Social Media and its Influence on Politics

By Suzana P. Sousa

Table of Contents

Abstract

This work-in-progress that contains five summarized chapters of a book that discusses the influence of social media on politics in the United States. This book describes the impact that social media have on U.S. politics and how politicians use it to do their jobs.

Introduction

Social media is fairly a new phenomenon. Social media is the concept of having an electronic platform where people can interact and have conversations about a wide variety of common subjects using computers. The idea started roughly four to five years ago around in 2004 when Internet websites like MySpace.com and Blogger.com were created and allowed users from all over the world to interact with each other.

Since year the early 1990s, the Internet has grown into a network of nearly 180 million websites[1] by the end of 2008. Many of these websites are news and gossip blogs where people can write their opinions and thoughts about news items and other subjects and readers can leave comments about what they think about the article or information they read on these given sites. This ability to comment on information and news, in a way, has changed how news is disseminated and how politics works in the United States and internationally has been run.

It would be fair to assume that most of the information in this project has come from blogs, because that's is the largest growing segment of where interest is held. Usually it's the social media websites that post news about social media or new media. It's only up to maybe a year ago that mainstream news media like CNN, have taken part of the new media by having their audience watch the news flow by offering their opinions on websites like Facebook, MySpace and

Twitter.com MSNBC have recently followed suit using contributions from Twitter and having their anchors getting an account and updating their status daily to let their followers know what they're up to.

Although the involvement of this new media form is accepted by many of those use it or have been involved with it somehow, there are still many people out there who think that it's a waste of time and that politicians shouldn't take part of a fad like CT First Selectman, Jim Rivers who says blogging is "… a way for people to be anonymous and misbehave."[33] However, many are taking part in this new media to reach out to their constituents in a way that wasn't possible 15 years ago.

And we can tell by the last Presidential Election in 2008, that social media outlets had greatly impacted who won. Many people caught on and now use Facebook and MySpace as part of their campaigns for state, local and national elections.

Chapter One: Social Media

What is Social Media?

Just about everyone who has an Internet connection and has searched online, either through Google or Yahoo, has probably stumbled upon a social media website. But what exactly is social media, and why is there so much confusion about what it means?

Mark 'Rizzn' Hopkins, a writer for Mashable.com, one of PC magazine's favorite 100 blogs[2], tries to clarify the meaning of what social media really is. He tries to explain, "When you look at it in context of the terms "new media," "old media," and "social media," there's some implied context. The media part of that doesn't refer to the message, but the methods by which that message is conveyed." He goes on to say that, "Social Media is a term that encompasses the platforms of New Media, but also implies the inclusion of systems like FriendFeed, Facebook, and other things typically thought of as social networking." He says that, "The idea is that they are media platforms with social components and public communication channels."[3]

Hopkins quotes Bryan Eisenberg in "Understanding and Aligning the Value of Social Media" on GrokDotCom.com. Eisenberg says," The biggest problem I have with the term "social media" is that it isn't media in the traditional

sense." He continues by saying that, "Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and all the others I don't have the word count to mention, aren't media; they are platforms for interaction and networking. All the traditional media — print, broadcast, search, and so on — provide platforms for delivery of ads near and around relevant content." Eisenberg says that, "Social media are platforms for interaction and relationships, not content and ads."[4]

The next time you're on Amazon.com, and you write a book review for a book you've bought and read, you'll notice that you are participating in a social media platform. The ability to actually write your opinion in a text box of an item is you're unique contribution to the world on whether the item on, this particular website, Amazon.com, is good or bad. Like Eisenberg stated, "social media are platforms for interaction" which is why a lot of websites like Wal-Mart, Target, and BestBuy, now cater to this idea of letting their customers review products before purchasing and rating the service quality on their website.

David Meerman Scott, writer for EContent magazine, wrote in the article "Asking the Right Questions about Social Media" that, "...tools of social media are frequently integrated into company websites. For example, a terrific video could be hosted by YouTube.com and embedded into a company's online media room. This valuable content would not be counted in these sorts of surveys because users did not go to the YouTube site directly to view it; they may not even realize they were viewing "user-generated content" (aka social media)."[5]

Social Networking

Social networking websites like Facebook and MySpace let their members create a profile page that showcases what their likes, dislikes are and upload photos of themselves. On both of these sites, friends can comment about things they've posted or anything else on the site. Flickr is a photo blog, powered by Yahoo, where anyone can sign up and post photos they've taken and the general public can comment on the photos and their favorites. YouTube is a website made up of user generated videos about anything and everything that also gives the public the opportunity to express their opinions on all subjects.

Youtube.com was especially resourceful during the 2008 presidential debates, by partnering up with CNN. YouTube created a profile of the candidates on their website where people could respond their questions to the presidential candidates by video.[6] From there, CNN and YouTube chose the videos they thought would be most interesting for the candidates to answer. This is just one way for social media to influence the political scene in Washington D.C. Never before was this technology available for those interested in public office to be questioned, not by news reporters or anchors on television, but by real, people around the United States.

During March of 2009, a new website called Twitter got a lot of attention. Twitter is a micro-blogging website where you can write about what you are

doing or thinking using 140 characters or less. It's similar to a text message on a cell phone. An individual written post is known as a 'tweet'. On this website, you can reply to other people's 'tweets' and post links to websites or videos. This website caused a flurry one month after President Barack Obama gave his State of the Union address to Congress in January 2009. A few senators in the audience were sending 'tweets' about what the president was saying as he was speaking.

Dana Milbank wrote "Politicians twitter throughout address to Congress like bored schoolchildren" and posted it The Sydney Morning Herald website. "At a time of national emergency, when America needs the focused attention of contemplative and reflective lawmakers, they are dispatching rapid-fire thoughts in 140 characters or fewer." Milbank continues on to say that, "Some members called it a new age of transparency. But to view the hodgepodge of messages sent from the House floor during the speech, it seemed as if Obama were presiding over a support group for adults with attention deficit disorder."[7]

Sen. Claire McCaskill, Democrat from Missouri, wrote on her Twitter on March 3, 2009 about those who don't like Twitter.com, "Those naysayers bout twitter don't get it. It's all about communication. Communication is always a good thing especially in my job."[8]

Communication is definitely 'always good thing.' What many citizens want is communication with their representatives for their state. Now, more than ever before, that option is available in a multiple of way thanks to the Internet. As of

March 10, 2009, Twitter has had more than 1.3 billion tweets posted.[9]

These posts include people from the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan. Because of Twitter is simple and easy to use, it has attracted millions of people to join the website and tweet. This is probably why political figures have gone to the site, because it's so simple to use, and many political figures that are older, may not be familiar with computers.

