history of engagement in civic behavior are the ones likely to apply those characteristics online. The natural outcome is that people who, in an offline world, were already playing an opinion leadership role, are simply empowered by interactive technology and have an opportunity to influence a wider circle of people virtually than they might otherwise in world of brick and mortar.

These facts are useful counters to those who argue that the Internet is a great democratizing tool, drawing new participants into the deliberative political process. Previous research has not demonstrated that to be true and despite much hype to the contrary, our research suggests social media tools did not significantly alter political discourse in 2008. Here we again highlight the importance of distinguishing between the utility of social media as a campaign tool and the declaration of social media as the antidote for political apathy among American voters.

As voter turnout and other indicators of engagement suggest, while people are not always eager to provide input into political decisions, they

do want to know that they could have input into political decisions if they wanted to. But the difference between the desire to influence political decisions and the desire to be able to provide input if it were ever necessary is substantial (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). The potential of the Internet and the disruptive influence of social media is the ability to bridge the gap between desire to influence political decisions and ability to do so.

As Delli Carpini writes, “A democratically engaged citizen is one who participates in civic and political life, and who has the values, attitudes, opinions, skills and resources to do so effectively” (397). In an election year when neither major party had an heir apparent, citizens seemed particularly inclined to observe, and often, to participate, in the political process. Statistics about participation in Facebook, YouTube, and other social media networks offer a glimpse of the extent to which citizens followed the campaign and often got involved.

A look at numbers from the day before the general election indicated that the Obama campaign was more active with social media than the McCain campaign. On Facebook, Obama had 2,379,102 supporters. McCain had 620,359. On Twitter, Obama had 112,474 followers to McCain’s 4,603. On YouTube, there were more than 18 million channel views for Obama, compared to just 2 million channel views for McCain. As some observers have since noted, the cost of purchasing that kind of air time would have taxed the finances of any campaign, even one as well-funded as Obama’s. In other words, social media can function as a highly relevant and cost-effective campaign tool when properly employed. And conversely, failure to exploit those resources can have serious, negative consequences.

## **Social Networks and Political Implications**

The morphing of roles and resources is a concept that communications scholars and practitioners should occasionally observe from a distance. Technology compresses the time and space in which information passes. A person with a very small piece of information, one that can be communicated in 140 characters (Twitter’s message limit), can potentially capture a nation. It can go from idea, to digital post, to a national audience with very few gatekeepers or powerbrokers weighing in on that information. That is the former audience on steroids.

This has implications in the context of a campaign. For example, one of the few issues we were able to identify as emerging from social media rather than from traditional outlets was the question of Governor Sarah Palin’s most recent pregnancy. A rumor emerged from Alaska-oriented discussion boards that Palin’s daughter Bristol was actually the mother of the Governor’s 4-month old baby. The rumor spread quickly once it entered

the national political blogosphere. It happened so quickly that the McCain campaign released a statement correcting the record within 24 hours of the rumor appearing on *The Daily Kos*. The correction to the record included the revelation that Palin's unmarried, teen-age daughter Bristol was currently pregnant. Speculating about how well prepared the McCain campaign was to handle this matter misses the point about how quickly the narrative of the campaign and intended impact of selecting Alaska's governor as a presidential running mate.

Could this rumor have been planted by Democrat supporters, not necessarily anyone associated with a campaign, but merely someone looking to make political mischief? Of course. It is also possible the rumor was fabricated as a way to draw Palin into an Internet brushfire that would force the hand of the McCain campaign. While this discussion may yield frightening insight into the motivations of political workers, it also illustrates quite dramatically how the integration of small and large networks, professional and unprofessional participants is so disruptive. Again harkening to Shirky, this example demonstrates the ability of individuals to operate outside the confines of organizations traditionally central to the conduct of campaigns. The results can be disruptive.

