The Disconnection In Online Politics: the youth political web sphere and US election sites, 2002-2004

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In recent years, candidates and other political actors have dramatically increased their presence and activities online. Although the notion of these activities reaching beyond a limited set of early-adopters is relatively new, younger citizens have long been at the forefront of new developments on the web and continue to make up a substantial proportion of those seeking political information online. Given longstanding concern over levels of civic and political engagement among young people, questions concerning what young people seeking information and opportunities for political involvement online might find there are particularly relevant. In particular, we explore political websites that are directly targeted at younger voters (e.g. Rock the Vote and similar sites), websites produced by candidates and political parties, and possible linkages between these two web spheres. Based on content and hyperlink analyses spanning the 2002 and 2004 US election cycles, we find a complex evolution of the online political information environment offered to youth. Although the youth engagement web sphere experienced dramatic growth during this time period, our data also identify a reluctance of many mainstream political actors to speak directly to young people through the web, and a surprising underdevelopment of linkages between youth politics websites and the wider web of political information online. We conclude by considering the implications of these patterns for future research on the role of new media in processes of political communication and engagement.

Keywords  Youth civic engagement; online politics; campaign websites; political portals; hyperlink analysis

Since the web first began to be used as a communications tool by candidates, interest groups and other organizations in the early 1990s, its political
importance has grown dramatically. With each passing election cycle since 1994, the proportion of political candidates that have integrated the web into their communication strategies has steadily increased (Foot & Schneider 2006; Howard 2006). Further, attention to political information on the web by average citizens has also grown, from an estimated 4 per cent of the US general public in 1996, to 29 per cent in 2004, when an estimated 75 million Americans, representing 37 per cent of the adult population and over half of all Internet users, went online to get information about the campaigns (Pew Research Center 2004).

Young voters are among the most attentive to the growing world of political information on the web. In the 2004 election, which featured unprecedented and novel uses of new media tools, young people were surprisingly engaged in the political process. Many were probably spurred by concerns over the war in Iraq, which ran high among 18–29-year-olds, and were significantly related to attentiveness to the campaigns (Patterson 2004). Others were mobilized by specific efforts to increase youth turnout in 2004, which included some of the most intense canvassing and get-out-the-vote efforts in history (Lopez et al. 2004). As a result of these and other factors, younger citizens showed marked increases in reading news of the election, talking about it with others, and thinking about how the outcome might affect them (Andolina & Jenkins 2004). Younger voters also turned out to the polls in record numbers not seen since Bill Clinton was first elected in 1992. While it is impossible, and quite probably wrong, to attribute increased turnout to the online environment, it is clear that as young people moved through the media environment of the campaigns on their way to the polls, many sought their information from websites produced by candidates, parties and other political organizations. Indeed, an estimated 28 per cent of 18–29-year-olds received most of their information about the campaigns via the Internet in 2004, making them the age group most reliant on new media for political information about the election (Pew Research Center 2004).

This is perhaps unsurprising, given the prominence of young people in the broader online world. Although age disparities in usage statistics have flattened somewhat over time, Americans aged 18–29 have remained perennially and stereotypically at the top of the curve and have been early-adopters of new features such as instant messaging, and the emerging collection of Internet activities dubbed ‘Web 2.0’ (Cole 2003; Madden 2003; Madden & Fox 2006). However, other characteristics of the youth demographic, such as their historic relative disengagement from traditional forms of civic and political activities (Putnam 2000), and a growing sense that politics and political discourse do not address them, raise important questions concerning the quality and type of information environment offered to youth through the web.
Of particular importance is the question of whether online politics offer the technological affordances and credibility that young people seek in their media experiences. In particular, we are concerned that the slickness and sophistication of sites devoted to motivating general political engagement among youth may not be mirrored in the kinds of experiences that young voters encounter when they visit candidate, issue and party sites during elections. Specifically, we pursue three research questions focused on the nature of these different political web environments, and explore how they have developed in recent years. First, drawing on Foot & Schneider’s concept of the ‘web sphere’ (2002), we ask, what is the nature of the youth political engagement web sphere – that collection of sites aimed at attracting young people to politics in general, but not sponsored by particular parties or electoral candidates (e.g. Rock the Vote and similar sites)? To address this question we identify the key political issues and topics discussed on these sites, as well as the interactive features used to attract and retain young visitors. Second, to what extent does the electoral web sphere (especially candidate and party websites) speak to the interests and sensibilities of younger citizens? To get at this question, we will compare the issues and features found on samples of candidate campaign sites to those found on the youth sites, and also explore the extent to which sites in the electoral web sphere ‘reach out’ to younger voters, as compared with other kinds of voters. Finally, given that its networked hyperlink structure is one of the defining characteristics of web communication, what are the network characteristics of the youth political engagement sphere, and to what extent are there linkages or navigational paths between the youth political engagement sphere and the wider electoral web sphere? Here we explore the extent to which youth political web networks provide useful pathways for young people to follow in search of information, opportunities for political participation, and campaigns and organizations that match their political interests.

