

THE ROLE OF BLOGS ON A SUCCESSFUL POLITICAL BRANDING STRATEGY

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Abstract:

The Internet is taking on an increasingly major role in political marketing and branding strategies. This is because of the use that the public itself is making of the Internet when taking part in the decisions made by their representatives and in the events of the environment they live in. These digital citizens have found in the Internet, particularly blogs, a new way of forming relationships with politicians, by communicating with them directly, coordinating their activities with other citizens with similar political ideals or even financing electoral campaigns. This article describes the use that some political leaders have made of blogs. Therefore, we analyze the two cases that represented the beginning of the use of the Internet as a major electoral tool: Howard Dean and Wesley Clark in the Democrat primaries in the USA in the 2003-04 campaign. Thanks to the analysis of these two cases and the theories developed around the concept of social capital and virtual communities, this paper presents the main characteristics of this type of digital citizen and the possible political marketing strategies developed around them. The analysis of these cases provides various implications for better management of these political marketing tools, whose potential is yet to be discovered.

Key words: *Social Capital, Virtual Community, Blog, Internet, Political Marketing*

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THE ROLE OF BLOGS ON A SUCCESSFUL POLITICAL BRANDING STRATEGY: THE DEAN AND CLARK CASE STUDIES

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the use of the Internet by public organizations is a recent phenomenon, in some countries like the USA or Singapore the Internet has become a primary way of keeping fruitful relationships with citizens. Likewise, political parties are beginning to prioritize the development of communication actions via the Internet in their political campaigns. These actions not only include promotional activities but in some cases they go beyond political messages and aim to achieve the electors' participatory attitude in the campaign and the design of the election program. This is especially remarkable in countries like the USA. As we will see throughout this work, the use of the Internet in the USA as a political marketing tool has reached relevant levels over the last few years. It has become a means to collect millions of dollars to defray campaign costs and mobilize thousands of people in support of their candidate.

The use of the Internet in electoral strategies is usually associated with virtual communities and especially the so-called blogs. According to Wikipedia.org a blog *"is a web application which contains periodic, reverse chronologically ordered posts on a common webpage...The format of blogs varies, from simple bullet lists of hyperlinks, to article summaries with user-provided comments and ratings."* The data contained in a blog don't used to be compiled and offered on the Net by an individual or an organization but by a group of individuals acting in an altruistic but coordinated way to serve the community.

The phenomenon of blogs clearly reflects some of the changes produced by the Internet in the transmission of information. Any person may reliably express their opinion on the Internet, reaching thousands of people interested in similar issues and avoiding high costs. Moreover, blog's messages may be commented by its readers so that the errors made by the person who first published the information can be depurated. Furthermore, the quality of a news item may be assessed according to the number of readings and comments on it.

Very different issues are dealt with in blogs and at present there are between two and five million of this type of websites on the Internet, some of which are managed by opinion leaders, such as scientists, artists or politicians (e.g. <http://weblog.siliconvalley.com/column/dangillmor/>, administered by a well-known journalist specialized in the technology). Nevertheless, blogs are not only an alternative to the traditional media, such as the radio or the press. Through these websites thousands of people coordinate their efforts and gather their knowledge in the interest of the community. Consequently, blogs are being used by several groups to manage their resources and coordinate their activities both in and out of the Internet. Among those groups which use blogs to improve the efficiency of their actions we can find the case of the campaign of Democratic Party presidential candidates in the USA. This is a paradigmatic example of the power of blogs, hence the remarkable interest for marketing researchers.

