

Crossing the Campaign Divide: Dean Changes the Election Game

David Iozzi and Lance Bennett

**Center for Communication and Civic Engagement
University of Washington**

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Over the past year, news of the internet's role in the race for the democratic presidential nomination made headlines in the mainstream media. Some news stories credited the very existence of Howard Dean's campaign to online organizing and fundraising. Others detailed the frustrations felt by other candidates as their attempts at creating vibrant online networks floundered. Still more went on to make predictions about the future role of the internet in American politics. Behind these articles lies a story of the tension between traditional and emerging campaign techniques—a story about by the coming of age of the interactive social networking technologies used so effectively by the Dean campaign.

Social networking technologies (SNTs) differ from other internet-based media because they allow users to contribute original content to websites, and because they enable sustainable self-organizing by bringing people together who are unlikely to have otherwise encountered one another. They have the potential to transform conventional political practices, bringing about a new type of campaign characterized by direct citizen involvement and bottom-up grassroots organizing. *As interactive social networking technologies continue to emerge, campaigns must make strategic choices to either embrace or reject them.* If campaigns choose to embrace online SNTs, they risk transformation from traditional, hierarchical organizations into broader, decentralized networks that give supporters partial control over campaign messages. If campaigns reject online interactivity, they retain the controlled and hierarchical characteristics of traditional,

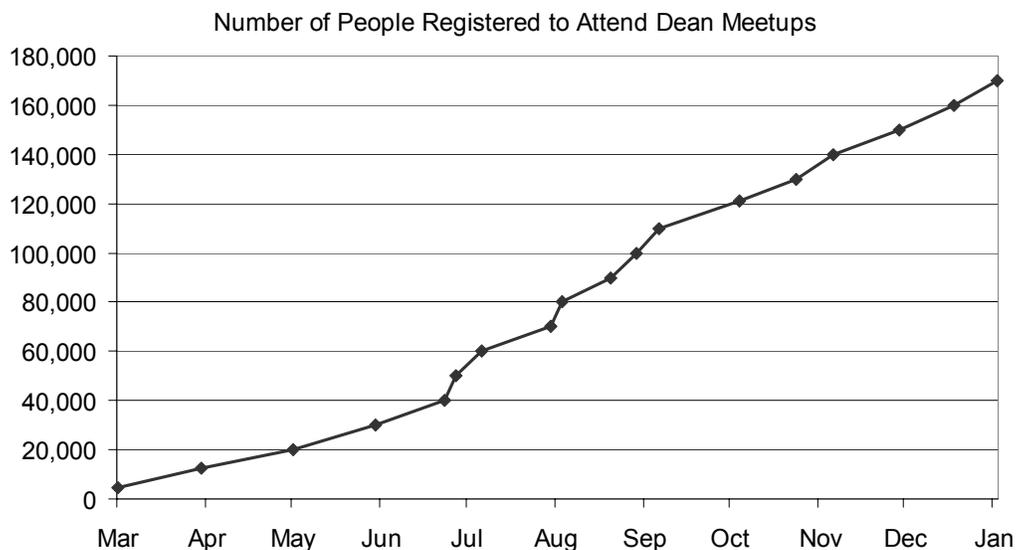
war room campaigns. They maintain greater control over the campaign's message, but restrict their fundraising potential as well as the potential size of their active support network.

Before the Dean phenomenon, prevailing logic pointed toward the war room model as the key to a successful campaign. War room campaigns are hierarchical, top-down organizations that rely on controlled messages and a clear strategy. They attempt to retain rigid control of the communication environment by choosing a clear thematic emphasis and staying on message. Each message, so the logic goes, should be thoroughly analyzed and pre-tested using focus groups and polling in order to maximize the campaign's vote share.

The websites of war room campaigns resemble cul-de-sacs—they can be nice to look at, but they do not allow the average citizen to do anything but look around and then retrace their steps. While often highly informative, they do not facilitate bottom-up grassroots organizing. War room campaigns do not allow citizens to contribute uncensored original content to the campaign's web presence because this could result in a multitude of messages, most of which never passed through focus groups or opinion polling. As a result, there is no true interactivity, but the campaign retains complete control of its message and all aspects of its website.

