ABSTRACT

Social Networking Sites and Intent to Vote in the 2008 Presidential Election

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This study examines the potential link between communication on social networking sites and the users' intent to vote in the 2008 presidential election. By surveying a group of undergraduate students, most of whom are users, if not frequent users of social networking sites, the study attempts to find out what students feel is influencing whether or not they vote in this year's presidential election.

Social Networking Sites and Intent to Vote in the 2008 Presidential Election

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In the past, radio, television and other forms of technology have provided the communication that influenced the political process (Shannon, 2007). Much of this communication occurred though the mass media, and in the past it influenced voters' views of political candidates. For example, in the 2004 election, President George W. Bush successfully labeled John Kerry as a flip-flopper, and this label managed to damage his reputation among some voters (Chait, 2004). As technology changes, the mass media is also changing, and they have grown to include social networking sites, especially Facebook and MySpace.

Today, it is clear that the Internet is also becoming a player in political communication (Ward, 2005). During the campaigns for the 2006 midterm elections the Pew Internet & American Life project found that "about one-third of Americans used the Internet to track down political news or to swap political viewpoints over e-mail" showing that the Internet is quickly becoming a part of how Americans gather information about politics and political candidates (Shannon, 2007).

Although the Internet is clearly a force in America, past research is inconclusive about whether or not the Internet actually has an influence on politics or if Internet use simply reinforces what users already think (Ji-Young Kim, 2006). Political scientists and some past empirical research also suggest that the Internet will not do anything to boost voter turnout on Election Day (Bimber, 2001; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003a). Since voter turnout has been declining over the past century, it may be possible for the Internet to "be

a means for updating American political institutions for a new information-based economy, thereby improving citizens' perceptions and trust in government," as well as increasing voter turnout (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003b). In his 2000 study, Michael Cornfield suggests that researchers must be careful when studying the relationship between political participation and the Internet because excitement over the medium may cause people to overlook other causes for the outcome they get in research (Cornfield, 2000).

Researchers have studied various effects media have on whether people vote. Typically, these studies included television or the newspaper, which have been the predominant forms of mass communication since television's debut in the 1950s. For example, in his study "How Media Use During Campaigns Affects the Intent to Vote," David Kennamer found that these kinds of communication variables affect people's "cognitions, strength of choice and intention to vote" (1987). In the 2004 election, the Internet seemed to be having some influence on voters. A USA Today story from October 2004 discusses one such instance:

> A torrent of negative spam aimed at President Bush and Sen. John Kerry has flooded the Internet the past few weeks in an attempt to influence fence-sitting voters. In many cases, it is working. One-fifth of Americans acknowledge political spam could have an impact on their vote, according to a MailFrontier survey of 1,000 adult Internet users in the USA. (Swartz, 2004)

Thus far, there have been no studies on the effects of these sites on a person's intent to vote. Because of the widespread popularity and past proof that mass communication has an effect on the elections, the relationship between social networking Web sites and intent to vote should be studied. While there is not a published study specifically focused on this political presence on social networking and its effect on

young adults' intent to vote, there have been numerous studies done on both social networking sites as well as on intent to vote.

This study argues that social networking sites have become an important part of every politician's campaign. This would probably not be the case unless the candidates and those who run the campaigns believed that this online presence would have a positive effect on their campaign. An increase in intent to vote is how this study will measure the effectiveness of the political presence on the Internet. This study is important because this is the first major election since a large portion of the population began using social networking sites. Because of this it is the first opportunity researchers have had to actually see if these sites actually influence those that use them.

Candidates and campaigns worked hard to have a strong presence on Facebook and MySpace – sites that are dominated by teenagers and young adults. This generation, often called the Millennials, includes "47 million young adults between the ages of 18 and 29," and they "constitute the first generation to come of age in the 21st century" (Cannon, 2008). Barack Obama's campaign is even working to create its own social networking site called MyBO, specifically for his supporters (Melber, 2008). This is not the only measure being taken to try to bring in the young vote:

> "Hillary Clinton announced her candidacy by video on her Web site. Obama's site went interactive so that supporters could "talk" to each other without a filter. Last March, John McCain invited his Web site visitors to challenge his NCAA basketball tournament picks on MySpace, another youth-networking site." (Cannon, 2008)

Politicians worked to appeal to this group that does not fit into the typical framework of either political party but are highly concerned about doing good whether or not there is monetary compensation (Cannon, 2008). Campaigns do not consider this just an addition to the campaign; rather, they see it as an important part of the campaign. In fact, Obama

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campaign spokesman Nick Kimball recently said, ""The online stuff doesn't just exist on its own, over here off to the side. It is part of the fabric of our campaign in every department" (Doerr, 2008).

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Historically, communication between political candidates and potential voters has occurred through a few different mediums. In the 1960s and 1970s, most of the information on politics was controlled by the two major parties, but as control over nominations shifted and finance laws changed, campaigns had to rely more and more on the mass media to get their messages out to the public (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003a). One of the earliest forms of written mass communication was the newspaper. Past research suggests that those who learn about politics and news in general through newspapers typically learn more than those who get their information from television (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003a).

Political Communication through Radio

The introduction of radio allowed for easier communication with the masses. In the 1930s and 1940s, radio was an important tool in political campaigns. In his 1947 article, Kenneth Bartlett said that Americans were a "radio-minded nation" and "a sound-conscious generation." Just 30 years after radio became available to the masses, more than 90 percent of families already had a radio (Bartlett, 1947).

