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Candidates Make Good Friends: An Analysis of Candidates' Uses of Facebook

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Through content analysis of Facebook wall comments in U.S. House and Senate races during the 2006 midterm election, this study describes young potential voters' comments (quantity, valence, etc.) through the lens of the dialogic communication theory of public relations. Findings indicate that individuals who wrote on candidate walls perceive themselves on friendly terms with the candidates, overwhelmingly write messages that are shallow and supportive, and are positive in tone. Candidates rarely, if ever, respond to these messages; although the mere use of Facebook is a dialogic feature, researchers conclude campaigns are not using it for two-way symmetrical relationship building.

An informed electorate is critical to democratic governance. For years scholars have studied questions grounded in this principle: How do people best become informed? How can people be motivated to learn? What media and what messages convey electoral information most effectively? In the last decade the Internet has entered the political media mix in regard to strategic communication and shaken some of the foundations of electioneering. Many scholars, philosophers, and activists argue that the Internet is revolutionizing participatory democracy by facilitating involvement of a wider body of constituents than ever before.

One key to this so-called revolution is the Internet's ability to facilitate dialogue (Taylor et al., 2001). This online dialogue has held promise of enabling

high levels of dialogic communication between candidates and constituents, but has only traditionally occurred between constituents themselves (Stromer-Galley, 2000; Hallahan, 2001). Since the 2004 presidential election, it appeared candidates were beginning to incorporate in earnest some true dialogic features in their Web-based campaigning. During the 2004 elections, candidates began blogs, which Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, Landreville, and Martin (2006) said offered a more personal view of the candidate and increased interactivity.

For the first time in U.S. electioneering, beginning in September 2006, the popular social media network Facebook invited candidates for U.S. Senate and House of Representatives to participate in this network that is primarily and heavily used by a younger-than-25 age demographic. This, argued here, was the greatest dialogic move to date in strategic communication online. As a part of Facebook, candidates could host profiles like other Facebook users, become "friends" with others, and have a "wall" where people could comment publicly and effectively broadcast a message to participating candidates.

The purpose of this study is to examine how primarily young voters responded to this dialogic opportunity, particularly as it may cast light on political participation and conversation among this cohort. This examination of the overt content of comments written to and about candidates provides one of the first studies in dialogic theory, which looks at the user reaction, and as a result, will provide insight into the reaction to such dialogic engagement in campaigns.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although public relations, political communication, and strategic communication are all distinctly different areas, they share the common purpose of communicating a specific strategic message in order to impact behavior or opinion among their publics. Political communication, revolving around campaign messaging on issues and image in order to get a candidate elected, in this regard can be appropriately seen as a hybrid of public relations and strategic communication. Relying more heavily on persuasion and strategic communication techniques, political communicators draw from a number of areas in the information industry to best engage their publics and move them to action. How these communicators employ online methods, and specifically dialogic communication, as a tool in the strategic communication toolbox is central to the current study.

In this study dialogic theory serves as the theoretical foundation for determining the extent to which politicians use social media to create a dialogue with voters. The dialogic theory, often used in the related field of public relations, looks at potential and active dialogue that can occur between an organization and its publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Originally developed by Pearson (1989), the theory was re-examined and extended by Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) and

their colleagues (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001; Perry, Taylor, & Doerfel, 2003; Taylor & Kent, 2004; Taylor & Perry, 2005). Based in a relational approach and easily applied to strategic communication, dialogic theory contends that in order to have good relationships with one's publics, there must be an ethical and quality dialogue between organization and publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent et al., 2003). Organizations must be open to this conversation. Dialogue with one's publics contributes to developing symmetrical relationships (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Kent and Taylor (2002) developed constructs for such dialogue:

mutuality, or the recognition of organization–public relationships; *propinquity*, or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics; *empathy*, or the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests; *risk*, or the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms; and finally, *commitment*, or the extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with publics. (emphasis in original, pp. 24–25)

The Internet has been examined as a fertile ground for such dialogue to occur because of its inherent interactive features (Kent & Taylor, 2002), and therefore a large portion of dialogic research examines dialogic communication available through organizational Web sites. Along these lines, Springston (2001) found that public relations practitioners believe the most effective Web design could aid interaction with one's publics. In their work to enhance dialogic theory, Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) proposed five dialogic principles for forming and maintaining relationships with publics through the Internet: (1) Dialogic Feedback Loop, (2) Usefulness of Information, (3) the Generation of Return Visits, (4) the Intuitiveness/Ease of Interface, and (5) the Rule of Conversation of Visitors. These principles were operationalized through a series of features (see Taylor et al., 2001 for more detail on method and specific features). Simply put, these dialogic principles measured the conversation in terms of opportunity, quality, and responsiveness. Additionally, the principles examined Web sites for how well each site could keep visitors on it and encourage return visits (through technology as well as conversation).

The overwhelming consensus in dialogic studies is that communicators do not take full advantage of the opportunities (Esrock & Leichty, 1999; Kent et al., 2003; McAlister-Greve, 2006). To this point, Kent et al. (2003) asserted "most Web sites fail to effectively maintain open channels of communication with stakeholders" (p. 74). Taylor et al. (2001) studied 100 activist Web sites and found that these groups are not actively participating in two-way communication with their publics even though the sites were better suited for serving member publics than the media. In a study examining 100 congressional Web sites, Taylor and Kent (2004) found politicians' sites to be one-way communication channels void of dialog. McAlister-Greve (2006) studied dialogic features

on community college Web sites and found schools scored low on conservation of visitors and the dialogic loop. Furthermore, follow-up user testing revealed that this lack of response in the dialogic loop component frustrated users.