Considering the interest of blogs for marketing experts, the present work analyses several aspects related to the way virtual communities and blogs may affect the group's social capital and therefore the individual's democratic and civic behavior. Subsequently, we will analyze how virtual communities, as blogs, were used by Democratic candidates Howard Dean and Wesley Clark in the 2003-2004 USA presidential elections. This analysis and the literature review will

allow us to delimitate digital citizen characteristics and the way he influence on his environment, to provide some recommendations for the management of electoral campaigns with the use of blogs, as well as defining the main benefits these communities may generate in the field of electoral strategies.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPT OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

From the first studies in the 19th century to the most recent ones conducted by e- marketing researchers, communities have been given special attention due to their role in the individual's socialization and even their success in the business policy of companies. On the whole, we may define the community as a group of individuals, usually small, whose members feel committed to each other because of the common interests on a certain aspect. From a marketing perspective, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) or Flavián and Guinalú (2004), notice that communities (they use the term "brand community") refer to the group of consumers who voluntarily relate to each other on the basis of an interest to a brand or a product.

The influence of the Internet on the way individuals relate to their environment has been essential to exponentially increase the e-marketing researchers' interest for these social structures. Specifically, this interest mainly lies in the appearance of the so-called virtual communities (Blanchard, 2004). Virtual communities refer to groups of individuals who regularly use new technologies to establish relationships (Cothrel and Williams, 1999). In general, we may say that a virtual community is a group of people with a common interest that interact regularly in an organized way over the Internet (Ridings *et al.*, 2002). In this respect, political blogs are a clear instance of virtual communities since they are characterized by the

three fundamental markers of communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001): consciousness of kind, the community's rituals and traditions and the moral responsibility of the community's individuals.

- *Consciousness of kind*: it is the most important factor when defining a community. It refers to the feeling which makes every individual bound to the other community members and the community brand (e.g. admiration for a candidate, passion for belonging to a given political party). Consciousness of kind is determined by two factors: (1) legitimization, the process of establishing a difference between true and false members, that is to say, those who have opportunist behaviors and those who do not; and (2) opposition to other brands. In fact, the identification with the rest of the group is mainly based on opposition, that is, brand community is usually defined in comparison with another brand. Indeed, in the context of political blogs, which are usually developed due to the admiration for a given candidate, it is possible to find a strong feeling against candidates that belong to other political parties.
- *Rituals and traditions*: those processes carried out by community members which allow to reproduce and transmit the community meaning in and out of the community. It is usually related to the commemoration of some events (celebrate the brand history or some events, such as the satisfaction of having won the general elections). All these processes enable to reinforce brand consciousness and improve the instruction on community values. In the context of political blogs, members usually share a common ideology and values.
- *Sense of moral responsibility*: it reflects the feelings which create moral commitment among the community members, which encourages joint behaviors and allows

stronger group cohesion. As a result of moral responsibility, there are two types of fundamental actions: (1) integration and retention of members, which guarantees the community survival (e.g. by spreading bad experiences suffered by those individuals who defended or chose a different ideology or political party); and (2) assistance in the correct use of the brand (e.g. by sharing information on the special interest associated to the community). For instance, in political blogs, this would take the form of the collective effort and social interactions carried out in order to develop and disseminate program ideas.

In addition, one of the main advantages of virtual communities is that, due to the Internet, these communities can overcome the space and time barriers to interaction that exist in traditional communities (Andersen, 2005). However, the characterization of virtual communities simply for replacing face-to-face communication would be too simple to comprehend a really complex concept. In this respect, it has been stated that virtual communities are able to satisfy psychological, social and economic needs of the individual (Amstrong and Hagel, 1997). Likewise, some authors have compared virtual communities with the groups which relate through traditional means, observing that virtual communities are less robust (e.g. Romm *et al.*, 1997). Therefore, we can refer to virtual communities as ephemeral in comparison with traditional communities in physical means. This ephemeral condition requires the following features for the virtual community to be considered an influential element on its environment (Falk, 1995): values and ideas shared by the members, and some degree of stability, growth, loyalty and commitment among the members.