Many political figures, like Gov. Sarah Palin of Alaska[10], Congressman Dennis Kucinich of Ohio[11], and Sen. Barbara Boxer of California[12] , have also hopped onto the Facebook wagon. Facebook is a social networking website where users post their hobbies, favorite music, movies and TV shows. It also has more than 52,000 applications[13]. Applications are programs that are integrated into the Facebook website that lets you waste time by playing games and even raise money for charity. One of the popular applications on Facebook is "Hatchlings"[14], (like an Easter egg hunt) is where you must go around to different profiles and find decorated eggs and these eggs hatch into different creatures and animals that you can dress up. Another is "Word Hunt."[15] It's a game that you have to find letters (similar to Scrabble® pieces) in order to fill up 5 words on your list and gain points once you've collected enough letter pieces to fill the word. Causes[16] is a Facebook application where users can join a cause they care about and donate money to environmental causes, educational causes and health causes.

Facebook, which has over 175 million users with 70% of those users being outside of the United States, and "more than 28 million pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photos, etc.) shared each month."[17] Facebook, which had a slow start back in 2004 because MySpace then dominated the social networking scene. At the time, Facebook only allowed college students with a school email accounts to join; unlike MySpace who's only qualification was that the user be over 14 years old. The other difference between the two websites is that MySpace is customizable (change the layout, add photos and music), where Facebook really isn't.

During the 2007-2008 presidential election season, the Democratic and Republican candidates had Facebook pages to tell users who they were and what they stood for. And they'd offer links to their own websites for more information. The decision to actually get out there and communicate with their constituents is something that hasn't been done before in this way because any information that was printed in newspapers or magazines may have been distorted by media bias. The Internet has served a source for politicians, even though there have been some negative components which will be explained later in this report. One example is that on Facebook, users are able to create groups to support or to rally against anyone and anything. The people who join these groups often rant about why they think the person is right or wrong for the job. During the 2008 election, there were many pro- Barack Obama and John McCain groups as well as anti-

Obama and McCain groups and people who were undecided could read what was on these group sites were saying about both candidates. The negative remarks influence people. If the person is having doubts about a candidate and they end up on a website that doesn't favor them, they might lean toward that position because all the information is there that explains why they aren't the right candidate. Most of the blogs were biased, but they have an effect on changing people's minds, similarly like the pundits on Fox News and MSNBC trying to persuade their audience a certain way, or to keep them from going against the candidate they were in favor of.

Many candidates from the 2008 election continue to have Facebook pages, mainly because it's easier for their constituents to get too. They're on Facebook already checking on their friend's page, so instead of leaving the website that they already know how to maneuver, they can just type their name into the search box or click the link in their friends list.

In January of 2009, Facebook teamed up with CNN to air the Presidential Inauguration of Barack Obama. CNN streamed live videos of the events that day with Facebook, and let users comment on what was going on in real time. This was such a hit "According to Omniture SiteCatalyst as of January 20th at 3:30 p.m. (US ET), CNN.com generated more than 136 million page views, while CNN.com Live served more than 21.3 million live video streams globally, shattering its all time total daily streaming record set on election day which

recorded 5.3 million live streams."[18]

The social media is integrating video within the website, and also letting users talk to each other. They did this again for President Obama's Address to Congress in February 2009 and have continued by giving live coverage of President Obama announcing new cabinet members who will run different departments in the government.

Facebook isn't the only social media site that gets millions of hits. MySpace does too. MySpace which first started in 2003, a year before Facebook, is a bigger hit among the entertainment business, because they're able to post trailers, movie clips, songs that users can add to their profiles and offer the ability to design their profile page with professional looking pre-made layouts.

Like Facebook, MySpace also has profiles of previous presidential candidates as well as current political figures in government. MySpace has a page called MySpace Impact, where it says it's a "...hub for social and civic engagement – a channel for the causes and campaigns MySpace users care about." It goes on to say that the reason for IMPACT is to "... assist not-for-profit organizations and political campaigns in their efforts to make a positive difference in the world: this page is dedicated to help you leverage the free tools of the MySpace platform to inform, inspire, and motivate our users to take action."[19]

Facebook also offers different groups that users can look up and join and learn about different issues, however, MySpace has a more comprehensive and

organized page for global issues. For years, teenagers have heard from adults who say are uninformed and aren't involved enough, however, teenagers do not recognize that there are different ways to contribute to the community and to learn about different organizations and how there are ways to help those in need. There's a section of the MySpace IMPACT page that offers people the chance to put in what kind of activity they'd like to get involved in and their location and find local opportunities to help. This page also offers a forum where people can discuss things that are currently going on in the government, like whether or not President Obama's goals are realistic.

Now, these social networking sites aren't social media, as defined by Bryan Eisenberg earlier [20], but the websites themselves have the platforms that are necessary for social media to exist. Many political figures have decided they want to be part of this and have their own profile pages to inform their constituents, but it's also a way to let other users from other parts of the country to know what's going on in other states and possibly find new ideas and ways that would benefit their own state or community. Social media has been a way to relay and retrieve ideas and opinions to improve the lifestyles of the American public. And one of the ways to relay and retrieve those ideas is through blogs.

Chapter Two: The Blogging Influence

When did Blogging Begin?

According to Dave Winer, the author of one of the longest running web logs, Scripting News[21], the first blog was the first website built by Tim Berners-Lee at Central European Research Network or CERN, is the world's largest particle physics laboratory[22], in 1990. The address was http://info.cern.ch/[23] and March 2009 was the 20th anniversary of this first website.[24] This site was updated periodically when new sites were created and added to the World Wide Web. The concept of posting information daily is essentially a blog even though no one thought about it at the time.