Even so, there are some promising results for practitioners with regard to dialogic communication. Kent et al. (2003) found that the more dialogically oriented an organization “appears,” the more likely that organization is to actually respond to stakeholder questions. Seltzer and Mitrook (2007) found more dialogic features present in an organization’s blog than their Web site, concluding such social media tools allowed more effective, ethical, two-way communication and relationship-building than standard Web sites. McAlister-Greve (2006) asserted that dialogic communication through an organizational Web site would be most effective during the early part of a relationship. Indeed, practitioners do recognize the opportunities of dialogic communication via the Web, but find themselves limited by technical expertise or manpower to “keep up” with queries from the organization’s site (Taylor & Kent, 2004; McAlister-Greve, 2006).

To date, little research has examined the user reaction to these dialogic principles and communication. Furthermore, even fewer have examined dialogic communication outside of the realm of traditional public relations to analyze such interactive communication in strategic political communication. This remains a limitation in furthering theory. In order to begin work in this area (soliciting user reactions to and interaction with dialogic features), this study focuses on a single feature that is assumed to be dialogic, based on what previous literature outlines as being high in dialogic features. From there, user interaction and dialogue within this feature are examined to provide a first look at how successful a specific tool can be in increasing dialogic communication with publics.

Online Strategic Political Communication

According to Taylor and Kent (2004), “The Internet and the WWW can theoretically improve relationships between elected officials and their constituents” (p. 60). Historically, candidates have used the Internet as a strategic tool for more than a decade since the 1996 campaign (Selnow, 1998). While the look of the campaign Web site has evolved since these early days, sites seem still to graphically mirror one another during a campaign cycle (Banwart, 2002); their main purpose appears to provide information to voters and mobilize them (Banwart, 2002; Endres & Warnick, 2004; Tedesco, 2004). That said, campaign Web sites are a strategically different campaign tactic, as research finds campaigns utilize different online-offline appeal strategies (Banwart, 2002) and issues focus (Sweetser, Golan, & Wanta, 2008).

Early candidate use of campaign Web sites left much to be desired regarding the quality of content and interactivity, but online campaigning has advanced

and quickly integrated Web-based tools since the 2004 presidential election. Scholars often criticize campaigns' early use of technology tools on grounds that campaigns were not harnessing the true potential of the tools. For example, Tedesco (2004) said early campaign Web sites were nothing more than brochure-like content posted on the Web and Taylor and Kent (2004) confirmed Tedesco's findings, saying these Web sites were simply used for information dissemination rather than as a means for building dialog. Stromer-Galley (2000) criticized campaign use of interactivity on sites and found staffers to generally and pervasively avoid it, while Trammell and Williams found candidate use of e-mail messages/newsletters were not properly targeting publics or tapping into the viral nature of the tool (Trammell & Williams, 2004; Williams & Trammell, 2005; Williams, 2006). Further, Stromer-Galley and Baker (2006) accused Howard Dean's blog as being nothing more than a façade of interactivity.

Indeed, it appears that even if dialogic features were introduced into campaign sites, they were not incorporated in the spirit of truly encouraging dialogue or strategically communicating. These findings are not surprising, as even though dialogue with one's publics through such interactive features can lead to an increase in public satisfaction and a feeling of greater involvement among publics (Kent & Taylor, 2002), incorporating features that truly enhance dialogue come with many risks.

Even with these growing pains, online campaigning has becoming an increasingly important part of the political selection process, especially as young people become more involved in politics. Weaver Lariscy, Sweetser, and Tinkham (2007) found generational differences among four age cohorts regarding what one considered to be political involvement. In their survey of people aged 18–85 years old, the researchers saw a clear trend where younger cohorts were more likely than their older cohorts to perceive online dialogic communication activities like searching for a candidate/political information on the Web, adding a candidate as a Facebook friend, or watching a political viral video on a site like YouTube to be a viable form of political involvement. With this changing definition of political involvement, campaigns must meet the needs of coming generations in order to successfully court their votes. As Carpini (2000) suggests, "if part of the reason young adults tend to eschew politics is the unwillingness or inability of political elites and organized groups to effectively reach them, the Internet provides opportunities for increasing their ability to do so" (p. 347).

Social Media Campaigning

Social media, often referred to as Web 2.0, is centered around a concept of a *read-write* Web, where the online audience moves beyond passive viewing of Web content to actually contributing to the content. While the initial set of dialogic features did not include such specific audience participation measures,

recent studies have updated the method to include blogs and social media content (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Traynor, Poitevint, Bruni, Stiles, Raines, Clay, Little, & Sweetser, 2008). The audience-initiated content contributions include interactivity, the ability to tailor a site's presentation on the individual level, and opportunities for the audience to actually create or contribute content on the site. The term *social media* describes a set of technology tools that are just as they sound — mediated opportunities for bringing people together and encouraging social networking and dialogic communication. Tools such as blogs, wikis, and social networking sites like Facebook or MySpace are considered social media.

During the primary season leading up to the 2004 presidential election, candidates adopted one social media tool in particular, at unprecedented rate, to further their strategic communication goals. Blogs became such an important part of a candidate's Web presence that campaigns incorporated "blog" into the main site navigation (Trammell et al., 2006; Trammell, 2007). Site design moved toward this in-vogue "blog-like" design where the entire site ascetics mirrored blogs (Papacharissi, 2004).

Many studies examined blogs in the 2004 election cycle, focusing on traditional content such as issue coverage, negative campaigning, targeted audiences, and interactivity. Beginning during the Democratic primary leading up to John Kerry's nomination, 6 of the 10 candidates vying for the Democratic nomination adopted blogs and four of these campaigns made "blog" a main navigation link throughout their entire site (Trammell et al., 2006). Stromer-Galley and Baker (2006) note that candidate Howard Dean was the first to popularize the use of a blog and often made more headlines for his campaign's Web strategy than his issue stance. Trammell et al. (2006) reported that:

The campaign staff used the blogs as a means to achieve three main goals: (a) to make the readers feel part of the campaign by directly communicating with them (25%) and providing daily updates on the candidate and his campaign staff (record-of-the-day type of stories, 22.2%); (b) to publicize the candidate's media appearances (25.8%), speeches (20.8%), and endorsements (22.6%); and (c) to encourage donations (15.7%) and involvement on part of the public (12.5%). (p. 31)

Looking at the interactivity used on these early campaign blogs, Stromer-Galley and Baker (2006) frame the technology as causing both joy and sorrow for the campaigns. The researchers found that blogs were a cause for celebration because of the interactive nature of the technology, but created problems when this interactivity was proven only to be a façade. Dean's campaign, for instance, merely made the tools available but ignored the input from supporters on the blog. This is an example of integrating a strategic communication tactic, but not using the tool appropriately. Trammell et al. (2006) support such findings with their data, as they found interactivity more prevalent in text (rhetorical devices asking

participants to interact) rather than technology (hyperlinks, feedback mechanism, ability to tailor Web site for each user).

