Social Media Silence
An Examination of Social Media Use in Rural New York Political Campaigns

By COLLEEN LEMZA

It took 38 years for the power of radio to reach 50 million listeners. Television took 13 years; the Internet took just four years. Facebook, on the other hand, added double that, or 100 million users, in just nine months (Qualman, 2009). Social media evangelists have led the charge that social media has changed the way we do business, search for news and live our lives. Million dollar businesses have been created on Facebook, companies have found themselves handling crises through Twitter and YouTube and public relations firms are gobbling up youngsters with social media know-how. Incidentally, as this is being written, political analysts are wagering that the Qaddafi regime in Libya will fall within the next 24 to 48 hours. Is it possible that social media can fell a dictator, democratize a country, change the world?

Until recent revolutionary events throughout Northern Africa, one of the best examples of the power of social media was the rise of Barack Obama through the Democratic National Party and his election as President of the United States. Obama went from an “unknown senator in 2004 to the most powerful man in the world four short years later” (Qualman, 2009). He did this by leveraging social media to mobilize both the young and old.

Media scholars attributed a new medium called radio to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s success in the White House with his fireside chats. Television was attributed to John F. Kennedy’s success in the 1960 presidential campaign against Richard Nixon (MacDonald, 2009). For President Barack Obama, it was social media (Neptune, 2009).

Barack Obama won the presidency in a landslide victory by converting everyday people into engaged and empowered volunteers, donors and advocates through social networks, email advocacy, text messaging and online video. The campaign’s proclivity to online advocacy is a major reason for his victory. (Lutz, 2009)

Social media use by his campaign positively impacted voter turnout for the highest levels since 1908. Almost 65 percent of the American population voted in the 2008 election and there were a greater number of younger voters than ever before (Solis, 2008). Campaign contributions in small amounts less than $20 poured in directly from individuals totaling $660 million (Solis, 2008). In comparison, the Haiti relief mobile fund, set up by the American Red Cross, brought in $37 million. Prior to that, the largest mobile donation was for Hurricane Ike in 2008, which raised $190,000 through text messaging donations (Design Planning, 2010).

American voters who turned out in support of Obama felt a personal connection to him in a way that has never been seen before. If political campaign managers know social media is the answer for success, why can’t it be replicated in all political campaigns?

This paper will examine the utility of social media usage in political campaigns to see if its prior success can be replicated in rural northern New York. We’ve seen the power of social media and its effectiveness. However, we must first understand our audience. We can’t allow ourselves to be amazed at the utility of the technology if we haven’t first analyzed our audience. One of the most important lessons in public relations has always been to understand your public. The glitz of being able to push a message out to millions of eyeballs is diminished if results aren’t achieved. And our audience in northern New York doesn’t have mobile coverage, high-speed Internet, young voters or disposable income to spend on “i” gadgets, so how can the message be blasted locally in the first place?

Social Media Use in Political Campaigns

In spite of numerous studies, blogs and articles about Web usage in political election campaigns little had been written about the use of social media in campaign elections, outside of the Obama campaign, until the Pew Internet and American Life Project.

According to the Pew Research Foundation’s Internet and American Life Project, more than half of all American adults were online political users in 2010. An astounding 73% of adult Internet users, representing 54% of all US adults, went online to get news about the 2010 midterm elections, or to get involved in the campaign in one way or another (Smith, 2010). According to this Pew study, an online political user includes anyone who participated in one of the following activities during the 2010 midterm election cycle:

- Get political news online—58% of online adults looked online for news about politics or the 2010 campaign, and 32% of online adults got most of their 2010 campaign news from online sources.
- Go online to take part in specific political activities, such as watch political

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videos, share electronic-related content or “fact-check” political claims—53% of adult internet users did at least one of 11 general online political activities measured by Pew in 2010 (Smith, 2010).