Winer explains that after Berners-Lee's website, the 'What's New' page at The National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA) website was heavily viewed until "Netscape's 'What's New' page was the big blog in the sky in 1993-96. Then all hell broke loose." Winer meant that after creating this webpage, it became a massive hit. It was a new way of communication and it took off. Winer continues on to say that, "The Web exploded, and the web log idea grew along with it."[25] By 2007 there were more than 70 million blogs created, that's about 120,000 blogs a day.[26]

But what exactly is a web log?

In 2008, The Huffington Post, a popular online news blog, published a how-to-book about blogs called: <u>The Huffington Post's Complete Guide to Blogging</u>. The book said a blog "at its most fundamental level is simply a "web log," a regularly updated account of events or ideas posted on the web. But calling blogs mere updated web diaries is a bit like calling poetry a pleasant arrangement of words on a page. The Post said there's an art to blogging. "Those of us who work at HuffPost believe we are fortunate enough to be present at the advent of a new form of human communication—one that is more interactive, more democratic, and just more fun than what has come before."

Blogger.com founder, Evan Williams, is the same online genius, who co-founded Twitter.com On the Charlie Rose television show in February of 2009 Williams said he has, "... been an entrepreneur since birth, at least in my mind. And I like creating things that are new. I like working things that are new. And I felt a similar thing when I created Blogger, and then was part of the team that created Twitter, that this is really fun. I don't know where it's going, but there is something very fundamental about what this can do. And of course, when Twitter came out, it had all the Blogger experience, so it was based on a lot more experience. And I thought, well, people will like this."[27] From there on, there have been many similar blog websites like WordPress.com, LiveJournal, and Xanga which have their fair share of users who blog.

Stephen Coleman, a writer for The Political Quarterly, says that

"blogs become a form of networked expression; an ongoing experiment in the social production of reflection and knowledge." He continues to say that "to blog is to declare your presence; to disclose to the world that you exist and what it's like to be you; to affirm that your thoughts are at least as worth as hearing as anyone else's' to emerge from the spectating audience as a player and maker of meanings."[28]

Indeed, blogging has been a newfound way of communication where the public can write daily about what they believe in and without feeling as though they have to address to a certain kind of audience other than themselves. This form of social media mixed in with politics can cause quite a stir because if one person believes in one way, there must be another person who does too and this can affect a politician and how they go about things because their constituents disagree. Blogging has become a way for the public to interact with their government in a way that wasn't possible before. Being able to interact with representatives of your state and tell them how you feel about a certain issue is incredibly important.

Mayor Mark Boughton of Danbury, Conn., who writes in a daily blog[29], says that he sometimes "looks at an issue a little differently" when he gets feedback from people who comment. Boughton explains that he began blogging a year ago and that he writes each "… post personally and receives a number of comments. As long as the comments are not rude or offensive I will post them.

Traffic has grown steadily, roughly from 20 or so unique visits a day to several hundred. I use them as a way to communicate with residents and to cut through the spin of the local media as well as the opposition." Social media is influencing politics and Mayor Boughton is just one example of how it's happening locally. And he isn't the only one.

Mayor Jerry Brown of Oakland, Calif. has gotten attention because he is able to get his own message out in his blog that isn't tainted by any mainstream media agenda. Mayor Brown tells the Christian Science Monitor that blogging, "enriches the conversation and provides a forum for an exchange of ideas that - for a public official- is very useful."[30]

Blogs, however, are a way for politicians to freely express their ideas without being edited by the newspapers and media. For those who have been criticized by their communities, blogging maybe one way that could help them become closer and connect with constituents, especially in a larger city or state where it might be hard to reach everyone.

However, in addition to political blogs, there are also a growing number of entertainment blogs like TMZ.com (Thirty Mile Zone) that aren't strangers to breaking news. TMZ, for the most part, is so credible that some celebrities endorse it. TMZ occasionally slips out of Hollywood, and on March 1st, 2009 went to Washington after breaking the news that Northern Trust bank was throwing parties with some of the $1.6 billion in federal bailout money it was

getting. The TMZ story said the bank was going to have to give the money back.

TMZ wrote, "We had our cameras out as the bank hosted fancy dinners for

hundreds of clients and employees. We had video of the Sheryl Crow concert it

threw after closing down the House of Blues. And then there were concerts by

Chicago, as well as Earth, Wind & Fire ... and the Tiffany gift bags for the ladies.

The story triggered a furor in D.C. ... Rep. Barney Frank, D-MA, demanded that

Northern Trust repay the money it blew."[31]

Websites like The Huffington Post, The Drudge Report and the Daily

Beast and DailyKos are political blogs that have become credible sources in

mainstream media and have made huge impacts on the political scene. Often,

these websites are used as sources for television news channels like MSNBC and

CNN.

In February of 2009, President Barack Obama gave his first press

conference as president and the first reporter he called on was Sam Stein, a

reporter for The Huffington Post.[32] This selection was news since the previous

administration shut out blogs at presidential news conferences by making them sit

in the back of the press conference room where they couldn't get their questions

answered.

In an interview with Fox News Channel's on the Bill O'Reilly Show

in March of 2009, former press secretary under the Bush administration, Ari

Fleischer, was asked about President Obama calling on a reporter from a blog.

This is part of the interview:

> **O'REILLY:** George Bush came in with a list of guys he was going to call on?
>
> **FLEISCHER:** Yes, I used to prepare it for him. I would give him a grid, show him where every reporter is seated. And there are some reporters, you know, in that briefing room, you can imagine, Bill, you get a lot of dot coms and other oddballs who come in there. They're screened.
>
> **O'REILLY:** Like the Huffington Post. Now it gets called on.
>
> **FLEISCHER:** And I used to seat them all in one section. I would call it
>
> **"**Siberia." And I told the president, "Don't call on Siberia."[33]

There wasn't further explanation about why not call on the blogs. The Presidency of George W. Bush was at a time when blogging was really taking off. There was Blogger.com and similar websites that were gaining popularity and notoriety and the Bush Administration was filled with people who were not of the generation to use computers on a regular basis, so they might not have understood blogging as to why people do it, but they might have realized the impact that blogs have because they're choosing to shut out political blogs that are popular and that actually have some credibility by sitting them in "Siberia." But the threat of ignoring social media isn't going to be easy.