As the campaign moved into the home stretch, monitoring the issues discussed in social media and mainstream was like watching someone at a muscle contest at a carnival to see which issue would ring the bell. To the practiced political eye it was clear there was one trial balloon after another floated to generate buzz online. The purpose of these balloons was to spread information – whether true or false – virally without having to rely on the traditional media to act as gatekeeper or fact-checker or moderator. Both campaigns and parties had their respective network of bloggers and other social media types. Consumers of content from those social media sites would then circulate information through their own networks. Trial balloons in the social media age rise quickly and either gain an audience as they continue their ascent skyward or decompress from lack of attention and credibility. Examples of trial balloons floated during the campaign were statements that Senator Obama would talk to Iran without conditions, thus jeopardizing American security; that Senator Obama was “palling around with terrorists,” or various stories about Joe the Plumber. These kinds of stories combined with the steady decline of the economy during the campaign created an environment unlike any other. It led to dramatically shortened news cycles, roller coaster reactions from voters and traditional media, and an acute awareness on the part of both campaigns that social media was “always on.”

There are structural reasons for differences between the Democratic and Republican parties' usage of social media in the general election.

Structurally, history suggests the Republican Party is typically a more top-down, hierarchical organization. That is the kind of organization that functions well with dictates from above, with a single leader, a single message and a comprehensive organization for distributing that message. Matt Burns, director of communications for the Republican convention acknowledged in an interview with us that the party was not prepared to delegate responsibility for message generation and management to people outside the traditional party structure.

On the other hand, the Democratic Party, almost by definition as more heterogeneous group, was more comfortable with ceding control to others outside the formal party hierarchy. One suspects it was largely that approach which led to more widespread use of social media tools by the Democrats. It is clear that the Obama campaign practiced all of the above principles. Indeed, examples of the Obama camp's refusal to obsess about message control became two of the campaign season's most famous examples of social media.

The first was the Obama Girl video titled "*I Got a Crush... On Obama.*" The three-minute video, made by independent filmmakers unassociated with the campaign, featured a seductive young woman singing about her "crush" on Senator Obama. The second, also unassociated with the campaign, was a video montage of Barack Obama edited to appear as if the candidate were performing with musician Will.i.am. Titled "*Yes We Can,*" that video became a rallying cry for the Obama campaign. Those videos were watched 11.6 and 13 million times respectively. As others have noted elsewhere, that is the equivalent of many millions of dollars of broadcast air time and almost certainly influenced the election's outcome in some way.

Exercising control in attempts to curtail that kind of "unauthorized" support for the campaign would have cost the campaign the benefits of viral media. The irony, of course, is that the McCain campaign focused on the growing celebrity of Barack Obama in a now-famous commercial comparing Obama's notoriety to that of Paris Hilton or Britney Spears, two perennial faces from the pages of entertainment magazines. For those millions of Obama supporters engaged in the campaign via social media, the McCain response smacked of ignorance about the importance of relationships and personal connections in social media.

While the differences between the two campaigns and the size of their audiences in social media contexts have led many to suggest that the Obama campaign succeeded simply because of its use of social media, Arianna Huffington offered perhaps a more realistic observation: "The problem with the McCain campaign was not the age of the candidate. It was the age of the ideas dominating the campaign." In other words, it was the content of the message, not the means through which it was delivered that made the

difference. Those ready to attribute Obama’s electoral success largely to his use of social media would do well to curb their enthusiasm.

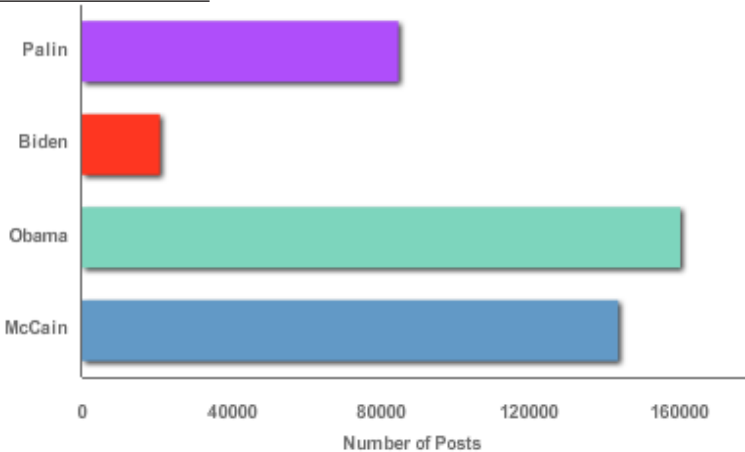
The applications to the political environment are clear: Have a message. Know where to find the target audience. Connect with that audience, offering a mutually beneficial two-way relationship. Nurture that relationship. Then ask for the vote. This is not new. It just is old-fashioned campaigning. But it also a powerful rebuttal to Marshall McLuhan’s rallying cry of technological determinism that the “medium is the message.”

