

Democrats claim Web advantage

GOP says gap isn't as big as thought

By Kevin Vance
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New forms of the Internet are playing a larger role in politics, and Democrats see both the medium and the culture associated with it as giving them a leg up in the perpetual fights of two-party politics.

Joe Trippi, an adviser to the presidential campaign of former Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina, predicted in a forum last week at George Washington University that sites where users provide the content, such as YouTube, will become more important for political campaigns. He partly attributed this trend to the lack of trust young people have for institutions, as compared to their trust for their peers. Advantage: Democrats, he said.

"It's a medium that abhors command and control," he told an audience at the forum, titled "The Future of Political Communications." "Two guesses: Which party is really good at command and control? The Republican Party. Which isn't? The Democratic Party."

He said that "credibility is moving downwards, away from the top," comparing the situation to that of a young person who hears from five of his best friends that a particular film is not good. No matter what the production company says, that person is unlikely to see the film.

But Republicans are skeptical of the thesis.

Bryan Preston, executive producer of Michelle Malkin's conservative Internet broadcast network HotAir.com, dismissed Mr. Trippi's words about "control" as "projecting what he thinks of the right, not what's actually going on."

"We know that there is significant command and control on the left side of the blogosphere that does not exist on the right. There is no analog to the Townhouse list on the right," said Mr. Preston, alluding to the e-mail list that connects some members of the liberal blogosphere.

"By controlling links and access to advertising groups on



Jack Hornady/The Washington Times

Blogads, the bloggers who run Daily Kos, MyDD, Firedoglake and one or two other major left-wing blogs can and do dictate a party line approach to blogging. This gives the Democrats an innate advantage over Republicans among the blogs — if the Dems successfully co-opt a handful of major left-wing blogs, they can dominate and shape the message that those blogs transmit."

Mark SooHoo, an adviser to the presidential campaign of Republican Sen. John McCain of Arizona, told The Times at the GWU forum: "I don't think the gap [between Republican and Democratic success on the Internet] is as large as a lot of people make it out to be. I think we're slowly getting closer."

As a result of the increased importance of Web sites such as YouTube, Facebook and MySpace, Mr. Trippi anticipated that authenticity will be key in attracting voters.

"The only thing that matters is how authentic you are," he said. "If you get caught in an authentic moment that says to everyone you may be a racist ... pretty bad."

Because candidates will appear more often in unscripted situations, Mr. Trippi predicted that "someone's probably going to have a 'macaca' moment," referring to the furor surrounding Republican Sen. George Allen's use of the word to refer to an Indian-American volunteer who worked for his opponent in the

2006 Virginia Senate race, which Mr. Allen lost.

Eighteen-year-old David D. Burstein wants to increase the young-adult vote in 2008. The forum concluded with the premiere screening of "I'm 18 in 08," Mr. Burstein's short documentary that promotes the participation of young adults in elections.

"I'm 18 in 08" features elected officials from both parties encouraging young people to vote.

Heather Smith, executive director of Young Voter Strategies, spoke to the forum about the opportunity that political parties have with young people. She said partisan preferences are usually solidified by 30, and most voters continue to vote for the same party after they have voted in three elections.

Mr. Burstein said he thinks that if young people vote, elected officials and candidates for public office will pay more attention to them. He said young people care about Social Security, the budget deficit and the environment. He said global warming "is a crisis that's real now, but it's going to become more prominent as we mature and grow older."

Mr. Burstein, who will attend Haverford College this fall, said he thinks young people "focus on things like Darfur, gay rights, abortion and student loans. Darfur is something that's not an immediate impact on our lives, but we can look at it and say, 'This is

genocide; this is wrong' — something that's more clear-cut, as opposed to a more conceptual issue."

He blamed low voter turnout among young adults on a "growing frustration among young people that government and politics don't respond to us," attributing the frustration to a series of events from the past decade: the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the September 11 attacks, Hurricane Katrina and the Iraq war.

Mr. Burstein, who said he leans Democratic, cautioned against saying young voters are more liberal than the rest of the population, but said, "In general, young people agree more with the social policies of the Democrats."

However, Mr. Preston expressed skepticism about the young adult turnout in 2008.

"Everyone is always pushing the youth vote as the next big thing, and it never pans out."

There was some tension at the forum when a Brandeis University student asked Steve Grove, YouTube's head of news and politics, how concerned Americans should be about "jihadist propaganda" that gets posted on YouTube.

Mr. Grove said he advises users to post video rebuttals to videos with which they disagree.

"The ethos behind all of this is the best bubbles up to the top," he said. "We're a platform in the same way the town hall's a platform."

Hugh B. Price, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, suggested, "One could argue that [the use of YouTube by jihadists] is one of the best intelligence devices that the FBI could have at its disposal."

Mr. Preston told The Times, "They're missing the point. The problem isn't that YouTube hosts jihadi video. The problem is that YouTube capriciously deletes videos and even whole accounts of users who criticize jihad and/or Islam."

He cited the example of the removal of Miss Malkin's video "First They Came," produced in the wake of the furor over Danish cartoons depicting Islam's prophet, Muhammad.

A YouTube spokesman declined to comment on any particular video, but said YouTube removes videos that violate company rules.