Presently, talk radio seems to be the area where radio still carries influence. Many studies focus on the influence of specific talk radio hosts, such as Rush Limbaugh, most of whom are fairly conservative (Barker, 1998; Jones, 1998). However, in his 1998 study Richard Hofstetter found that talk radio "has so deeply penetrated most sectors of American society that nearly all segments of the public are exposed to a significant

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extent" (Hofstetter, 1998). Especially in the mid-1990s many Republican leaders believed that they owed their victories to conservative talk radio, because it allowed them to speak directly to voters without going through the "liberal media" (Jones, 1998). David Barker defines the community of people who listen to Rush Limbaugh as a "nontraditional social network;" because of participation in this network, members are encouraged to be active by "informal pressure" from the community (Barker, 1998). In the same study, Barker said, "Political talk radio represents an ideal medium for media effects to emerge because hosts often unabashedly attempt to move listener opinion" (Barker, 1998). Another aspect of radio includes black- or urban-focused radio. In past research, voter registration has been an important theme on these stations (Johnson, 2004). These efforts included both Democrats and Republicans. (Johnson, 2004).

Political Communication through Television

In 1960, John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon revolutionized presidential campaigns with the first televised debate. This first debate changed the way Americans saw politics, in that those who heard the debate on the radio declared Nixon the winner, while those watching it on television called it in favor of the younger, more handsome John F. Kennedy (Frank, 2004). Ever since that first televised debate, "body language and nonverbal cues" have become important parts of presidential debates (Scheufele, Kim, & Brossard, 2007). Television allowed candidates "to reach an audience through verbal and visual messages" (Levin, 2005). Although television coverage of elections is popular, it tends to focus coverage on the "horse race" rather than on the actual qualifications of a candidate (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003a).

One aspect of politics on television is campaign advertising. These ads aim not only to talk about the candidates, but also work to get potential voters to feel strongly enough about the election to get out and vote, since voting participation is not high in the United States (Levin, 2005). This advertising is also important because television advertising often takes up a large portion of candidate's campaign budgets (O'Cass, 2002). An important part of political advertising is negative advertising, while there are questions as to the exact effect of negative advertising, the fact is that over time negative advertisements make up a larger percentage of the political ads aired (Faber, Tims, & Schmitt, 1993). While the effect of negative political advertising is not completely clear, what is clear is that people remember these negative ads (Faber et al., 1993).

Television, like most electronic technology, is not a static medium, instead it is constantly changing. More voters are getting their information about political candidates and issues from many different sources, some traditional like television news, and some less traditional like television comedy programs (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005). These comedy shows are both loved and hated. One study goes as far as to "accuse Jon Stewart of political heresy" (Hart & Hartelius, 2007). Although the authors of the study acknowledge that he is popular and profitable, they still hold firm that he is a "heathen," and that his cynicism is dangerous to our democracy (Hart & Hartelius, 2007). Of course, there are two sides to every argument, and in his 2007 article, Robert Hariman compares this persecution of Jon Stewart to the execution of Socrates for heresy, which he states is "a crime that does not exist in free society" (Hariman, 2007).

Politics has infiltrated more than just comedy programming like Jon Stewart's show. It is also showing up on syndicated talk shows like *Ellen* and *The Tyra Banks*

Show, both of which had front-running Democrats on their 2007 season premiers (Pursell, 2007).

<p align="center">*Political Communication through the Internet*</p>

In recent years, the Internet has become another player in communication. The Internet has been called "the mass medium for the twenty-first century," because it brings the audiovisual part of media like newspapers and television together with "the interactivity and speed of telephone and mail" (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003a). The Internet also allows unprecedented access to information no matter what a user's distance is from the source (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003a).

Politics and Blogging

One major concern about the Internet as a source for political information and news is that some of this information does not come from a major news network or even from professional journalists. Instead, the Internet provides a forum for anyone who cares to participate, even if that participant has no real credibility. This mass participation in the news is also known as "citizen journalism" and one of the most common places for citizen journalism to take place is in blogs. According to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, a blog is defined as "a Web site that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer" (*Blog - definition from the Merriam-Webster online dictionary.*). A 2007 study by David D. Perlmutter and Mary Schoen defined a blog as an "interactive journal of Web site commentary, news, and debate" (Perlmutter & Schoen, 2007). Blogs are typically written in a more conversational manner than a traditional news story and often include links and references to outside sources (Palser, 2002). In her 2007 article, Diana

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Hull says that blogs "tackle subjects both serious and esoteric and encourage an ongoing dialogue" (Hull, 2007). While the blog is new in comparison to some forms of media, such as the newspaper, it has roots that go far beyond the creation of the Internet. In his 2006 article, Ken Cohen chronicles this heritage through a "media genealogy," a "social genealogy," and a "technological genealogy" (Cohen, 2006). Cohen says that blogs find their roots in the media through zines and broadsides, socially through "Internet forums, book clubs, and tea rooms," and technologically through "homepages, ham radio, and letters" (Cohen, 2006). Many blogs gained popularity after the September 11, 2001, attacks, since this was one of the first events since the widespread popularity of the Internet to affect the country as a whole (Gillmor, 2004; Johnson & Kaye, 2004).

Blogs are not only being used in addition to traditional news, but in some cases, use of blogs is replacing use of traditional news (Perlmutter & Schoen, 2007). According to a 2005 study, more than 11 million Americans read a blog every day (Perlmutter & Schoen, 2007).

Bloggers, no matter what their status (from amateur to journalist to businessperson), "are performing many functions that mimic professional newsrooms" including covering political conventions, and often view their writing as a contribution to journalism (Perlmutter & Schoen, 2007). In his 2004 article, Dan Gilmor puts this change into a wider perspective:

> Humans have always told each other stories, and each new era of progress has led to an expansion of storytelling. It is, however, also a story of a modern revolution because technology has given us a communications toolkit that allows anyone to become a journalist at little cost and (in theory) with global reach. Nothing like this has ever been possible before. (Gillmor, 2004)

He also states that the line between those who tell the news and those who consume the news will become less defined (Gillmor, 2004).