## Findings

In assessing the differences between traditional media and social media in the context of the 2008 presidential election, we began with a few simple parameters. For example, we compared mentions of the members of each ticket in traditional media and social media. Although there was a significant difference in scale between the two formats – with far more examples of social media than of traditional media – we could still compare proportions.

*Figure 1: Comparing Candidate Mentions*

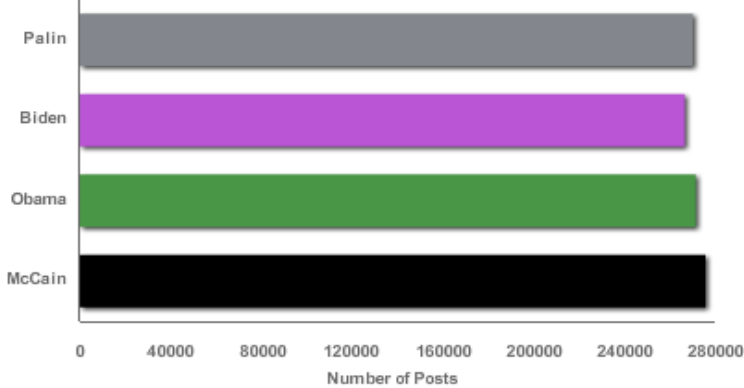
### Traditional Media



### 09/04/08 – 11/03/08 - Candidate Mentions

Palin:	84,714
Biden:	20,834
Obama:	160,207
McCain:	143,611

## Social Media



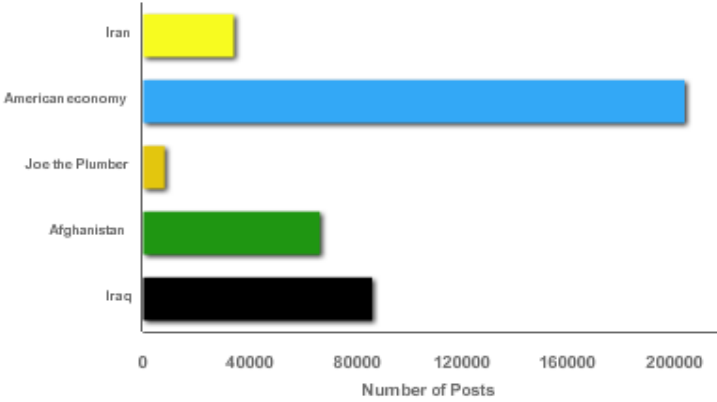
### 09/04/08 – 11/03/08 - Candidate Mentions

Palin:	270,266
Biden:	266,523
Obama:	271,400
McCain:	275,780

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of discussion of the four major players during the general election, first in the traditional media, then in social media. Social media offered more uniform discussion of all four members of the major party tickets. Traditional media gave relatively little coverage to Senator Joe Biden. While conventional wisdom suggests that social media is more likely to be biased, fragmented, and biased, this snapshot suggests social media was, in the aggregate, more uniform in its discussion of candidates.

Figure 2: Comparing Issue Coverage

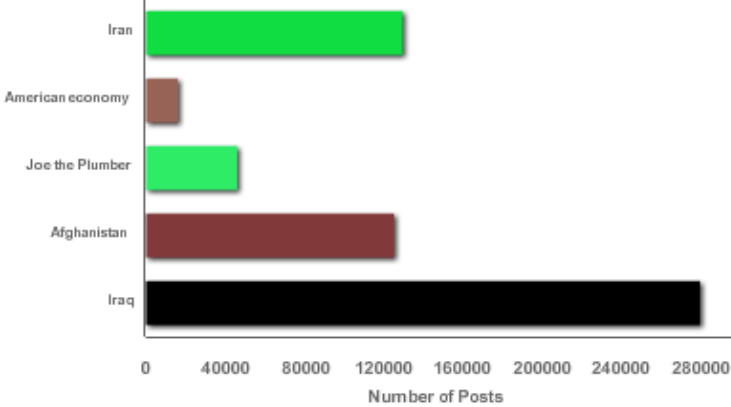
Traditional Media



09/04/08 – 11/03/08 - Topic Mentions

Iran:	34,316
American Economy:	204,258
Joe the Plumber:	8,176
Afghanistan:	66,774
Iraq:	86,458