Until recently, campaigns did not have many convincing incentives to employ SNTs. However, internet use in the current presidential primary race tells a different story. In February 2003, Howard Dean's campaign discovered that groups of people were meeting regularly to discuss the candidacy of the then little-known candidate. These meetings were not organized by the campaign, but by the supporters, themselves, using Meetup.com. Meetup.com is an online tool that organizes local interest groups. It began as a place for people with common hobbies, interests, musical likes, and gaming preferences to connect online and then meet up in the real world. Sometime during late 2002 or early 2003, Dean's supporters began using the site to

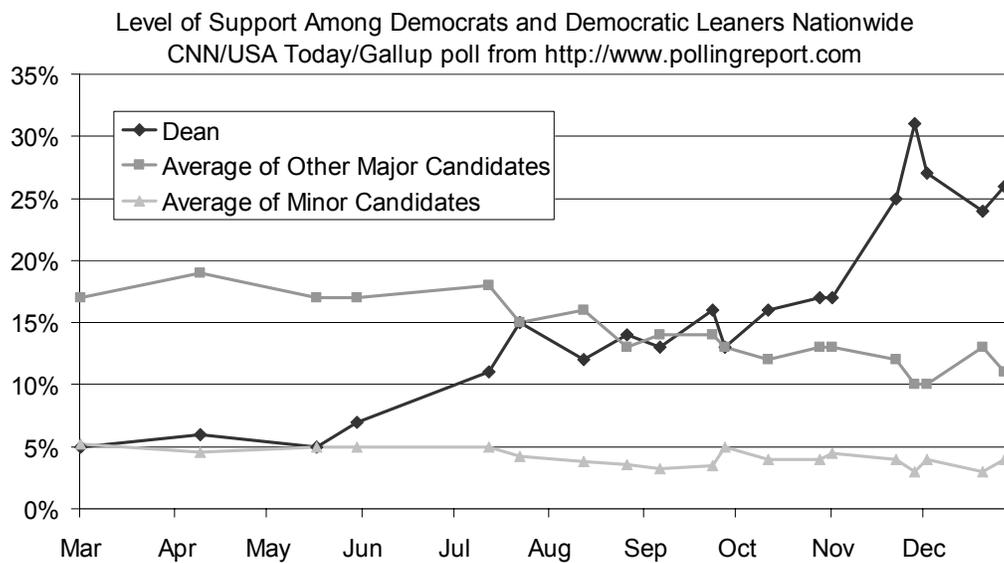
organize around Dean's candidacy and turn online communication into real-world action. Users registered to attend a Meetup in their area, voted on a venue, and then showed up to work towards furthering Dean's campaign. After discovering the site, Dean started attending Meetups and, more importantly, put a link to Meetup on his website. With a link on the campaign's website, increasingly large numbers of supporters found their way to the monthly Meetups. Over 10,000 people attended Dean Meetups in early May. By the end of the summer, the number of attendees passed 100,000, and by early 2004, it had swelled to over 170,000.



By recognizing Meetup, Dean campaign manager Joe Trippi began his innovative use of SNTs and his organization started to shift toward a *networked campaign* model. Dean's use of online interactivity continued to grow when, in March 2003, a blog was linked to the campaign site that allowed readers to respond to posts from the campaign. As the number of viewers and comments increased, the blog transformed from an online journal into a grassroots networking and organizing hub that facilitated two-way communication among supporters and between the supporters and the campaign. The real-time discussions on the comment threads allowed supporters to communicate independently of the campaign. Over the summer, the campaign

added more innovative technologies to its website including discussion forums and surfable databases that allowed supporters to contact one another and post information about grassroots events. The campaign also began using its blogsite to post scores of links to grassroots support sites not controlled by the campaign. Without the campaign-sponsored links, most supporters would never find these sites, but once the campaign acknowledged them, blog users could enter into an immense network of grassroots sites relatively easily.

