

Thomas J. Johnson & David D. Perlmutter:
New Media, Campaigning and the 2008 Facebook Election
New York: Routledge. 2011.

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The social media revolution has created a media world so different from the one we knew before that much of the media research done prior to 2005 is of historical value at best. Social media have changed how we keep friends and family updated; receive news, entertainment, and opinions; do politics; and are persuaded to consume.

The rapid changes in media consumption have created a desperate need for research and theories that can explain the use and impact of Web 2.0 media platforms. Facebook has only existed as a public medium for approximately five years,¹ but the company claims to host close to one billion accounts.² Ever since Barak Obama and his team proved the value of social media during the 2008 presidential election campaign in the USA, political movements around the world have successfully used social media to communicate with peers and other stakeholders.

This anthology contains reprints of five articles concerning the use of online social-interactive media (OSIM) in connection with the 2008 presidential election, written by scholars from nine American universities and first printed in *Mass Communication and Society* November/December 2010. Adopted in the anthology from A. Bruns (2008, p. 3),³ the term OSIM refers to media in which “boundaries between producers and consumers are eliminated so that the users create content for each other in communities that rely on user collaboration and an ethic of openly sharing user creations”. OSIMs include not only social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn but also micro-blogs such as Twitter,

video-sharing sites such as YouTube, and online discussion forums. This book's researchers have examined the phenomenon from different perspectives.

Regas and Kiouisis use an agenda-setting approach. They have studied the extent to which frames from the political activism group MoveOn.org and from the official Obama campaign were adopted by citizen activists producing videos for a competition called *Obama in 30 Seconds* and by journalists writing in the partisan weekly *The Nation*. All of these communication platforms supported Obama, but to what degree did these political friends adopt one another's agenda when it came to transferring issues and attributing salience? The empirical data in this interesting study contains 186 advertisements and 369 news stories, and the researchers found that the Democratic agenda-setting dance was not always a smooth waltz. The strongest relationship was found between *Nation* news stories and *Obama in 30 Seconds* videos produced by citizen activists. From my perspective, this finding indicates that the journalists at *The Nation* had a fairly good sense of what interested Democratic voters.

Regas' and Kiouisis' article could provide an excellent platform for classroom discussions about agenda setting in the 2010s because it illustrates the complexity of the question of agenda-setting power even within a group of media explicitly supporting the same candidate. As the editors write, this study demonstrates "that agenda setting is alive and well and can be extended to political activist communication efforts and consumer-generated content" (p. 5). They also write:

As the internet has equaled newspapers as a source of information and people are getting information from a host of sources beyond traditional media, it no longer makes sense to talk about a *single* media agenda. Similarly, users have more information to choose from as well as more control over what sources they will search out, indicating that the public will increasingly have influence on the media agenda (p.5).

Hanson, Haridakis, Cunningham, Sharma, and Ponder look at the relationship between social networking sites, video-sharing sites, political blogs, and political cynicism from a uses and gratifications perspective. They asked 467 university students in a lecture room to answer 168 questions. Based on this data, they conclude that media use is not a major contributor to political cynicism. In this study, video-sharing sites and political blogs were unrelated to political cynicism, while time spent using social networking sites for political information seemed to lower political cynicism, which probably has to do with the interpersonal nature of social networking sites since the researchers also found a lower level of cynicism among students who had been motivated to use online social-interactive media for companionship. Kushin and Yamamoto also asked university students about their use of online social media, attempting to measure political efficacy and situational political involvement. In this case, however, the completion rate was less than 11 pct., making the results less relevant.

The final two articles in this collection examine user-generated content in Facebook groups, and both contain interesting discussions and methodological experiments. Woolley, Limperos, and Oliver found 541 Facebook groups affiliated with Barak Obama and 536 affiliated with John McCain. For each candidate, they selected the four groups with the most members and then undertook a systematic random sample of a further 135 groups for each candidate. Their findings confirmed media reports that groups focused on Obama were more active than groups focused on McCain and that comments in Facebook groups supporting either of the candidates tended to be partisan and polarizing. The most interesting finding was that comments in Obama's groups were generally more positive than those in McCain's groups. Woolley et al. write:

Overall, the most significant finding here is not just that Barak Obama seemed to have more positive support than John McCain within Facebook groups but that groups which featured McCain were overwhelmingly negative. (p. 95)

Unfortunately, the findings in some of these studies are not as interesting as the methodological discussions. However, if we combine the findings from Limperos' and Oliver's study with insights acquired from studies using other methodologies, the end result could prove enlightening. For example, Fernandes, Giurcanu, Bowers, and Neely studied the political dialog in nine Facebook groups created by students in seven swing states. They found 562 wall posts, of which less than ten pct. were pro-McCain posts. It was thus obvious that students supporting Obama were more active than students supporting McCain. Fortunately, Fernandes et al. share with us some information about the type of content on these sites. They write:

Students are using Facebook to facilitate dialog and civic political involvement [...] Political discussions related to the political civic process, policy issues, campaign information, candidate issues, and acquisition of campaign products dominate across groups and election seasons [...] In the primary season, pro-Obama groups focus mostly on short-term topics (candidate image and campaign issues), whereas pro-McCain groups focus mostly on long-term topics (partisanship and group affiliation). The overall findings of this study suggest that youth online communities actively follow campaigns and post comments that foster the political dialog and civic engagement. (p. 102)

Even if the actual findings in these studies may be unsurprising, the researchers should be praised for their efforts to find solid methodological grounds for content analyses of online social-interactive media since many researchers find this content fluid and difficult to handle. As scholars in this field of study, we are confronted by numerous methodological challenges; this small collection of articles contributes to our reflections. However, it would have been excellent if the findings from such quantitative studies (mostly numbers) had been presented in context. For instance, Facebook dialogs could have been described using

qualitative methods such as the analysis of narratives, arguments, metaphors, and implied author roles.

Another issue I would like to raise here involves academic work in general but became strikingly clear during my reading of this small collection. International journals in the field of media and communications research generally require a thorough literature review. This is true for this book's articles as well. However, online social-interactive media is by its very nature a relatively new field of study, meaning that the relevant literature is limited, and scholars thus tend to include studies that seem too old to make sense in the present context— for instance, studies concerning the characteristics of internet users over ten years ago (p. 34, p. 61, p. 86).

The *Mass Communication and Society* journal is closely linked with the Mass Communication and Society Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), and special issue calls for manuscripts are published at <http://aejmc.net/mcs/symposiacall.php>. The acceptance rate for the journal is generally low,⁴ and quality expectations are thus high.

In this case, I especially recommend the article by Regas and Kiouis for use in classroom discussions. In addition, most of the articles in the collection contain interesting methodological discussions for scholars in the field.

Notes

1. September 2006 "Facebook expands registration so anyone can join", <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?timeline>. Consulted on January 16, 2012.
2. Facebook, Statistics, <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>. Consulted on January 16, 2012.
3. Bruns, A (2008). *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and beyond: From production to produsage*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
4. MC&S News, fall 2011, p.7, <http://aejmc.net/mcs/newsletters/fall2011.pdf>. Consulted on January 16, 2012.

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