



Insights

Cronkite vs. the Web

Peter Huber 09.29.08, 12:00 AM ET

Nov. 4 could be the day the web meets its Waterloo. If so, millions of highly wired and politically engaged young people will be stunned. Text messages will fly. Thousands of chat forums will fill with garbled rage. Charges of fraud will erupt across the blogosphere. Millions of people whose social lives hinge on digital connections will suspect the worst. They will all be saying what the *New Yorker's* film critic Pauline Kael famously told the *New York Times* in 1972, after Richard Nixon won every state except Massachusetts and the District of Columbia: "I only know one person who voted for Nixon. Where they are I don't know. They're outside my ken."

The Web has certainly proved that it can launch political rockets, but that comes as no surprise. As every digital pundit will tell you, the Web provides a fantastically cheap, fast and flexible way to launch political startups. You launch a dot-com candidacy and start booking credit card orders a day later. The Web can flack anything, and some dot-com candidates will inevitably sell well.

But the Web's real power lies as much in its ability to separate, divide and take apart markets and people. Ebay is huge not just because it's the ubiquitous garage sale accessible to all, but because so many different people are interested in buying and selling so many different knickknacks. The social networking sites sign up everyone not because everyone wants to friend everyone else, but because almost everyone wants to join some tight community of compatible, like-minded people. All the people who abandoned CBS and the *New York Times* turned to smaller--not bigger--alternatives.

Taking markets apart works brilliantly when you're selling goods and services, because people always prefer things and friends that fit them, not just sort of, but perfectly. But success in a national election hinges on delivering the exact opposite of what the Web delivers--one size that fits all, or at least 51% of all.

The Web wins elections held in relatively small, homogeneous ponds, where starting fast and locking in loyal customers is key. The commercial world understands this phenomenon, too. Network effects and first-mover advantages may have played a role in locking in the QWERTY keyboard over a century ago, and in helping Microsoft and Windows sew up the desktop more recently. As Hillary Clinton and the old-guard women's organizations learned the hard way this year, getting a fast start among early adopters can be crucial in a market where most shoppers have quite similar tastes and will go with the flow once someone captures a critical share of the market.

But the more polarized and divided the national election, the worse the dot-com candidates will ultimately serve the parties that they crash and capture. The Web doesn't bridge divisions; it multiplies and sharpens them. It doesn't build consensus or national coalitions; it grows factions. Truth be told, the Web doesn't network people at all--it lets them network themselves, which is quite different. The Web is the place where people can roll their own, and given that freedom, people tend to coalesce in relatively small, insular groups.

The real genius of the Web, in short, is that it lets people disconnect. That's why it has obliterated the old media. During the Tet Offensive of the Vietnam War, President Lyndon Johnson is reported to have said, "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost Middle America." Nobody would ever say that about anything posted on a cronkite.com or a CronkiteTube. There are too many celebrity sites, scattered all over the digital landscape, and they're all saying different things.

The un-Walter Cronkiting of American politics of course dismays his would-be heirs, but their opinions hardly matter anymore, and they will have all but disappeared from view four years from now. Few of them will be missed, because America, it turns out, doesn't much trust them. Plummeting audiences for network news have made that clear. The challenge now is to get disconnected people to accept how little they can trust themselves and their closest friends. People who live overwired lives--which means the young, especially--may easily suppose that they have a very good picture of what all the rest of America is thinking. Quite a few of them are going to find out otherwise in a few weeks, and the rest will find out an election or two down the line. When the results are close, many may be so astonished that they'll spend the next four years denouncing the result as corrupt or illegitimate. It has happened before.

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