Social Media



09/04/08 – 11/03/08 - Topic Mentions

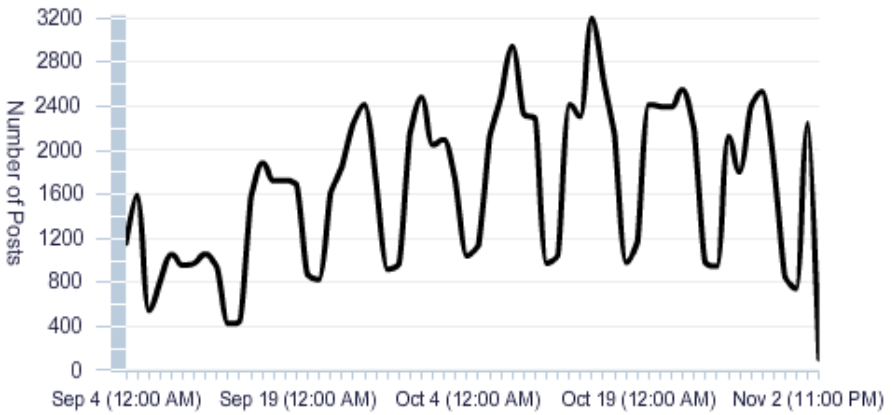
Iran:	130,015
American Economy:	16,191
Joe the Plumber:	46,178
Afghanistan:	125,650
Iraq:	280,473



Figure 2 compares coverage between traditional media and social media on issues that emerged following the first presidential debate. The five issues we considered were: Iran, the American Economy, Joe the Plumber, Afghanistan and Iraq. The most striking difference between the two is attention to the U.S. economy. Traditional media dedicated far more attention to economic issues than did the social media environment. Among social media, Iraq was the issue earning the most attention.

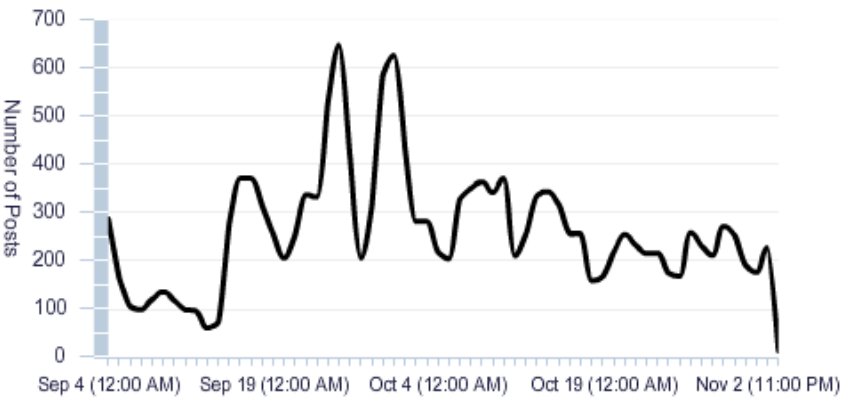
Figure 3: Trends in Coverage of “Economy”