Nevertheless, it is not always possible to replace traditional tools. Thereby, we have several variables which affect the individual's decision of joining the community which may be divided into four differentiated groups (Romm *et al.*, 1997). First, there are technological barriers. In this respect, the inherent complexity of some technologies prevents the consumer from joining virtual communities. Therefore, more simplicity in the information systems would increase the number of individuals using these virtual groups (Culnan, 1984). After overcoming technological barriers, the consumer's decision is crucially affected by psychological factors (Markus, 1994). Among these factors, the individual's motivation is essential. Consequently, the fear of change or conservatism prevents joining the virtual community. A third factor, also psychological, refers to the individual's perception of the convenience of the Internet for interpersonal relationships. This factor is explained by some authors according to the Theory of Richness. This theory states that the richness of the media depend on their capacity to transmit complex messages (Daft, Lengel and Trevino, 1987). According to Daft and Lengel (1986), face-to-face might be the richest media, followed by the telephone and the written media. Further research considers electronic mail between the telephone and the written media (Rice, 1993), although several authors have criticized this ranking (e.g. Sproull and Kiesler, 1991). In fact, given the variants of Internet communication, it is reasonable to suppose that in some cases, it could come higher than the telephone and even come close to face-to-face communication. Finally, the most crucial factor for the development of a virtual community is the one which shows how the integration of the individual into the community depends on the adequacy of the new communication structure to the established procedures. In other words, to join a virtual community virtual communication must be adequate for the characteristics of the group. Therefore, to develop a virtual community it will be needed:

1. To design friendly systems, easy to use, in order to avoid technological barriers.

2. To develop the virtual community around individuals highly motivated to participate in the community.
3. To design systems that facilitate the emission of complex messages (e.g. to combine images and sounds). That may increase the richness of the Internet as a communication channel and therefore, it will make the individual perceive the Internet as a product close to face-to-face communication.
4. To adapt these communication tools to the needs of the group. That is, virtual communities must replicate as far as possible the way community members interact in traditional channels.

2.1. The influence of virtual communities on social capital and civic behavior

The presence of a virtual community has significant implications for the environment around it. For instance, according to Romm *et al.* (1997), a virtual community may influence the language used by the community members, which can develop their own language (e.g. the so-called emoticons), or the development of virtual identities, very different from real ones, due to the anonymity that Net provides to individual. In addition, virtual communities may have social and cultural effects (e.g. the transmission of cultural values).

However, one of the most important effects of virtual communities on society falls on the field of social psychology and the idea of social capital. According to Fukuyama (1999), social capital is a third type of capital, together with technical (capital goods and raw material) and human (the workers' abilities). Social capital is sustained by the trust ties existing among the society members. These ties allow the nations to develop activities of coordination and

cooperation between their citizens and those from other countries. Powerful organizations able to help the development of the region are thus generated. According to Putnam (2000), the main premise of social capital is that social networks have value, so that social capital includes the collective value of all social networks (who people know?) and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other.

The lack of social capital, that is, the lack of trust between the community members, reduces their relationships to restricted areas such as the family. This limitation also affects commercial activities and prevents the development of a competitive economic structure. Researchers have analyzed this phenomenon in regions like southern Italy, China and Latin America. All these regions have two things in common, their low per capita income and the strong influence of the family. Regions like the south and north of Italy have a very different economic development, possibly due to the fact that the northern citizens tend to relate with other people beyond restricted family environments.

Concerning virtual communities, the concept of social capital refers to the trust existing in the social nets of a community. It is the degree of trust shown by the community members which favors the development of more intense and regular relationships. Some authors have remarked that social capital may be increased as a result of the establishment of Internet-based communication tools in the community (e.g. Friedland, 1996). Due to the use of new technologies, the behavior of the community members may become more civic and democratic, increasing the ties between the individuals and their intensity. This phenomenon is the result of increasing interaction and contacts between the community members thanks to the opportunities and alternatives the Internet provides for communication and distribution of resources (Blanchard

and Hom, 1998). Likewise, some authors have observed that virtual conversations may take longer than face-to-face ones, and the number of participants is higher (Rafaeli and Sudweeks, 1994). The reason is that virtuality allows disregarding the real time inherent in spoken conversations, that is, conversations may be temporally suspended and later resumed with hardly any quality loss. Furthermore, some online tools (e.g. moderated discussion forums, etc.) promote democratic participation in a virtual community since they allow the coordination of several individuals in a conversation, which is not always possible in face-to-face communication.

