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The Internet and the 2000 Republican Convention:
An Appraisal

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The Shorenstein Center asked Michael Cornfield, an expert on the Internet and politics, to give a quick appraisal of the performance of online media at the 2000 Republican Convention. Cornfield prepared the following paper for a panel discussion to be held on August 13, 2000. The paper looks at a key moment in the campaign to illustrate the possibilities of online communication in democratic politics. Professor Cornfield wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Ryan Thornburg of George Washington University's Graduate School of Public Management and WashingtonPost.com .

I.   Philadelphia: The Political Convention, Rewired

The online public is increasing in both numbers and attention to news and political information. The Nielsen Company's www.netratings.com puts the U.S. online population at 136.9 million.   The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press finds an increase in the audience for political news on the Internet.[1] A July 2000 Yankelovich poll reports that 65% of the electorate says it will go online to learn about candidates and issues by election day. Given an increasing audience and lots of venture capital, a number of commercial companies were recently formed to provide political content on the Internet. These new political dot-coms are competing with non-profit and traditional media, who have also expanded their online news divisions. At the same time, online campaigning is expanding exponentially. More Congressional candidates established Web sites by July 2000 than for the entire 1998 campaign.

The Internet and politics community has seized the opportunity provided by the 2000 national party conventions to showcase online journalism. Political parties, interest groups, activists and the news media established an Internet beachhead at the Republican convention in

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[1] Pew Research Center, "Internet Sapping Broadcast News Audience," June 11, 2000.
www.people-press.org/media00rpt.htm.

Philadelphia. They laid over 6600 miles of fiber optic cable at the convention complex; and connected 2000 ISDN lines and 500 DSL lines, 125 DS-1 and 100 DC-3 circuits, for a capacity of 70,200 lines for data and voice streaming.[2]

The first online convention failed to live up to the hype that preceded it. This is not so surprising, because the convention was not an exciting news event. Moreover, technical difficulties plagued convention innovation, the online audience paid only modest attention, and the Republican Party made little effort to incorporate the Internet in their media strategy.

II. The First Union Center: The Bush Campaign Places the Web Offstage

Historically, political campaigns have used new media to surprise and out-maneuver the opposition. In 1952, for example, the Eisenhower campaign used television to win a crucial confrontation at the Republican convention.[3] This year, even though television networks reduced convention coverage, they still offered the Republican party several hours of prime-time exposure to mass audiences. The Republican party could have taken this opportunity to publicize its presence on the Web, and to embrace politics on the Internet.

The Republican convention opted not to take advantage of these opportunities. Although "gopconvention.com" signs were visible to delegates in the arena, they were not seen by television audiences. There were no signs whatsoever for related GOP sites, such as rnc.org, georgewbush.com, and gop.net. While many Republican officials were interviewed at the nearby "Internet Alley," where online media booths were located, the nominees, Bush and Cheney, failed to appear. The biggest sensation on the Alley was the television-star wrestler, The Rock, registering to vote at the YouthVote2000 booth. During the convention proceedings, none of the major speakers issued invitations to visit Republican Web sites. In all, there were a half a dozen references to "the Internet" in the C-Span/Virage convention index. In his acceptance speech, George W. Bush only mentioned the Internet in a punchline to a joke about Al Gore.

There were indicators prior to the convention that the Bush campaign was not going to integrate fully the Internet into its campaign strategy. As soon as the Republicans announced their 2000 Vice-Presidential nominee, Richard Cheney, the Democrats posted an attack on Cheney's Congressional voting record on the DNC's new Web site, www.bush-cheney.net. As a result, most of the first-day news stories about George W. Bush's Vice-Presidential choice referred to both the Republican spin and the Democratic counter-punch. Although the selection produced a "Cheney bounce" in opinion polls, an aggressive Internet strategy could have converted that poll surge into contributions, volunteers, and money.

