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## Democrats Have an Early Lead ... in the Web 2.0 Race

**But GOP Is Catching Up as Both Parties Realize MySpace and Other Social-Networking Sites Can't Be Ignored**

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NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- Two weeks ago, in a 38-second YouTube video, presidential hopeful Fred Thompson chomped smugly on a cigar and issued a scathing, belittling response to Michael Moore. The documentarian had just that morning challenged Mr. Thompson to a debate after the former Tennessee senator criticized Mr. Moore's recent trip to Cuba.



Photo: Mark Avery

Presidential hopeful Fred Thompson scored a hit with the GOP faithful for his 38-second YouTube video belittling Michael Moore.

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some Web 2.0 skills.

John Durham, who led internet strategy for the Bush-Cheney reelection campaign, was impressed with Mr. Thompson's grasp of the YouTube medium. "He is smart enough to understand he needs to cede a certain amount of control for a certain amount of visibility," he said.

### **The new talk radio**

But Mr. Thompson's savvy could be seen as a rare standout on the Republican side. Even

The following day a poll on Instapundit asking who'd won the previous night's Republican debate showed Mr. Thompson leading the field with almost one-third of the vote. Except the former "Law & Order" star wasn't in the debate. He hasn't even officially entered the race.

Was the poll scientific? Hardly. The outcome coincidental? Probably not. Web audiences on the Republican side seemed thrilled that one of their potential candidates showed off

Republican supporters concede that the Democrats have the upper hand in Web 2.0, which has become the Democratic version of talk radio. It's an issue that has been the subject of recent debate, naturally, around the blogosphere.

A big part of the problem, according to Rob Bluey, director of the Center for Media and Public Policy at the Heritage Foundation and a contributor to RedState.com, is that Republican bloggers are more interested in being pundits than activists.

"You have [left-wing bloggers] Markos Moulitsas at DailyKos, Jerome Armstrong and Matt Stoller at MyDD and they live for stirring up their base, creating a brouhaha and getting people to do things," he said. "The right may be more interested in commentary and analysis and ... it doesn't do much for advancing a candidate or getting legislation passed."

### **'Noise' extension**

Mr. Moulitsas himself said the right views the web too much as an extension of its broadcast domination.

"They are, in effect, an online extension of the Rush Limbaugh/Fox News noise machine," he said. "And while they can be very effective at what they do, it's not as exciting for the average Joe or Jane looking to have a voice in his or her nation's politics."

How did the Democrats develop their 2.0 prowess? Some observers point to the outcome of the 2000 election. After all, dominant activist positions are rarely born out of places of power. For another example of that phenomenon, consider the rise of Republican talk radio during the Clinton years.

"The Democrats have done a better job of building a culture of grassroots activism -- fueled mostly by their minority-party status over the past decade," said Michael Bassik, VP-internet strategy at MSHC Partners, which placed online ads for John Kerry and the Democratic National Committee during the 2004 campaign.



Trying to reclaim his MySpace page cost Barack Obama his No. 1 fan.  
Photo Credit: Jared Pilon

"There was more motivation among Democrats to use the web as an outlet for frustration and they saw it as a great tool for activism," Mr. Bluey said. "You have to give Howard Dean and Joe Trippi a lot of credit for it."

### **Dem voters more interested**

Mr. Bassik predicts implications for the coming election: "While Republican and Democratic candidates all feature Web 2.0 tools on their sites, Democratic voters appear significantly more interested in using new technologies to help their favorite candidates win."

That seems to be true on Second Life, said Steve Nelson, co-founder of San Francisco digital agency Clear Ink, which created the in-world Virtual Capitol Hill. "There's a strong Republican presence but I don't see their connection to their candidates as much as I see it on the Democrats' side," he said. "It's more tied to Republicanism than to a candidate."

Jeff Berman leads public affairs for MySpace, which can be credited for trying to even the field by courting candidates on both sides of the aisle. He said all the candidates had been open to working on the site and users are "wildly creative" in their responses, taking the badges and banners the candidates have created and incorporating them into their own pages -- essentially creating digital yard signs. One user even took all the images of Barack Obama's friends and incorporated them into a collage of the senator's portrait. While people used to surf to a friend's page to see what music and TV shows they liked, now people are viewing their political affiliations.

### **The MySpace campaign**

Whether or not MySpace and its primary elections, set to be held in January 2008, are predictive of the general outcome isn't clear. But no candidate is going to want to lose the contest and the public-perception value that goes along with it. And it's good business for MySpace -- while few candidates have begun to spend heavily on the site, most will in coming months.

"If anything, [MySpace primaries] basically said that '08 is not going to be about CBS, NBC, and ABC," said Mr. Durham.

Added Mr. Berman: "Any candidate who ignores MySpace as a powerful tool for political communication is missing out on a political opportunity and, frankly, [is] potentially in peril." He quoted a Nielsen/NetRatings study that over 80% of the community is of voting age and MySpace users are far more likely to listen to a political debate, be it audio or video online, and far more likely to research political issues online. "And that's not just more likely than the average American but [it's more likely] than the average internet user," he said.

Indeed, there is a reinforcing factor to Web 2.0. Mr. Nelson noted that only about 150 people showed up for a war protest in Second Life but that 50,000 people saw it on YouTube.

### **Give and take**

Still, for as valuable as MySpace, Second Life and YouTube might potentially be, there are several 2.0 tactics -- take Twitter, for example -- unlikely to ever create any impact

outside the cyber-beltway. At best, such enthusiast communities mobilize the base that was planning to vote and campaign on a candidate's behalf anyway; at worst, it can erupt into a ferocious maelstrom of blogger criticism and negative attention leaking into the mainstream media. At play, no different than with brand marketers, is the push-pull between staying on message and giving up control.

John Edwards, arguably the most 2.0 active of all the presidential candidates, ran into trouble with his ambitious blogging plan when his hiring of a pair of liberal feminist bloggers erupted into a scandal as watchers on the right turned up controversial posts the two had made on the always-polarizing issues of religion and sex. The pair left the campaign shortly after. Barack Obama's mini-scandal came when he tried to reclaim his MySpace profile from a volunteer who had been running the page for two years and racked up 160,000 friends. Suddenly the campaign wanted control of the space and the volunteer wanted \$50,000 for his work on it. Obama's camp refused and lost its biggest fan.

Mr. Bluey was skeptical about whether his party would catch up -- until he interviewed Joe Trippi about it. As he tells it, Mr. Trippi predicted the Republicans will catch up eventually. The Democrats just got the early lead because they were so embattled after the 2000 election and had a cause around which to rally. In fact, Mr. Trippi, who headed Howard Dean's failed 2004 campaign, was even inspired by the earlier 2000 run of John McCain, who was raising money and uploading video onto his site -- those were forward-thinking ideas at the time.

While their MySpace "friends" lists pale in comparison to Hillary Clinton's and Barack Obama's, John McCain and Rudy Giuliani are hosting conference calls for bloggers, and Mitt Romney was one of the first to use YouTube. And to be sure, this is still a very early election in a space that's moving incredibly fast. Consider that it only took YouTube 17 months to rocket from anonymity to a \$1.6 billion monster. That's one less month than Election Day is from today.

"Every vote is going to be necessary and that undecided group of voters is going to be reached in nonmass ways," Mr. Durham said.