

From MySpace to NoSpace

For Republicans, campaigning on the Web hasn't leveled the 2008 playing field.

By David Weigel

THE VIDEO STARTS with a grungy, bot-tomed-out guitar riff that sounds like the noodlings of a spunky high-school metal band. But when the drums kick in, we see no band. Congressman Ron Paul, the Texas Republican and 1988 Libertarian Party presidential candidate, is going over his notes for a speech in New Hampshire. He piles into a car, arrives at a televised candidate forum, and Paul supporters and skeptics talk into the camera. By the end, they're all believers.

At the start of Easter weekend, this ten-minute video—of a 72-year-old presidential hopeful and his adherents—had been scanned by 16,000 viewers at YouTube.com. The cost, discounting the original camera and the editing software used by a campaign ally in Los Angeles, was nothing.

"Our first priority is to get Ron's message out," says Kent Snyder, Paul's campaign chairman, who marshals videos to YouTube with a skeleton staff of three. "Because we're not in the so-called top tier, we have to really fight for media coverage. For us to be competitive, we have to use the Internet as much as possible."

That's the mantra of every White House candidate. The poll leaders in both parties count on the Web to reel in small-money donors, to build organization, and to win buzz. Barack Obama's Democratic campaign, never really in danger of losing the Fourth Estate's attention, pulled in more than 100,000 donations through its website from January to March. A webbie with casual links to Obama slapped together a parody of Apple's old 1984 ad that turned Hillary into Big Brother and got more than 4 million views.

The minor candidates for the Republican nomination have watched all of this with hungry eyes. Since the party's front bench of John McCain, Rudy Giuliani, and Mitt Romney offers so little to hardcore conservatives, the campaigns polling at one or two percent believe that they can use the Internet to rocket them into contention.

"Think of it like baseball," says David All, a Republican consultant whose last job for a Senate candidate had him guest-blogging on conservative websites and turning his ads into viral YouTube videos. "You've got baseball players in the major leagues, but if they're falling down, you look to the farm team. If you're an MVP in that conservative farm team you can definitely rise up."

Any of the second-tier candidates could become that MVP. The blog aggregator Pajamas Media temporarily pulled Ron Paul from its poll because Paul stubbornly kept winning. California Congressman Duncan Hunter and former Virginia Gov. Jim Gilmore have submitted posts to RedState.com, the popular conservative blog, and RedState veteran Leon Wolf was snapped up for online work by Kansas Sen. Sam Brownback. In February, noticing an online poll that had Colorado Congressman Tom Tancredo struggling in fourth place, adviser Bay Buchanan e-mailed online supporters to point them over to the site. Within 24 hours, Tancredo leaped to the top of the poll with 80 percent of the votes.

"It didn't even look legitimate anymore," Buchanan laughs. "Yes, this was just an online poll, and you don't want to overstate what that means. But

something like that demonstrates the power of the Internet. There are thousands of people who are saying 'contact us, tell us what to do.' We can put this army together. That's the role the Internet plays."

How big is the army, and who could the campaigns convince to suit up? Almost 10,000 conservatives have become "friends" with the 2008 candidates on MySpace, the social networking site. The videos of the five Republican candidates who've taken advantage of YouTube's "YouChoose" aggregator have been viewed about 160,000 times. Hundreds of thousands of conservatives check out forums like FreeRepublic or more streamlined blogs like RedState or LittleGreenFootballs; millions more are online, checking their e-mail, selling beat-up bookshelves on Craig's List, buying half-off DVDs of "24" on Amazon with Super Saver Shipping.

The thinking in the second-tier campaigns is relentlessly hopeful: these conservatives must represent that greater mass of voters who might go online but aren't constantly clicking through videos and blogs. There are swarms of uncommitted Republicans registered to vote in the primary states, and the Internet offers the means to reach them. The plans inside Tancredo, Paul, Hunter, Gilmore and Brownback headquarters are variations on one big idea: build an online machine that can attract those voters, keep them interested, and turn them into volunteers or donors for the campaign. In short, become the new Howard Dean.