Before the convention, the Republican party invited its supporters to become "dot-com delegates." These virtual delegates could download a credential, only suitable for framing. They

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[2] www.foxnews.com (background section on the conventions)

[3] Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang, *Politics and Television*, (Quadrangle Books, 1968); Zachary Karabell, "The Rise and Fall of the Televised Political Convention," Shorenstein Center Discussion Paper D-33 (October 1998).

could "gain entry to the Talking Points used by Republican leaders when they brief delegate caucuses on key issues," pose screened questions to a GOP official, and chat with fellow dot-com delegates. These opportunities appeared to be only sparsely attended; when the author went to the GOP chat room, there was no one else there.

It seems that the Bush campaign is more concerned with the e-mail side of the Internet than the interactivity of the World Wide Web. The Republican Party plans to use the Internet for its get-out-the-vote drive in the Fall and has begun to place banner ads. They would be smart to distribute video clips from the Bush speech on their Internet site. It may be that the Bush campaign calculated that embracing the Internet carried too great a risk, since a political message placed on the Net can be forwarded, repackaged, and re-sequenced by countless others, including the press and Bush opponents.

Other political players were more active on the Internet than the GOP or the Bush campaign. Surprisingly, McCain added fresh content to his Web site, www.straighttalkamerica.com, during the convention. The Shadow Convention on the Internet was well organized, executed, and attended. Its Web site featured a voice-chat technology that enabled speakers to converse with their audiences on and off-line right after their addresses. A "Rapid Response Panel" reacted to GOP speeches in real time. Both techniques are likely to become part of the future Internet campaign repertoire.

III.   Internet Alley: Online Media Start-Ups Flicker; Old Media Off-Shoots Hold Steady

The Republican convention was an opportunity to show off the capacities of the Internet. Given the pre-convention news coverage, the event presented an opportunity for media start-ups to make names for themselves in front of an expanded audience for political information. Internet Alley consisted of 35-40 booths in one-third of the four tent "pavilions" for the non-television press adjacent to the First Union Center. (The TV networks had their own tents and trailers, and some established media organizations placed their Net personnel with the rest of their team, so the one-twelfth of the space estimate understates the presence.) One estimate of the media Net presence put the population at 100 Web sites and 1,000 people.[4] The Alley was like the exhibit section at any convention except that the stalls featured a different type of transaction. People stopped by not to buy souvenirs, but to furnish information in exchange for personal publicity.

The Republican Party itself had a booth on Internet Alley, and Republican officials streamed by for interviews. The Party had plenty of competition as a hub for news and activism. Several dot-com political portals vied to establish themselves as "the one-stop" broker for information and action. The home page of www.grassroots.com illustrates how these functions can interact. The left side was entitled "In the News," and the right side encouraged visitors to "Take Action."

The new media companies needed a bounce from this convention even more than the Republican Party or the nominees. Because there was no major breaking news story, the online

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[4] Martin Miller, "Web Sites See Convention Bonanza," *Los Angeles Times*, July 29, 2000.

communicators did not have a peg on which to hang their hats. Still, their coverage of the convention merits critical review. We looked at twenty media sites and focussed our analysis on three areas: information, dialogue and interactivity.[5]

 1. INFORMATION: The Internet can accommodate almost infinite quantities of information from diverse sources. It enables both providers and users to draw boundaries to make that information intelligible. Material can be archived. What gets posted to the Internet can stay there at minuscule cost and can be downloaded at the user's convenience.

 2. DIALOGUE: The Internet can host a variety of information exchanges, from informal chat to moderated discussions, from many to one and one to many, in text and audio, and eventually, in video. Political relationships can be made and broken during such exchanges.

 3. INTERACTION: The Internet can incorporate entertainment into the educational value of political information. Online games such as trivia competitions, puzzle-solving and role-playing can be staged in layers of difficulty.