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Perhaps one problem with examining blogs as a form of journalism is that blogs are too often compared to a news story when in reality they "are more like radio and television commentary than newspapers" (Heyboer & Rosen, 2004). In her 2005 article, Barb Palser states that the blog really is not the best format for a traditional, hard news story, and that the format is much better for opinion pieces and shorter news pieces (Palser, 2005). This brings up an ethical issue. How is a blog-reader supposed to know the difference between news and opinion? Newspaper opinion pages are clearly labeled. Television and radio commentators are fairly easy to pick out thanks to the titles that pop up under their names each time they appear on camera. However, blog pages are separated into news and opinion. There are no titles identifying the writer or speaker as "reporter" or "commentator." Especially when it comes to political coverage, it is important to be able to differentiate news from commentary.

Bloggers recently made a significant step into being taken seriously as political journalists. The Democratic National Convention sent more than 20 bloggers press credentials for the convention, and the Republican convention planned to issue as many as 20 (Lee, 2004). While not all bloggers can be considered journalists, this select group must be doing something journalistic since they were given official identification as members of the press. Jay Rosen, a journalism professor at New York University, believes that this identification means, "That someone just expanded the idea of the press a little bit" (Lee, 2004). This will also provide a different kind of opportunity for bloggers, since they will actually be able to speak with primary sources, rather than just working from their home computer (Lee, 2004). Bloggers hope to provide coverage on issues too narrow for mainstream news media, while offering an irreverent eye on the

media-political complex and gossipy accounts of behind-the-scenes convention life" (Lee, 2004).

Blogs have gone beyond the confines of the private home and entered the newsroom. In fact, it seems that many news organizations have "fallen in love" with blogs, and have launched blogs to talk about everything from fly-fishing to sports (Hull, 2007). In fact, it is possible that mainstream news organizations' embracing of blogging shows that mainstream news values the voice of the blogger, even if they do not always value the blog's content (Nip, 2006). The popularity of blogs is widespread with most major newspapers. *The New York Times* has more than 50 active blogs (*Blogs - New York Times*). There is even a link to its blog listings on its main page, and it has blogs on everything from Iraq to "Freakonomics" which is maintained by the authors of the popular book with the same title. *The Washington Post*'s link to its blog directory is less prominent, but it has even more blogs than *The New York Times*. The *Post*'s blog options are just as varied, with specific blogs for every D.C. area professional team (*Blog directory (washingtonpost.com)*). It even has a blog by its obituary writers called "Post Mortem," which features entries on "the end of the story" (*Post mortem*).

One issue with journalists being bloggers, especially when their blogs are associated with a traditional news organization, is that blogs and news stories have two distinctly different styles. A blog is often spur-of-the-moment and triggered by something seen on television or seen in the world. A news story goes through a process of interviewing, writing, editing, writing some more (if there's time) and finally editing again before it hits the newsprint or airwaves. During the California recall election, when Arnold Schwarzenegger appeared as a viable candidate, Sacramento Bee Columnist

Daniel Weintraub's blog became immensely more popular than it had been in previous months, but this popularity brought on scrutiny, first from the public and then for the newspaper where he worked. Eventually it was decided that his blog, along with any others written by members of the organization, would have to go through the same editorial process as regular columns and news stories (Heyboer & Rosen, 2004). Weintraub said that this changed not only his writing process, but also the feel of his blog, making it less "spontaneous and spunky" than it had been before the change.

This change is not specific to Weintraub's experience; in fact in her September 2007 article, Meg McGinty Shannon says that blogging is actually "in danger of becoming institutionalized" (Shannon, 2007). Although an editorial process does change the "feel" of the blog, the larger news organizations still have to protect themselves from things like libel suits. Some newspapers, such as Spokane, Washington's Spokane Review, have never had any serious concerns with unedited blogs, while others, like the New Republic, have had writers say things that required serious apologies to avoid serious trouble (Heyboer & Rosen, 2004). This could mean that blog entries, at least those written by professional journalists, may end up offering virtually identical information to that found in the traditional news media. Another journalist who is blogging said that he found it to be "the purest form of journalism" because it changed the way he thought about life and kept his thought process running around-the-clock (Heyboer & Rosen, 2004).

Social Networking Web Sites

Social networks have been defined as "a collection of individuals linked together by a set of relations" (Downes, 2005). When talking specifically about online social

networks, there are various ways to describe what these networks actually are. The broadest way to define these online networks is that "virtual or online communities are groups of people connected through the Internet and other information technologies." (Finin et al, 2005). There are many other, much more specific ways that different people have defined these social networking sites. Having a clear idea of what an online social network actually means is very important in order to study the political presence on these sites. For the purpose of this study, social networks are Web sites, such as MySpace or Facebook, that allow users to interact and create online relationships through individual and group communications.

First of all, social networking sites can be seen as a tool people use to develop individual identities or communities. In his article about MySpace, Sean Rapacki says that these sites are helping teenagers to form an identity for themselves (Rapacki, 2007). Forming an identity is a vital part of participating in a social network because on social networking Web sites a profile – or online identity – is how everyone else within the network sees an individual, and creating person-to-person connections is the first step in creating a social network. On these sites, "it is the interaction between people that matters" (Haythornthwaite, 2005). This way of looking at social networks focuses on "the importance of exchanges that support both work and social processes" (Haythornthwaite, 2005). Looking at individual exchanges shows exactly how these sites are affecting the people that use them. Web sites, such as Facebook, allow users to expand their definition of community beyond their physical location, providing "one way for students to find others with common interests [and] feel as though they are part of a larger community" (Shier, 2005).

Social networks are also ways for individuals to connect. In his paper on semantic and social networks, Downes says these sites try to "develop networks or 'social circles' for individuals of mutual interest" (Downes, 2005). In other words, they allow people to make connections with each other based on common characteristics. This could be anything from having the same English professor to sharing a deep interest in the same video game or television show.