Yes, that campaign eventually melted down in a frenzy of primal screaming

and 24-hour cable news replays. Still, if you're running a struggling outsider campaign for president, the Dean movement provides most of your playbook. When Dean entered the race in 2002, the former Vermont governor polled around one percent. He hired Democratic consultant Joe Trippi, who believed that the Internet's potential to organize voters and raise funds had barely been explored. Since the 2000 presidential campaign, the use of personal publishing software and classified-ad-style networking sites had exploded. Dean's staff latched onto both of those trends. They used the networking site MeetUp.com to inform voters of Dean's upcoming stumps. They launched a blog on the Dean for America website with posts by the candidate himself and jokey, convivial writing by campaign staffers as distinct from typical campaign boilerplate as a Thomas Pynchon novel.

Dean's anti-Iraq War, pro-universal healthcare platform was an easy sell, especially next to the reheated Kennedyisms of John Kerry or the featherweight consultant-speak of John Edwards. But in another era, he could have come up short on money and dropped out. Yet Internet tools made it so easy for the campaign to organize and fundraise that Dean temporarily surged to the front of the field. Momentum gathered and supporters organized like splinter cells, hosting their own events, opening their checkbooks at moments that surprised even Trippi. In June 2003, Dean gave an interview on "Meet the Press" that pundits and people inside the campaign considered badly botched, campaign-killing. In the 10 days afterward, \$1.5 million rolled in through the Dean website. In February 2004, after the campaign hit the reef (and Trippi left), it asked online donors to pony up \$700,000 for a last stand in the Wisconsin primary. They gave more than \$1.4 million.

Those numbers are impressive, and they dwarf what the GOP insurgents have raised online as of the end of the first campaign finance filings. When Heritage Foundation media scholar Robert Bluey surveyed the campaigns on their online successes, the outliers were too chagrined to answer, and the frontrunning Republican campaigns have gotten no momentum and only marginal funds online as they've watched Obama, Hillary, and Edwards dominate the medium. Democrats "know it will take years for Republicans to catch up to them in online fundraising," Bluey wrote.

"This just doesn't seem to be in the Republican DNA," says Joe Trippi. "Republican campaigns are much better organized, much more in command and in control, than Democratic campaigns. There's a rugged individualism in the Republican message that sort of forestalls any ability to really talk about what we can do if we all work together. Maybe they consider that communism."

Another explanation is that conservatives have spent most of the last seven years in power, with a congressional majority and a president they were more interested in defending than organizing against. "The two sides of the blogosphere have been structured differently from the beginning," Leon Wolf theorizes. "The Left side was more activist, more of a community, out of necessity, because they were out of power. The Right side was born out of dissatisfaction with what people viewed as the biased mainstream media."

That's only a partial explanation. The blogs, the Facebook and MySpace groups, and the YouTube channels can't turn a second-tier candidate into a contender unless he has enough real-world supporters to take over those media and start growing their movements. Support for the Iraq War still crests 70 percent among Republicans, and support for the surge hovers just as high.

Antiwar conservatives have more presence online than they do in the average meeting of the Fort Bragg Young Republicans. But they're irritating the pro-war majority, not convincing them. Sen. Chuck Hagel, the most public anti-Iraq War voice in the party, tanks so badly in online polls that some have simply started to strike him out. John Hawkins, the founder of RightWingNews and an adviser to Duncan Hunter, claims that the Ron Paul vote that wins occasional online polls is "the same 5,000 people showing up again and again."

"Ron Paul's people spam these polls," says Hawkins. "We're actually appealing to conservatives and slowly rising in those polls across the board. Paul's our Dennis Kucinich. He's not a conservative. He's a libertarian. He's a kook, and his supporters are pretty obnoxious."

"I would caution anyone who'd dismiss the online polls," argues Howard Mortman, a media consultant and blogger at Extreme Mortman. "If you get 50,000 people participating across these polls, it's not scientific, but it means something if Tancredo or Paul end up on top. You can't just say these are yahoos getting online."

They're not yahoos, but neither are they gaining any ground. The mightiest online Republican survey is the GOP Bloggers Straw Poll, operated by gopbloggers.org, that lets voters pick their "first choice" candidate then denote the other candidates as "acceptable" or "unacceptable." Some 11,000 Republicans voted in the March 2007 version of the poll, which excluded both Chuck Hagel and Ron Paul. Fewer than 700 voted for Tancredo, 500 voted for Hunter, 253 voted for Brownback, and 34 voted for Gilmore. For all of their effort, their messages, and their outreach to online conservatives, these candidates have stayed stuck in the back of the pack.