Our investigations in this area, which span the 2002 and 2004 US election cycles, reveal a complex evolution of the online political information environment offered to young citizens. One of the most dramatic shifts in our data over this period is an unmistakable surge in youth-oriented political content online during this period, contemporaneous with the spikes in interest and turnout among American youth. A substantial number of sites (youth oriented and otherwise) have emerged to offer detailed issue information, as well as other useful and interactive tools that simplify processes like registering to vote, donating money to political causes and contacting elected officials. At the same time, however, our data also identify a reluctance of mainstream political actors to take advantage of the Internet as a way to speak directly to young voters. Candidates and other political actors, for example, appear far less interested in using the web as a way to bring in younger voters than one might suspect given the distribution of Internet
users by age group. Put simply, politicians have shown surprisingly little indication of adapting to the shifting world of political communication as young people are creating and experiencing it. Moreover, in examining the network characteristics of youth engagement websites as a group, we find increases in density and interactive features, yet pathways to the wider web of elections and related political information resources remain notably underdeveloped. After presenting the details of these findings, we conclude with a discussion of their implications for future research on the role of new media in processes of political communication and engagement.

Study design and data

To address our first two research questions we conducted extensive content analyses of sites produced by youth-oriented political engagement organizations, as well as electoral sites produced by candidates and parties. We harvested and archived youth engagement sites during the 2002 and 2004 elections. The political campaign web data come from two sources. During the 2002 cycle, we conducted content analysis of nearly 200 candidate campaign websites, which we compare with data from a smaller sample of 2004 campaign websites gathered by other researchers (Foot & Schneider 2006). Additionally, to shed light on the network questions we created a series of network maps based on linkages to and from sites within the youth political web sphere that chart the emergence and development of this unique part of the web over time.

Site identification and sampling

In each of the two election cycles under study, a collection of youth political engagement websites was generated using a combination of site identification techniques. First, in each cycle a series of Google searches were conducted using descriptors such as ‘youth’, ‘political’, ‘politics’, ‘elections’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘civic’. The URLs generated in this process were then used to create a ‘seed list’ that was fed into the Issue Crawler tool developed by Richard Rogers. The Issue Crawler identifies networks of sites based on linkages to, from and among an original list of sites on the basis of co-link analysis. A co-link is simply a page that is linked to or from at least two of the starting points for that iteration. If a site is added to the list as a result of the co-link analysis, it then becomes one of the starting points for the next iteration. By adjusting the network parameters inputted at the beginning of a crawl (e.g. varying the seed lists of sites, the depth to which the crawler scans each site for links, and the number of iterations for each crawl) we were able to identify what we believe to be reasonably complete renderings of youth
engagement site networks for each of the two election cycles, leading us to
the final lists of sites that comprise what we consider to be the youth political
generation web spheres for 2002 and 2004, and the primary data pool for our
content analyses of youth sites.

Through each of the iterations of crawling, the goal was to identify portal
sites focusing generally on youth politics (rather than narrowly on one issue,
or one set of issues) and oriented toward the 18–25-year-old demographic
group. We deleted from our analyses sites from interest organizations that
did not display a clear youth engagement program. We also added sites that
were identified by other researchers working on youth engagement that did
not emerge from the automated crawling process that generated our initial
list. At every turn, we sought to create the most inclusive and exhaustive collection of websites providing political content directed primarily at younger citizens, guided by the principles of web sphere analysis outlined by Foot & Schneider (2006). Ultimately, the 2002 list included some 22 sites, and the 2004 sphere totaled 35 sites. After archiving the sites using an off-the-shelf web crawler program, we were then able to conduct our content analyses on what we believe represent the full universes of youth political portals that operated in the US 2002 and 2004 election cycles.