Traditional Media



■ American economy

Social Media



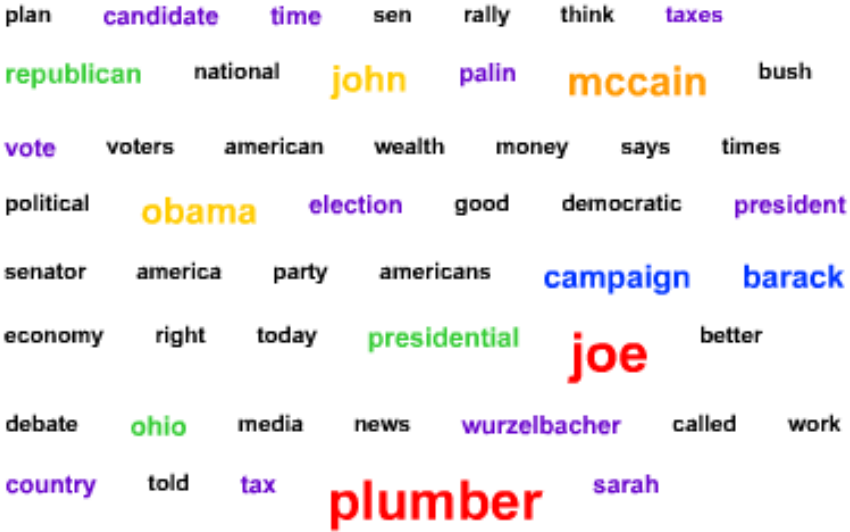
■ American economy

Figure 3 illustrates the difference between traditional media and social media coverage of the economy over time. The graphics demonstrate that

traditional media coverage of the subject, while it may have been more plentiful, was also more sporadic. Social media reference to the economy less frequent relatively speaking, but it was more consistent over time.

Figure 4: Joe the Plumber

Traditional Media



Social Media

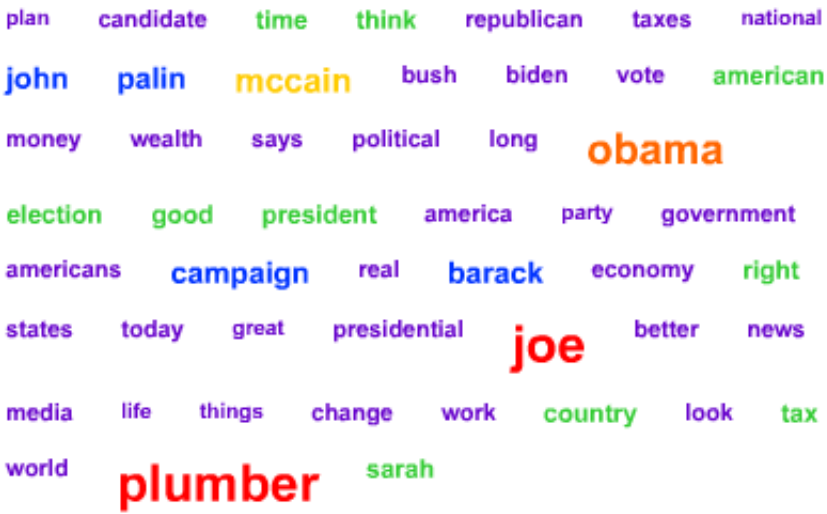
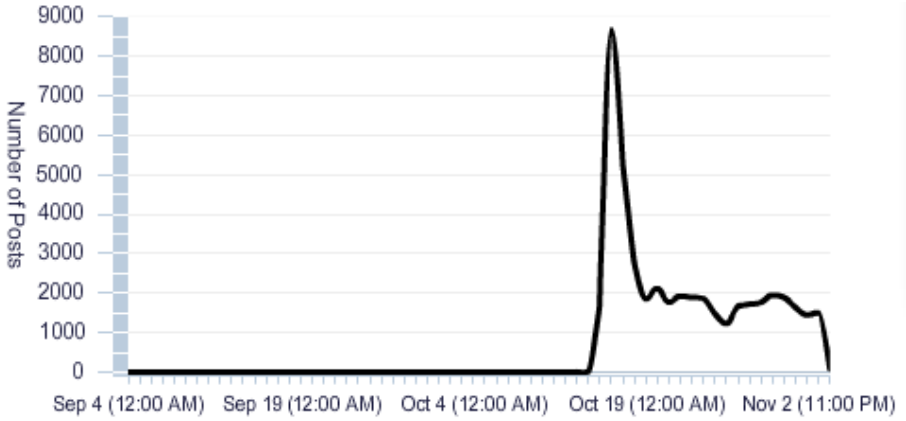


Figure 4 compares the context of discussion between traditional media and social media about Joe the Plumber. As the two topic clouds demonstrate, there was little difference between the two formats and how they discussed Joe the Plumber.

