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Enter The Cybercandidates
Politicians like Howard Dean are using the Web to rewrite the rules of American politics.

By Henry Jenkins
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By now, you've probably heard that savvy use of the Internet has helped to push Howard Dean, the previously little known former governor of Vermont, into the front ranks of candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination. Dean has raised more money online than any other campaign in U.S. political history; his staff is using blogging technology to create a more intimate, real-time relationship with its supporters; and they are deploying "smart mob" style tactics to quickly launch rallies around the country. Dean won 40 percent of the vote in an online "primary" run by MoveOn.org—an event that attracted more voters than the 2000 Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary combined. Pundits are calling Dean the cybercandidate.
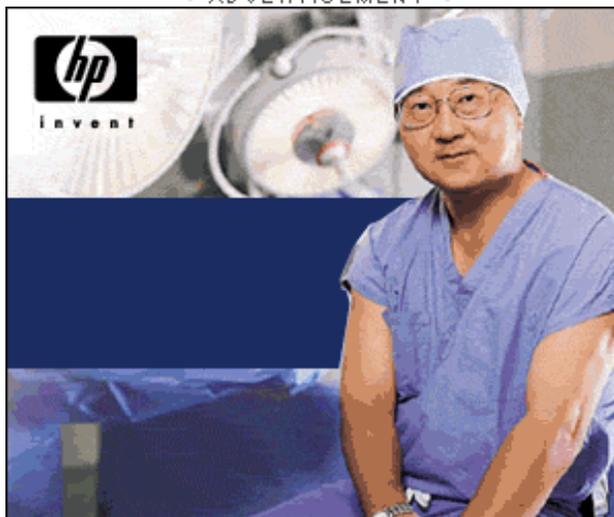
By all reports, Dean himself is no more digitally literate than any of his rivals, but his staff and supporters "get it." They talk about the perfect storm of electoral politics, where the right person is employing the right technology to send the right message at the right time.

Of course, we've heard this kind of talk before. Many commentators had predicted that the Net might be the decisive factor in the 2000 election. By November 2000, 64 percent of all registered votes were Internet users and 90 percent of U.S. users of the Internet were registered voters. The Web was going to be the least costly and most effective means of reaching and mobilizing likely voters.

There's no question that the Internet played key roles in 2000. Steve Forbes became the first person to announce his presidential campaign on the Web. Arizona became the first state to allow online voting in its presidential primary.

Democrat Bill Bradley and Republican John McCain set their respective party records for online fundraising—records that Dean has now smashed. The nominating conventions were webcast. The Republican and Democratic parties used the Web to issue real-time e-rebuttals during the fall debates. Computer modeling allowed both campaigns to know where their voters were and thus to realize that something had gone wrong in Florida. Among users under the age of 30, half said that information they gained from the Web had changed how they voted—a sign of things to come.

Despite all of this, skeptical political scientists concluded that the Web was not a decisive factor in the 2000 presidential election campaign.

In my introduction to a new MIT Press anthology, *Democracy and New Media*, I argue that these disappointed pundits were looking in the wrong places. They were seeking some decisive moment—the contemporary equivalent of Roosevelt's fireside chats on radio or the Kennedy-Nixon debates on television. Those events were emblematic of the broadcast era: they were important because they allowed candidates (or, in FDR's case, the president) to directly address a significant portion of the electorate at the same time and with the same message. The current diversification of communication channels, on the other hand, is politically important because it expands the range of voices that can be heard: though some voices command greater prominence, no one voice speaks with unquestioned authority.

Previous candidates had seen their Web sites as high-tech brochures, often bringing to the Internet old, top-down assumptions about how campaigns are run. In 1996, for example, the Bob Dole campaign created a site that featured a click-on map of the United States. Was he able to localize and customize messages to the concerns of voters in specific states? Not exactly. Rather, you could find out which of the state's party officials had endorsed the Dole campaign. The candidates hadn't yet grasped the simple insight that using the Web as a read-only medium shuts people out rather than inviting them on board.

The Dean campaign, on the other hand, has discovered how to use the Web to build a community of support around the candidate, allowing voters not only to feel more connected to the campaign but also to each other. One could argue that Dean's approach builds on earlier experiments conducted by Pat Buchanan and Ross Perot in 1996, Jesse Ventura in 1998, and John McCain and Ralph Nader in 2000.