Sweetser Trammell (2007) analyzed blog posts targeted to young voters by 2004 presidential candidates Bush and Kerry and concluded that even though social media is more popular and used by young people, the candidates were not effectively targeting this group in what could be considered "their (young people's) space." Only a quarter of the posts that were targeted to young people on these two blogs made political statements (27.4%) and the most common appeal strategy was to attack the opponent's record. Examining such negative messages on the two major candidates' blogs, Trammell (2006) analyzed the blog posts from a functional theory approach and found that 78.8% of the political statements that discussed an opponent contained an attack against him and attacks focused on issue instead of image. Of the political statements, campaigns employed the logical appeal (63.6%) most frequently, followed by source credibility (54.4%) and emotional (24.4%) appeals (Trammell, 2006, p. 404).

Beyond blogs, little academic research has been published regarding campaign use of other types of social media. However, given Wells and Dudash's (2007) national focus group findings that the two most popular sources for political knowledge among young people is talking to others (28.5%) and the Internet (15%), it seems likely that this Internet generation would be interested in the informal, conversational dialogic campaign communication that is facilitated through social network sites like Facebook. Furthermore, the focus group findings revealed that young people like to remove the "middle man," which they see as the media, when getting information about a campaign but see direct candidate communication (such as performance/messages in a debate) more "real" than prepared campaign materials (Wells & Dudash, 2007).

Based on this rationale, the substantial importance of the 2006 campaign cycle as a "first opportunity" for candidates to participate in a student-originated site, and the literature that documents both increasing frequency and impact of Internet communication in campaigns, this study seeks to answer one broad research question that includes several subissues: How are the primarily young persons who wrote on candidate walls during the 2006 midterm election using the medium? Are they primarily interacting with the candidate in a personal manner? Are they having conversations with each other about the candidate? Are their comments more positively or negatively valenced, about the candidate, the opponent? Are they expressing issue positions and if so, about what issues?

METHOD

In order to explore these questions, this study employed quantitative content analysis to study the individual wall comments on campaigning candidates'

Facebook walls during the 2006 midterm election. Typical dialogic studies use the entire site or blog as a unit of analysis (Kent & Taylor, 2001; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Traynor et al., 2008) to determine the number of dialogic features a site hosts. However, given that all of the communication within Facebook occurred in a standard “fill in the blank” profile type page with the same number of features possible, there would be little variation if this traditional method were used for all of the candidate Facebook profiles. Furthermore, given that this study was more concerned with the audience reaction to this obvious type of dialogic communication, it adopted a different method of analysis. Here, the mere Facebook profile page is instead assumed to be a dialogic feature with great potential. From there, the focus of the analysis on the actual comments left on the candidate’s walls making the wall posting the unit of analysis. As an early study of the use of such social network sites in political discourse and user reaction to a specific dialogic feature, the results are primarily descriptive.

Sample

Campaigns were identified from the *New York Times*’ listing of candidates in “key races” during the 2006 midterm election cycles. Of these races, there were 32 Senate and 56 House seats across 18 states with Facebook pages. The researchers used this list to search for candidates within Facebook to determine if the candidate had a Facebook profile. There were 87 candidates with profiles. The candidate profile page and all wall comments were archived immediately after the polls closed in each state on Election Day. Third party candidates (Green, Independent, Libertarian) were eliminated from this analysis leaving a total of 33 Republican and 34 Democratic candidates. In sum, for these candidates there were 5,735 total wall comments and all comments were analyzed.

Categories

The categories in this analysis were developed to examine basic demographics of the commenter (gender, school network affiliation, in/out-of-state in relation to the candidate, etc.) and the content of the wall posting, to gauge reaction to dialogic communication features such as social networking. Only manifest content was considered in the coding.

In looking at the content, several subcategories were created based on other analyses, such as previous work examining social media content like blogs. For example, the roots of dialogic theory lie in rhetoric and, as such, reference to one’s self and others factors into measuring dialog, relationship, and connection established or assumed by the communicator (for more detail, see Buber, 1970; Kaplan, 1994; Arnett & Arneson, 1999). The more personal the address to the candidate (first name only vs. formal title), the more human the commenter

presumably sees the candidate. In this regard, reference to the candidate was dichotomously analyzed separately—did the commenter refer to the candidate by first name only, last name only, full name, formal title (e.g., Mr. Smith or Senator Jones), or referring to the candidate as “you”?

Much political discourse in other previously examined social media spaces, such as blogs, has shown that conversations develop between the commenters, rather than solely being messages between the candidate and commenter. Given this possibility for other wall commenters to respond to a comment, comments were reviewed to determine whether they were a reply to a previous wall comment, i.e., creating a “conversation” on the wall (item asked as question and coded dichotomously as yes/no). Presence of this would point to two dialogic principles: generation of return visits and conservation of visitors, which both encourage people to check back to see if someone has responded to their wall comment. Certainly, dialogic communication ideally occurs between the organization and its publics, but social media experts argue that allowing publics to communicate with one another on the organization’s own space enhances the conversation and signals the organizations is listening (Scoble & Israel, 2006).