Information

 An important potential of the Internet as a democratic medium is to provide multiple perspectives on political controversy.   Much of politics is about the struggle to interpret the world for others. In a democracy, the people should be able to choose among a variety of interpretive frames. We examined Web sites to see whether they provided multiple perspectives on the convention by linking to the Republican party, the Democratic party, and either the Shadow convention or the Unity (protest) movement.

 We were disappointed to find that the Internet news media rarely provided direct access to political parties or to other activist sites. USAToday.com was the only one of 19 media sites we examined to link to the Web sites of both the Republican and Democratic parties. Only 8 linked to the Republican party. Only 2 (Philly.com and Yahoo.com) linked to alternative politics sites. These omissions do not make best use of the Internet. Even though links cost nothing and can be framed so that the host site retains the visitor's eye, the online media generally chose not to provide direct access to political viewpoints. (See Table 1)

 It could be argued that the use of hotlinks on news media Web sites raises a question of journalistic ethics. If a news site has partisan links, and, more importantly, sponsored content, it must clearly identify the relationships between the organizations. Both Speakout.com and Voter.com made it reasonably easy to distinguish between editorial and paid content. But their relationships to the parties remained obscure.[6]

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[5] Given the constraints of time and space, we only sampled the most prominent free sites. We did not examine the Web sites of the *Wall Street Journal*, *National Journal*, or others which normally charge access fees. We also did not evaluate commentary, feature-writing, and other media forms which do not lend themselves to quantitative and formal analysis.

[6] Rebecca Fairley Raney, "Two New Web Sites Cover Political Races," *The New York Times*, July 17, 2000.

The online media displayed some promising viewing and archiving capacities. (See Table 2) C-Span (in partnership with Yahoo) offered online viewers the chance to choose among several camera angles, including one on the C-Span production unit so that they could see the process of television selection at work. Unfortunately, the actual video was dark, tiny, and hard to decipher. C-Span also incorporated a potentially powerful public resource -- the C-Span/Virage search engine. Virage permits users to find moments of a speech in archived video. During the convention, Virage worked only imperfectly. For example, it was not possible to find what Colin Powell said about affirmative action the day after his speech. It did succeed in cataloguing six references to the Internet by convention speakers; however, only George W. Bush's acceptance speech was cued to the section where the keyword was uttered.

Voter.com offered a variety of well-known Beltway talent, from columns by Elizabeth Drew and Martin Nolan, to nightly tracking polls by the bipartisan "Battleground" team of Washington, D.C. survey research firms, released the next morning in graphic and news form. It had one of the best collections of content from other sites. Voter.com also established a CyberChat area at PoliticalFest (a political trade show held in conjunction with the Republican convention). It also put up kiosks throughout the city at likely points of conventioneer traffic. But for all its efforts, Voter.com did not pull in much traffic during the convention week.

Dialogue

Two online media companies -- AOL and Pseudo.com -- purchased skyboxes in the convention arena and received maximum exposure. This looked like a smart public relations move. It was especially well worth the estimated $20,000-50,000 price for Pseudo.com to be seen in the same television shot with the Internet giant, AmericaOnline.

AOL non-members could view the nightly "pre-game show" Web-cast, the streaming video of the convention, and poll results. Members could enter the chat rooms and participate in surveys. These polls were meant to spark conversation and elicit reactions from guests. Members could choose among four topic questions to be posed to a guest, or could rate the speech they just saw and heard.

Pseudo.com allowed visitors to choose a camera angle, (with 360-degree swivability), an audio track (which did not have to correspond to the video), or participate in chat, moderated or provoked by an online moderator known as an "E-J".[7] The result was bewildering.

The New York Times innovation was more straightforward.   The Times used the convention to publicize "Abuzz," an "interactive knowledge network" launched in January, 2000. When a visitor posts a question, Abuzz routes it to people already on the network according to their user profiles. One question posed within the "National News Circle" (3,423 members) ran: "How can someone [Colin Powell] who has benefited his whole life from anti-discrimination legislation, none of which has flowed from the Republican party, stand up with a straight face and support that bunch of bubble-heads?" One reasonable answer was: he shares the same social philosophy and work ethic. This kind of exchange shows promise.

