

Obama's 'Cybergenic' Edge

How McCain and Obama Operate in Cyberspace Could Determine Election's Outcome

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Ever since a youthful, telegenic John F. Kennedy bested a haggard Richard Nixon in the 1960 TV debates, it has been a political axiom that successful candidates must be “mediagenic” – able to reach through a TV camera and grab the attention and votes of passive viewers.

It still matters in this election, but it is no longer sufficient to just be TV mediagenic, for the political center of gravity is shifting from the waning mass media world of TV to the emergent personal media world of the Web and cyberspace. To win, candidates must now be “cybergenic” – able to surf, blog, IM and twitter their way into the hearts of activist “netizens.”

Hillary Clinton lost to Obama because her campaign didn't take cyberspace seriously. In early 2007, I found myself at a dinner with Clinton chief strategist Mark Penn and, asking him about his cyber-strategy, I was astounded to hear him scorn the idea that Hillary would ever blog. Perhaps if she had, the race would have played out differently.

The problem is that Clinton and her staff were so steeped in mass media thinking they didn't realize that a new personal media world had arrived. In contrast, the Obama campaign was quick to colonize cyberspace, eagerly taking a page from Howard Dean's innovative 2004 presidential run.

Just as Dean leveraged the Web to shatter fundraising records, Obama's campaign reached



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across cyberspace for dollars as well as mind-share and raced past one candidate after another to the Democratic nomination.

From Firesides to Firewalls

Technologies have long transformed politics, and the first politicians to appreciate a new technology's potential typically enjoy a huge first-mover advantage.

Franklin D. Roosevelt famously made radio his medium with his Depression-era “Fireside Chats” of the 1930s, and Kennedy rode TV into the presidency, leaving more experienced politicians in the dust. Lyndon Johnson launched his post-war political career by helicopter, barnstorming Texas in a tiny Bell 47 whirlybird, literally flying

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rings around the competition to win a tightly contested three-way primary and ultimately the Senate seat.

What is telling about these examples is that in every instance the winning politicians were passionate about the technology they used. Roosevelt loved radio, JFK had a special relationship with Hollywood and LBJ's affection for helicopters was so strong that his Oval Office desk chair was a green vinyl helicopter pilot's seat with built-in ashtray. This passion is essential to seeing – and seizing – first-mover advantage.

I left the Penn dinner with the distinct impression that Hillary Clinton and her team were anything but passionate about digital media, an impression borne out by subsequent events.

Clinton reportedly loves her Blackberry, but Obama is comfortable enough in cyberspace to [make news](#) in a lively e-mail exchange with adoring starlet Scarlett Johansson. Hillary's campaign crafted TV ads viewed by couch potatoes in a few contested states; Obama's team confected the viral "Yes We Can" video screened by over 10 million netizens in the first week alone.

Googling for a Veep?

Now that Clinton is out of the race, the cybergenic contrast between Obama and McCain is even more stark. If Clinton felt like a reluctant tourist in cyberspace, McCain acts like a stay-at-home who reads about the place in National Geographic.

Describing his VP selection process in a June 9 speech in Virginia captured by MSNBC and posted on YouTube, McCain made the cringe-worthy observation that, "We're going through a process where you get a whole bunch of names, and ya & Well, basically, it's a Google. You just, you know, what you can find out now on the Internet. It's remarkable, you know."

In fact, the mediagenic contrast between Obama and McCain also is not tilting in McCain's favor.

McCain gave another speech in New Orleans on the evening of June 3, scheduled to run in the same news cycle as the Democratic primary results of the same day. The carefully planned speech was panned by media commentators and bloggers alike, who criticized everything from the speech's unfortunate timing to the lime green backdrop – like "the cottage cheese in a Jell-o salad," observed one [blogger](#).

Indeed, compared to Obama's energetic victory speech the same night before a crowd of 20,000, McCain's standup in front of a small audience of loyalists seemed a serious mass media flub. Worse yet, the flub is now preserved on YouTube for the curious to view again and again and again.

Of course, the McCain-Obama race is just getting started. Election Day is a long way off, and the next few months are certain to hold plenty of surprises. But absent some wildcard event like another terrorist attack, I'll bet we will look back from the other side of Nov. 4 and conclude that the single most important factor in this election was the winner's cybergenic edge.

We might even see a Kennedy-Nixon moment before the race is over. But even if we don't, I'll be very surprised if Obama isn't our next president. And when he wins, let us hope that Obama's cybergenic instincts enable the first cybergenic president to govern as effectively as he ran.

Paul Saffo is a technology forecaster based in Silicon Valley. You can read more of his essays at www.saffo.com.