Our primary set of election campaign candidate sites was drawn from the archival collection of all of the 2002 House, Senate and Gubernatorial candidate websites produced by webarchivist.org and available at the Library of Congress under the Mapping the INternet Electronic Resources Virtual Archive (MINERVA) collection (http://www.loc.gov/minerva/), as well as through webarchivist’s public scholarship site, http://politicalweb.info. Although it is often the sites of presidential candidates that receive the most popular attention in discussions of online politics, our analysis proceeds from the assumption that the vast majority of campaigns in the United States are for these lesser offices. Indeed, at the height of the campaign season in 2002, over 1600 individuals officially competed for House, Senate and Gubernatorial office, and nearly two-thirds of them fielded a functional, stand-alone campaign website (Foot et al. in press). Close to 1200 websites are included in the 2002 Election web Archive. Lacking the resources to conduct coding on the full universe of campaign sites from 2002, we opted for a random sample of just over 200 of the sites listed in the archive. Initial analyses of the makeup of the sample, focusing on the contexts within which each site was produced (e.g. the partisanship of candidates, and their likelihood of success as gauged by campaign intensity), revealed no significant differences between our sample and the full universe of cases available in the archive. Ultimately, close to 30 sites were eliminated from coding due to exclusion of the actual site contents by the campaigns themselves, problems with archival availability of the sites, and in a few cases the mistaken inclusion in the archive of websites that were not official
campaign sites. In all, a total of 177 archival website impressions comprised our (hyper)text corpus for the candidate site content analysis.

Data on youth-oriented content in the 2004 electoral web sphere were generously provided by Kirsten Foot and her collaborators, who allowed us to include an item on youth appeal in their more general analysis of web practices engaged in by political actors in the 2004 elections (Foot & Schneider 2006). In their analysis of the 2004 electoral web sphere, they used a similar process of focused sleuthing to identify a set of sites representing the web presence of a variety of different political actors. Based on the results of this site identification process, they then created a representative sample for coding purposes. Although smaller than our 2002 sample, their sample of the 2004 web sphere included a total of 102 sites from four distinct producer types relevant to the present investigations. Specifically, they coded candidate, party, labor organization/NGO and press/portal sites. A fifth, ‘other’ category was also created for sites that did not fall cleanly into one of these four categories (e.g. sites produced by individuals).

Coding

We coded the archival renderings of the youth engagement and election campaign websites as they appeared at the height of the 2002 campaign season, typically in late October or early November. Graduate and undergraduate researchers conducted the coding using a web-based survey tool, which facilitated data transfer during the coding process.

Youth engagement sites

The coding scheme developed for the youth political sites probed for the presence or absence of 16 distinct political issues, and 15 specific features. The list of issues was developed on the basis of polling data identifying the political issues salient to voters during the time period for which we coded the websites. These ‘most important problem’ data included traditional national samples, as well as samples of voters in the 18–25-year-old age group. We also coded for a collection of website features to determine the extent to which various attractive features of the web (e.g. blogs, links, personal logins, and polls) were available in the respective web spheres. The list of features was developed on the basis of prior research on the 2002 candidate websites (Foot et al. in press), as well as exploratory analyses of the youth sites themselves. Table 1 lists the specific issues and features included in the coding scheme. Overall, inter-coder per centage agreement for each of these items falls within the acceptable range, with the vast majority at or above 90 per cent.
Candidate sites