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[7] Pseudo.com requires users to surrender an e-mail address in order to participate.

Interactivity

Seven of the media sites we examined included a game. CNN's "Interactives" section sported a "Virtual Convention" which promised players the chance to "learn what it's like to be a delegate, reporter, VIP, or protester." While this was a clever idea, the execution left something to be desired -- the opportunity consisted solely of reading CNN feature stories. MSNBC's "Virtual Campaign Manager" taught the simple, but essential, lesson that a presidential election is, in fact, 51 contests. Visitors awarded Bush or Gore the electoral votes for each state in order to win the election.

A better job of encouraging visitors to role-play, although not in a game format, was found at the Los Angeles Times Web site. Its "Diary of a Delegate" section was an excellent example of online journalism's capacity to incorporate primary source material into its offerings. Barbara Russell provided refreshing daily video clips of the convention from her perspective as a New Hampshire delegate. Visitors to the LA Times site could send e-mail to Ms. Russell throughout the convention.

At www.phillyimc.org, the Independent Media Center gave space to anyone who wanted to contribute an article, photo, or clip. Visitors could also join the "Editorial Collective," which rated the contributions and thereby affected the placement of the contribution. A video by "KK, philadelphia radical surrealist front," under a minute in length, showed a Philadelphia policeman confiscating a soccer ball from the middle of a downtown intersection. It was captioned as "stealing" from an "anarchist." The title might have been accurate, but that was impossible to determine, even if one joined the editorial collective.

Several sites conducted online surveys during the convention. Speakout.com offered an Instant Response Meter, or what might also be called a digital dial poll. Site visitors were invited to take part in a real-time evaluation of major convention speeches, and rate the appeal of what they were hearing and seeing on a scale of 0-100. Results were posted the next morning. These graphs and tables looked scientific, but these polls are about as representative as calls to 900 numbers.

The sponsors were still experimenting with the format of the Instant Response Poll during the convention. On Monday, the results were doubly compressed: all the response moments in all of the speeches were lumped together, and all of the speeches in the evening were lumped together. Aggregating the responses cast doubt on the reliability of the findings, such as "Messages aimed at female voters appear to have hit their target." On Tuesday, the poll results were unpacked into nice graphics, which however were not very well labeled. On Wednesday, the system crashed. But it was back up on Thursday, with the added feature that transcripts of the entire speech could be viewed with their corresponding response indicators. The instant response poll experiments suggest that in the future, Web visitors will be able to replay a video clip, and read the text, while scanning the poll results. That would be a great addition to public knowledge, provided there was a representative sample.

IV. The Electorate: Cyber-Citizens?

Good statistics of Internet traffic are hard to come by, but early evidence suggests that the online audience responded to the Republican National Convention like the rest of the electorate: mostly, it stayed away. PC Data Online, a Virginia firm which meters and weights the choices of 120,000 home Internet users in the United States, reported a 14% dip in traffic to the four most popular news sites during the week of the convention compared with the previous week. Whereas 11,246,000 unique visitors went to MSNBC.com, CNN.com, NYTimes.com, and WashingtonPost.com from home computers the week ending July 29, only 9,643,000 entered those sites during convention week. (See Table 3) Of course, there is no telling from this outside data who looked at convention news material, and for how long; nor does the PC Data Online survey include people accessing the Internet from work. But the clear implication of their data is that there was a drop in online news attention during the Republican convention.

A case could be made that a surge in online attention would have been a good thing for Republicans, media organizations, and even democracy. Politics on the Internet has the potential to provide a powerful political tool to individual citizens. It can also increase the accountability of authority figures and institutions by keeping thorough, accessible records of their words and deeds.