These relationships are not necessarily the same as relationships people create in face-to-face, physical circumstances, but they can be defined in much the same way. In physical, face-to-face relationships, people can be categorized according to how well they know a person or how deep the relationship is; this rule carries over to these online interactions. Online relationships and interactions "sustain strong, intermediate, and weak ties that provide information and social support" (Wellman et al, 1996).

Even before the primaries, candidates were taking advantage of new methods for reaching potential voters and supporters. This new type of campaigning has found its home on the immensely popular social networking sites MySpace and Facebook. In September 2007, Bill Tancer of *Time Magazine* addressed this new wave of campaigning: "With some candidates in the 2008 Presidential election embracing every facet of Web 2.0 to get their message out, from YouTube videos to MySpace profiles, your next president may be no further than a friend-add on Facebook (p.)."

Practically, it makes sense to study this move to social networking sites because it is so widespread. In fact, a Pew research study found that "26 percent of young people visit a social networking site such as Facebook at least once a day" (Daley, 2008). Every candidate not only has a Web site, but he or she also has MySpace profiles and a strong

presence on Facebook. Barack Obama's page goes far beyond the cookie-cutter MySpace page. It not only provides practical information such as his stance on various issues and his educational info, but also encompasses many other aspects of a Presidential campaign. His "about me" section sounds like a note to a personal friend. Obama's profile features links to his presence on other Web sites, such as Facebook and YouTube, as well as codes for graphics that other users can place on their own profiles.

It has features that allow users to donate to and get involved with the campaign. His page also has blogs from members of his campaign staff and links to purchase official Barack Obama merchandise. It contains links to the headquarters for his campaigns in key states for this early portion of the election, such as Iowa and South Carolina. These features are fairly typical parts of a MySpace profile for most major candidates.

Beyond these official pages, other MySpace users have also created pages to support the candidate of their choice. On Facebook, these users show their support, or lack of support by joining groups such as "Mike Huckabee for President 2008!" or "Stop Hillary Clinton: (One Million Strong AGAINST Hillary)" (Facebook, 2007). These groups range in impact. For example, the Mike Huckabee group has less than 7,000 members, while the anti-Hillary Clinton group has more than 500,000 as of November 10, 2007 (Facebook, 2007).

Facebook has applications allowing members to showcase their candidate of choice on their personal profiles. Facebook provides a generic form for its members to fill out giving basic information such as name, birthday, activities and a few "favorites." The profile also includes a picture and a wall where friends can leave messages.

Applications are add-ons created by users that members can put on their profile to showcase their interests. One particular application, called "Election '08," places a box on a person's profile with the name, picture and current news stories about the candidate. The box is even color-coded. It is red if you choose to support a Republican and blue if your candidate of choice is a Democrat. If a user has not yet narrowed down his or her decision to a specific candidate, her or she also has the option to choose a party to support.

MySpace has even joined forces with MTV "to present the first-ever presidential debate to feature real time, one-on-one dialogues between candidates and voters" (MTV, 2007). According to MTV.com (2007) these debates, which will "be aired on MTV and MTVu and webcast on MySpaceTV and MTV.com," allow candidates to "answer candid, unfiltered questions from young viewers."

Unlike the typical political debates, each candidate past tense has his or her own assigned date and time, and there is no live back-and-forth debating between candidates. Also different from the traditional debate is the method of getting questions to ask the candidate. This virtual "town-hall" meeting allows users to submit questions to the candidates via MySpace IM and other electronic methods (MTV, 2007). As of August 23, 2007, former Sen. John Edwards, Sen. Sam Brownback, Sen. Hillary Clinton, Sen. Chris Dodd, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, Rep. Duncan Hunter, Sen. John McCain, Sen. Barack Obama, Rep. Ron Paul, Gov. Bill Richardson, and former Gov. Mitt Romney had all agreed to participate in these digital debates. Along with this list of candidates, MTV provided links to each candidate's MySpace page (every candidate had a site). This method is directly focused on reaching young voters and

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perhaps even teenagers who are not yet eligible to vote but will be eligible in the next few years.

The question is, in the end, will it be worth it? Since the voting age was lowered to 18, "young voters have yet to determine the outcome of a presidential race" (Cannon, 2008). Politicians, Web site designers, and these social networking sites will all want to know what effect this presence had on the election. Even more important, were any of these efforts successful in getting the notoriously apathetic younger voters out to vote? They showed more participation in the 2004 presidential election, and it is likely this trend will continue through the 2008 election (Cannon, 2008).

Theoretically, it makes sense to explore social networking and politics because the Internet is still a new medium for communication, and social networking sites are an even newer medium. As television became the new popular medium, mass communications theory shifted to accommodate and explain this medium and its effects. The very fact that such a strong political presence exists on these sites shows a major shift in media usage by teenagers and young adults. In fact, a recent Reader's Digest poll found that "that nearly half of young people have attempted to influence the vote of a friend or peer in this election, often by using Facebook" (Cannon, 2008).

The Definition of and Influences on Intent to Vote and Political Participation

The influences of these forms of political communication can be seen by looking at whether or not people vote. Prior to the election this is called intent to vote, and after the election it is political participation

Intent to Vote

While most researchers agree on a basic idea of what the intent to vote is (few even bother to define it within their works), they do differ on what influences people on whether or not they should vote.

One researcher defines intent to vote as "the individual citizen's decision to participate in the political process" (Jankowski, 2007). One reason why intent to vote is so difficult to measure is because many people will claim that they plan to vote because it is socially desirable (Duff, Hanmer, Park, & White, 2007). Therefore, these individuals may say that they plan on voting, which would appear to be intent to vote, but in reality have no actual plans to participate in the election.

Some researchers believe the definition of intent to vote also encompasses the process that an individual goes through when they decide to vote. They believe that those with a higher socio-economic status are more likely to vote because the "decision costs and the direct costs of registering and going to the polls" are much easier to deal with than for those people of a lower socio-economic status (Gomez, Hansford, & Krause, 2007).