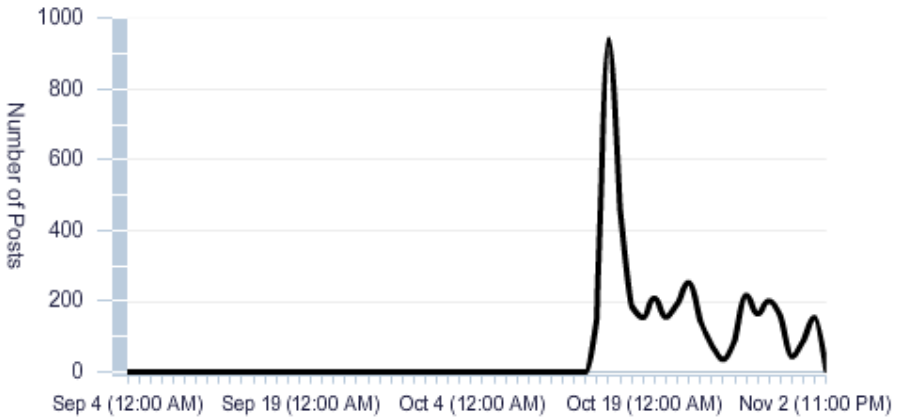
Figure 5: Emergence of Joe the Plumber

Traditional Media



■ Joe the Plumber

Social Media



■ Joe the Plumber

Figure 5 shows the simultaneous emergence of Joe the Plumber in both traditional and social media contexts. This is not surprising, given that the first formal candidate reference to Joe the Plumber was in a major debate on which both traditional and social media were commenting.

## Conclusions

### *Primary Observations*

This research resulted in several observations about the political environment and the place social media has come to play in it. First, social media was useful not just for its facility in distributing a campaign message, but also for its utility in offering a mechanism for ongoing engagement on the part of those moved by the message.

This leads to the second observation that even though conventional wisdom suggests that “the medium was the message” in this election, the evidence considered here does not bear that out.

Third, although the scale of coverage naturally varied considerably between traditional media and social media, generally speaking the priority given to coverage of an issue in traditional media was reflected in social media and vice versa. Relatively speaking, issues were given equal coverage in the two venues.

Fourth, on a related note, on some of the biggest issues, traditional media and social media coverage merged. Part of this is likely an artifact of the process used for collecting and measuring data. Another part of this is the fact that social media often acts as an aggregator of information mined from traditional media. Moreover, traditional media was tracking the social media environment so carefully during the campaign that it was unlikely an entire news cycle would pass without traditional media picking up something from social media or vice versa. The result was relative uniformity in topics discussed.

Fifth, given the close correspondence between traditional media and social media made it difficult to identify issues that emerged first in one format or the other. However, prudent campaign strategy suggests the viability of the social media environment as fertile ground for placement of stories harmful to one’s opponents. Given the lack of formal gatekeeping in the social media environment, it is likely to be implementing a whisper campaign in the social media environment.

Sixth, throughout the general election campaign, both candidates focused on a relatively small number of issues. The result was little deviation over time from major themes. It was only when a debate introduced an unexpected variable like Joe the Plumber that there was likely to be an

opportunity to see differences between the two formats, and even then, given the dynamics discussed in point five above, there was little variation.

### *Sharing the Wealth*

In the spirit of social media sharing, below are a few concluding thoughts generated by the preceding discussion. First, social media's strength lies in its communal nature and lack of strict hierarchies. Campaigns that embrace this lack of hierarchy, rather than fight it, are more likely to reap the benefits the technology can offer.

Second, even in the seemingly anarchic environment of the social media world, passionate networks of thought leaders can influence the course of public discourse on campaign-relevant issues. This poses challenges for typical efforts at message control, but when social media is at its best it can lead to exposure far exceeding anything traditional media can offer today.

Third, it is true that the audience is highly segmented. The "niche-ification" of America continues, but that need not mean the end of either democratic discourse nor old fashioned campaigning. The audience may no longer be passive, but it is still out there. Campaigns need to change with the technologies, going where the voters are going and employing the tools the voters are using still out there. But even more importantly, campaigns must have a message that resonates with the voters wherever they may be found. Creating a Facebook page or integrating blogging capacity into a campaign homepage does not guarantee that a campaign will catch fire. As history continues to teach, a candidate without a compelling message is unlikely to win an election – no matter how flashy the packaging. And as concluded here, social media tools are just part of the packaging. They are no substitute for substance in the heat of a campaign.