2.2. The influence of virtual communities on branding strategy

In addition, one of the most important characteristics of virtual communities is that traditionally, it has been considered that participation in the activities carried out in these communities may foster consumer loyalty to the brand or interest around which the community is developed (e.g. Andersen, 2005; Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). For instance, we can note the work of Benyoussef *et al.* (2006), who found that participation in Free Software virtual communities favours consumer identification and loyalty to the Free Software. That is, once individuals participate actively in a virtual brand community, their commitment and identification with the brand or organization around which the virtual community is developed may increase (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). Finally, all of these may favour higher levels of individuals' loyalty to the brand around which the virtual community is developed (Koh and Kim, 2004). Indeed, it is possible to state that a key aspect of participation in a brand community is the ongoing purchase and use of the brand products (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005).

This can be explained by the development of emotional ties with the brand or interest around which the community is centred that appear as a consequence of the interactions with other community members, which are usually based on topics related to the brand products (e.g. experiences with different products of the brand, support in the correct use of the brand, etc.).

Therefore, the importance of virtual brand communities is threefold. Firstly, virtual brand communities can be used by individuals to take part in discussions in order to inform and influence fellow consumers about products, brands or organizations (Kozinets, 2002). These social groups have a real existence for their participants and therefore, they can affect their members' behaviour (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). In fact, Almquist and Roberts (2000) point out that consumer advocacy is one of the major factors influencing positive brand equity. Secondly, virtual communities may help to identify the needs and desires of particular individuals or groups of people (Kozinets, 2002). Therefore, it would be possible to use virtual communities to test new products or to achieve a more effective market segmentation. Lastly, active participation in virtual communities may favour higher levels of individuals' loyalty to the interest (e.g. a brand, a product, etc.) around which the community is developed (Koh and Kim, 2004).

3. BLOGS AND THE DIGITAL CITIZEN

Taking into account the previous considerations, blogs and virtual communities developed around a political interest (e.g. general elections, etc.) may foster the citizens' participation in political issues by expressing their opinion in the Internet in a democratic manner. It may allow reaching thousands of fellow citizens and messages may be commented by its readers. Indeed, the use of these online tools may also enhance citizens' commitment with their environment since

they will take part of political decisions. Therefore, it may help to overcome some of the trends observed in recent years with regard to an individual's knowledge of political issues. According to Keeter and Delli (2002): (1) the average American is poorly informed about politics; (2) knowledge is a critical foundation for good citizenship; and (3) little change has occurred in any of these tendencies over the past years.

These individuals that have started to use online formats to participate in political issues have been traditionally called "digital citizens" (Katz, 1997). According to Katz (1997) and UCLA (2004), as the use of information technologies grows, the individuals show a more democratic profile, know the political system better and increase their voting intention. Likewise, they have a wider knowledge of their country's political life, current events and participants. Furthermore, they read more than those consumers who make a scarce use of information technologies. Their trust in the institutions and the possibility of changing those aspects which largely affect the community's well-being is higher. They are more optimistic and their capacity to assess political decisions, far from irrational alignments with certain parties, is more significant.

However, the most relevant characteristic of the digital citizen is shown by ICPI (2004). According to this study, the digital citizen is seven times more likely to act as an opinion leader among those making up his immediate circle. This motivates him to use the Internet to influence his circle, since this medium enables him to reach more individuals rapidly and efficiently. More specifically, the digital citizen may use the following types of blogs in order to participate in political conversations and to influence fellow citizens:

- *Personal blogs*, which are developed by a given citizen who act as an opinion leader by spreading his/her own opinion,
- *Citizen communities*, which are groups of citizens that emerge in the Internet to discuss about common political issues, and
- *Political blogs*, developed by a given candidate or political party, where citizens (usually with an ideology similar to the candidate) may express their opinions regarding, for instance, the candidate's program ideas.