Other researchers believe that intent to vote is something that is influenced by social factors, such as age, sex, income, or even how a person obtains their information about the candidates (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005). Social influences may also determine a person's intent to vote, because people tend to want to blend in with their peers. Because of this, the intent to vote of a person's peer or social network will affect their intent to vote (Bélanger & Eagles, 2007).

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Another researcher says that intent to vote can be influenced by a person's ethnic background, and that there are specific things which influence the minority intent to vote, especially in the younger demographics (McIlwain, 2007).

Personal Communication and Its Influence on Voting

The other side of social networking Web sites is the idea of having personal relationships with other users through the Web site. In past political campaigns, this more one-on-one method of communication was chiefly achieved through phone calls. In their 1981 study, Miller, Bositis and Baer found that personalized contact, such as phone calls, produced more voter turnout than less personalized methods like letters (Miller, et. al. 1981). Despite the seemingly obvious success of this method in the Miller study, other studies found that in a general election, these phone calls had little effect on voter turnout (Gerber & Green, 2001). In this 2001 study, Gerber and Green state that reminder phone calls are more successful in special elections where people are less likely to remember about the date of the election (Gerber & Green, 2001).

Influence of group membership and personal relationships. One important aspect of interpersonal relationships in elections is group membership. For example, Rogers, Barb, and Bultena state that, along with social status, organizational membership is one of the most important influences on political participation (Rogers, Bultena, & Barb, 1975). One important thing to note about these groups, or social networks, is that they are typically "demographically homogeneous" (Schwadel, 2005).

Social theorists have emphasized that membership in such voluntary organizations is an important part of having a functioning society (Zhang & Chia, 2006). The idea of social capital, defined as an "individual's connectedness to others in their

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community" is an important part of this type of society, and having social capital in a society has been found to produce things like a "robust economy" as well as "a more vibrant participatory democracy" (Zhang & Chia, 2006). Another way to view this idea of social capital is that it is necessary for members of a society to feel "interpersonal trust" among other things in order for that society to be able to work together to accomplish something (Zhang & Chia, 2006). An important part of social capital is "social relations" or the "association that links individuals in a society," and a prime example of this is social networks (Zhang & Chia, 2006).

One of the things that researchers say takes away from social capital is the mass media, because "media foster cynicism or distrust on the part of media consumers and thus alienate them from political or civic activities" (Zhang & Chia, 2006). Simply put, people who consume mass media tend to over-consume media, and spend less time participating in these important social groups, which encourage social capital within a society. The exception here seems to be that consuming information about public affairs on television or reading the newspaper encourages political participation even though they do not encourage civic participation (Zhang & Chia, 2006). The type of organization a person is involved in can also determine whether or not the organization encourages political participation; for example, an organization's scope and the location of its headquarters can be influential (Rogers et al., 1975).

<div align="center">Other Influences on Intent to Vote and Political Participation</div>

Influence of Religious Affiliations

Religious affiliation can influence political participation. In his study of African-American churches, Brian McKenzie found that "political conversations in religious

social networks influence black political behavior," which includes simple informal conversation between members can influence members to vote along with statements made by the clergy and church leadership (McKenzie, 2004). Religious participation has been found to have an effect on civic participation, specifically, those "who are active in religious organizations tend to be more likely to participate in civic organizations than those who are less religiously active, and participation in these groups tend to be a good indicator of political participation (Rogers et al., 1975; Schwadel, 2005).

Influence of Age

Age can be another factor that may affect political participation. For example, "young people are often described as disengaged from conventional politics" (Ward, 2005). When 18 year olds were given the right to vote in 1971, they turned out in great numbers for their first presidential election, but ever since then the numbers have declined (Smith, 2007). Despite this "conventional wisdom," more recently voter turnout for 18- to 29-year-olds has increased significantly from the 2004 to the 2006 election (Schwab, 2007). One important aspect that plays into whether or not young people vote depends on whether or not their parents vote (Schwab, 2007).

Voting, like many other behaviors, becomes a habit, and "once people start voting, they don't stop" (Schwab, 2007). In fact, in an article in "The Atlantic" Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi said that "the power and passion of young people" would help "our new order grow stronger and flourish for the ages" (Pelosi, 2007). One concern about youth voters is that they are "fickle" and can change their minds about a candidate in much the same way they change their minds about music (Schmidt, 2008). This fallout of young voters is not a one-time occurrence; it "happened to George McGovern

after the 1972 Democratic Convention, John McCain early in the 2000 primaries, and Howard Dean just after the Iowa caucuses of 2004" (Schmidt, 2008). Although turnout is characteristically low for young voters, it is also typically higher for older voters, with three-fourths of those 55 years old and older participating in the last presidential election (Hebel, 2007).

Since this study occurs prior to the presidential election, the researcher used the term "intent to vote." For the purpose of this research study, intent to vote as a person's plan to vote in the upcoming Presidential election.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

The review of literature shows that in the past communication in various forms has influenced the public's intent to vote. It also shows that the Internet is becoming an important medium in politics, however, there is little research on social networking Web sites or the influence they may have on voter intent. Because social networking sites combine personal relationships with mass communication in a unique way, it is possible that the political campaigning on these sites will influence voter intent among users of the sites. Based on the above review, the following hypotheses and research questions are posed:

Hypothesis 1: Freshmen and sophomores are less likely to vote than juniors and seniors.

Hypothesis 2: Students are using social networking sites to form relationships with candidates.

Research Question 1: Are students using social networking sites to obtain information on candidates and the election?

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Research Question 2: What form of media are students using most often to obtain information about the election?

Research Question 3: What do students believe is influencing their decision to vote?

Research Question 4: Do college students, who have traditionally been apathetic in voting, intend to vote in this election?