Coders were asked to classify the type of relationship based on the text of the comment. To do so, a four-level familiarity system was devised of two “formal” levels and two “friendly” levels. Ranging from very formal to very friendly, the levels were formal, acquaintance, friend, and close friend. If the candidate was not mentioned at all, coders were able to mark that as such. Strict definitions in the codebook guided coders on making proper determinations for this variable and several examples were provided for each category to assist in the determination process.

The quality of comment was coded as either being a “shallow,” “neutral,” or “complex/well-developed” comment. In this three-level classification variable, coders were instructed to look for cues such as full sentences, spelling, grammar, and the content of the message itself. A quick and simple “Katherine rocks!” would be coded as shallow, where as a more developed comment explaining why the commenter supports a certain issue would be complex. Tone was also coded on a standard three-level system as being positive, neutral, or negative toward the candidate on whose wall the comment was posted.

Regarding the actual message content, items were reviewed for theme. A three-level theme categorization system asked if comments were “support,” “horserace,” or “issue” related themes. Additionally, the topic of the wall post was measured dichotomously using a list similar to that which was employed by Trammell and Williams (Sweetser Trammell, 2007; Trammell, 2006; Trammell et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2005) in their studies, asking if comments discussed candidate advertisements, media, support, get out the vote, and so forth.

Coding Process

The researchers created a comprehensive codebook to provide coders training and reference materials during the coding process. The codebook mirrored the codesheet exactly and provided specific guidance and examples from the wall comments for coders to aid in making accurate determinations for each variable. Coders were first trained during a three-hour session. During this session, each variable on the codesheet was explained and examples from the candidate wall comments were provided to give prospective coders a reference point for the variable. After familiarizing prospective coders with the codesheet and codebook, those in the session coded several items as a group, allowing the trainer to verbally reconcile errors. Then, each prospective coder was given several items to code on her/his own. When the prospective coder was able to code within the researcher-determined reliability standards, coders were cleared to code. Coders were dispatched items weekly and they coded them through an online code sheet. The coding process took approximately eight weeks. Items to be coded were accessed through the CD ROM archive of wall comments that each coder was issued after he/she had been cleared to code.

After initial training, a random set of items was selected from each coder each week and analyzed for intercoder reliability using Holsti's formula measuring the percentage of agreement. Differences were reconciled during the process. In total, approximately 8% of the total items analyzed were reviewed by a master coder and the overall intercoder reliability across all categories was approximately 0.85.

RESULTS

Candidates and Commenters

The 5735 comments represent individuals from every state where there was an election. More than a thousand of the comments were made on walls of U.S. House candidates ($\underline{n} = 1012$; 17.6%) and the majority ($\underline{n} = 4723$; 82.3%) were made on the walls of U.S. Senate candidates. The Senate wall comments were rather evenly divided between Republicans ($\underline{n} = 2739$; 44.7%) and Democrats ($\underline{n} = 2632$; 45.8%). In looking at Senate election results, every Republican Senate candidate lost his/her election and seven of eight Democrats won. In the House races, Democratic candidates won 11 seats, shifting the Congressional balance of power to their party for the last two years of the Bush presidency. In comments left on House candidate walls, Democratic candidates accounted for 550 wall posts, whereas Republican candidates accounted for 462 wall comments. See Table 1 for party demographics.

The majority of commenters write on walls of candidates in their own states ($\underline{n} = 2951$; 51.4%), but 31.4% ($\underline{n} = 1798$) write on walls of candidates in other

TABLE 1
Walls of Political Candidates on
Facebook in the 2006 Midterm Election

<i>Overall (N = 5735)</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>Democrat</i>
House	462	550
Senate	2,739	2,632

states.¹ While some of these appear to be “get out the vote” oriented and often from party loyalists, many are also from students who attend school in a state other than their home, but still support and often vote for their home district or state candidate. Commenters are 3:1 male to female. Fully 77.2% ($n = 4425$) comments come from males, while 22.3% ($n = 1280$) are written by females. See Table 2 for descriptive results of commenters and content.

The researchers began collecting comments on September 1, 2006 and placed comments in archives on November 8, the day after the election. Slightly less than a quarter (22.7%) of all comments were posted in September; 41.9% were posted during October; and 35.4% were posted in the one week in November leading to the election. The largest single frequency of comments ($n = 413$; 7.2%) were posted election day, November 7. The date with the second highest number of postings was November 6 ($n = 349$; 6.0%).

Perceived Relationship

Given that dialogic communication is related to relationships, the perceived relationship the commenter was analyzed for an indication of a parasocial relationship with the candidate through the wall post. This is revealed in part by how the candidate is referred to, if at all, in the comment, by how the commenter refers to him/herself, by the intended audience, and by whether the comment is part of an ongoing conversation with other commenters. For example, when referring to the candidate in the wall comment, 30.2% ($n = 1732$) use the interpersonal “you;” this is followed in frequency by fully 20.8% ($n = 1194$) who refer to the candidate exclusively by his or her first name. In descending order of frequency, using the candidate’s last name only accounts for 16.7% ($n = 958$) of references, using first and last names accounts for 9.9% ($n = 570$). A small percentage (5.7%, $n = 325$) speaks of the candidate as “he” or “she;” and the smallest number of references uses a formal title (5.4%, $n = 312$).

Further examination of reference to the candidate was done by sorting reference categories based on gender. Only those who referred to the candidate were used for this analysis. Overall, both males and females are rather personal

¹Location of commenter could not be determined for 986 comments (17.2%).