4. BLOGS AND POLITICAL BRANDING STRATEGY: THE DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL RACE IN THE USA

The influence of virtual communities on the behavior of the individual has not gone unnoticed by the political strategists. As we have said before, digital citizens use the Internet to influence their circle and this can be especially relevant to win new voters since personal advocacy is one of the major factors influencing positive image. In addition, individuals are increasingly turning to online communication in order to obtain information on which to base their decisions (Kozinets, 2002). In this respect, individuals use virtual communities to share ideas and contact fellow consumers who are seen as more objective information sources. As a result, since 2003 one can observe how the use of virtual communities, particularly blogs, has become more common and relevant in political candidates' marketing strategies.

The Internet enables thousands of citizens to debate online on the topics they are most concerned for in their environment. The Net allows a higher participation of citizens in the

political life, largely affecting the formation of public opinion (Fischer *et al.*, 1994). Consequently, the use of information technologies as a means for the citizen to contact their political representatives directly is highly relevant (Schuler, 1996). For example, in the project *Candidat 2003* (<http://www.candidat2003.net>), an initiative by the regional institutions of the Spanish autonomous community of Catalonia, carried out during the autonomous elections in 2003, citizens were able to ask and comment anything to candidates. The experience achieves its initial objectives, with over 3.000 consultations made to the 715 candidates standing in the elections.

However, the breakthrough in the use of Internet tools, particularly virtual communities and blogs, came with the Democrat party primary elections in the USA in 2003 and 2004. Blogs, together with other tools such as online fundraising and the coordination of citizens through websites like MeetUp, were widely used by the Democratic candidates Howard Dean and Wesley Clark in 2004. Nowadays, thanks to the success of these cases, most of the politicians in the world involved in any kind of elections make use of this tool to promote their campaigns and to obtain online support for their proposals. Moreover, the power of this online tool was clearly seen in the general elections in Brazil in 2006, where citizens gathered in several blogs in order to support or criticize the different candidates. For instance, concerning the president Lula da Silva, the blog “Lula Out” was formed by more than 170.000 registered users that strongly criticize his management. In turn, he found online support of more than 60.000 people in “We vote Lula for President”. Therefore, due to the importance of the Dean and Clark cases, both cases will be analyzed below.

The selection of the two cases analyzed was based on the results of a first focus group made up of e-marketing and virtual community experts, which identify the most representative cases. In addition, according to Edmunds (1999), the conduction of a focus group at the beginning of the investigation may help to understand, in this case, the behaviour of the digital citizens. We then carried out an *in situ* study of the functioning of the selected blogs. To do this, following the recommendations of Kozinets (2002) regarding the conduction of ethnographic studies in the online context, the research group registered first on the blogs in order to learn as much as possible about the cultural characteristics of the group the activities carried out therein. Secondly, we took part in the debates for 2 weeks in order to obtain the relevant information required to evaluate the power of these blogs in the development of a successful political strategy. Finally, we also gathered information from various specialist sources.

Howard Dean case study

The spectacular popularity increase of Vermont Governor, Howard Dean, in his race for the USA Democratic presidential candidacy in 2003-04, was largely due to the efficient use of virtual communities by the campaign designers. A few months before the starting signal for the race, very few North American citizens knew Howard Dean and his following organization Democracy for America. However, the use of websites like MeetUp (<http://www.meetup.com>) exponentially increased his popularity.

More than 180.000 citizens, most of them taking part in political activities for the first time, registered in MeetUp supporting Howard Dean's candidacy. They used the Internet to find other people with the same interests in order to organize and hold offline meetings. Thus, a small group

of Democrat sympathizers in a small Texas town was able to coordinate its activities with other small groups of sympathizers in other towns in the State.