In order to address our second research question concerning the extent to which candidates and other political actors ‘reach out’ to younger voters, our coding scheme for the 2002 candidate sites included items tapping the presence or absence of the same 16 issues and 15 features included in the youth site coding scheme.\(^8\) This enabled us to compare the content and features of the two kinds of sites. Additionally, we also included a number of items probing for the presence of age-related appeals within both the issues content, and the features employed on the candidate sites. This enabled us to assess more fully the extent to which candidates reached out to youth sensibilities in 2002. To illustrate, for each distinct issue identified on a site, we asked coders to further probe for the presence of either implicit or explicit appeals to younger citizens. Implicit appeals were defined as the presence of photographs or other images that either featured individuals resembling members of the 18–25-year-old age group, or symbolized that group. For example, coders looked for photographs of young workers on pages related to the economy and college students on pages related to education. Explicit appeals were defined as direct, textual references to younger voters, where younger voters were clearly part of the intended audience. For example, under this system if a candidate posted to their site a block of text decrying the flight of young people from her rural district, this would not be coded as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>education</td>
<td>voter registration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>healthcare</td>
<td>news/press releases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>national security/terrorism</td>
<td>photos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taxes/government spending</td>
<td>endorsements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>economy/jobs</td>
<td>email signup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social security</td>
<td>contact officials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>environment</td>
<td>participation/mobilization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gun control</td>
<td>multimedia content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crime/violence</td>
<td>send links</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>abortion</td>
<td>message board or blog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>campaign finance reform</td>
<td>interactive polls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>minority rights/recognition</td>
<td>contact media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>politics/government changes</td>
<td>personal login</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>censorship/free expression</td>
<td>onsite information on elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>national debt</td>
<td>links to information on elections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gay rights
an explicit youth appeal on economic issues, whereas a different candidate page including calls for greater student loan funding to help younger constituents finance their educations would be coded as an explicit youth appeal on education. Ultimately, we found that implicit and explicit appeals to young people were so infrequent that we combined both into a single measure for presence of youth appeals in issue content, and inter-coder agreement was calculated on the basis of this combined measure. With respect to youth appeals in site feature content, we examined four distinct facets of the typical campaign website; we looked for explicit or implicit youth appeal or representation in (a) mobilization/participation features (such as a campaign calendar featuring events held on college campuses), (b) photo galleries, (c) news items listed in a press release or newsroom section of a website, and (d) endorsements (e.g. from the local College Republicans or College Democrats). As a point of comparison, we also coded for the presence or absence of appeals to another age-based demographic, senior citizens, using similar procedures. Finally, we also coded for the presence of biographical sketches in the candidate websites. Inter-coder percentage agreement for each item in the candidate site coding displayed slightly more variation than those for the youth site coding, but were generally above 80 per cent.

As mentioned earlier, our 2004 electoral web sphere coding data come from an item included in Foot & Schneider’s (2006) investigations. This item was based on our original items on youth appeals in the 2002 candidate coding, but in keeping with our earlier findings combined references to implicit and explicit appeals. Other than this slight change, the wording and instructions for this item were taken from our original coding scheme. The result is a measure comparable to our collapsed 2002 variable, though somewhat less precise than our more elaborate coding of the 2002 candidate sites. It is important to note, however, that since this measure reflects a simple presence or absence of youth appeal on each site in general, it is therefore in some ways more sensitive toward the identification youth content.

Network properties of the youth political web sphere

Finally, to determine the emergence and chart any growth or development of networks in the youth political web sphere, we conducted a series of controlled crawls using the Issue Crawler at a number of different time points. These crawls provide a unique time-lapse picture of the youth political web sphere over time. For each of these crawls, we entered as a seed list the collection of sites identified as the youth engagement sphere for that election cycle, and instructed to the crawler to go through two iterations of the co-link analysis described earlier, and to scan each site to a depth of two pages for links.
Findings

Taken as a whole, our analyses of this critical period reveal complex patterns of staggered development in the evolving world of online resources available to young voters who may turn to the Web for political information. While the youth political engagement web sphere appears to have matured in significant ways over the period of our investigations, patterns in the candidate sphere appear to lag in terms of responding to the increasing demand for online political information among young people. Within the youth political web sphere, for example, we see dramatic growth (from 22 sites identified in 2002 to 35 in 2004), as well as substantial improvements in terms of issue content and features. In network terms, we also see signs of a dynamic structure that is quite responsive to external developments in the political world. Among the candidate websites, however, we find that although candidates often discuss issue topics that younger Americans are interested in, or at least appear on youth-oriented sites, there is little effort to address these in language or policy terms aimed at younger demographics (compared, for example, with clear attempts to target appeals to senior citizens). Moreover, we found a noticeable lack of interactive features on candidate sites, as compared with sites within the youth political web sphere. Finally, we also identify a paucity of easily navigable linkages between these two important sets of online resources for young voters. We begin our discussion of findings with the nature and development of the youth political web sphere, subsequently moving on to the patterns identified in the electoral web sphere.

The youth engagement web sphere

As noted earlier, on the surface the most observable pattern in the youth engagement web sphere during the time period under study was its marked increase in size, from 22 to 35 identifiable actors. Within this unique sphere of web content, we also find a vibrant array of information and features, as well as a number of encouraging signs of growth and development over time.