For each of these questions the researcher defined social networking sites as Web sites, such as MySpace or Facebook, that allow users to interact and create online relationships through individual and group communications. Intent to vote is defined as a person's plan to vote in the upcoming presidential election.

CHAPTER THREE

Method

A survey was chosen for this study so the researcher could get information from a large group of people. For the purpose of this study, it was decided that receiving short answers from a large group of people would provide better answers than longer, in depth answers from a small group of people like interviews or a focus group would provide.

Participants for this study were recruited through journalism and communications classes at Baylor University. College students were selected to participate because they are still a large percentage of users on social networking Web sites. The researcher asked professors if their classes could be surveyed, and students within the class were allowed to volunteer for the study. The two classes recruited for the study were Introduction to Mass Communication and American Journalism History. Introduction to Mass Communication is a freshman-level course, and is open to students of all majors. Since the class counts as a fine-arts credit, it attracts a variety of students. American Journalism History is an upper-level course, and is a requirement for most journalism majors. Those on the public relations track may choose between this course and Law and Ethics of Journalism.

Data were collected through a survey about political opinions, media use habits, and social networking habits. The researcher developed the survey from two Pew Research Center for the People and the Press surveys that were conducted within the past year. The researcher selected questions that best fit the research questions and hypotheses for this study. The researcher particularly focused on questions asking about

general media use, online media use, and social networking Web site use. All were multiple-choice questions that were modified from their original oral format into a written format appropriate for the survey. The survey was pilot tested with a group of nine students in the journalism department. The pilot group took the survey and then gave the researcher both oral and written feedback on the survey. The final survey, as given to the participants, is attached in Appendix A.

Participants in the survey remained anonymous, and participants were reminded not to write their name on any part of the survey. All participants were given the option to opt-out of completing the survey, or to leave any question blank that they did not wish to answer. Participants had unlimited time to complete the survey, and the survey was administered in the participants' regular classrooms. Participants were instructed to circle one answer that best fit their personal activities or beliefs. If participants selected more than one answer to a question, their answer was dropped and not included in the analysis. A breakdown of classifications (freshman, sophomore, etc.) for each class can be seen in table 1.

A total of 135 surveys were distributed to the two participating classes. Of those surveys, 130 were returned with at least partial completion giving the study a response rate of 96.3 percent. In the Introduction to Mass communication Class there was a response rate of 95.7 percent, and in the American Journalism History class there was a response rate of 100 percent.

Table 3.1

Classification Breakdown by Course

Class Name	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior
Introduction to Mass Communications	49	35	16	10
American Journalism History	0	0	8	12
Total	49	35	24	22

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

All of those surveyed for the purpose of this study were undergraduate students at Baylor University. All of the demographic data are in tables 4.1 and.

Table 4.1

Breakdown of Participants' Sex by Class

Sex	n	Percentage
Male	44	33.8
Female	85	65.4
n missing = 1		

While these results do show the Baylor tradition of having more women on campus than men, the results do not perfectly align with the actual make-up of the student body for the Fall 2008 semester when the study was conducted. The actual undergraduate student body is 41.8 percent male and 58.2 percent female. The same applies to participant's classification. While these results were not completely off-base, the participants were still more skewed toward freshman and sophomores. The actual student body is more evenly distributed. For the fall 2008 29.4 percent of students are freshman, 21.2 percent are sophomores, 21.7 percent are juniors, and 27.7 percent are seniors. Full classification results are in table 4.2.

Table 4.2

Breakdown of Participants' Classification

Classification	n	Percentage
Freshman	49	37.7
Sophomore	35	26.9
Junior	24	18.5
Senior	22	16.9

Traditionally, Baylor University has been considered a conservative school with a conservative student body, however, the results showed a much more varied student population. While the majority of students surveyed did affiliate themselves with the Republican Party, many others aligned themselves with the Democratic Party or identified themselves as independent. For full results, please see table 4.3.

Table 4.3

Breakdown of Participants' Political Affiliations

Republican	67
Democrat	20
Independent Leaning toward Republican	11
Independent Leaning toward Democrat	10
Independent Leaning toward Neither Party	12
n missing = 9	

Table 4.4 shows the participants' use of social networking site. This was one place where the participants' answers aligned themselves exactly with what the researcher expected.

Table 4.4

Participants' Use of Social Networking Sites

Yes, uses social networking sites	128
No, does not use social networking sites	2

Hypotheses and Research Questions

The primary purpose for this study was to find out if the information that candidates and campaigns put on social networking Web sites influenced those who use the sites, so the questions in the survey focused on media use and opinions on political participation, as well as on voter intent.

Hypothesis one, that juniors and seniors were more likely to vote than freshmen and sophomores, was not supported by this study at p=. 05, as shown in table 6. The Chi Square result was .2373.

Table 4.5

Results of a Chi-Square: Classification vs. Intent to Vote

Classification	Yes	No	Total
Freshman and Sophomores	72	10	82
Juniors and Seniors	39	4	43
Total	111	114	125
Chi Square= .2373 p=.05			

In this population, the age difference did not seem to have any effect on whether participants chose to vote.

Hypothesis two, that students are using social networking sites to form relationships with candidates, was not supported by this study. While they are aware of the presence of political and candidate information on social networking Web sites, that knowledge does not seem to foster a relationship. In fact, of those surveyed, only 15 percent (n=20) had actually even added a candidate as a friend on a social networking site. "Friending" someone is really the only easy way to maintain a relationship with a candidate on a social networking Web site. Without taking this step, the site will not update the person on the candidate's activities on the site, and the person will not be reminded of their "friend's" existence on a regular basis. Without this established relationship, it is hard to believe that campaigns can really get across strong messages to those they are targeting with a presence on social networking sites.