Likewise, there were blogs supporting Dean, from Latinos for Dean (<http://www.latinosfordean.com/>) to Mormons for Dean (<http://mormonsfordean.blogspot.com/>). However the most famous blogs for Dean was Dean Nation -<http://dean2004.blogspot.com/>- and Blog for America - <http://www.blogforamerica.com>- see figure 1 and 2. In this websites, Dean followers offered their views on the candidate's program and proposed ideas to improve it. As shown by the study conducted by the Institute for Politics Democracy & the Internet, the digital citizen is characterized to a large extent by the fact that he influences the thought and decisions of people in his immediate surroundings (IPDI, 2004). Therefore the members of this and other blogs were particularly active. They carefully analyzed the proposals of Dean and his opponents, offered their own ideas, organized rallies and even made donations to help defray the campaign on the Internet and buy merchandising products (e.g. t-shirts, mugs, bags, etc.).

Throughout 2003, Dean's online campaign raised 40 million dollars from the contributions of 280,000 people (an average of \$143 per person). Dean himself expressed his gratitude for the work on behalf of his campaign, carried out mostly by supporters in small-town America: *"Thanks to all of you for your energy and your help ... I can't tell you how helpful this is. Many many thanks..."* (see this message in <http://dean2004.blogspot.com/>).



Image 1: <http://dean2004.blogspot.com/>

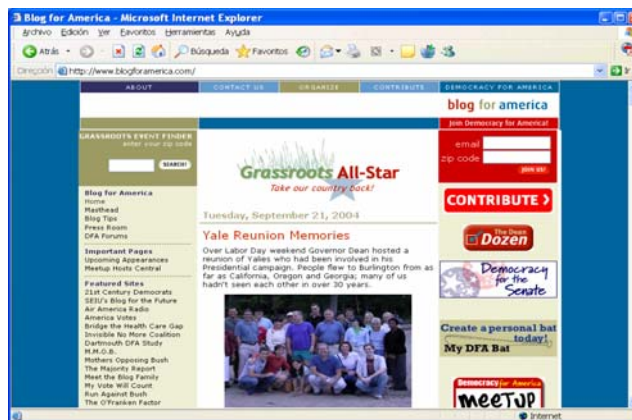


Image 2: <http://www.blogforamerica.com>

Wesley Clark case study

The use of web-pages like MeetUp, fundraising for the campaign on the Internet and blogs helped not only Dean in his presidential race. Wesley Clark's candidacy was also related to the Internet. The over \$ 2m collected through an online campaign and the fact that Clark supporters mobilized in dozens of blogs even before his candidacy was announced, were crucial for Clark's decision of leading the Democrats to the USA government

Many of the dozens of personal and group blogs which supported Clark were in the so-called Clark Community Network (<http://www.forclark.com>, see figure 3). On this website, citizens could make contributions and organize meetings. Likewise, this website agglutinated blogs in the same platform so that the management and design were homogenous. Unlike the blogs in Dean's candidacy, the Clark Community Network searched for a more participative attitude of the individuals. The Clark Community Network had a greater sense of community than Dean's website: the feeling of belonging to a group and the opportunity to actively

participate in mapping events. In this respect, when somebody joined the website they were given the opportunity to create their own personal blog. Above the group of personal blogs there was a second level of group blogs where only registered users were allowed to publish after the screening of a series of moderators who voluntarily avoided inappropriate messages. All the published messages were rated by the readers between 1 to 5, thus only those with a better rating were susceptible of being published in Clark's official campaign blog (<http://campaign.forclark.com/>). Consequently, the feeling of membership increased and the comments quality was motivated. This was the major difference with Dean blogs, where only official members of the campaign or some authorized bloggers were allowed to publish. On the other hand, Clark Community Network offered other possibilities, such as online donation or an interesting register of members who tried to recruit people for the cause, thus obtaining some kind of reward.