Where is Blogging heading?

Paul Verna, senior analyst for eMarketer.com[34] says there were nearly

"…116 million US user-generated content consumers in 2008"[35] as well as nearly

82.5 million content users. Verna says that both of these numbers "will climb
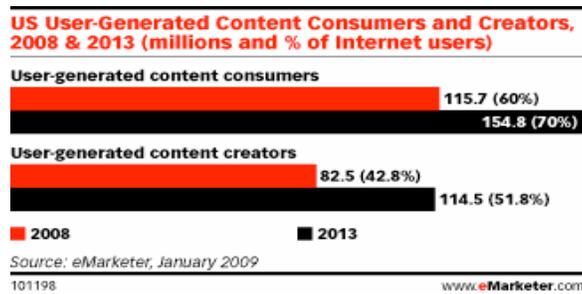
significantly by 2013.[28] The number will steadily go up as people find more uses for blogging, whether it's a campaign blog to inform voters

of where they will be or what issues they are talking about or blogging from stay–

at-home moms who want to share recipes, social media will become increasingly

more influential.

Chapter Three: Local Political Influence

Local Newspaper Ventures on the Internet

The Danbury News-Times is a newspaper that covers most of northern Fairfield County in Connecticut and has had its website up since 1995. This is a new venture for this broadsheet newspaper but observers say the web presence has only been a serious venture since 2004.

Eugene Driscoll, multimedia reporter for the News-Times says, "Around that time we tried to start a "youth-oriented" web site. It failed miserably, the reporter said because the core site, NewsTimes.com, was trying to be something it wasn't.

Now, the website is a hit, and thousands of people check out the website everyday, and leave all sorts of creative comments on different stories, according to Driscoll.

"There is benefit in the concept of people commenting on stories. It gets them involved in stories, promotes the interactivity inherent in the Internet and, in some cases, can push reporters to write stronger stories. Having a reader point out something you should have known in the reader comment section is never fun." But there is a bad side to the commenting, "The negative side is that the comment section seems to be dominated by cowards, jerks and racists. That is the same at many, many newspaper websites."

Scandal Makes A Good Blog

Al Robinson of Danbury, Conn., has two blogs. He began covering

Connecticut state politics in April of 2005 in ConnecticutBLOG[36]. He said he

considered covering Danbury also, but wasn't sure if he was going to be able

covering two blogs at the same time. A little reporting changed Robinson's mind.

"After questioning Mayor Boughton about immigration (and receiving an

answer which was basically a lie), I decided to make covering Mayor Boughton

and City Hall a top priority and HatCityBLOG was born," he said.

With HatCityBlog.com[37], Robinson is able to be his own boss and decide

how in-depth his reporting of the Danbury will be, he said. Since July of 2005, the

blog has had a great impact on the community. He believes that, "Before

HatCityBlog, local political news reporting was basically non-existent." He

launched his website and says the local community was able to see video footage

of their "local representatives in action, and more importantly, local politicians

became immediately aware that their words and actions were being documented."

Robinson is using social media to dramatize what his competition fails to report

accurately or report at all.

In October of 2007, The Danbury News-Times got hold of emails sent by

former Common Council majority leader Pauline Basso and Planning

Commission member Joel Urice. The emails contained racist and anti-immigrant

remarks and photos that did not flatter African-Americans or immigrants. The

News-Times broke the story, but Robinson says his website was able to update the story throughout the day with information clarifying previous reports using video and commentary of what was happening at City Hall surrounding this issue. Robinson also showed video clips from local news media TV shows where the issue was discussed. Robinson said that media outlets for information on this scandal used his blog. He says, "Blogging on local events became critical when it came to such issues as the Pauline Basso/Joel Urice email scandal and the Danbury 11," an immigrant case involving the mayor, the police department and federal agents who arrested 11 immigrants, without probable cause. "My site became a source of information not only for the public, but also for the mainstream media across the country as well." Robinson said. "The Basso case really highlighted how blogging can be used as an effective political tool as well because my coverage of the scandal assisted in keeping that particular story in the spotlight until Election Day. In the case of Basso, the former majority leader traditionally received the most votes as Common Council-At Large ... after the scandal broke; she was defeated by a considerable margin."

Danbury, Conn., a town with a little less than 80,000 residents[38], and has

blog coverage of the many diverse cultures living in the community and that

coverage coincides with the local newspaper coverage. At Danbury High School,

there are as many as 45 languages are spoken[39] by students, the faculty and

administrators in town. Many small communities don't have newspapers or even

radio stations, but with a varied Internet connection in Danbury, people can find

out what their local government is doing and what their representatives believe in

and are doing in the community. There are enough events and situations occurring

where the newspaper can't or won't cover, but the many bloggers covering

various events can blanket the town with coverage.

Still, the News-Times through Driscoll's reporting is trying to keep pace

with the blogger community in town. He says Mayor Mark Boughton "…has a

Twitter account, a Facebook account and a blog. Perhaps sensing the decline of

local media, and feeling confident by his online following, the Mayor has gone

from "I'm at the Girl Scouts fundraiser" to "That darn News-Times editorial about

me giving a job to my friend is so off the mark!!!" His posts are then supported by

a number of people who share his politics. Now, there is nothing wrong with

this… but imagine what the U.S. will be like if the only people "covering" the

news are politicians promoting themselves and bloggers who follow politics like

it is a football game?"

Blogging has become an exciting adventure for local residents in any community for people who want to express an opinion without it being screened by middlemen like a newspaper reporter who might change the meaning of a comment or letter to the editor.