TABLE 2
 Commenters on Candidates' Facebook Walls in
 the 2006 Midterm Election

<i>Location of Commenter in Relation to Candidate</i>	
In-state	51.5% (\underline{n} = 2951)
Out-of-State	31.4 (\underline{n} = 1798)
<i>Commenter Gender</i>	
Male	77.2% (\underline{n} = 4425)
Female	22.3 (\underline{n} = 1280)
<i>Reference to Candidate</i>	
"you"	30.2% (\underline{n} = 1732)
"he" or "she"	5.7 (\underline{n} = 325)
First name	20.8 (\underline{n} = 1194)
Last name only	16.7 (\underline{n} = 958)
Full name	9.9 (\underline{n} = 570)
Formal title (Senator or Mr.)	5.4 (\underline{n} = 312)
<i>Wall Conversation</i>	
Responded to previous comment	14.9% (\underline{n} = 855)
<i>Closeness Classification</i>	
Formal role (very formal)	19.8% (\underline{n} = 1135)
Acquaintance (formal)	24.3 (\underline{n} = 1393)
Friend (friendly)	28.7 (\underline{n} = 1645)
Close friend (very friendly)	3.3 (\underline{n} = 189)
Candidate not mentioned at all	22.4 (\underline{n} = 1285)
<i>Theme classification</i>	
Support	60.3% (\underline{n} = 3457)
Horserace	10.7 (\underline{n} = 614)
Issue	8.8 (\underline{n} = 505)
Other	10.3 (\underline{n} = 590)
<i>Depth of Comment</i>	
Shallow	56.2% (\underline{n} = 3221)
Neutral	30.9 (\underline{n} = 1774)
Complex/well-developed	12.9 (\underline{n} = 740)
<i>Tone of Comment</i>	
Positive	63.0% (\underline{n} = 3615)
Neutral	18.5 (\underline{n} = 1062)
Negative	13.9 (\underline{n} = 798)
<i>Topic of Comment</i>	
Mention of opponent	16.5%
Testimonial from supporter	7.2
Expression of vote support	6.8
Vote request of other readers	6.3
Point to content on other Web site	5.1
Morality or values	5.0
Targeted to Youth	1.7
Upcoming event	2.4
Media coverage	3.9

(Continued)

TABLE 2
(Continued)

<i>Topic of Commente</i>	
Advertisements	1.8
Fundraising	0.6
Polling data	2.7
Debates	3.0
Speech	1.5
Promotional items	0.6
Endorsement	0.6
Support from other politician	0.4
Support from celebrity	0.2

TABLE 3
Reference to Candidate based on Gender, Network, and Comment Depth

		<i>You</i>	<i>He/She</i>	<i>First Name</i>	<i>Last Name</i>	<i>Full Name</i>	<i>Title</i>
Gender	Male	23.9%	3.2	26.6	23.2	14.5	8.6
	Female	38.1	2.7	27.8	17.4	9.7	4.3
Network	High School	37.2%	4.5	25.8	17.6	10.2	4.7
	College	25.3	3.1	27.4	20.6	14.8	8.6
	Other	38.2	2.9	29.4	8.8	11.8	8.8
Depth	Shallow	30.4%	2.7	27.8	23.2	10.7	5.1
	Neutral	27.6	3.4	28.2	18.8	14.0	8.1
	Complex	14.9	3.5	20.3	23.5	22.1	15.8

with their reference to the candidate, preferring use of the first name and “you” over last name, full name, or title. However, a chi square test found that males referred to the candidate by first name more than any other reference category, but females referred to candidates as “you” the most, $\chi^2(5) = 98.26, p < .001$. See Table 3 for complete comparisons.

Additionally, the differences in reference to the candidate based on commenter network type were examined. Here, the coders classified each commenter’s given network affiliation (e.g., University of Oklahoma, Junction City High School) as either being a high school, college/university, or other. Networks that were classified as *other* were primarily cities (e.g., Washington, DC) or organizations (e.g., U.S. Army). Only those who referred to the candidate were used for this analysis. The overall breakdown of reference to candidate based on network was strikingly similar to gender (see Table 3), with high school commenters relying on “you” and college commenters using more first-name references, $\chi^2(10) = 35.47, p < .001$.

Another indicant of perceived relationship is how the commenter refers to him or herself, and on this commenters are rather evenly divided: just over

half (52.2%, $n=2993$) use a personal pronoun (I, me, we, us) in writing the wall comment, and 47.8% ($n=2742$) use no personal references. Next the intended audience for the posted comments was coded, with a two-level coding system containing the categories of: interpersonal comments addressed to the candidate or broadcast-type comment for a general audience. Again, a fairly even division was observed with 47.9% ($n=2749$) being coded as clearly interpersonal messages to candidates, and 52% ($n=2985$) being broadcast messages. Our last relationship item examined whether the comment is part of an ongoing wall conversational exchange with others; 855 comments (14.9%) are so categorized.

Finally, the coders classified each comment by the type of relationship revealed. Coders were instructed to first classify each comment into one of two broad categories: one more formal the other less formal and more friendly. Next each comment was classified as *formal role* where there is clearly no personal relationship and the candidate is referenced by a more formal salutation; as *acquaintance* which is less formal but still might refer to the candidate by title; as *friend*, which is not overly involving or personal, but might call the candidate by first name; or as *close friend*, where the commenter knows or has met the candidate, gives money, and is the epitome of a strong supporter. The most frequent classification of overall relationship classification is that of friend (28.7%, $n=1645$), followed by acquaintance (24.3%, $n=1393$). The formal role is next with 19.8% ($n=1135$) and close friend accounts for the smallest class (3.3%, $n=189$). The candidate was not mentioned at all (and thus not coded on this variable) by 22.4% ($n=1285$).

General Message Content

Each wall comment was first examined for the presence or absence of any type of disclosure. For example, an issue discussed self-disclosively might mention the commenter's personal experience in Iraq. In all, 392 comments (6.8%) are categorized as self-disclosive on an issue. Some comments are self-disclosive about the writer's feelings; "I will be so terribly happy when Claire wins! I feel so good about her!" More comments self-disclose such emotions than did issues (34%, $n=1952$). Some comments can contain self-disclosure from the writer about the candidate (12.3%, $n=703$): "I met Senator Johnson when he came through town and stopped at Wal-Mart." Finally, some individuals make self-disclosive comments about the campaign itself (6.6%, $n=378$): "I worked all night at campaign headquarters and people are really nervous there."