In addition to this study focusing on broader internet usage, Pew completed two additional studies focusing specifically on mobile political usage and social media usage such as Facebook and Twitter. In “Politics goes mobile”, Pew found that 82% of American adults say they have cell phones, and 71% of them use text messaging (Rainie and Smith, 2010). Also by the end of 2010, 39% of Americans were accessing the Internet via a handheld device (2010). In this survey of 2,257 adults taken immediately following the election, respondents were asked about their cell phone usage during the election season. This survey found that more than a quarter of American adults—26%—used their cell phones in one way or another to connect to the elections around the country (Smith).

In the Pew “Politics and social media” study, researchers found that a total of 22% of adult Internet users engaged with the political campaign on Twitter or social networking sites. Political social media users stand out for their use of technology. They are significantly more likely than other Internet users to go online wirelessly from a cell phone or laptop (91% vs. 67%); own a laptop computer (79% vs. 63%); have a high-speed broadband connection (94% vs. 80%); and use the Internet on their cell phone (61% vs. 40%) (Smith, 2011). In addition, political social media users are younger, more educated, more likely to have a college degree, and are more likely to have a higher household income (Smith, 2011).

On a smaller scale, both the Adirondack North Country Association and the Snelling Center for Government, through the University of Vermont, are working on projects to bring high speed Internet access to rural communities. In a conversation with Sue Matton, Vice President of Economic Development for the Plattsburgh and Clinton County Chamber of Commerce, bringing high speed Internet access to rural communities throughout the region is a top objective for the newly formed North Country Regional Economic Development Council (Matton, 2010). Governor Cuomo recently divided New York State into 10 regions naming 20-person councils to devise a strategic, five-year plan that will guide economic development efforts and help determine how $1 billion in state aid is spent over the next year. The North Country Council has determined high speed access throughout communities in the region to be essential to economic vibrancy in the rural North Country (Matton, 2011).

A project in Vermont is working to bring equal Internet access throughout 24 rural communities. The mission of The Snelling Center for Government is helping rural towns take full advantage of the Internet, to advance a wide variety of local needs including economic development, school innovation, job creation, downtown marketing, community engagement and e-commerce. Although the Center’s focus isn’t specifically political in nature, it is another example verifying the need for rural connectivity to this high speed world (Snelling, 2011).

Other than these initiatives and the Pew studies, secondary research of this nature is primarily limited to anecdotes of the Obama campaign, or the Internet’s rise in popularity among politicians and candidates as a communication tool. This case study not only examines social media use in political campaigns in rural northern New York, but focuses more specifically why the digital divide is prevalent in this area. The six million acre forest preserve known as the Adirondack Park, and many of the neighboring communities in northern New York that comprise the political districts of the upper one third of the state, simply bear no resemblance to the urban steel of New York City and other population centers across the United States. According to the 2009 report by the Adirondack Park Regional Assessment Project (APRAP),

Many in-park trends differ from the rest of New York State, even other rural areas. The decline in school enrollment is steeper and the median age of the population is rising more rapidly than elsewhere. Household incomes are lower than in much of New York State. There is an out-migration of young families and an in-migration of semi-retired and retired persons. Sparse populations and regulatory practices have contributed to a lag in private sector investment of broadband communication and data transfer infrastructure. (APRAP, 2009)

Lack of Digital Infrastructure
Maple trees and cows, quiet mountains and lakes. This is the rural landscape of
one of the largest congressional districts east of the Mississippi, according to the National Atlas. The Adirondack Park lies within this district. To say the district is rural might be an understatement. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the largest city in the district is Watertown with less than 30,000 people. In contrast to the 23rd district's nearly 15,000 rural square miles, the 15th district in Manhattan is just over 10 square miles of concrete (National Atlas, 2010).

The lack of digital services, including cell coverage and high-speed Internet, is the single largest hindrance to social media usage in political campaigns in northern New York. One thing that's certain for a social media campaign to be successful is the infrastructure to send the texts, to watch the videos and tweet with voters. Without effective mobile service, Obama supporters in metropolitan areas would have sounded like a Verizon commercial asking, “Can you hear me now?” (Verizon, 2009). Voters without high-speed Internet would have tuned out, instead of engaging and donating.