Research question one asked if students use social networking sites to obtain information about candidates and the election, and the answer seems to be an overwhelming "no." Of those surveyed only 10 percent said that they regularly use these sites to get information. Further, only 8 percent said they regularly use the sites to share information. The beauty of the entire social networking site movement is that it allows information to "go viral" and spread quickly from person to person. If students are not accessing or sharing this information, it cannot possibly go viral.

For research question two, which asked what form of media students use most to get information about the election, the results show that most students surveyed use television the most, with 49.2 percent selecting that response. The next most selected

response was "other" (31.5 percent). Finally 11.5 percent of participants selected "newspapers." Participants in this study did not even state that they visited the candidate's Web sites. Only 31 percent had done so.

In regard to research question three, which asked what students believe is influencing their decision to vote, the answers were varied, with two or more participants selecting each of the answer choices. Response d, "family," was selected by 35.4 percent of participants. This was closely followed by response a, "network and cable news," which was selected by 28.5 percent of participants. Only two participants selected response c, "information found on networking sites like Facebook or MySpace." Concerning media influence, 66.2 percent of participants believed that some form of media had an influence on their decision to vote. This question stated that media include

Considering research question four, it does seem that college students intend to vote in the upcoming presidential election. Of those surveyed, 85.4 percent said that they planned to vote. Only four stated that they did not plan on voting, and one of those was not able to due to her age. This means that the group surveyed does not fit the traditional view of college students as politically apathetic.

Other Results

One of the more confusing results involves question 26, which asked if participants were registered to vote. Only 91 participants knew for certain that they were registered, but 111 participants said they planned on voting. Since this study was conducted after the deadline to register for the upcoming election, there are a few people who may be disappointed when they are unable to vote on Election Day.

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Questions 18 and 19 addressed how people are using e-mail in relation to the campaign. Question 18 asked whether or not participants sent or received e-mails about the campaign with friends, family, etc. This was a close result, with 45.4 percent stating that they had, and 53.1 percent stating that they had not. Even more interesting, only 69.2 percent of participants said they were involved in e-mail communication with groups and political organizations.

This study also found that most participants (83.8 percent) who use social networking sites visited them at least once a day. In this study all but two of the 130 participants were members of at least one social networking site.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

Overall, the results of this study did not follow the researcher's theories. This could be for a variety of reasons. It is possible that social networking sites are having little to no influence on participant's decision to vote, or that participants are not recognizing the influence of these sites. Since almost half of participants said that they use television the most to get information about the upcoming election, it is not surprising that it was selected as the second most popular response. Also, most college students have only been out of their parents' home for a few years at best, which explains the influence of family.

It is possible that it is going to take more than one election cycle before this becomes an effective medium for political communication and influence. Facebook was founded in February 2004, and was only available at select schools. This means it was not yet widely used during the 2004 presidential election. The recent 2008 election is the first time that Facebook was available for the entirety of an election season. The same goes for MySpace, which was founded in 2003.

Another idea to consider is the referential nature of the Internet. Students may have decided not to sign up as a fan of a candidate in order to avoid being spammed by that campaign. However, if they had a friend suggest it to them or invite them to a group it is possible that they would be more willing to join.

Another item that could be influencing these results is traditional social values. Most people are taught from an early age that it is inappropriate to discuss politics and

religion in social situations. Facebook and MySpace, despite their many other uses, are still mainly for social purposes. Friends use them to catch-up and keep-up with one another despite the constraints of time and distance that can hinder other forms of communication. Because of this, it is possible that users are not comfortable flaunting their political beliefs on a page where the main purpose is to maintain social relationships. This clearly would not influence all users, but it could influence some. Also, since this is a value that is ingrained into many from childhood, it is possible that users do not recognize it as having an influence on them. The simple desire not to offend or because conflict could be enough to prevent some users from adding political information to their pages beyond the generic labels of conservative or liberal.

Another side of this same issue, is that there were many other places in this campaign where saying the wrong thing could easily offend a number of people. Users may have decided not to support Hillary Clinton on their page in order not to appear racist against Barack Obama. An Obama supporter may have kept quiet so as not to look like an ageist by not supporting John McCain. A McCain supporter might have ignored a group invite in order to not look sexist and offend Clinton supporters. Because of this, even people who were normally comfortable with sharing their political beliefs might have chosen to remain silent.

Despite the fact that proponents of new media emphasize its interactivity ability to reach new groups of people, it seems that new media is just following the patterns of old media. According to the results of this survey, it seems that people continue to use media that supports their own personal beliefs, and despite the availability of interactivity, it is still not widely used by those on social networking sites.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Studies

Conclusions

Overall, it does not seem that social networking sites are influencing students' decision to vote. In fact, it does not seem that students are even using the sites to get information about the election. Participants in the study were, for the most part, active users of the Internet and of social networking sites. It seems that students are getting information about the election, and they plan on voting. They are not, however, getting this information off of social networking sites.

This does not mean that social networking sites will never be an influence over political participation; it simply means that these sites are still being used for social purposes rather than political purposes. The overwhelming presence of politics on these sites does indicate that candidates and campaigns see these sites as a possible influence. As the sites continue to be used more widely it is possible that this will change, since this is the first Presidential election since the sites began to be widely used.

The story on social networking sites and politics is far from over. Like all media, the Internet and social networking sites are still evolving and changing. It is possible that in 2012 or later these sites could be far more influential.

Limitations

The greatest limitation of this study is the limited population. A wider study that included the entire University would provide even better results. All upperclassmen surveyed in this study were journalism majors, who are trained to pay more attention to

media and the things that influence them. By expanding the study beyond the walls of Baylor would provide even better, more generalizable results. Baylor is a private, religiously associated university. A study could provide better results by surveying students from different types of schools all over the world.

Traditionally, voters younger than 30 have been considered one of the most apathetic groups of voters, and clearly not all of these are college students. The next logical step beyond a multi-university study would be a study which also included adults in this demographic who are not college students.