The next general content issue classifies each comment as to its overall theme. The dominant types of messages among all our wall comments are those of support ("Go George!" "I'm voting for you Claire"). Fully 60.3% ($n=3457$) of all wall comments in the 2006 elections are statements of support. All other types are substantially less in evidence: horseshoe (reports of who is ahead in the polls)

accounts for 10.7% ($\underline{n} = 614$), issues comments account for 8.8% ($\underline{n} = 505$) and "other" includes 10.3% ($\underline{n} = 590$).

The next general message evaluation concerns the depth of the comment. Coders were instructed to classify each comment as: *shallow* (a quick note of few words, like "I'm voting for you," or "You suck"; a comment written in a few seconds typically with little thought); *neutral* (comment a bit longer than shallow, may bring up issue or opponent in quick way); or *complex/well-developed* (long, well thought-out, complex statement; often discuss an issue or argument). More than half of all wall comments posted are classified as shallow (56.2%, $\underline{n} = 3221$), with 30.9% ($\underline{n} = 1774$) neutral, and 12.9% ($\underline{n} = 740$) complex.

To further understand depth, several tests were run to compare depth across categories such as gender, network, and one's reference to categories (using only those who referred to the candidate). For gender, there was not a difference in the rank order of depth as the most popular for both males and females was the shallow comment, followed by neutral, then complex. However, females had more occurrences of shallow comments (61.9%) than males (54.5%), $\chi^2(2) = 29.81, p < .001$. Network ranking of depth occurred similarly, though high school students relied more on shallow comments (62.5%) than college students (55.5%), $\chi^2(4) = 11.82, p < .05$. Looking at depth based on reference to candidate yielded interesting results. For rank order, shallow comments relied most on "you", neutral comments on candidate's first name, and complex candidates on last name, $\chi^2(10) = 173.03, p < .001$. See Tables 3 and 4 for comparisons.

When evaluating message content for valence the study found 30.2% ($\underline{n} = 1734$) contain some type of negative information. The most likely target is the opponent (17%, $\underline{n} = 975$) and an opposing candidate's issue stance (.9%, $\underline{n} = 54$). Other subjects of attack include the candidate him/herself (4.3%, $\underline{n} = 246$), a political party (2.4%, $\underline{n} = 138$), the media (.3%, $N = 19$), or a campaign (.2%, $N = 14$). The category "other," which contained largely random subjects, account for 5% ($n = 288$).

The final general content variable is overall comment tone. The majority of wall comments are positive (63%, $\underline{n} = 3615$), with some neutral (18.5%,

TABLE 4
Depth of Comment based on Gender
and Network

		<i>Shallow</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Complex</i>
Gender	Male	54.5%	31.5	14.0
	Female	61.9	29.0	9.1
Network	High School	62.5%	27.4	10.2
	College	55.0	30.9	14.2
	Other	58.2	30.0	11.8

$n = 1062$) and the smallest percentage are negative (13.9%, $n = 798$). A small percentage (4.5%) could not be coded for overall tone.

Specific Message Content

What are the topics that are being discussed on Facebook walls? Coders coded multiple topics for individual commenters where appropriate. First, just 10.9% ($n = 625$) of comments include mention of any topic; a large majority (89.1%, $n = 5110$) do not. In descending order of frequency of mention, the six most common topics that are mentioned on walls during the 2006 campaign are the opponent (16.5%, $n = 948$), testimonial from supporter (7.2%, $n = 411$), indication of vote support (6.8%, $n = 391$), vote request (6.3%, $n = 362$), pointer to content on Web site or blog (5.1%, $n = 292$), and morality or values (5%, $n = 286$).²

For all negative wall comments, coders classified not only the general object of attack (mentioned previously) but also specific elements of these messages. For example, after the standard categories of subjects (candidate, opponent, party, issue stance, campaign, media) the next most frequent object of attack was “women.” These comments are often made about a female candidate but are sometimes directed to female commenters on Facebook. Thus, the second group that was the victim of attack is “other previous Facebook commenters.” “Liberals” and “conservatives” were also specifically mentioned in attacks.

When the opponent was the object of attack, it was far more likely to be about an image (12.1%, $n = 696$) than an issue position (3.4%, $n = 197$). This pattern holds constant when a political party is attacked, also? (image = 2.1%, $n = 118$; issue = 1.1%, $n = 64$). Please clarify this sentence.

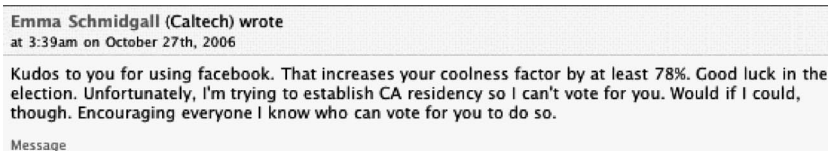
Finally coders were instructed to count the number of issues mentioned based on a list of issues that are frequently talked about in news and candidate discourse. Fully 60.2% of all wall comments make no mention of a specific issue. However, a substantial number of wall-writers do mention one or more issues. Two issues were mentioned by over 2% of commenters: the war in Iraq (2.2%, $n = 127$) and dissatisfaction with government (2.3%, $n = 130$).³

²Other topics include youth target (1.7%), upcoming event (2.4%), media coverage (3.9%), advertisements (1.8%), fundraising/donations (.6%), polling data (2.7%), debates (3%), speech (1.5%), promotional items (.6%), endorsement (.6%), other politician support (.4%), and celebrity support (.2%).

