

Campaign web wars 2.0: can Republicans strike back?

May 6 2012, by Michael Mathes

Tired of playing catch-up to the Obama Internet juggernaut, Republicans have rolled out a one-stop online shop for conservative activism which they hope will help them capture the White House.

The Social Victory Center, which launched this week and allows Republicans to do everything from distribute campaign materials to ring up undecided voters in battleground states like Ohio, has been craftily embedded in the most comprehensive social media landscape of them all: [Facebook](#).

Call it the Republican National Committee's newest weapon in campaign web wars 2.0, the virtual battlefield of the 2012 election. But is Democratic President Barack Obama's huge advantage in Facebook, Twitter, digital advertising and online fundraising already unassailable?

The web emerged as a star campaign player in 2008, and Obama used it to unprecedented effect to thump rival John McCain. Now Republicans are re-arming.

"We lost the technology battle in the 2008 cycle, without a doubt, and we could not stand by and get away with just having (campaign) centers make telephone calls and knock on doors," RNC political director Rick Wiley told AFP at the committee's Washington headquarters.

"We had to develop something that took on the Obama campaign's presence on the web."

Romney, the presumptive nominee, needs a vibrant online presence to galvanize support as his campaign enters a summer lull before the party nominating conventions in late August.

In its new app the RNC seeks to recreate the volunteer experience online, eliminating geographic boundaries to allow Republicans in red states like Texas to impact the dozen or so swing states that will decide the November election.

Both sides have capitalized on [YouTube](#) to stream press conferences, weekly addresses or online campaign videos for free, making the medium the "fireside chats" of their era.

But social media in particular will have an extraordinary impact in 2012.

"I can tell you right now that social marketing will swing millions of votes in this election," said Scott Klososky, an author and expert on social technology.

"It will also allow candidates to target demographics in completely new ways and that will be key for the GOP."

Romney hopes to harness the power of Facebook's 160 million American users, who spend an average of six hours per month on the site -- but his main competitor got there first.

The Obama re-election campaign's Facebook page has been "liked" more than 26 million times, compared to just 1.6 million for Romney.

"It is so not a gamechanger," Michealene Risley, who is running for president as a third-party candidate on the Americans Elect web platform, said about the new Republican app in Facebook.

Risley, an award-winning writer, director and media expert, said the Romney websites lack depth compared to the "seamless and engaging" Obama sites.

"Obama is telling people stories in a very visual way," she added.

On Twitter, the president has 14 million followers. Romney has 483,000, and growing by just 15,000 or so per week. Even Newt Gingrich, who recently suspended his own campaign, has 1.4 million followers.

"It's important for (Republicans), now that they have a nominee, to make a big push to get Facebook fans and Twitter followers to try and help level the playing field with Obama," said Andrew Lipsman, vice president of industry analysis of comScore, which tracks digital analytics.

"It wouldn't hurt for Romney to start promoting it on the stump or in subsequent primary victories."

Or to start ponying up for online ads. A new comScore report on how digital media is shaping the 2012 election puts Democrats squarely in the digital driver's seat, with the Obama campaign outnumbering by 10 to one the combined effort last year by the top four Republican presidential campaigns.

"The Republicans were almost nowhere to be found" online in 2011, the report said, with Republican candidates opting for traditional channels of TV and radio to get their message out.

But to be sure, team Romney is all over Twitter, where a campaign war is in full effect. The immediacy of the platform has allowed top Romney and Obama aides to trade barbs on everything from policy and jobs data to the brouhaha over women's issues or the way the two candidates treat

their dogs.

The Obama campaign recently released a web-based series of graphs, called "The Life of Julia," which maps out how the president's policies would help one woman over her lifetime.

Republicans however quickly hijacked the meme.

RNC spokesman Sean Spicer used Friday's modest US jobs data as an opportunity to mock the president online: "#Julia just told her mom she was going to be living at home a lot longer," he tweeted.

Obama might get the last laugh, however, with the mocking of #Julia merely sending more users to his website.

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