Technology

Canuck election sites suck

But that may not have as big an impact on the results as you'd think

By Joseph Wilson

The web is all a-twitter over the phenomenon that is Barack Obama. I mean that literally: Obama has his own Twitter feed, a site that sends 140-character mini-blog postings to his fans (83,000 and counting). Predictably, John "what's the Internet?" McCain has recently got on board but only has about 2,000 people following his feed.

This isn't surprising. Obama has built a reputation as a master at harnessing social networking sites like LinkedIn, Facebook and YouTube. McCain lags behind, seemingly baffled by the power of the Web. He has 339,000 supporters on Facebook, compared to Obama's 1.9 million. McCain doesn't even hide the fact that his Facebook page is written by someone else; his resumé is written in the third person.

Before our own election on October 14, a similar battle will be fought on these Web platforms. Much ink has been spilt over the quality of the official party websites and to what extent they've embraced social networking. Harper leads the charge on this front, with a Twitter feed, pages on Facebook and MySpace, et al.

Dion is playing the McCain role here, overwhelmed by the demands placed on him in the virtual world and its up-to-the-second updates and hyperlinks. I couldn't find an authentic Dion page on MySpace or Facebook, though there are lots of groups devoted to getting Dion elected.

Media pundits look at these trends and predict doom for the Luddite politicians who don't understand the power of the new media. But is online organization really that important?

In the U.S., over 20 per cent of people still don't have computers in their homes. Only 65 per cent of Americans have access to the Internet. Of these millions of surfers, the vast majority are sending e-mails or checking movie times. The demographic driving the popularity of the current wave of social networking activity is overwhelmingly young and liberal.

It turns out that this is also the demographic that doesn't vote. In the epic Gore vs. Bush election of 2000, youth turnout was 36 per cent.

In the last presidential election, the media speculated that John Kerry's ability to harness the Web would allow him to beat Bush handily. He didn't, of course, but not for lack of Web presence. Pundits in the media tend to be a self-reflexive bunch, and didn't notice what was happening outside their own blogosphere.

Organizing people in church basements all across the Midwest was enough to narrowly win W. a second term, and it just might be enough to carry McCain into the White House later this fall. Technophile writers like me like to think that what we write about is terribly important, but the fact is, there are other factors to consider, and we shouldn't blinker ourselves to that fact.

In the Canadian battle, Harper's presence online isn't too much of a cause for concern. Dion should be more worried about the support Harper is currently getting from middle-class suburbanites worried about climbing gas prices. As it stands, only 645 people follow Harper's every move through his Twitter feed. That's less than the margin of error for most ridings.

Online presence won't make or break an election. It's becoming more important day by day, but in the end, good old-fashioned campaigning will make the biggest difference. Oh, and don't forget the attack ads.

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