

# Not ready to play nice: Online attacks by presidential candidates

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As voters increasingly rely on websites of presidential primary candidates for news, they run a risk because candidates' online attacks are not vetted through traditional "watchdog journalists" and other gatekeepers to determine accuracy or fairness, according to a study by Baylor University researchers.

"The primary danger is that constituents often use this one-sided information to decide how to vote," said Mia Moody, Ph.D., study co-author and an assistant professor of journalism, [public relations](#) and new media in Baylor's College of Arts & Sciences.

The study — "Not Ready to Play Nice: An Analysis of Negativity in the Online News Releases of 2007-08 Presidential Primaries Candidates" — appears in the *Southwestern Mass Communication Journal*. Co-author is Joseph Brown, Ph.D., an associate professor of political science in Baylor's College of Arts & Sciences.

Researchers analyzed more than 700 news releases from websites of presidential primary candidates collected between Sept. 1, 2007, and Oct. 31, 2007.

While research on negativity in presidential ads and campaign debates has been done for more than a decade, little research previously existed on online news releases, Brown said. But the increase in candidate websites and political blogs — and, more recently, in social media sites such as

Facebook and Twitter — has transformed them from a "fringe activity" into one that levels the playing field, he said.

"This topic is particularly important leading up to the 2012 elections, as statistics indicate many voters increasingly use the Web during election campaigns to gather information about a particular candidate as well as to sound off on key issues," Moody and Brown wrote in their article.

Nearly a quarter of Americans (24 percent) say they regularly learn something about the presidential campaign from the Internet, according to a 2008 Pew Research Center report, "The Internet Gains in Politics." That is nearly double the percentage from a similar period in the 2004 campaign (13 percent).

Compared with the 2000 campaign, far fewer Americans now say they regularly learn about the campaign from local TV news (down eight points), nightly network news (down 13 points) and daily newspapers (down nine points). Use of cable news network is up modestly since 2000, but have shown no growth since the 2004 campaign, according to the Pew report.

"There is even more of a demand today," Brown said. "There's a greater need for politicians to use the Internet because more and more people are getting their news that way. Internet-ready devices such as iPhones and iPads have given more and more people personal and immediate access to the Web. No sooner than a candidate makes a statement, it's available on YouTube. And if it's very controversial, it's going to go viral in minutes."

In the 2008 race, negative messages generally were not personal attacks — which often focus on another candidate's morality, such as accusations about infidelity or unethical finances — but instead used hostile or aggressive language, the researchers said.

In their research, Moody and Brown examined the traditional scholars' view — that underdogs are more likely to use negative tactics than frontrunners — and found it held true in the early stages in the Democratic race. Only 3 percent of then-frontrunner Hillary Clinton's 165 releases had a negative tone, while 32 percent of John Edwards' 78 news releases were. Approximately 11 percent of the 100 releases from the website of Barack Obama — then trailing in the race — were negative.

But Republicans — regardless of whether they were frontrunners — used negative online messages more uniformly. Early frontrunner Rudy Giuliani issued a higher percentage of negative releases (17 percent of 119) than the Democrat frontrunner, followed by 19 percent of negative releases in Mitt Romney's 83 and 18 percent in John McCain's 72. Conversely, Mike Huckabee's percentage of negative news releases was only 7 percent of 83 releases.

"Perhaps Huckabee, an ordained Southern Baptist minister, consciously decided to project a positive image," the researchers said.

In any case, "when you're down to two viable candidates, like Clinton and Obama in 2008, you'll see an increase in negativity — particularly as one candidate sees himself or herself dropping in the polls," Brown said. "Then the underdogs are more likely to use the Internet and online news releases. They're more likely to use the free media." Generally, the front-runner will not turn to negative messages unless the race is tight, Brown said.

"In the end, it was an all-out war," Moody said. "Clinton started talking about Obama's lack of experience and his African garb."

The researchers noted that as the race continued, Barack Obama competed effectively in 2007-2008 by campaigning aggressively on the

Web, surpassing what had been Clinton's record-setting total.

Provided by Baylor University

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