For the majority of geographic landscapes in the country, the timing of his campaign was aligned with availability of new technology. But for rural areas without the digital infrastructure, social media had yet taken its place as a leading tool in the promotional mix for political campaigns in much of northern New York State.

This is just the case for 23rd Congressional District US Representative William Owens, D-Plattsburgh. His spokesperson, Bradley Katz, agrees that while social media use has increased since the first Owens campaign, lack of high-speed Internet and cell service in the district is a major hurdle to effective campaigning. For the first Owens campaign in 2009, there was little to no use of various social media platforms, (Owens, 2010), but this time around, “it's a greater part of the media mix for a targeted purpose to a targeted audience,” states Katz. “Now, it is part of the equation.”

However, Katz provides a great example of just how the lack of infrastructure reduces his team's effectiveness for communicating with voters. On a recent drive from Plattsburgh to Watertown, "there was no cell service for over half of the trip," says Katz. “It’s hard to multitask if all the passengers in a car can't work because there is no cell service,” states Katz. So while the technology might exist, in less rural areas it's tough to post, blog, or update Facebook accounts when you aren't plugged in.

Marshall Weir, finance director for Matt Doheny’s (R) campaign against Owens in the 2010 23rd District Congressional race, agrees that the usage of social media is certainly hindered by a lack of infrastructure. “For us, the biggest thing is the lack of mobile social media.” This campaign has experienced similar frustrations as the Owens campaign. “There are places in the district where there is no cell phone coverage for an hour and a half,” states Weir (Weir, 2010).

Dan MacEntee, NYS Senator Betty Little's director of communications, has the same misgivings about using social media in his district. He’s heard the anecdotes of the value of social media from counterparts in other districts, but states that it's just “not that valuable here due to the lack of availability of services,” (MacEntee, 2010).

According to the 2009 APRAP report, which is the latest comprehensive report available on the Adirondacks, only seven park communities have complete cell phone coverage, while the remainder have limited or no service at all (2009). This is precisely the case for the northern boundaries within New York State. Mobile social media is simply ineffective in the rural parts of northern New York. Because of reduced infrastructure, rural areas fell behind in digital technology. So while engaged voters in San Francisco were texting to donate $10 to Senator Obama in the 2008 presidential election (Neptune, 2009), the North Country didn't even have the iPhone at the time. This isn't an isolated experience. The North Country often lags behind the rest of the country in receiving products and services. AT&T opened its doors as the first carrier of the iPhone in Plattsburgh on January 16, 2009, just days before President Obama was inaugurated (AT&T store manager, Smithfield Blvd., Plattsburgh).

Age of Voters

Inexpensive mobile service is still the only reason regional political campaigns aren't seeing the social media success of the 2008 presidential election. The second largest reason political campaigns haven't embraced social media is the age of voters in the region.

Within the Adirondack Park, residents average just less than 43 years of age, older than any state for median age. By 2020, only the west coast of Florida will exceed the Adirondacks as the oldest region in America (APRAP, 2009).

Political campaigns in the North Country don't perceive their voters as being fully immersed in social media. According to all of the campaigns interviewed, social media isn't as effective in this area because of age demographics. Even with Mark Zuckerberg's announcement as the Time Person of the Year for 2010, in this rural region of Northern NY, Facebook continues to carry with it a stigma of being a frivolous college and high school pastime. In 2008, that may have been accurate, but statistics printed in Time magazine's final issue of 2010 indicate 30-60 year-olds make up
roughly the same size audience as 18-30 year-olds. And what's even more interesting is that Facebook now has about the same number of senior citizen users as high school students aged 13-17 (Ford, 2010).