Every new medium has helped to transform American politics. In the 1930s, FDR discovered that radio required a different kind of rhetoric—less bombastic, more intimate—than the whistle stop oratory of the 19th century. In the early television era, Kennedy taught Nixon that the candidate's personality was as important as what he said. And the first President Bush—a mediocre speaker serving in the wake of Ronald Reagan—rewrote the books on presidential television. In 1988, the Bush campaign adopted a "message of the day" approach designed to provide the images to support his key campaign themes—as when he spoke about patriotism in a flag factory or denounced Michael Dukakis's environmental record from a boat on the polluted Boston harbor. Four years later, Bill Clinton demonstrated the power of cable narrowcasting to target messages at specific constituencies when he spent an hour talking informally with college kids on MTV and used the Arsenio Hall Show to address the African-American community about his views on the Los Angeles riots. Newt Gingrich rose to national prominence by helping to build up a network of right-wing talk radio stations and by using C-Span to get free television airtime. Each of these men found the right style of speaking to best suit the key media system of his era.

To be clear, the medium doesn't totally create the candidate. Most of these

candidates had successfully political careers in the old media environments. Yet, two things took place: first, either the candidates or their handlers discovered something important about these new media that others had previously not realized and second, the candidate's positions and personalities were effectively expressed through their chosen medium.

So what will the cybercandidates look like?

Over the past decade, *Wired* magazine has conducted a series of surveys that have found that the most wired segment of the public share some core political assumptions. These "netizens" are fiscally conservative and socially libertarian and tend to label themselves as independents. The candidates who have most fully exploited the new medium (Ventura, McCain, and Dean, most notably) are those who stress their independent thinking, their hybrid ideologies, and their straight talk. So far, none of these candidates has been able to get the nomination of a major party, even though they attract voters from across the political spectrum. The Internet didn't create the outsider candidate, but it is particularly hospitable to them. So far, it is hard to find an inside-the-beltway candidate who has thrived on the Internet or who has felt the need to tap this potential base of support.

Cybercandidates tend to be underdogs who are written off by traditional media. Third-party candidates, for example, are much more visible on the Web than on television. Part of what's fueling the Dean surge in the polls is the sense of cultish discovery that many of his early supporters feel toward a candidate they found online before the rest of the country had even heard of him. Ventura attracted a significant number of young and working class voters who had never registered previously; many of these first-timers said that they would not have voted if they had not found someone who so perfectly expressed their dissatisfaction with mainstream politicians. These candidates don't just have supporters; they have fans.

 The cybercandidates don't necessarily have polish or glamour. They are not telegenic. Dean often looks physically awkward, and Steve Forbes was a hopeless nerd in front of the camera, but netizens see them as geeks like us. The awkwardness comes across as a marker of authenticity, especially when backed by the candor and take-no-prisoners attitude people associate with such candidates.

If radio turned out to be a more intimate medium than old style stump speeches, the Internet is turning out to be an even more informal medium, encouraging candidates to show us what goes on behind the scenes. Political talk shows like *Inside Politics* on CNN and dramas like *The West Wing* have educated voters about the work that goes into constructing a campaign's image and themes. The Dean campaign takes this fascination with "spin" one step further—allowing voters to collaborate in shaping the image of our political leaders. It is no accident that many of the best ideas about how to use the Web in the Dean campaign have come from unsolicited e-mails or that the Dean Web site's most popular feature is a blog written by his staffers about their day-to-day activities.

The telegenic candidates had to be cool under pressure. Never let them see you sweat, as perspiration-drenched Nixon learned in 1960. But many of the cybercandidates—Buchanan, Perot, Nader, Dean—have portrayed themselves as mad as hell. When Dean says that he represents the "Democratic wing of the Democratic party" and accuses his opponents of not standing up to Bush, he shows the spirit of the veteran flame warrior who blasts away his opposition. Pundits question whether such candidates have the temperament for the office (a charge directed first at McCain and now at Dean), but supporters give more money

every time the cybercandidates shoot off their mouths. Television is a push medium—political messages come to you whether you want them or not. The Web is a pull medium—you have to actively seek out information. So far, the hot-blooded candidates are more effective catalysts in drawing supporters to the Web than those who come across as calm and collected on the tube.

Once they come to a site, though, netizens demand data. Ventura's campaign offered much more detailed position papers than either of his major party opponents. The telegenic candidate depends on sound bites; the cybercandidate, on posts. Part of Dean's appeal is his willingness to let us in on his thinking process, to show us step by step the logic that shapes his positions. Not all Americans will want all of the details and may not read through all of those position papers, but the blogging community can help customize the message to the concerns and attention spans of specific constituencies. The key thing is giving the impression that we can drill down as deep as we want and still get more information. Yet this focus on his thinking process leaves Dean vulnerable to traditional media, where provisional ideas get treated as definitive positions.

Will the Internet improve U.S. democracy? It will certainly change it—and for the moment, it is certainly enlivening the early days of the 2004 campaign. What we need to watch for is how the traits that add up to a successful cyber-campaign play out on broadcast and cable television, which operate on very different paradigms. So far, the traits that make for an effective cyber-insurgency don't necessarily play well on the evening news, and we may be seeing the cybercandidates getting caught in the crosscurrents between the two very different media.

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