In terms of issues and informational content, we may begin by considering the simple case of offering a distinct menu of ‘issues’ information. For the 2002 youth engagement web sphere we detected pages devoted to information on a menu of political issues within only eight of the 22 sites identified. By 2004, however, we found discussion of specific political issues on close to two-thirds of the 35 youth political websites identified in our 2004 analyses. Further comparisons of the sites from 2004 with those of 2002 also revealed greater levels of general information about the current elections, greater provision of information on voter registration, and greater levels of information
about actual offline political events and opportunities for political participation. Indeed, by 2004 over half of the youth-oriented political websites examined contained information on the elections in some form, information on how to register to vote, and information about events and ways to get involved. Especially noteworthy across the two time points is the shift away from providing specific information about the elections through links to third-party sites like the one produced by League of Women Voters, and toward the provision of election information on-site, in a context more directly targeted toward younger voters. These areas of growth, and the conversion of election information transmission from off-site links to on-site content, are graphically illustrated in Figure 1.

With respect to the features offered in the youth political engagement web sphere, we also found a number of positive developments for the online information environment offered to young voters. Though even in 2002 youth oriented political websites offered an impressive array of interactive and multimedia features, comparing analyses of features on these sites from both the 2002 and 2004 election cycles again reveals substantial gains during this time period. With the notable exception of declines in two features from 2002 to 2004 – the use of interactive opinion polls and pages providing interactive forms that enable site visitors to contact elected officials – overall we see a steady, and in some cases marked increase in the presence of a variety of web-exclusive communication techniques. The most common features found on youth sites in 2004 were signup forms for email updates, which alert visitors to new site content, news/press release pages, often

![Figure 1](#)
highlighting events and issues of unique concern to younger voters, and photos, which often help young voters to identify with the producers of a given website. These three features were found on 81 per cent, 86 per cent, and 83 per cent of the youth political sites we coded in 2004, respectively. As in the broader world of Internet communication, there were also marked gains in the presence of message boards or blogs on youth political websites across the two time points, representing a 70 per cent increase over their prevalence in the 2002 cycle. The proportions of youth political websites containing these features in 2002 and 2004 are shown in Figure 2.

A final set of positive developments concerning the potential of digital media as a useful resource for young voters comes from our investigation of the network structure of the youth political engagement web sphere. The baseline for this comparison is starkly clear: our earliest attempts to map the network of youth political websites in 2002 produced such a sparsely networked collection of sites as to make mapping nearly impossible. However, on the basis of network maps generated over a period of 10 months, including crawls before, during and after the 2004 election, we see that the collection of youth-oriented political websites experienced important advances in connectedness to the wider web of political sites on the Internet. These advances are best illustrated through a comparison of the network map generated from our seed list of youth-oriented sites in July 2004 (Figure 3), and the map generated using an identical seed list and set of parameters in November 2004, at the height of the campaign season (Figure 4).
In examining these maps and the more detailed matrix of linking patterns on which they are based, we see a number of important patterns in the linkages and navigational paths within the youth political engagement web sphere, as well as connections to other sites featuring political content related to the elections. Comparing the July network with the November network, for example, we see a clear progression as the election drew closer: the network grows in size and complexity, eventually reaching a peak just before Election Day. In July, for example, five months preceding the election, we see a relatively sparsely populated map of network actors, with few of the sites comprising the youth engagement web sphere receiving links from other election network nodes, or connecting disparate regions of the network together. By November, the network topography has become highly compact, with youth oriented political websites occupying central positions within the broader network of election websites, and node locations on the map rendered much more densely with more co-links, indicating greater ease in terms of navigating from node to node. Although not shown, a later map rendered in April 2005 depicts a moderate though not total relaxation of the network, exhibiting a level of activity and interlinking somewhere between the July and November maps.

