Internet and politics an uneasy fit
Campsaigns strain to control message

By Michael Kranish, Globe Staff  |  May 10, 2007

WASHINGTON -- In 2004, a Californian named Joseph Anthony became one of the first online activists to successfully promote the idea of a Barack Obama presidential bid in 2008. He created a page on a popular website, MySpace.com, devoted to Obama, and signed up 160,000 "friends," far more than any other candidate has attracted.

After Obama announced his candidacy earlier this year, however, his campaign decided Anthony's page was too valuable to leave to an outsider and got MySpace to hand over the Web address. After initially suggesting it would pay him for his work, Anthony said, the campaign withdrew the offer, and the dispute became so heated that Obama called him last week. The Illinois senator expressed appreciation for the work, Anthony said, but explained that he had to stand by the decision of his aides.

Anthony's experience is a symptom of the growing clash of two political forces: Candidates want to tap into the uncontrol lable citizen power of the Internet, but they also want to control their message. In a growing number of cases, campaigns are finding these efforts impossible to reconcile.

"You have technology and political strategy at war with each other," said Phil Noble, the founder of politicosonline.com, which monitors how campaigns and the Internet interact. "The challenge is, how do you align them, how do you take advantage of the technology in a way that moves your strategy forward?"

No campaign wants to risk alienating Internet users, who have become a financial as well as organizational juggernaut. Nearly half of the contributors to the Obama campaign during the first quarter of this year gave money online, and his campaign has grown in part because of the groundswell of support from thousands of bloggers and other online activists like Anthony.

"Part of the reason [Obama] has this success is he is reaching out to sites like MySpace," said Anthony, a 29-year-old paralegal who still supports Obama, in an interview. "And on MySpace, it was people like me doing it."

Increasingly, however, the Web is also a place for attacking and ridiculing candidates. And even supporters can get a candidate in trouble, if bloggers perceived as being linked to the campaign don't stick to campaign standards.

Therefore, many campaigns are trying to put at least some controls on how they are viewed online. For example, campaigns have tried to control what advertisements show up on search engines such as Google and Yahoo when key phrases are typed.

The campaign of former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, for example, has bid on key words and phrases that Internet users type into search engines, in the same way that companies pay the search engines to place ads alongside relevant search results.

The campaign has purchased not only obvious phrases, such as "Mitt Romney" and "New Hampshire primary," but also "government accountability," "budget spending," and "American family values." Many campaigns are adopting similar strategies, occasionally igniting bidding wars for a valuable phrase.

"The idea is not just to come up with words that you think describe Romney or relate to him; it is words that people who have a likelihood to support him are likely to search," said Mindy Finn, Romney's director of "eStrategy."

The bidding for words is part of a projected $80 million market for nationwide political online advertising during the 2008 cycle, including display ads that appear on Web pages, according to Yahoo's vice president for political advertising, Richard Kosinski, whose recently created title reflects the growing market. In a telephone interview, Kosinski said that Yahoo's political ad revenues are likely to be double the 2004 amount.
Yahoo has been meeting with all of the major campaigns, setting up official candidate pages and arranging for candidates to participate in a multitude of forums and user groups. Kosinski said that until recently there were two major types of political media: paid political advertising, and "earned" or free media coverage. Now, with users interacting directly with campaigns, he said, there is "participation media, a whole new world."

But such participation sometimes comes at a cost. Campaigns are finding that opponents can bomb media sites with negative comments. CBS News announced on Friday that it was turning off the capability for readers to post comments about stories involving Obama because some users had made racist postings.

"It tells me that it can be very uncomfortable to cede control of your message and material," said Lee Rainie, with the Pew Internet & American Life Project. The comments section of news sites "gives new opportunities to critics or even creeps to enter your space."

Campaigns can also be hurt by the posting of amateur video attacks. Senator Hillary Clinton was the subject of a widely viewed video likening the New York Democrat to Big Brother. It was created by an Obama supporter, Phil de Vellis, who noted in a blog entry on his video: "This shows that the future of American politics rests in the hands of ordinary citizens . . . The game has changed."

The candidates' own words and actions also can be turned against them. Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona has been embarrassed by clips that show him singing a ditty he called "Bomb, bomb Iran." Former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani, another top GOP candidate, can be seen dressed in drag in an old comedy sketch.

Indeed, embarrassing clips posted by Internet users seem far more popular than those uploaded by campaigns. A clip of Clinton singing "The Star-Spangled Banner" off-key in Iowa has been viewed about 1.2 million times on YouTube.com, while an official campaign clip called "Iowa Loves Hillary!" had logged about 5,100.

Former North Carolina senator John Edwards has tried to turn YouTube to his advantage, asking supporters to upload video of themselves stating their support for the Democratic candidate's position against the Iraq war. He incorporated the clips into an online ad, and asked video contributors to donate money to the campaign, raising more than $100,000 in 24 hours.

Few user-created online efforts have been as successful as the Obama page on My Space created by Anthony. The page attracted 160,000 "friends," referring to other MySpace users who link to the page and may post comments. For comparison, as of this week, Clinton's official My Space page had about 64,000 friends, Edwards' page had about 34,000 friends, and Romney had about 17,000 friends.

After the Obama campaign suggested that it take over myspace.com/barackobama, so it could become an official campaign page, Anthony said, officials asked him to propose a one-time fee for his work. He asked for $39,000. Then, according to Anthony, the campaign reversed course, rejected the proposal, and took over the page with the assistance of officials from MySpace. A spokeswoman for MySpace did not return a call seeking a comment.

Some of the Obama friends who had signed up with Anthony's page said in their blogs that they were disappointed and would not vote for Obama as a result. "This is downright awful," one wrote on Anthony's personal MySpace page.

Sensing a backlash, the campaign posted a blog entry in which it praised Anthony's "great work" but made clear it wanted control of the page.

After gaining control of the page, Obama added 60,000 "friends," many of whom signed on after being directed to the site by the still-loyal Anthony.

A campaign spokesman said questions about the controversy were answered on its Web posting.

"At the end of the day, this is all new for everyone -- this Joe, that Joe, and everyone participating or commenting on it," campaign official Joe Rospars wrote in the posting. "We're flying by the seat of our pants, and establishing new ways of doing things every day."}

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