The Internet removes the necessity of simultaneous attention. Millions of Americans now have a practical alternative to tuning into a broadcast and monitoring it in real time. Today, citizens can catch up with a convention speech and many other political developments at their convenience. They can also use the Internet to share their information and opinions with family, friends and political organizations. Online politics might also be the vehicle to involve young people in political life.

The overall number of people using the Internet to get news and other public affairs information is on the upswing. The emergence of effective cyber-citizenry depends on how the new technology is deployed. This presidential year is an opportunity for online news and political organizations to help voters find the information they want and compare views and communicate with political leaders and each other.

There are already many promising developments on the Internet. The California Voter Foundation, www.calvoter.org, is a model of ballot-organized information. Democracy Net, the Freedom Channel, and Project Vote Smart offer candidate- and contest-indexed information. The Washington Post indexes its voluminous event-triggered materials. During the Republican convention, USA Today linked to the major political parties. The Shadow Convention incorporated dynamic voice-chat technology. Grassroots.com and others made it easy for visitors to link information to action. Speakout.com's instant response poll brought audience participation to a new level.   Several Web sites used games and other entertaining features to draw web surfers into the political process. The New York Times' Abuzz has potential for many-to-many political dialogue. Virage gave users a campaign search engine. There is no reason to expect that one site can do everything, but political Web sites still have time to make the 2000 election a landmark in cyber-enhanced citizenship.

TABLE 1: Links to Political Web Sites from Media Web Sites
(GOP Convention Week 2000)

WEBSITE	RNC	DNC	ALTERNATIVE*
ABCNews.com			
AOL.com			
CBS.com			
CNN.com			
CSPAN.com			
FoxNews.com			
GOP.com	√		
Grassroots.com			
LATimes.com	√		
MSNBC.com			
NYTIMES.com	√		
PBS.com			
Philly.com	√		√
Pseudo.com			
Speakout.com	√		
USA Today.com	√	√	
Voter.com			
WashingtonPost.com	√		
Yahoo.com	√		√
Total	**8**	**1**	**2**

* Alternative political convention websites are defined as either
   ShadowConventions.com or R2Kphilly.org

TABLE 2: Media Web Site Archives of GOP Convention

WEBSITE	EDITED	*UNEDITED*
ABCNews.com	TEXT/VIDEO	TEXT/VIDEO
AOL.com	NO	NO
CBS.com	VIDEO	VIDEO
CNN.com	TEXT/VIDEO	TEXT/VIDEO
CSPAN.com	VIDEO	VIDEO
FoxNews.com	NO	TEXT
GOP.com	TEXT	TEXT/VIDEO
Grassroots.com	NO	NO
LATimes.com	TEXT/VIDEO	TEXT/VIDEO
MSNBC.com	NO	NO
NYTIMES.com	TEXT/VIDEO	TEXT/VIDEO
PBS.com	TEXT/VIDEO	TEXT/VIDEO
Philly.com	TEXT/VIDEO	TEXT/VIDEO
Pseudo.com	NO	NO
Speakout.com	NO	TEXT
USAToday.com	TEXT/VIDEO	TEXT/VIDEO
Voter.com	TEXT	TEXT/VIDEO*
WashingtonPost.com	TEXT/VIDEO	TEXT/VIDEO
Yahoo.com	NO	VIDEO

*Video links to CNN website

TABLE 3: Online Media Traffic During GOP Convention Week

WEBSITE	VISITORS
MSNBC.com	3,745,000
CNN.com	2,990,000
NYTIMES.com	1,736,000
WashingtonPost.com	1,172,000
USA Today.com	998,000
ABCNews.com	856,000
PBS.org	589,000
FoxNews.com	485,000
LATimes.com	399,000
Phillynews.com	286,000
Speakout.com	146,000
Voter.com	120,000
GOPConvention.com	106,000
Grassroots.com	Not available
Pseudo.com	Not available

Source: PC Data Online