In numerical terms, we may describe the network development between July and November by stating that in the July map we see 50 sites represented,
and a total of 173 links between those points, whereas in the November map we see 60 sites, and a total of 387 linkages. This represents more than twice the total number of links, and a substantial increase in the density of the network. On the whole, then, we may say that although our earlier investigations of the network structure of the youth political web sphere in 2002 were somewhat uninspiring, the structure of pathways and linkages found during the 2004 election indicates a healthier pattern with respect to the Internet as a starting point for young citizens interested in the electoral process. This pattern may be an example of Bimber’s notion of an increased agility and responsiveness among organizations within the post-bureaucratic political structure induced by new media (2003). In addition, the relatively self-organizing emergence of a denser network by Election Day represents an interesting ecological dynamic in network structure (Monge 2004). Focusing events such as elections may enable network nodes to connect in ways that may persist (to some degree) after the end of the activating events.

The electoral web sphere

Turning our attention to the campaign websites, and the linkages between the youth and electoral web spheres, we find a collection of sites much less dynamic and appealing to would-be young voters. Specifically, we found a
notable lack of appeals to young people and comparatively fewer features in the candidate sites. Moreover, the bridges between the youth engagement sphere and the candidate web sphere are still not well established.

Issues and features on candidate websites

As noted earlier, the broad topical focus of issues on the candidate sites analyzed in 2002 was similar to that found in the youth sites. That is, young voters were likely to find discussion of the same kinds of issues (education, healthcare, national security/terrorism, taxes/spending, and the economy) on candidate sites as they would on youth sites. There were a few exceptions to this pattern, for example issues like gun control (on roughly half of the youth sites but only 31 per cent of candidate sites) and gay/lesbian rights (also on roughly half of the youth sites but only found on 6.2 per cent of candidate sites), but the overall pattern is one of overlap. The critical divergence is in terms of the ways in which issues were discussed. Indeed, despite indications that young voters are the group most likely to go online to seek political information, particularly in contrast to senior citizens, we found that in 2002 the candidates rarely phrased or framed issues in ways that directly addressed young people.

First, we found a large number of issues on which candidates made no age-related appeals. On its own, this is a troubling finding, but one that may be less alarming if we assume that the absence of age-related appeals is a sign of age-neutrality rather than aversion to younger voters. However, our data suggest that candidates often opt for an age-specific format in issue discourse. As a point of comparison we identified whether issue appeals on sites either directly or indirectly appealed to another age-based demographic, that of senior citizens, and found that candidates reached out to this group far more often. Of the 16 issues included in our study, half contained at least some appeal on the basis of age. The issue of greatest age specific appeal to young voters was the obvious issue of education but, even here, there were age specific appeals only in 23.3 per cent of the cases. Appeals to young people were all but non-existent on most of the other issues, and in terms of Social Security (which, considering the future of the program, has great potential for youth appeals) and healthcare, senior appeals dwarfed youth appeals. In the case of Social Security, we found senior appeals over 70 per cent of the instances in which it was discussed, as compared with youth appeals, which were present in less than 20 per cent of the candidate pages on Social Security. For healthcare, the disparity runs from over 60 per cent of candidate issue pages featuring senior appeals, compared with less than 5 per cent featuring youth appeals.

Overall, we believe these findings speak clearly to the question of the extent to which candidates appear to be reaching out to younger voters in
their online issue communications. The resounding answer is in the negative. Despite the fact that there appear to be no strategic costs associated with including youth appeals in online candidate statements on issues such as the environment, crime and violence, and economic growth and job creation, candidates in 2002 almost universally did not do so, reinforcing the common sentiment that younger voters who ignore politicians largely do so because politicians largely ignore them.

With respect to the features deployed on candidate websites in 2002, we found another, though less stark point of disconnection. On the whole, candidates used very few of the interactive capacities of the web to reach voters in 2002. Candidates used interactive features much less often than producers of youth-oriented political websites. Indeed, our results are consistent with previous studies suggesting that candidates are much more likely to use the web as an efficient way of distributing basic information than they are to take advantage of its interactive and multimedia capabilities (Stromer-Galley 2000; Foot & Schneider 2006). The most common features we found on candidate websites in 2002 were candidate biographies (87.6 per cent) and pages devoted to news items and press releases (57.1 per cent). Just over a third (35 per cent) offered an email newsletter. Multimedia content, message boards and interactive polls were found on fewer than 10 per cent of the candidate sites we coded.