Another limitation of this study was the format. Surveys do not allow for further feedback from or questioning of participants. By conducting either an oral survey or by doing a qualitative study, it would be easier to find out why or why not people use these sites to get information about candidates and election.

Future Studies

Other than expanding sample size and adjusting format, there are many other potential studies that could come from these findings. First, it would be interesting to compare the contents of a candidate's Web site to his or her page on a social networking Web site, and see which of those two sites users find more informative, visually interesting, engaging, etc. This would require a multiple method study, but would also provide worthwhile information to media and political researchers as well as candidates and campaigns. Also, as the presidential campaign approaches in 2012 it will provide the first opportunity to see how the political use of social networking sites has changed. Will more people be on these sites, and will these sites influence those who use them more then than they do today?

Another part of social networking involves blogging, chatting, and message boards. Examining the content of these forms of communication could provide another view of the interaction between social networks and politics.

Other, simple studies could be done to measure how people are using social networking sites to gain political information. A researcher could easily compare the number of fans or friends of a candidate on a social networking site with the actual results of the election, to see if there is any correlation between the two.

Both Facebook and MySpace provide anyone with the opportunity to place ads. Facebook also has software to help advertisers target the potential clients who best fit their product. For example, changing one's relationship status to "engaged" triggers something in Facebook's system so that the majority of ads are about wedding-related products and weight loss. It would be interesting to see if candidates in upcoming elections take advantage of this feature by targeting specific groups for their ads. What would be even more informative would be to then count the number of clicks on the ad to see if it was more successful than a non-targeted ad campaign.

APPENDIX

SURVEY

Please circle the answer to each question that best fits you.

1. Are you:
   a. Male
   b. Female

2. Are you a:
   a. Freshman
   b. Sophomore
   c. Junior
   d. Senior
   e. Graduate Student

3. How have you been getting most of your news about the presidential election campaign?
   a. Television
   b. Newspapers
   c. Radio
   d. magazines
   e. the Internet

4. Do you get most of your news about the presidential election from:
   a. Local news programming
   b. ABC network news
   c. CBS network news
   d. NBC network news
   e. CNN cable news
   f. MSNBC cable news
   g. The Fox News cable channel
   h. Other

5. Thinking about the different kinds of political news available to you, what do you prefer:
   a. Getting news from sources that share YOUR political point of view?
   b. Getting news from sources that don't have a particular political point of view?
   c. Getting news from sources that share a political point of view opposite from you?

6. Do you ever use online social networking sites like MySpace or Facebook?
   a. Yes
   b. No

7. How often do you visit the social networking Web site where you have a profile?
   a. Several times a day
   b. Once a day
   c. Every few days
   d. Once a week
   e. Less often

8. How often do you **get** information about local, national or international news through social networking pages?
   a. Regularly
   b. Sometimes
   c. Hardly ever
   d. Never

9. How often do you **share** information about local, national or international news on you social networking page?
   a. Regularly
   b. Sometimes
   c. Hardly ever
   d. Never

10. Have you gotten any campaign or candidate information on social networking sites like Facebook or MySpace?
   a. Yes
   b. No

11. Have you signed up as a "friend" of any candidates on a social networking Web site?
   a. Yes
   b. No

12. How frequently do you go online to get news?
   a. Every day
   b. 3 to 5 days per week
   c. 1 or 2 days per week
   d. Once every few weeks
   e. Less often

13. Thinking about the news you get online, what do you do more often?
   a. Follow links to specific news stories from Web sites, search engines, or e-mails
   b. Go directly to the home pages of news organizations
   c. Both

14. How much would you miss getting news online, if it were no longer available?
    a. A lot
    b. Some
    c. Not much
    d. Not at all

15. When you use the Internet, do you ever come across campaign news and information when you may have been going online for a purpose other than to get the news?
    a. Yes
    b. No

16. Have you watched any of the candidate debates this year?
    a. Yes
    b. No

17. Have you happened to see any of the presidential candidates being interviewed or appearing as guests on news or entertainment programs?
    a. Yes
    b. No

18. Have you sent or received e-mails about the candidates or campaigns with friends, family, or other personal acquaintances?
    a. Yes
    b. No

19. Have you received e-mails about the candidates or campaigns from any groups or political organizations?
    a. Yes
    b. No

20. Have you gotten any campaign or candidate information from Web sites set up by the candidates themselves?
    a. Yes
    b. No

21. Have you gotten any campaign or candidate information from news satire Web sites like *The Onion* or *The Daily Show*?
    a. Yes
    b. No

22. Have you watched any video of the candidate debates on the Internet?
    a. Yes
    b. No

23. Have you watched any video of interviews with candidates on the Internet?
    a. Yes
    b. No

24. Have you watched any campaign commercials on the Internet?
    a. Yes
    b. No

25. Have you watched any videos of campaign speeches or announcements on the Internet?
    a. Yes
    b. No

26. These days, many people are so busy they can't find time to register to vote, or move around so often they don't get a chance to re-register. Are you NOW registered to vote in your precinct or election district or haven't you been able to register so far?
    a. Yes, I am absolutely certain that I am registered.
    b. Yes, I think I am registered, but there is a chance my registration has lapsed
    c. No, I am not registered
    d. Don't know

27. Do you feel that the information you have seen in the media (including television, the Internet, and radio) have influenced your decision to vote?
    a. Yes
    b. No

28. What item, if any, has the greatest influence over your decision to vote?
    a. Network and cable news
    b. Online news
    c. Information found on networking sites like Facebook or MySpace
    d. Family
    e. Friends

29. Have you, or do you plan on voting in the upcoming election?
    a. Yes
    b. No

30. In politics today, do you consider yourself a:
    a. Republican
    b. Democrat
    c. Independent

31. If you answered C on number 30, do you lean more to:
    a. The Republican Party
    b. The Democratic Party
    c. n/a

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