Walter Cramer, dean of students at Western Connecticut State University also in Danbury, says that he believes that social media has seriously affected politics. "As a rule, I think [social media] is good in that it has encouraged many young people, in particular, to become engaged in the political process," Cramer says, but he is still apprehensive about some of the information posted on blogs. "I am concerned sometimes with the accuracy of information available on these websites; but I will take more active involvement by a greater percentage of our population as a start and look to improve them as time passes."

In the case of Al Robinson at HatCityBlog.com, he tries to do as much research as he can when he's writing a post. "When reporting (or commenting) on a subject, I take great care in gathering as much information as possible and sharing it with the public. This could be in the form of documents, video news clips, or (most important) my personal video footage of meetings at City Hall." Robinson continues, "I feel it's critical for me to back up any statement I make about a particular individual or event with as much evidence as possible... then let my readership decide. Again, this became important in cases where the mayor

would make a remark to the press which was in contrast with what he said in the past (i.e., the parade ordinance where at first he stated that the ordinance was in response to the World Cup celebrations, then stated that it was in response to parade permits after the proposal was passed)."

In a 2008 article on the NorwhichBulletin.com, "Local Blogs Hunger for News"[40], quotes Pomfret, CT First Selectman, Jim Rivers who said that he didn't like the idea of blogs. He said, "There's so many ways to communicate with town officials. We have e-mail. We have selectmen's meetings twice a month. If you have something to say, say it to the people you need to."

The article goes on to quote Jim Rivers saying that he does not blog, nor does he have interest in viewing the blog in his town. "They can reach me so many ways," he said, "and a blog, I think, it's a way for people to be anonymous and misbehave."[33]

However, many of those who run blogs aren't anonymous. They have 'about me' pages and offer their emails for readers to ask questions. Still, some public officials say they don't understand new media and are against it for this reason alone.

However much public officials dislike social media and its ability to change and influence politics, it's here and appears to be growing. Officials should reconsider their stance on new media.

Chapter Four: U.S. Political Influence

In an article for Business Week Online, "The Vote: A Victory for Social Media, Too," suggests that "The 2008 contest for the White House may go down in history as the first social media election."[41] They go on to explain this by stating that four years earlier, all of these social networking and media websites like Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and Twitter, were either not around or just getting started as becoming an Internet phenomenon.

In 2008, CNN has partnered up with Facebook.com. CNN provides the video coverage, while users on Facebook can click on the link and watch the Presidential Inauguration and comment on what they're seeing up to the moment in real time. CNN Live with Facebook has been a big hit.

CNN has always been the one network to incorporate websites like Facebook and Twitter to their broadcasts, so it would only be reasonable to carry that to the Internet. Other news networks, like MSNBC, are slowly catching on to CNN by being innovative and bringing citizen journalism to the forefront on cable news.

MSNBC and NBC use Twitter.com, on some of their news programming like Nightly News with Brian Williams, and the Today Show, which each have their own Twitter accounts. The ability to involve the audience at home with the news that is being told on television is very important because it let's them say what they think without having to be edited.

During the 2008 Presidential Election, MSNBC had a feature on their website called the "Decision Dashboard"[42] which allowed users to participate in polls and follow the status of their favorite candidate as they travel around the country and participate in the televised debates. This would be considered a part of social media because it's a venue for letting an audience to participate in media and give their opinion on whatever the poll question was and to write a brief summary of their thoughts. This is a beneficial feature because it allows the audience to have a voice on a subject and maybe change a mind or two about the issue at hand. This in turn influences politics and how the government is run because ideas and opinions continue to change and evolve over time.

There were other ways of keeping track of any of the presidential hopefuls. Abbey Zink, Ph.D., the Assistant Dean, School of Arts and Sciences at Western Connecticut State University in Danbury, Conn. agrees that, "… social media websites have had an impact on politics. The Obama campaign is a wonderful example of how new media can be used to connect with voters, distribute messages, raise money, and organize events.   I'm on several e-mail lists that distribute information about candidates. I enjoy being "in the loop" and getting information directly from the candidate."

And during the 2008 Presidential Election, millions of people did keep in track directly to their favorite candidate. According to the statistics offered on this table on, Web-Strategist.com[43] as of November 3, 2008:

Internet Usage in United States
United States Population: 303,824,646
Internet Usage: 220,141,969
Penetration rate: 72.5%
Growth from 2000-2008: 130.9%
Stats from Internet WorldStats (Census, Nielson)

Facebook
Obama: 2,379,102 supporters
McCain: 620,359 supporters

    Obama has 380% more supporters than McCain

MySpace
Obama: Friends: 833,161
McCain: Friends: 217,811

    Obama has 380% more supporters than McCain

YouTube
Obama: 1792 videos uploaded since Nov 2006, Subscribers: 114,559 (uploads about 4 a day), Channel Views: 18,413,110
McCain: 329 videos uploaded since Feb 2007 (uploads about 2 a day), Subscribers: 28,419, Channel Views: 2,032,993

    Obama has 403% more subscribers than McCain
    Obama has 905% more viewers than McCain

Twitter
Obama: @barackobama has 112,474 followers
McCain: @JohnMcCain (is it real?) 4,603 followers

    Obama has 240 times more followers in Twitter than McCain

Community Platforms/Branded Social Networks
MyBarackObama: I was unable to find total number of registered members (anyone have data?)
McCain Space: I was unable to find total number of registered members (anyone have data?)

The table shows the impact that social media has had on potential voters. With the opportunity to find more information about their candidate, the presidential candidate themselves were able to expand their constituency base to younger voters.

Walter Cramer, Ed.D., Dean of Student Affairs at Western Connecticut State University, said that he does, "… believe they (social media websites) have influenced [politics] in that they have encouraged many young people, in

particular, to become engaged in the political process." However, he continues to say that he is, "…concerned sometimes with the accuracy of information available on these websites; but I will take more active involvement by a greater percentage of our population as a start to look and improve them as time passes."

