5 Ways New Media are Changing Politics

The outrage was immediate: The Supreme Court decision that struck down restrictions on the use of corporate funds in political advertising, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, is "devastating to the public interest" (President Obama) and a "disastrous rollback" of campaign finance laws (MoveOn.Org) and promises a "windfall" (*New York Times*) of big-money television ad buys by groups like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the AFL-CIO.

But really, does anyone think that in 2020—or maybe even 2015—we'll still have big-money television ad buys, regardless of who's paying for them? The magnitude of technological change over the past 10 years has been astonishing; the next 10 will surely be more so. I'm not saying that there won't be televised political ads at all anymore or that corporations won't find new and creative ways to spend their money. But the collective outrage focused on a top-down, big-money view of politics, well, that's so . . . last century. If the goal of television ads is to motivate viewers to vote, volunteer, or give money, there are far better ways to reach people, thanks to the new media.

New social media are already changing the way organizations attract supporters. The American Red Cross raised a record $8 million plus for Haitian relief efforts via Twitter, which, according to the Nielsen Co., has become the top source of discussion about the quake, followed by online video and blogs. The potential mobile universe of grass-roots text messagers is now over 136 million—an emerging market and communications network for nonprofits, small businesses, and political campaigns.

Most Americans have a cellphone and access to a computer these days, and many of us have moved to a much more digital existence. We've gained hundreds of cable TV channels and satellite radio stations, millions of bloggers, and literally billions of Web pages. The media today are more diffuse and chaotic than ever.

The result is a new paradigm in political communications, and both parties are using it. Very little of it has to do with expensive political advertising on mass media. Look at your desktop, and you'll see the ways the new media are changing the political scene from the bottom up:

1. **News you can choose:** Dan Pfeiffer, the White House communications director, recently told the *New Yorker* magazine, "With the Internet, with YouTube, with TiVo, with cable TV, people are selective viewers now. . . . People approach their news consumption the way they approach their iPod: You download the songs you like and listen to them when you want to listen to them." That affects the way reporters spend their days and the way campaigns craft their message.

2. **Share this:** Sharing is emerging as a way of distributing the news—tweets from the streets of Iran and from the rubble of Haiti have been retweeted hundreds of times in a new, virtual form of word of mouth. The White House's Facebook page has nearly half a million fans; its Twitter feed has 1.7 million followers. That's no surprise: President Obama was the first candidate to announce his White House run via Web video and his vice presidential pick by text message. Don't forget that Sarah Palin began the whole "death panels" discussion not by giving an interview but by posting the idea on her Facebook page, which then got shared with thousands of friends.
3. **Like it:** By clicking on a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" icon, constituents can give politicians an instant read on opinions and positions posted on their Web pages, sort of a rudimentary straw poll that is faster, cheaper—but less accurate—than a high-priced telephone poll.

4. **Connect with others:** During the height of demonstrations in Iran, street organizers tweeted safe locations for impromptu protests—building "flash mobs"—to great effect. Similarly, last-minute organizational details for tea parties, town hall meetings, and even State of the Union-watching events get posted on Facebook pages and tweeted to supporters. It sure beats passing out fliers at subway stops, as political organizers used to do.

5. **Donate now:** John McCain first harnessed the Internet for fundraising after his 2000 New Hampshire primary victory; by 2007, Ron Paul raised $4 million online in one day, despite being largely ignored by the media. Barack Obama raised hundreds of millions online over the course of his presidential run, and in just the last two weeks of the senatorial race in Massachusetts, Scott Brown raised $12 million from 157,000 donors, according to online consultants Mindy Finn and Patrick Ruffini, who helped Brown. Most politicians would rather have thousands of individual givers than a few big corporate donors, and the Internet makes that much easier.

   Politicians have long sought to go around the mainstream press filter—from fireside chats, to whistlestop tours, to snail-mail newsletters—but the new media take it a step further by even more directly connecting them with voters. And the technology is moving quickly. Last fall, a Conservative Talking Points iPhone app came out; a few days ago the White House unveiled its new iPhone app, with live-streaming video of presidential events. Who knows what's next?

   The Internet "has reorganized the way Americans do everything—including elect their leaders. Candidates who would have had no chance before the Internet can now overcome huge odds, with the people they energize serving as the backbone of their campaign," Finn and Ruffini wrote in the *Washington Post*. To me, it's a good thing that the new media give a bottom-up boost to candidates facing overwhelming odds. And that far outweighs the supposedly devastating effect of a few big corporate donors buying top-down television ads.

*Written by Mary Kate Cary, former White House speechwriter for President George H.W. Bush. She currently writes speeches for political and business leaders, and is a contributing editor for U.S. News & World Report.*