

On the stump in cyberspace

Politicians can't afford to ignore the Internet, but it's also risky to put all their blogs in one basket

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Ask anyone.

If you corral a group of Type A partisan personalities in a relatively small city and give them no specific focus, there's bound to be trouble. Or, at the very least, recurring speculation about the possibility of a federal election this fall.

But never mind what the political leaders or the polls have to say about it: The real indication of who's really ready to rumble is in cyberspace.

These days, long before the war room is rented, the bus is leased and the lawn signs are ordered, political campaigns get rolling on blogsites. Or YouTube. Or Facebook.

"It's generally acknowledged now that there has to be an official as well as an unofficial campaign," says political strategist Nik Nanos of SES Consulting. "It has become a very deliberate approach: the conventional ads and flyers and the edgier, nastier underground stuff."

These political tools have steadily gained momentum since about 2004. And while some argue that they open a new opportunity for broad-based political debate, others denounce them as a repository of the very worst in partisan propaganda.

In any case, however, there's little debate that they've become a force to be reckoned with, if an imperfect one.

"The risk lies in over-estimating the power of the Internet. It all tends to be



CREDIT: Pat Mcgrath, the Ottawa Citizen
Dalton McGuinty at Moe's Newport Restaurant in Westboro yesterday. Mr. McGuinty's supporters have been active online, waging a campaign war through Internet blogs. While it's a good way to boost morale, experts say much of the online rhetoric is only read by hardcore political junkies.

very inside stuff," says NDP press secretary, Ian Capstick. "You're already a partisan political junkie if you're watching the political videos on YouTube. And most of the postings only get a few thousand hits at most."

He notes that in his view, the strategists backing Ontario Liberal candidate Dalton McGuinty, "are spending way too much time and energy on messages on YouTube."

"You can't have a campaign that's overly focused on any one platform," he insists. "It can't be all lawn signs, all pamphlets, all debates or all YouTube."

While that may be true, there's always the hope that if a clip or the comment is sufficiently embarrassing, amusing or nasty, it will break through to a more mainstream audience, generating that most precious political commodity: buzz.

And therein lies a risk: grabbing attention can also incur damage at a time when many voters have become increasingly uncomfortable and critical of the nasty tone of many recent political exchanges.

Provincially, John Tory paid a steep price when a partisan video camera caught him jokingly referring to the University of Ottawa as "U of Zero" while door-knocking in the city. The clip was posted on YouTube within hours.

While the messages carried through cyberspace may register only nominally with the average Canadian voter, they've become -- more than anything else -- a critical tool to building the internal momentum and party solidarity required to execute a successful campaign at the grassroots level.

"Blogs and YouTube clips tend to motivate the troops all the way down the line," notes Mr. Nanos. "It has gained huge traction inside a campaign, where people are already believers."

Another part of the appeal of the cyber-campaign, of course, is that it doesn't count in terms of campaign spending because it's free -- a significant consideration in the aftermath of tight new limits on campaign budgets.

Furthermore, while it allows the converted to preach to one another, it also holds the promise of appealing to a younger demographic.

Most notably, a video of former NDP leader and local Ottawa candidate Ed Broadbent performing a political rap made the veteran politician relevant to a new generation of voters.

That clip accomplished the ultimate, by going "viral" and crossing over into the mainstream media, where it was drawn to the attention of a much wider audience.

Following that trend, the Liberal Party's youth wing has also been active on YouTube, aggressively posting their own advertisements.

But the occasional eruption of mutual attacks or particularly incendiary postings in the blogosphere also tends to get attention as well.

"The tone of blogs can often veer to the extreme because there's a sense that it's all off-road and there's need for balance or accountability," says Michael Geist, Canada Research Chair of Internet and E-Commerce Law at the University of Ottawa -- and an active blogger and newspaper columnist.

But, he counters, an offsetting advantage is that bloggers "wear their politics on their sleeve and are self-declaring."

"There's an openness there that side-steps the sort of spin that people often have to try and detect on their own in the mainstream media. It's very honest that way."

And that's almost as radical a concept as a prime minister on Facebook.

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Follow the Leaders

NDP leader Howard Hampton

8:30 a.m., Campaign announcement, Kitchener

12:30 p.m., Campaign event, Port Colborne

Progressive Conservative leader John Tory

10 a.m., Media Event,

1880 Sheppard Ave. W., Toronto

2 p.m., Campaign event, North Bay

8 p.m., attends Lakehead Thunder Wolves Hockey Game,

Thunder Bay

Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty

itinerary not available

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