This is one of the areas that politics and social media collide. Because information researched by blog websites like The Drudge Report and The Huffington Post are a couple of the most reliable news blogs out there with active reporters investigating, there are other phony blogs that just spill out false, inaccurate statements. This is where politicians view the new media as not real journalism, because they think everything that people post is false. Many politicians believe that if you aren't a journalist by trade, then anything you write on the Internet does not hold any truth, because how is it possible that they are able to find validity any information. But like Al Robinson, who writes from the HatCityBlog.com in Danbury, Conn. he was able to go out and actually do real reporting and bring the local community the news that wasn't being reported on by the local newspaper or radio station.

Some even consider social media sites are a distraction, because many pry into the private lives of politicians. Emily Olson, a professor at WCSU, says "I think there's too much focus on the personal lives of officials and that they often influence people to lose sight of the issues that are really important. If a person is doing a good job and cares about it, it shouldn't matter so much what sort of car

they drive or what church they attend. That being said, I think people's

shortcomings and crimes have been exposed thanks to certain sites like MySpace.

But these sites repeatedly cross the line. It's all about the constantly changing face

of the media and how the public perceives it."

Social media is growing and websites like MySpace, Facebook and Twitter

have helped shape politics, especially in the 2008 Presidential Election and it has

been said that social media is what won President Barack Obama the presidency.

Mayor Mark Boughton of Danbury, Conn. said, "I am on Twitter, Facebook

and Blogger. I think they're a terrific and unique way at communication. The

Obama campaign used these mediums to great success in '08 and I have enjoyed

using them as well. I think any politician who ignores these mediums does so at

their own risk."

Meghan McCain, daughter of republican Senator John McCain of Arizona,

wrote on the Daily Beast, an online news blogging website in February of 2009,

that "Why Republicans Don't Get the Internet"[44]. She writes about her time

campaigning with her father during the 2008 presidential election and how she

suggested to the campaign that she should start a blog and chronicle her time

during the campaign.

McCain writes, "Unless the GOP evolves as the party can successfully

utilize the Web, we'll continue to lose influence. I think nothing confirms this fact

to be more true than this recent election." Slowly but surely, republicans in

Washington D.C. have taken onto Facebook and Twitter. Even Senator McCain, who has told the public that he isn't tech savvy at all, has his own Twitter account, which he updates periodically. Mayor Boughton is a republican and he has a Twitter, Facebook and Blogger account. Not all republicans are out of tune, but some just refuse to evolve and learn about new technology.

Paula Lehman, who wrote, "The 2008 Vote: Why MySpace Matters[45]," for Business Week Online, said, "MySpace users are highly likely to get informed on politics via the Web. Compared with the general population of online adults, MySpace users are 139% more likely to visit an online chat room with public officials or political candidates and 50% more likely to watch a political or public affairs-related video online. They're also 29% more likely to have looked up political or campaign information on the Internet. Among respondents, 86% say they are "extremely likely" or "likely" to vote in the 2008 Presidential election." Lehman continues to say, "The findings validate efforts by candidates [BusinessWeek.com, 6/18/07] to use social networks to rally supporters. Candidates from Hillary Clinton to Mitt Romney have "friend" pages, conduct online chats and forums, and are tapping a wide range of other interactive Web tools [BusinessWeek.com, 1/22/07] to solicit votes. "Younger people are more engaged in a lot of the issues than ever before," says Lee Brenner, director of MySpace IMPACT. "Politicians often neglect this demographic If they [neglect them] now, it's at their own peril.""

It's true, young adults are getting their information more and more from the Internet, because it's easily accessible, and they can cut through anything they aren't interested in reading in, by just clicking URL links. Plus, social media websites like Facebook have a way of organizing information and letting the public comment about any issues. This is what makes Twitter very appealing. For someone like President Obama to have a member of his technology team twitter links with a short heading describing it, would make those interested in it- click on it. If the person who clicks on the link enjoys it, or doesn't enjoy it, they could always reply to President Obama on Twitter and say so.

People do not only go on these social media websites to see what the politicians think of an issue, they also go to see what their peers think of the same issue too, to get a different approach to the issue- and to see who they support. Dr. Paul Haridakis was quoted in ScienceDaily.com's article "Social Media and President Election: Impact of YouTube, MySpace"[46] saying, "Many people will watch videos and use traditional media like TV to acquire political information about the candidates, but they also are going to the Internet and using social networking sites to see who people they know support. The information gleaned from their social networks may be the information they find most credible and persuasive."

The 2008 election is only the beginning of a firestorm that social media is going to create in the political forum. And politicians will take advantage of these

websites to their advantage, whether to promote themselves or to bash their opponent. If politicians use social media wisely, it'll be to their advantage. If they can work around Facebook and update on Twitter, their constituency base will grow. People are more likely to keep up with a politician if they update regularly. But if they just post something every couple months, it'll look like they don't care. If the politician doesn't care, they'll lose another voter.

Chris Bigelow, writes for his blog, CTLocalPolitics.net[47] says, "Social media has had a huge effect on politics, and the way that politics gets done. What's happened, basically, is that the political conversation has expanded greatly, is more accessible, and is far more immediate. It's neither entirely positive nor entirely negative, though I think by and large it has been a good thing."

It has been a good thing; it's a new form of communication that political figures have embraced and some who have yet to figure the whole thing out. But it's undeniable that social media has had an impact on politics. Even if it just gets the conversation going, social media is not going to disappear any time soon.

Appendix

Questionnaire One

Sent to Professor Emily Olson, Dean of Student Affairs Dr. Walter Cramer, and Assistant Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at WCSU Abbey Zink, Ph. D.

Please write a few sentences of your education and work experience:

Do you read online blogs/newspapers like The Huffington Post, The Drudge Report, The Daily Beast, or any magazine or news publication on the Internet? Do you think these are reliable sources?

Do you prefer reading the newspaper or reading the news the Internet?

Do you have a Twitter or Facebook account? If not, have you considered getting one? Also, do you write in a blog?

Do you think that social media websites (i.e. blogs, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace) have influenced American politics at all? Do you think that these sites are good or bad for politics?

Please add any additional comments here:

Questionnaire Two

Sent to Eugene Driscoll, Multi Media Reporter at the Danbury News-Times

Name, Education, Title and Time at Current Place of Employment, Experience with Journalism:

Do you read online blogs/newspapers like The Huffington Post, The Drudge Report, The Daily Beast, or any magazine or news publication on the Internet?