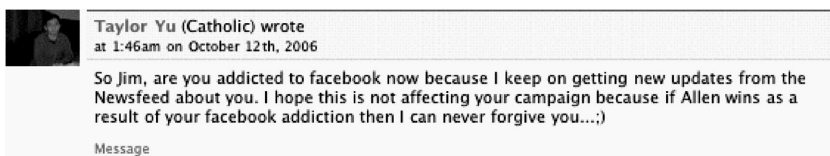
³Other issues include taxes (.8%), budget deficit (.3%), unemployment (.2%), cost of living (.1%), recession/depression (.0, $n = 2$) immigration (.7%), general economy (.7%), job growth (.1%), education (.6%), crime/prison (.2%), health care/insurance (.4%), senior citizens (.1%), poverty/hunger/homeless (.1%), welfare/reform (.2%), environment (.4%), drugs/trafficking/abuse (.1%), satisfaction with government (.1%), ethics/moral decline (1.2%), women’s choice/harassment/equal rights (1.2%), gay marriage/rights (1.0%), gun control (.4%), defense/security (.6%), other foreign policy (.6%), homeland security (.6%), youth/school violence (.0%, $n = 1$), terrorism (.3%).

DISCUSSION

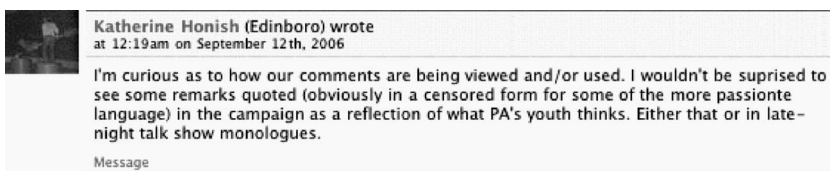
This study aimed to examine how primarily younger-age potential voters responded to a first-time unique opportunity in election history: social network Facebook invited political candidates to have a presence and invite members of the network to have conversations on their walls. This move in itself represented a marked step forward in online dialogic communication in strategic political communication. In some cases, such as this example from Minnesota Democrat Senate candidate Amy Klobuchar's wall, commenters felt that the mere presence of the candidate in Facebook was enough to win people over:



Another comment, this on the wall of Democrat Senate candidate Jim Webb from Virginia, jokingly asked if the candidate was now “addicted” to Facebook:



On the other hand, some commenters were more cynical and wondered what being on Facebook meant for candidates, as this comment to Democrat Senate candidate Bob Casey from Pennsylvania shows:



Even with this criticism, there were more comments voicing support for the fact candidates were on Facebook than cynical ones. This supports our assumption that people see that merely having such a site sets the conditions to encourage dialogic communication.

The numbers of comments and the ongoing nature of conversations in several of the Senate campaigns is striking with more than 4,000 comments were made within eight campaigns. As Scoble and Israel (2006) note, conversations occurring in an organization's social media space signal a willingness for dialogue, even if the organization itself is not as active as the community on the site. To this point, Scoble and Israel discuss the power of one's publics sending motivational and supportive messages to other users on through the organization's online space. For example, this comment on Republican Senate candidate Mike Dewine from Ohio shows how the site users become catalysts among their peers:

Daniel Hurley (Ohio State) wrote
at 1:53am on October 24th, 2006

Facebook election pulse:

Dewine 31%

Brown 68%

Come on everyone, lets get more support for our Senator, get as many friends as possible to help us win the facebook poll, this is our platform, let's send the message that we want Dewine!

Message

While motivations were not examined here and commenters not surveyed, this analysis does allow us to conclude that the numbers and types of comments clearly indicate that for some potential voters writing on candidate walls is an engaging activity—one arguably is as much political communication interaction as reading a pamphlet or several other forms of traditional involvement. To this point, some of these comments offered assistance along the lines of traditional volunteering at a campaign headquarters office. For example, this comment on the wall of Ohio Democrat Senate candidate Sherrod Brown found the commenter notifying the candidate of an error he found in order to help the candidate:

Colin Morris (DePaul) wrote
at 2:22pm on October 7th, 2006

Mr. Brown,
There's a typo at the top of your website today. "The Cleveland Plan Dealer."

I only nitpick to help, I hope. :)

Message

It is interesting that the majority of people who write on candidate walls perceive that they have fairly close relationships with these politicians. While there is not a great deal of self-disclosure about issues or personalities, most commenters see themselves as friends of the candidates. Small numbers use formal titles and roles when referring to candidates, with most preferring a personal pronoun or first name. Our findings indicated that females in particular expressed this closeness, more than males, by their dominant reference to the candidate as "you." Additionally, the finding that as the comment became more in-depth

(moving from shallow to complex), the reference to the candidate became more formal with reliance on referring to the candidate by the last name and full name. This clearly shows two types of commenters: those who come on Facebook to be “friends” with the candidate and treat him or her just like any other Facebook friend, and those that use the social networking space as place to engage in political discourse. The former category is more representative of the communication and expectations found in this analysis.

Traditional dialogic method reviews the responsiveness of the organization to a query the researcher sends. This analysis found very few comments from the candidates themselves responding to the comments left on their walls, with some notable exceptions such as Republican Senate candidate George Allen, Republican House candidate Eric Dickerson from Indiana district 7, and Democrat House candidate Jerry McNerny from California district 11.⁴ Given so few candidates actually engaged in true dialogic communication via their Facebook walls, it was not beneficial to compare comments based on whether they were posted on responsive walls or unresponsive walls. While not the norm, the candidates that did encourage this candidate-to-constituent conversation came back to their own Facebook walls to respond directly to questions posed by commenters on the campaign wall. Interestingly, this action of replying on one’s own wall—rather than replying on the wall of the person to whom one is talking — goes against the normal practices within the social network, however it does allow others to see that the candidate is responding to comments. Even so, as previously mentioned, this act of the candidate replying to comments on his or her own wall was far too few. Sadly, this represents another case where campaigns integrate a dialogic interactive technology as a façade. Indeed, even one comment advised another commenter that the candidates were not really maintaining/reading the Facebook profiles.

Furthermore, regarding the norms within Facebook and lack of candidate response, some commenters would actually draw attention to candidates who were not behaving within the social norms of the space. For instance, Facebook has a feature where one can “poke” another user. This is seen as a fun, less formal means of communication than a wall comment. In the following example, a commenter on Senate Democratic candidate Amy Klobuchar drew attention to the lack of candidate response:

Joe Polzin (Minneapolis / St. Paul, MN) wrote
at 1:38am on October 26th, 2006

Amy, I poked you ages ago. How come you haven't poked me back??? I long for the day I log in and see "You've been poked by Amy Klobuchar." Oh well. I'm voting for you regardless. Best wishes!

