

WEANING CAMPAIGNS FROM OLD MEDIA'S TEAT

Brad Templeton

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Congressmen tell me that as soon as they are elected to office they immediately set to work on their first order of business, raising money to get re-elected. They raise money mostly from large donors and special interests, and become beholden to them whether they like it or not. This is the primary source of corruption in government.

Most of this money will be spent on TV ads. These ads will effectively push their way unasked into voters' homes. Every candidate has a website, but that website only influences the people who sought out information on the candidate.

In the last decade we've had a true revolution in media. In particular, many new media are vastly less expensive to use than broadcast media. If the cost of media drives corruption, and the cost of media has been driven down, is a different result possible?

I propose that we collect e-mail addresses from people when they register to vote, just as we do street addresses. This release of information could be voluntary, perhaps promoted as a voter's civic duty. E-mail addresses would not be made public the way other categories of registration data are and voters would have the choice to opt in or out of political mailings. Any registered candidate could request that election officials do an e-mailing to all the voters in their district. You might think of this option as political spam, but it will be conducted with the consent of registered citizens, and managed by election officials. Every candidate would get one free hit before voters can opt out, but after that the candidates must carefully choose how much mail they send so as to not annoy voters. Each e-mailing would also include appropriate opt-out links and instructions.

Some candidates would send out a modest quantity to keep the voter's ear. Others might be less sparing. Some might reserve their messages for the weeks preceding the election. That's up to the candidate, and the voter. We might also consider some opt-out variations, such as allowing each candidate one more shot two days before the election. It can be assumed that most of the e-mail messages would try to be pithy and to direct the voter to websites or web-videos for more information. Some e-mail messages might be longer and wordier—it's up to the candidates to see what works.

Voters could even be given a range of e-mail options that would allow them to control how much they want from each candidate. "Show me all your ads," one voter might say, while another might say, "You get five e-mails. Use them wisely." Candidates could then send out an e-mailing only to voters who have set their criteria at a certain threshold.

The most important point here is that e-mail is super, super cheap. A Secretary of State could run such a program with a tiny expenditure. If this option reduces the candidates' dependence on expensive advertising even a little, it's worth doing. Also, it is important to note

that as voters opt-out because they have made up their minds or don't want to participate in an election, the e-mails would correspondingly end up largely in the inboxes of the undecided voters, just the folks the candidates would love to reach.

It would not be unreasonable to assure some control over the content of the e-mails, if for no other reason than to ensure that impostors don't register as candidates simply to advertise used-car lots and the like. And as there are so many elections at so many levels of government (e.g., county legislators and sheriffs, etc.), e-mail efforts may need to be limited to the major races, say congressional and larger, that generally rely upon costly television advertising.

If old media is going to continue to be used, it doesn't just have to be for partisan purposes. Rather, every so often one of the TV ads could announce, "You see candidates saying many things about themselves and their opponents here on TV. Before you vote, be sure to visit the official election site and see all sides. You owe it to yourself. You owe it to democracy."

We could also draw voters into the use of new media by reminding them of different modes of learning about candidates and issues on the ballot. A checkbox on the ballot might say, "Yes, I gave serious consideration to the booklets or websites of several candidates." This would not be binding—as it would appear on a secret ballot but it would make you feel embarrassed if you weren't able to check the box.

E-mail is certainly more "in your face" than a website, and it is less intrusive than a robodialed phone call. However, there are more new media capacities with which to experiment. For example, most websites and search engines have a large amount of "spare inventory." This means that they have pages they display for which there are not enough paid ads. Similar to the way that old broadcast media space was often reserved for public service announcements, we could consider encouraging major websites to donate such space for use by political

campaigns. We could encourage these donations through tax deductions, or through a campaign of civic duty. This ad space is largely free to provide; the only cost would be to broadcast media, which would lose the previous windfalls from campaign advertising.

The nation's TV broadcasters are addicted to the teat of political ad spending. They want that revenue and will lobby hard to protect it. Perhaps we can recruit the websites to donate excess capacity before they too are lost to the addiction of campaign dollars. Imagine if one out of 50 election season YouTube videos started with a randomly selected short political video ad? It might be annoying, but it might also convince the electorate that the new method is much better than the corruption-driving system it replaces.

In competitive elections, most voters focus on just two or three candidates. Open, inexpensive systems of communications like those outlined above might make people more aware of minority views. Some voters might even think that it is making them disproportionately aware of these views, as, in the current set-up, they usually don't see them at all.

The future holds the promise of an array of new media we have yet to imagine. If we begin early, we may be able to shape these media to encourage inexpensive, open and broad political discourse without allowing them to become captive to and of political campaigns and candidates.

About the Author

Brad Templeton founded ClariNet Communications Corp (the world's first "dot-com"). He also created and publishes rec.humor.funny, and its website, www.netfunny.com, the world's longest running blog. He is currently chairman of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), the leading cyberspace civil rights foundation, and involved with the Foresight Institute and BitTorrent, Inc.