How long has the News-Times website been running? Was there a lot of support to get the website going?

Has the News-Times website has helped subscriptions of the print newspaper?

How does the News-Times benefit from having people comment on news stories? Do you think that community interaction with the newspaper online has brought more insight into what people want to read or care about?

Does the News-Times website get positive or negative feedback from the public on how the website is interactive, or well put together?

Besides Twitter, do you have accounts on other social network sites like Facebook, MySpace or Flickr?

Do you think that social media websites (i.e. blogs, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace) have influenced American politics at all? Do you think that these sites are good or bad for politics?

Please add any additional comments here:

Questionnaire Three

Sent to Mayor Mark Boughton of Danbury, CT

When did you start writing your blog and why did you feel like you should start one?

How has writing your blog affected your role as Mayor?

Do you get comments from people that make you think about things in a different way?

Do you think that social media websites (i.e. blogs, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace) have influenced American politics at all? Do you think that these sites are good or bad for politics?

Questionnaire Four

Chris Bigelow at CTLocalPolitics.net

Name, Age, Education, Title and Time at Current Place of Employment, Experience with Journalism:

How did you come up with CTLocalPolitics.net and why?

Do you think your blog has had an effect in Connecticut Politics?

Do you think that social media websites (i.e. blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Myspace) have influenced American politics at all? Do you think that these sites are good or bad for politics?

Please add any additional comments here:

Endnotes

[1] "How Many Websites are there on the Internet?" Digital Inspiration: A Technology Blog on Software and Web Applications. 03 Apr. 2009 http://www.labnol.org/internet/total-websites-on-internet-worldwide/5206/

[2] "Our Favorite 100 Blogs 2007 - PC Magazine's Favorite Blogs - Blogs 1-10 - News and Analysis by PC Magazine." PC Magazine - Computer, Software, Hardware and Electronics Reviews, Downloads, News and Opinion. 02 Mar. 2009 http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2192204,00.asp.

[3] "Just What is Social Media, Exactly?" Mashable | The Social Media Guide. 02 Mar. 2009 http://mashable.com/2008/11/18/social-media-defined/

[4] Eisenberg, Bryan. "Understanding and Aligning the Value of Social Media | FutureNow's GrokDotCom / Marketing Optimization Blog." FutureNow's Marketing Optimization Blog: GrokDotCom. 03 Mar. 2009 http://www.grokdotcom.com/2008/11/07/understanding-and-aligning-the-value-of-social-media/.

[5] Scott, David Meerman. "Asking the Right Questions About Media." EContent Dec. 2008:64+. Academic Search Premier. EBSCO. Haas Library, Danbury, Conn. http://0-search.ebscohost.com.csulib.ctstateu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=35766348&site=ehost-live. 3 Feb. 2009.

[6] "YouTube - YTdebates's Channel." YouTube - Broadcast Yourself. 10 Mar. 2009 http://www.youtube.com/user/YTdebates?blend=3&ob=1.

[7] "Politicians twitter throughout address to Congress like bored." Sydney Morning Herald - Business & World News Australia | smh.com.au. 28 Feb. 2009 http://www.smh.com.au/news/technology/web/politicians-twitter-throughout-obamas-address/2009/02/25/1235237790423.html.

[8] "Twitter / clairecmc." Twitter: What are you doing? 03 Mar. 2009 http://twitter.com/clairecmc.

[9] "GigaTweet - Counting the number of twitter messages." Popacular - popular delicious bookmarks. 10 Mar. 2009 http://popacular.com/gigatweet/.

[10] "Sarah Palin | Facebook." Welcome to Facebook! | Facebook. 19 May 2009 http://www.facebook.com/sarahpalin?ref=pdb

[11] "Dennis Kucinich | Facebook." Welcome to Facebook! | Facebook. 19 May 2009 http://www.facebook.com/denniskucinich?ref=pdb

[12] "Barbara Boxer | Facebook." Welcome to Facebook! | Facebook. 19 May 2009 http://www.facebook.com/pages/Barbara-Boxer/6887788786?ref=pdb

[13] "News." <u>Facebook Developers</u>. 03 Apr. 2009
http://developers.facebook.com/news.php?blog=1&story=174.

[14] "Hatchlings™ | Facebook." <u>Welcome to Facebook! | Facebook</u>. 19 May 2009
http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=7176719309&ref=mf

[15] "Word Hunt 2009 | Facebook." <u>Welcome to Facebook! | Facebook</u>. 19 May 2009
http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=45170866570&ref=mf

[16] "Causes | Facebook." <u>Welcome to Facebook! | Facebook</u>. 19 May 2009
http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=2318966938&b&ref=pd_r

[17] "Statistics | Facebook." <u>Welcome to Facebook! | Facebook</u>. 10 Mar. 2009
http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics.

[18] "Marketing, CNN.com pulls in big numbers for Obama, GLOBAL, Media, Social networks, Technology, Social Networking, TV, | Market-interactive.com." <u>Marketing - The Art and Science of Connecting With Consumers</u>. 10 Mar. 2009 http://www.marketing-interactive.com/news/10560.

[19] "A Place for Impact." <u>MySpace.com</u>. 10 Mar. 2009 http://www.myspace.com/aplaceforimpact

[20] Eisenberg, Bryan. "Understanding and Aligning the Value of Social Media | FutureNow's GrokDotCom / Marketing Optimization Blog." <u>FutureNow's Marketing Optimization Blog: GrokDotCom</u>. 03 Mar. 2009 http://www.grokdotcom.com/2008/11/07/understanding-and-aligning-the-value-of-social-media/.