Message

⁴Others making comments on their own walls were: Republican Senate candidate Mike Dewine from Ohio, Democrat Senate candidate Bob Casey from Pennsylvania, and Arizona Republican Senate candidate Jon Kyl. These candidates commented, but less than 3 times each.

Similar to previous research on candidate blogs, this data included family members of the candidate getting involved in the social media space. The daughter of Republican House candidate James Walsh from New York district 25 left a comment on her dad's wall on his behalf:



Maureen Walsh (Nazareth) wrote

at 9:41am

I just wanted to thank everyone who has volunteered their time and effort to this campaign. It's nice to know there are so many "Jim Walsh Backers" out there. It's getting down to the wire and there's only one more thing you can do...get out there and VOTE for my Dad, Jim Walsh.

Message - Report

This signals that dialogic communication does not always have to be between the candidate himself, but a proxy such as a family member or campaign staff can also speak for the candidate. Given that transparency is such an important aspect of social media, political communicators should act ethically and properly identify themselves when engaging in conversations online on a candidate's behalf.

Another unexpected finding is that these walls are not just about the candidates. Certainly, the majority of commenters visited and posted a note to the specific candidate hosting the wall. However, there were a handful of "vocal" commenters who would go throughout the entire set of Facebook campaign pages and leave general "get out the vote" mobilization messages. Comments such as these were almost always not partisan in nature; rather, they were general notes reminding others of state deadlines for voting or notifying people of other nonpartisan Facebook groups. For example, this commenter from the Washington, DC, network would post the same comment on every candidate wall (this particular comment from the wall of Republican House candidate Donald Sherwood in the Pennsylvania district 4 race):



Jacob Ritvo (Washington, DC) wrote

at 2:22pm on October 4th, 2006

Check out the new We Will Rock the Vote group at <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2210777127>

There's a link there to our online voter registration tool, which makes registering quick and easy, along with lots of other voting information. We're also putting the finishing touches on some fun election-related events for the group to take place in the upcoming weeks. We're non-partisan and we're reaching out to candidates from all parties so it's up to you to utilize our tools.

Join the group, register to vote, and spread the word!

On November 7th WE WILL ROCK THE VOTE!

Message

Another thing that is noteworthy is that, at least at this early point in time with Facebook in campaigns, the messages are not overly negative. The dominant message theme, across all campaigns, is one of support for the candidate whose wall is being written upon; further, while the large majority of all comments also are shallow in nature ("I'm with you, Joe!) they are an indication of dominantly positive regard and vote support. At a time when political advertising messages are strident and often negative, perhaps wall-writers prefer the quieter, more positive environment found on the social network walls.

This preliminary look at how primarily young people use the opportunity to write comments to candidates is a small glance, but indicative nonetheless, of support for extension of the Hibbing-Thiese Morris hypothesis about what Americans want from their government, and may want from campaigns (Lipsitz et al., 2005). If there are in fact two distinct subpopulations — one highly involved with issues of governance and elections and one responsible participant with minimalist involvement — both groups are represented in this study. Clearly the majority of commenters are minimalists. They write primarily short, shallow, personal statements generally of support, such as this comment on Democrat House candidate John Hall in the New York district 19 race:



However, for the much smaller percentage of commenters who want to express well-developed thoughts about complex issues or experiences, Facebook provides them a venue as well—and, in fact, some of them did just this. This supports the idea that social media offer unique opportunities for candidates (and governing officials) to interact with constituents at the political communication involvement level most desired by individual constituents.

Limitations

Due to time and labor constraints related to coding a very large set of comments, two decisions were made that limit this study. First, it did not include independent candidates in this analysis, including one U.S. Senator (Joe Lieberman), who ran as an independent and won. Data from all independents are currently being coded and analyzed. Second, this examination of wall comments only without the candidate profiles or candidate responses (in some cases) to wall comments left on supporter (noncandidate) Facebook walls. As with the independent candidates, this data is archived and will soon be analyzed for a future study.

Future Research

A logical extension of this work is to rectify the two previously cited limitations—including all candidates, not just those of each major party—and including analysis of candidate profiles and candidate responses to wall comments. Additionally, the researchers plan to extend this analysis in a slightly different form into the 2008 presidential primaries. Finally, in order to come closer to understanding the impact of dialogic communication, scholars should move toward an experimental method comparing predetermined responsive and nonresponsive social media sites.

CONCLUSION

Candidates in every election cycle need to recognize the power and unique strengths and opportunities that social media provide. Social media like Facebook allow supporters to communicate with each other as well as establish what they largely perceive to be a personal friendship with the candidate. This network facilitation requires little work by a campaign or government entity but produces tremendous potential rewards. Second, there was a time when both scholarly and conventional wisdom seemed to conclude that the greatest strengths of Internet communication in political campaigns was for fundraising, developing mailing lists, conducting “get out the vote” drives and reaching highly segmented targeted groups. This study clearly supports that young users of social media are not interested in fundraising; they are interested in the establishment of relationships with candidates and fellow supporters. At times they are interested in lively disagreement with supporters of opponents! There is a substantial use of social media, as demonstrated here, to support its continued use to motivate primarily young voters to “go vote.”

One thing that struck us as surprising is the number of candidates who did *not* take advantage of the Facebook invitation. Sometimes they were uncontested or minimally contested races; however, to overlook this free way to build a mailing list of constituents seems almost uncaring. If a politician’s goal, even an entrenched incumbent, is to establish, maintain, and build upon relationships within a district, this was a golden opportunity to contact hundreds, perhaps thousands, of young voters, for whom this may have been their first voting experience. It is surprising that some Senators and Congressional representatives let this opportunity slide by. Such an opportunity will likely not be bypassed in the future.

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