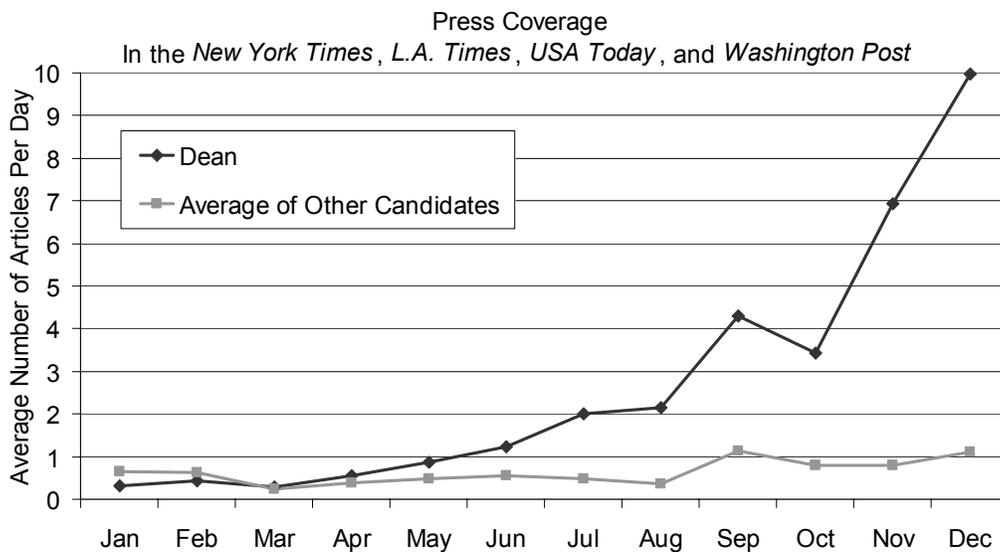
By December, with the first primary only a month away, Meetup.com and the Dean Blog had become central to the campaign. Traditional logic would hold that a staggering number of uncensored comments and uncontrolled links coupled with a network of over 170,000 active supporters operating with minimal guidance from the campaign would do more harm than good. However, as Dean's grassroots support network grew, he began to rise in the polls and, by late fall, found himself in the position of front-runner.



Dean's jump from the bottom to the top of the pack would probably not have happened without his innovative use of SNTs. The Meetups and comment threads, because they allowed supporters to become active participants in the campaign, provided a meaningful relationship

between the campaign and its supporters. This resulted in a large support base that donated money to the campaign on a regular basis, partly because of the connection they felt to the campaign. During the second and third quarters of 2003, Dean raised \$8 million and \$16 million respectively, compared to just \$2 million during the first quarter when he had not yet begun to employ interactivity. During each of these quarters, the other major candidates raised an average of just \$4 million each.

As Dean’s fundraising success became a news story in its own rite, the media paid increasing attention to him. By April, Dean was getting above average news coverage, and by the end of the year, he enjoyed far more coverage than any of the other candidates.



The crossover from digital to mass media legitimated Dean’s frontrunner status and contributed to his jump in the polls. Dean’s use of online interactivity, and his ability to mix a war room campaign and a networked campaign, provided tangible benefits in the form of money and high opinion poll ratings. While they cannot create something out of nothing, SNTs can engage potential supporters, enhance existing support, and produce strategic benefits despite the issue blurring and loss of control they may entail. Where there once were no strategic incentives

to giving up control in pursuit of a networked model, it now looks as though campaigns have two options to choose from and a number of difficult decisions to make.

As we write these words, the news tells of Dean's collapse in the Iowa caucuses. Pundits attribute the surprise defeat to good old fashioned ground and air campaigns run by Kerry and Edwards. However, we also note the creation of a news narrative of Dean's anger and inability to be elected. These themes were reinforced in attack ads and debates that turned Dean into a "pincushion" as one political observer put it. This dynamic reminds us that integrated management of all the levels of media is crucial to winning campaigns. Dean clearly won the contest for most effective use of micro media (e-mail and lists) and middle media (blogs, campaign sites, Meetup), but did little to combat mass media images that he was angry, impulsive, and unable to beat Bush. Next generation campaign communication must learn to integrate the media strategies.