Overall, we see that with the exception of endorsements, which are found much more frequently on candidate sites, the key points of divergence are precisely in the areas of interactive and multimedia features. Simply put, young voters visiting candidate sites in 2002 were not likely to find the same kind of interactive environment they might have been accustomed to through exposure to political websites more directly targeted toward them. Though such features were not widespread among the youth political sites, they were certainly more common than in the mainstream political web. For example, youth sites featured online forums and other pages facilitating visitor communication with media (e.g. writing letters to the editor) five times as often as candidate sites, and the youth sites featured interactive polls, multimedia content and message board features three times as often as candidate sites. In the features dimension, our conclusion is clear: candidates in 2002 used the interactive and multimedia features unique to the web environment much less frequently than the producers of youth political websites. Figure 5 provides an illustration of these key points of divergence.

As discussed earlier, we were not able to replicate the same extensive coding of candidate websites in 2004 as we had in 2002. However, drawing on research and data from our colleagues, we were able to partially confirm whether the patterns just described transferred over into the 2004 political web sphere. These data, which come from a smaller number of sites but a greater variety of political actors, including political parties and
interest groups advocating their issues in the election, suggest levels of issues discussion and features (such as email signup, multimedia content, and voter registration) comparable to those found on candidate sites in 2002. With respect to youth appeals, these data from the broader electoral web sphere in 2004 show that the use of the web to reach out to younger voters by mainstream political actors continued to be quite sporadic, with only 8 per cent of all sites examined featuring some type of appeal to younger voters. Considering the slightly broader nature of our measures for youth appeal in 2004 as compared with those used in the 2002 analyses, this is hardly encouraging. Political party websites, however, did feature youth-targeted content at a non-trivial rate of 27 per cent, suggesting that mainstream political actors may be moving toward greater efforts to communicate through the web with its most avid and savvy users. However, in the other categories (labor/NGO, press, and other) youth appeals were found at rates of 10 per cent or fewer. In the main then, these figures reinforce our findings from

**FIGURE 5** Features on youth vs. candidate political websites (2002).
2002 with respect to the puzzling paucity of appeals made by major actors in electoral politics to a substantial segment of those going online to seek political information.

**Navigation between the youth and candidate web spheres**

In addition to our more detailed quantitative coding, we also conducted a more informal investigation of the kinds of click-paths that would-be young voters may have followed from the sites of the youth political web sphere into the electoral web sphere. Though somewhat imprecise, these investigations led to some additional noteworthy observations on the potential of politics online to help reinvigorate levels of youth engagement in electoral politics. The overwhelming impression was one of pathways that were not as smooth as the basic co-link analyses from our network maps might suggest. For example, a young voter interested in Social Security reform may easily find information on that topic on a site like Rock the Vote, and even links to organizations working in this policy area. However, doubtless due to the non-partisan nature of these sites, very little interpretive information that might help match specific interests and geographic locations to particular candidates and campaigns is provided. Although we did find a shift, from 2002 to 2004, away from a simple link-menu strategy and toward providing more specific information on the youth sites themselves, in many cases the experience following the personal discovery of a particular issue somewhere in the youth politics sphere is to dump the now motivated young citizen into a generic voter site like the League of Women Voters, where she must start from the beginning to learn about candidates’ positions on the issue.

One promising exception was the strategy deployed by sites such as http://www.indyvoter.org, which used site features similar to those found on the dating and social networking websites popular among young Internet users to help connect younger citizens with others who share common interests and preferences. As configured during the 2004 elections, the indyvoter.org site featured a system through which ‘joining’ the website and obtaining a login also involved creating a user profile, complete with photos and biographical statements. Users could use the profiles to contact others, by interest or location, to share information and coordinate offline political actions. Perhaps most valuable, users were also encouraged to create their own personal or collective ‘voter guides’, which were then made available to all other members. Though relatively unnoticed during the 2004 cycle, these innovations represent significant steps in terms of combining the features and functionality common to sites more frequently visited by younger citizens with political information and avenues to participation, but unfortunately
were an exception that proved the rule with respect to greater use of the networking capabilities of the web to help young citizens connect with politics.

**Conclusion**

We believe the findings presented here make important contributions to ongoing scholarly discussions of the potential of new media to help young voters to re-enter and reconnect with traditional areas of political participation such as voting and engagement with electoral politics. Although restricted to content and features, and thus not directly related to questions concerning the effects of online political communication, the key points in our analysis may prove useful in further research exploring these questions, and provide a detailed picture of the evolving world of political resources available to young voters on the web.

