November 18, 2003
Bill Schlotter

Use of Internet in Presidential Campaigns, Lessons of 2000 Race Analyzed in Book by UC Santa Barbara Political Scientist

As the 2004 presidential race heats up, President Bush and his challengers will use every means possible to put their political messages before the American electorate.

Campaign strategists who want to make the best use of the world's latest media technology – the Internet – may find a new book by political scientists Bruce Bimber and Richard Davis helpful. In "Campaigning Online: The Internet in U.S. Elections" (Oxford University), Bimber, an associate professor of political science at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Davis, a professor of political science at Brigham Young University, analyze how candidates used the Internet in the 2000 presidential election, what worked, what didn't, and why.

A key finding of the research was that voters did not use candidate Web sites to help them decide for whom to vote. Instead of sampling the sites of all or many of the candidates, most voters went only to the site of their favorite.

"The most important thing we learned is that Web sites tend to reinforce people's partisanship and their preferences," Bimber said. "People tend to go to the Web sites of the candidates they support, and they tend to come away feeling even more

strongly about them than they did going in."

Bimber said some Internet developers had thought candidate sites and other Web resources could be a reference library where undecided citizens could go to decide for whom to vote.

"Some optimists thought that people would sample each candidate's Web site, gather information and make up their minds," Bimber said. "But it doesn't work that way."

Thus, said Bimber, candidates should tailor their Web site's content not to win converts but tosolidify the support of those already in the fold.

"In the 2000 campaign, the Bush and Gore sites went first after their own supporters," Bimber said. "And that strategy proved right."

Journalists from the mainstream media were second targets of the 2000 campaign Web sites.

"The traditional mass media really have a lot of power to anoint the winner by focusing attention," Bimber said. "So part of the early primary game is convincing journalists to write stories saying the candidate is viable."

Candidates used the Internet to help accomplish that.

"Bill Bradley had his staff take digital photos of him campaigning and post them on his Web site," Bimber said. "The purpose was to say – not to the public, but to journalists – look what a great campaign this guy is running. Look at Bill out on the campaign trail. Bill's a viable guy."

Though some had envisioned that the Internet might supplant old media such as newspapers, radio and television, Bimber and Davis found in 2000 that old media and new media were working in complementary ways. Senator John McCain's campaign was a good example.

McCain earned a lot of coverage in the old media when he defeated George Bush in the New Hampshire primary, Bimber said. The heavy coverage was followed by a flood of $1.5 million in contributions in just three days via the McCain Web site. McCain's campaign staff convinced reporters that the sudden bonanza of contributions was in itself big news, which earned McCain more time and space in

the mainstream media.

"The success of former Vermont governor Howard Dean this year very much echoes what happened with McCain and Bradley last time around, though Dean has benefited even more from online campaigning," Bimber said.

Another finding of the study is that the Internet does not seem poised to challenge the mainstream media's control of candidate access to the public. Bimber finds that disappointing.

"It turns out that the Web sites that get the most attention from the public belong to the candidates that get the most attention from the mass media," Bimber said. "That's the sad thing."

Another disappointing thing, Bimber said, is that the opportunity the Internet once seemed to offer low-budget candidates is disappearing.

"To have a good Web site in a national campaign is now a seven-figure affair," he said.

One area in which the Internet is serving the public better than the old media is in discussing the issues, Bimber said.

"Issues have increasingly been moved to the side in American politics," Bimber said. "The candidates often ask people to vote for them because of their personal characteristics: I'm a good guy. I'm honest. I'm patriotic. And my opponent is not.

"And the news business tends to emphasize the horserace: Who's ahead, who's behind and what the poll numbers say."

For those interested in the issues, the Internet is the place to go, Bimber said.

"The most common reason that people go to candidate Web sites is to learn about issues," Bimber said.

"That's what they told us. And to those who visit a site a second time, issues are more important yet. For some citizens, the Internet is satisfying a demand to know real information about substantive issues that is left unsatisfied by the traditional media."

During the 2000 campaign, a relatively small number of voters visited the candidates' Web sites compared to those who saw television advertising.

"About 5 percent of those we surveyed said they had visited George Bush's Web site," Bimber said. "It was about 4 percent for Gore and about 2 percent for Nader."

But he and Davis say they expect a larger number to visit campaign sites in 2004.

Indeed, the Internet has already made its mark on the 2004 campaign,

"Candidates are starting much earlier to integrate the Internet, particularly e-mail and online discussion, into their campaigns," Davis said.

Supporters of Howard Dean used Meetup.com, a Web site that enables people with common interests to find one another online, to so far bring together more than 129,500 people interested in Dean's candidacy. And the MoveOn.org Web site, originally developed to lobby against the impeachment of President Clinton, gave Dean a large victory over other Democratic hopefuls in a poll of its members this summer. In both cases, Dean's popularity on the Internet generated press coverage that has helped make him an early leader for the Democratic Party's nomination.

"The big question for Howard Dean now is can he sustain this," Bimber said.

Related Links

[Bruce Bimber Web Site](#)

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.