In 2009, the largest group of Facebook users was the 18-24 age group holding 41%. Following that with 27% was the 25-34 age group, and another 13.5% for the 13-17 age group. The under 34 age group fully held 81% of all Facebook users (Corbett, 2010). However, there's been a significant shift in the demographics of Facebook users since then. On January 4, 2010, the 55 and older age group comprised almost 40% of all users. The 35-54 age group saw a 328% increase, while the 55 and older group saw a 923% increase. So, by early January 2010, the 35 and over age group had become an audience using this social networking platform nationally. By the end of 2010, more than half of US Facebook users were over the age of 26 (Ford, 2010).

This shift in the age of social media users would seem a perfect fit for the older residents of the Adirondacks, however, there's still a lag in the adoption of nationwide trends in this rural area. Everything from the adoption of iPhones, to franchise restaurants to fashion trends seems to be delayed compared to the rest of the country. Mark Barie, Chairperson of the Upstate New York TEA (UNYTEA) party sums it up best with regard to social media. "We're not ready for it...or more accurately, our voters are not quite ready. One third of UNYTEA's 1,000 plus membership has no email! I'm the chair and at age 56, I don't fully understand the ins and outs of Facebook and neither does our membership," states Barie.

Even the Owens campaign perceives social media, "as a communication tool, such phone calls and going door to door," states Katz. "It's a particularly good way to reach younger voters on college campuses" (Katz, 2010).

While FB was amassing millions of users worldwide, in the isolated miles of rural New York, consistently reliable, accessible high-speed broadband Internet existed in only 5% of Adirondack towns and dial-up only existed in 39% (APRAF, 2009). So, while urban cities a more affordable tool to communicate with voters as compared to downstate or other metropolitan areas.

According to MacEntee, "Television and radio advertising in our area is relatively inexpensive and reaches a far greater audience for us than social media. I'd never say (social media) isn't worth the time, but more traditional media in our area is better." MacEntee believes social media might be more applicable in metropolitan areas where traditional mediums tend to be much more costly (MacEntee, 2010).

While MacEntee does use all the electronic outreach tools, he found that many of the people on Little's Facebook site, "weren't even in our district and couldn't even vote in our elections. It was rare that I would post something and get any valuable feedback. In a district of more than 300,000 people, we'd get two or three responses." MacEntee states, "In our area, we've found that email is more effective and tweeting just hasn't become a useful tool. What worked in the past for social media during the Obama campaign doesn't work as well for us. Plus it's a mid-term election so the younger voters are not as engaged this time and they are not happy" (MacEntee, 2010).

Marshall Weir from the Doheny campaign also states, "We use Facebook and Twitter, we have a web page, but we use traditional media for the bulk of our communication. Media buys are less expensive here than in urban areas. We have four different coverage areas so when you add them all up it does get expensive, but not as much as in larger areas." When you consider the time factor to keep them updated and current, social media isn't a zero cost, he says.

Both the Doheny and Owens campaigns both use social media primarily for promotional appearances and event updates, leaving their websites as the main medium to discuss issues and respond to feedback (Weir, Katz, 2009).
Conclusion
While social media isn’t as significant a tool as seen in the 2008 Obama campaign for various reasons, it isn’t to say it’s not being used at all regionally. It’s simply a smaller part of the media mix. Marshall Weir summarized it best, “It’s just getting back to the basics, you have to know the area, you just have to know your audience.” (Weir, 2010).
A deeper question to pose might be if this is just an issue in rural northern New York, or are there pockets of dismal social media usage for political purposes around the country? And if so, does this disparity produce an inequity in the nation? If it’s true that rural areas, for any of the reasons stated above, are showing a lag in the use of this communication tool, then is it fair and ethical that majority population centers are forming the opinions and choosing the leaders of our country?
One might propose that further research is necessary to document these inequities. But for those living without high speed connectivity for political, economic, or any other endeavors, enough is enough. Should individuals in rural areas be forced to live without electricity? Without a telephone? Without roads for essential emergency services? It’s time that corporate economic gain is sidelined for the needs of all Americans and we reallize that high speed Internet access is a primary means of connectivity in today’s technological world.

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