One key inference from the findings as a whole is that they underscore the importance of recognizing that ‘the Internet’, or even the collection of web content devoted to political information, is not a monolithic entity. As Lupia & Philpot (2005) point out, individuals engage with particular parts of the web rather than with the medium as whole and different characteristics of sites may appeal differently to different visitors. Specifically, they find that young people’s political interest in particular can be positively effected by sites that provide ‘important information effectively and efficiently’ (Lupia & Philpot 2005, p. 1134). Thus it is important to understand not only that there is variation in the extent to which different sites provide useful resources, but also the extent to which this variation may be systematic, as indicated by the differences between the youth engagement and election spheres. By charting the variations between different types of websites offering information to prospective young voters, our findings may help illuminate efforts to tease out the differential effects of individual interaction with political content on the web, based on the types of sites visited. Furthermore, our analysis suggests that some spheres of online politics are not entirely stand-alone, and that the ease of navigation to other sites and resources may also be an important part of a site’s effectiveness.

Perhaps the greatest irony of our findings is that the electoral sphere is notably disconnected from the youth engagement sphere due to the reluctance of candidates to use the web as a way to appeal specifically to younger segments of the electorate. At a conference on communication and civic engagement held in 2000, Michael Delli Carpini noted that ‘most of the formal institutions of public life either ignore young adults and the issues that matter to them or are ill equipped to attract young adults and provide them with meaningful opportunities to participate’ (Delli Carpini 2000, p. 344). Although our investigations of candidate websites show promising
development in the realm of issue discussion, they also reveal a seemingly persistent avoidance of appeals to young people as a group. The lack of appeals to younger voters (online or off) is in large part explained by professional consultants’ disregard for young voters due to their low voting rate compared with seniors. However, in light of research documenting the relationship between political participation and being asked or invited to do so in some way (Verba et al. 1995; Schier 2000), as well as research on the positive effects of textual appeals made to those visiting political websites (Warnick et al. 2005), the findings presented here suggest that the web has not yet realized its potential for stimulating political engagement among younger voters.

Overall, our time-lapse images of online youth political resources reveal a mixed picture. On one hand, the changes observed between the beginning of our research in 2002, and the 2004 cycle, suggest important developments in the online political engagement infrastructure for American youth. By contrast, the candidate and campaign web sphere shows sluggish development in content and features when compared with the youth engagement web sphere. Moreover, the lack of accessible pathways between the two spheres leaves both of them far short of their potential. If the Internet’s true potential as a pathway to greater youth engagement in the electoral sphere is to be realized, it is important to consider these issues as interest and research in digital media and politics continue.

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Notes

1 For information on the Issue Crawler, see http://www.govcom.org/crawler_software.html
2 Specifically, we created an archival version of each site using Teleport Pro.
3 Though these number suggest a 75 per cent, rather than a 64 per cent rate of web presence, this discrepancy is due to the inclusion in the archive of websites produced by candidates who ran at one time during the 2002 season, but either dropped out of their races or were defeated in primary elections.
4 Candidates were, and are, able to remove their records from the archive collection in two ways: candidates may ‘opt out’ of the archive officially, or they may have included technical features on their sites (the robots.txt
exclusion) that disable automated collection techniques, such as those used in the creation of the archive.

5 Though the technology has come a long way, web archiving continues to be a complex endeavor. As a result of the many variations in site design, layout, organization and construction, as well as the occasional contingencies of the Internet itself, 100 per cent reliability remains on the horizon. We believe, however, that exclusion from our analysis on the basis of these factors exhibits no underlying systematic bias.

6 For example, a few candidates listed personal or professional web pages in their campaign documents – such as Martin Lindstedt, Republican Senatorial candidate for Missouri, whose archived site is not primarily dedicated to his Senatorial campaign.

7 Archival rendering allows one to view a site more or less exactly as it was rendered during the time period specified. When a site is collected into the archive the files associated with that site are captured and stored electronically. Each time this is done, an archival ‘impression’ is made of the site for that point in time. For example, most of the campaign sites used in the study were captured on a daily basis. Thus one can select a specific date from index pages at politicalweb.info or MINERVA at the Library of Congress and view the impression of the site, which reproduces it as it was seen by web surfers on that particular day.

8 For seven of the 15 features analyzed we were able to obtain reliable estimates of their presence from prior research (Foot et al. in press) gathered on the basis of larger samples, thus these items were removed from our coding scheme.

References


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