This is not to say that 2008 failed to offer new insights for political communication. Indeed, in a post-mortem about the use of the Internet in the 2008 election, Peter Daou wrote, "Even if we accept the fact that old-fashioned campaign machinery still matters – and it does – it would be a serious mistake not to recognize that political communication is forever altered. Never before have so many people conversed publicly and never before has the global discourse been so accessible, recursive, and durable... It is now axiomatic that the greater the number of online commenters discussing an event or issue, the more unpredictable its unfolding."

Social media has profoundly changed political communication in the United States. As tumultuous as the 2008 election season was, there will surely be stories to top this season the next time around. The 2008 U.S. presidential election was another step in the direction of democratic discourse enabled by social media technology. While the end-state of such discourse

is not possible to predict, what is clear is that the people formerly known as the audience, empowered by technologies and spurred on by their fellow formerly passive audience compatriots have a bigger role to play than ever before.

## References

- Adamic, L. & Glance, N. (2005). The political blogosphere and the 2004 U.S. election: Divided they blog. HP Labs, Intelliseek Applied Research Center. Available at: [www.blogpulse.com/papers/2005/AdamicGlanceBlogWWW.pdf](http://www.blogpulse.com/papers/2005/AdamicGlanceBlogWWW.pdf)
- Bimber, B. (2003). Information and American democracy: Technology in the evolution of political power. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bishop, B. (2008). The Big Sort: Why the clustering of like-minded America is tearing us apart. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Bruns, A. & Jacobs, J. (2006). Use of blogs. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
- Cornfield, M.; Carson, J.; Kalis, A. & Simon, E. (2005). Buzz, blogs and beyond: The Internet and the national discourse in the fall of 2004. Pew Internet & American Life Project. (2005a). Available at: <http://www.pewInternet.org/PPF/p/1088/pipcomments.asp>
- Daou, P. (2008). The revolution of the online commentariat. Available at: <http://publius.cc/2008/12/09/the-revolution-of-the-online-commentariat/>
- Delli Carpini, M.X. (2004). "Mediating democratic engagement: The impact of communications on citizens' involvement in political and civic life." In L.L. Kaid (Ed.) Handbook of political communication, (394-434). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Drezner, D.W. & Farrell, H. (2004). The power and politics of blogs. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.
- Dutton, W. (2007). Through the Network (of Networks) - The Fifth Estate. Oxford, England. <http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/microsites/oxis/events/?id=4> Through the Network (of Networks) – the Fifth Estate, October 15, 2007, Professor William Dutton, Oxford Internet Institute.
- Euro RSCG Magnet (2005, June 20). Eleventh annual Euro RSCG Magnet and Columbia University survey of the media finds more than half of journalists use blogs despite being unconvinced of their credibility. Press release available at: [http://www.magnet.com/media/index.php?s=press\\_releases&item=28](http://www.magnet.com/media/index.php?s=press_releases&item=28)
- Fishkin, J.S. (1995). The voice of the people: Public opinion & democracy. New Haven, CT. Yale University Press.
- Gitlin, T. (2003). The Whole world is watching: Mass media in the making and unmaking of the new left. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Hibbing, J.R. & Theiss-Morse, E. (2002). Stealth democracy: Americans' beliefs about how government should work. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Huffington, A. (November 9, 2008). Web 2.0 summit videos: Huffington, Musk, Gore. Available at: [http://news.cnet.com/8301-17939\\_109-10092190-2.html?tag=rb\\_shell;rb\\_content](http://news.cnet.com/8301-17939_109-10092190-2.html?tag=rb_shell;rb_content)
- Internet now major source of campaign news, (October 31, 2008). Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. Available at: <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1017/internet-now-major-source-of-campaign-news>
- Kingdon, J.W. (1984, 1995). Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies. New York: HarperCollins College Publishers.
- Leonard Brody on what news consumers want, (April 29, 2008). NowPublic Blog. Available at: <http://blog.nowpublic.com/2008/04/leonard-brody-on-what-news-consumers-want/>
- Lim, J. (2006). A cross-lagged analysis of agenda setting among online news media. Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 83(2), 298-312.
- Lippmann, W. (1922). Public Opinion. New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997 edition. First published in 1922.
- MacKinnon, R. (2005). Blogging, journalism and credibility: Battleground and common ground. Available at: <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/webcred/>
- McKenna, L. (2007). Reporters Review the Bloggers: Freaks, Geeks, or Parasites. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.