[21] Winer, Dave. <u>Scripting News: 4/2/2009</u>. 02 Apr. 2009 http://www.scripting.com

[22] <u>CERN - European Organization for Nuclear Research</u>. 19 May 2009 http://public.web.cern.ch/public/

[23] Winer, Dave. "UserLand Software: The history of web logs." <u>UserLand Software: Home page</u>. 02 Apr. 2009 http://www.userland.com/theHistoryOfWeblogs

[24] "CERN Press Release." <u>CERN Press Office</u>. 02 Apr. 2009
http://press.web.cern.ch/press/PressReleases/Releases2009/PR04.09E.html

[25] Winer, Dave. "UserLand Software: The history of web logs." <u>UserLand Software: Home page</u>. 02 Apr. 2009 http://www.userland.com/theHistoryOfWeblogs

[26] Sifry, David. "Sifry's Alerts: The State of the Live Web, April 2007." <u>Www.sifry.com</u>. 02 Apr. 2009 http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000493.html

[27] "Charlie Rose - A conversation with Evan Williams, Co-founder of Twitter.com." <u>Charlie Rose</u>. 02 Mar. 2009 http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/10118.

[28] Coleman, Stephen. "Blogs and the New Politics of Listening." Political Quarterly 76.2 (apr. 2005): 272-280. Academic Search Premiere. EBSCO. Haas Library, Danbury, CT. 18 Mar. 2009 http://0-search.ebscohost.com.csulib.ctstateu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=17009310&site=ehost-live

[29] Boughton, Mark. <u>MayorMark's Blog</u>. 03 Apr. 2009 http://mayormarksblog.blogspot.com/

[30] Sappenfield, Mark. "More politicians write blogs to bypass mainstream media | csmonitor.com." <u>The Christian Science Monitor | csmonitor.com</u>. 03 Apr. 2009 http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0324/p02s01-uspo.html

[31] "TMZ Story Forces Bank to Return $1.6 Billion!!!! - TMZ.com." <u>TMZ - celebrity news, entertainment news, celebrity gossip, Hollywood rumors, celebrity photos, celebrity video, photo galleries</u>. 03 Mar. 2009 http://www.tmz.com/2009/03/01/tmz-story-forces-bank-to-return-1-6-billion/.

[32] Bergthold, Linda. "Linda Bergthold: Obama Calls on Huffington Post's Sam Stein." <u>Breaking News and Opinion on The Huffington Post</u>. 03 Apr. 2009 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/linda-bergthold/obama-calls-on-huffington_b_165448.html

[33] Powers, Ryan. "Think Progress.org: Fleischer And O'Reilly: Bush Didn't Call On Dot Coms And Other Oddballs Like The Huffington Post." <u>Think Progress.Org</u>. 03 Apr. 2009 http://thinkprogress.org/2009/02/10/fleischer-obama-media/

[34] <u>Market research & statistics: Internet marketing, advertising & demographics - eMarketer</u>. 03 Apr. 2009 http://www.emarketer.com

[35] "A Spotlight on UGC Participants - eMarketer." <u>Market research & statistics: Internet marketing, advertising & demographics - eMarketer</u>. 03 Apr. 2009 http://www.emarketer.com/Article.aspx?id=1006914.

[36] <u>ConnecticutBLOG</u>. 17 Apr. 2009 http://connecticutblog.blogspot.com/

[37] <u>HatCityBLOG</u>. 17 Apr. 2009 http://hatcityblog.com/

[38] "Danbury, Connecticut (CT) Detailed Profile - relocation, real estate, travel, jobs, hospitals, schools, crime, move, moving, houses news, sex offenders." <u>Stats about all US cities - real estate, relocation info, house prices, home value estimator, recent sales, cost of living, crime, race, income, photos, education, maps, weather, houses, schools, neighborhoods, and more</u>. 21 Apr. 2009 http://www.city-data.com/city/Danbury-Connecticut.html

[39] FitzGerald, Eileen. "Danbury searches for new high school principal." <u>News-Times</u> [Danbury] 14 Apr. 2009. <u>News-Times</u>. 14 Apr. 2009. 21 Apr. 2009 http://www.newstimes.com/ci_12133693?source=most_viewed

[40] "Local blogs fill hunger for news - Norwich, CT - Norwich Bulletin." <u>Home - Norwich, CT - Norwich Bulletin</u>. 21 Apr. 2009 http://www.norwichbulletin.com/archive/x1743979557/Local-blogs-fill-hunger-for-news?view=print

[41] Hesseldahl, Arik, Douglas MacMillan, and Olga Kharif. "The Vote: A Victory for Social Media, Too." Business Week Online (06 Nov. 2008): 19-19. Academic Search Premier. EBSCO. Haas Library, Danbury, Conn. 3 Feb. 2009 http://0-search.ebscohost.com.csulib.ctstateu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=35244941&site=ehost-live

[42] "The Social Media Minute -- '08 Election Special!" Content Management Systems (CMS) News, Reviews and Analysis. 14 May 2009 http://www.cmswire.com/cms/social-media/the-social-media-minute-08-election-special-003451.php

[43] "Snapshot of Presidential Candidate Social Networking Stats: Nov 3, 2008. Web Strategy by Jeremiah Owyang | Social Media, Web Marketing." Web Strategy By Jeremiah Owyang: Web Marketing, Social Media. 14 May 2009 http://www.web-strategist.com/blog/2008/11/03/snapshot-of-presidential-candidate-social-networking-stats-nov-2-20

[44] McCain, Meghan. "Why Republicans Don't Get the Internet." Weblog post. The Daily Beast. 19 Feb. 2009. 14 May 2009 http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2009-02-19/republicans-suck-at-the-internet/

[45] Lehman, Paula. "The 2008 Vote: Why MySpace Matters." Business Week Online (14 Dec. 2007): 18-18. Academic Search Premier. EBSCO. Hass Library, Danbury, CT. 15 May 2009 http://0-search.ebscohost.com.csulib.ctstateu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=28089162&site=ehost-live

[46] Kent State University. "Social Media And Presidential Election: Impact Of YouTube, MySpace." ScienceDaily 1 November 2008. 15 May 2009 http://www.sciencedaily.com-/releases/2008/10/081031122502.htm

[47] Connecticut Local Politics Connecticut politics and elections: discussion, analysis, opinion, news and maps. 15 May 2009 http://ctlocalpolitics.net/