The winner of that straw poll is the candidate who may have doused any

second-tier candidate's hopes of breaking out: former Sen. Fred Thompson. In March, allies of the "Law & Order" star started whispering, at greater and greater volumes, that he might be willing to make a presidential bid. The conservative blogosphere rushed to Thompson like ugly stepsisters trying on the glass slipper. Instapundit, still the premiere blog on the center-right, written by University of Tennessee law professor Glenn Reynolds, became a hub for pro-Thompson news. RedState.com opened its software for Thompson to post a *sturm-und-drang* squibble about the Iran/UK hostage standoff. *National Review's* online portal began posting Thompson's unedited political commentaries, which he reads over the radio in his job moonlighting for the waning Paul Harvey. A video of a Thompson speech shortly after 9/11 quickly attracted 10,000 hits on YouTube, all while fan-edited "draft Thompson" videos were bubbling up.

"The Thompson boom is really not being driven by consultants," Mortman points out. "There are candidates that the Right can settle for, maybe, but no one it seems to be excited for. And then Thompson arrives and people get excited about someone who sounds good and might have an impeccable record. He *might*, I mean. Who knows?"

That, so far, is what the Internet means in the Republicans' presidential race. The hard-luck conservatives who want to use it to gather support aren't having much luck, and the antiwar conservatives aren't broadening their base. The new media tools available online are doing the most for a candidates who weren't having much trouble with the old media tools. Technology has leveled the playing field, but the neoconservative, established candidates are bringing the bigger teams. ■

David Weigel is an associate editor of Reason.

Musharraf's Choice

Appease his countrymen or America

By Eric S. Margolis

COULD PAKISTAN be facing an explosion? America's most important ally in President George W. Bush's war on terror is unstable and violent at the best of times. But this writer, who has covered Pakistan since the early 1980s and recently returned from South Asia, has never before seen this highly strategic nation of 162.4 million so seething with tension and anger.

Last month, demonstrations and riots erupted in Pakistan's principal cities after its military ruler President-General (as he styles himself) Pervez Musharraf sacked the respected head of the nation's Supreme Court, Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudry. Eight senior justices resigned. Protesting lawyers were brutally beaten by police.

The chief justice's offense: daring to investigate the disappearance of some 400 suspects arrested by Pakistan at the behest of the United States. Chaudry was also investigating a series of huge financial scandals and was expected to rule on suits challenging Musharraf's plans to get himself re-elected next year in a rigged vote while retaining command of the 650,000-man armed forces, a clear violation of Pakistan's laws.

Newspapers and television stations were closed down and journalists intimidated for reporting Chaudry's arrest and the ensuing demonstrations. Hundreds of political opponents of the Musharraf regime were arrested. Meanwhile, Pakistani security agents and the army continued a two-year-old campaign to crush opposition to the government in the nation's hitherto

autonomous tribal regions along the Afghan border and to halt a growing rebellion in the western province of Baluchistan.

In the eight years since he came to power in a 1999 coup, Musharraf has relentlessly deconstructed Pakistan's weak democratic institutions, notably parliament and the courts, packing them with yes-men and staging elections so crudely rigged that even the general was embarrassed.

Before Musharraf, Pakistan had at least enjoyed a measure of parliamentary government. But after the 1999 military coup that ousted the inept Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan quickly transformed into a full-fledged military state with only the feeblest pretences of civilian government.

The nation's two most important opposition leaders, former Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, are both in exile and have been warned by Musharraf that they face immediate arrest if they return. Both are well known to this writer, as was their predecessor, Zia ul-Haq. Benazir, who remains highly popular, could ably lead Pakistan again. The un-gifted Nawaz, by contrast, is not equal to the job of running one of the world's most difficult nations.

When Musharraf seized power in 1999, Washington denounced him for overthrowing Pakistan's elected government and branded him a military dictator. But once 9/11 occurred, Washington suddenly discovered the very useful general was a "democrat," "statesman," and "key non-NATO ally."