- O'Rourke, P. J. (2004). I Agree with Me. *Atlantic Monthly*. Available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200407/orourke>
- Roberts, M.; Wanta, W.; Dzwo, T.H. (2002). Agenda setting and issue salience online. *Communication Research*, 29(4), 452-465.
- Roberts, M. & McCombs, M. (1994). Agenda setting and political advertising: Origins of the news agenda. *Political Communication*, 11, 249-262.
- Rosen, J. (2006). The people formerly known as the audience. Available at: [http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl\\_frmr.html](http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html)
- Shah, D. Kwak, N. & Holbert, R.L. (2001). 'Connecting' and 'Disconnecting' with civic life: Patterns of Internet use and the production of social capital. *Political Communication*, 18(2), 141-162.
- Shah, D. & Scheufele, D.A. (2006). Explicating opinion leadership: Nonpolitical dispositions, information consumption, and civic participation. *Political Communication*, 23, 1-22.
- Shirky, C. (2008). *Here Comes Everybody: The power of organizing without organizations*. New York: The Penguin Press.
- Shirky, C. (2000). RIP the Consumer, 1900-1999. Retrieved April 19, 2008, 2008, from <http://www.shirky.com/writings/consumer.html>
- Social media (May 31, 2009). In Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Retrieved May 31, 2009, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_media](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media)
- Straubhaar, J. & LaRose, R. (2008). *Media now: Understanding media, culture & technology*. New York: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Tewksbury, D. (2003). What do Americans really want to know?: Tracking the behavior of news readers on the Internet. *Journal of Communication*, 53(4), 694-710.
- Trammell, K.D.S., Golan, G. & Wanta, W. (2008). Intermedia agenda setting in television, advertising, and blogs during the 2004 election. *Mass Communication & Society*, 11(1), 1-20.
- Tuchman, G. (1978). *Making news: A study in the construction of reality*. New York: The Free Press.
- Verba, S. S., Kay Lehman & Brady, Henry. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

*Emily Metzgar is assistant professor at Indiana University's School of Journalism. She completed her PhD in media and public affairs at Louisiana State University's Manship School of Mass Communication in 2008. Her research focuses on political communication and social media. Emily has a bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan and a master's degree from The George Washington University. She is a former U.S. diplomat with additional professional experience at the National Defense University and the United States Institute of Peace. She also has extensive writing and editing experience. In addition to academic and professional publications, she also served as a community columnist for the Shreveport (LA) Times from 2003 through 2007. Emily's work has appeared in The Christian Science Monitor, Los Angeles Times and International Herald Tribune. She is an alumnus of the Council for a Better Louisiana's Leadership Louisiana program and was a contributing author for the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana and the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government's award-winning GulfGov Reports. Emily is a Graduate Fellow of the*



*American Academy of Political and Social Science and a Fellow of the Society for New Communications Research. She is also a recent graduate of the University of Southern California's Summer Institute on Public Diplomacy.*

*Albert Maruggi is a Senior Fellow of the Society for New Communications Research, president of Provident Partners, and host of the Marketing Edge podcast. He has spent his 25-year career in communications ranging from broadcast journalism, politics, marketing, and technology. In the 1980s, Maruggi worked as a radio and television journalist in markets across the Midwest. He moved to politics when he became a press secretary for a Congressman from Nebraska and then the press secretary for the Republican National Committee during the 1988 president election cycle. He served as a communications senior staff member for presidential cabinet members in the Bush '41 Administration. He's also held several upper-level corporate marketing and communications positions. Maruggi is a well-rounded and knowledgeable resource on new media and consumer engagement. Maruggi launched Provident Partners' own podcast, the Marketing Edge, in February 2005. He has been covered in many publications including BrandWeek, Sales and Marketing Management, and the Business Journal.*

Copyright of Journal of New Communications Research is the property of Society for New Communications Research and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.