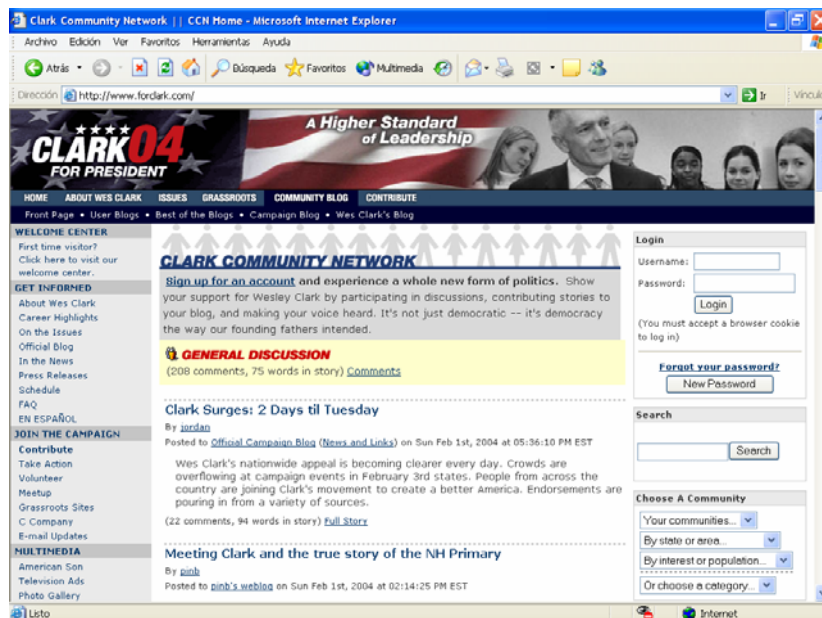


Image 3: Clark Community Network (<http://www.forclark.com/>)

The analysis of the cases of Dean and Clark has enabled us to verify what a powerful support tool the Net is, with a relevant power for the citizens. Through blogs, it is possible to call thousands of voters to attend the candidate's meeting in a city; to make economic donations; to obtain up-to-date information of the events; collect opinions on ideas proposed in the campaign; recruit people who are ready to altruistically help in the campaign, among other possibilities. Consequently, a modest campaign like Governor Dean or General Clark was able to compete satisfactorily in such a complex and expensive political battle as the Democratic Party primaries.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the present research we have verified the great relevance of the Internet for the way political parties and the public in general relate with their groups of interest. Virtual communities, which first emerged as the individual's socializing elements, have become real political marketing weapons, able to reach the target segment efficiently. The opportunity for socialization offered by a virtual community increases the social capital of the group and enhances relationships with its environment. Thus we have the digital citizen, an individual who is concerned with the decisions taken by his political representatives, and who influences the people around him by means of the tools provided by the Internet.

The pronounced importance of the digital citizen has been shown by the study of the cases of the USA Democratic party primaries in the 2003-2004, which have allowed us to define how the use of virtual communities favor the coordination of those citizens who are more aware of the progress of the society they live in, increasing their democratic attitude and a more active behavior in the interest of the community. Indeed, citizens who use the Internet to interrelate are

characterized by a stronger knowledge about the world around them, as it may be observed in the big amount of Meetup's groups developed and the subjects they dealt (e.g. Blacks 4 Clark, <http://www.blacks4clark.us/>). Therefore, digital citizens are individuals who are socially involved in their community needs and able to consistently appreciate the initiatives promoted by political candidates.

In addition, virtual communities, and more specifically blogs, may represent an efficient weapon in electoral strategies. Blogs provide three main benefits difficult to obtain by means of traditional actions:

- Firstly, it would be possible to increase the amount of active supporters; that is, people who altruistically spread the message and recruit new voters. Indeed, blogs can be used by citizens to take part in discussions in order to inform and influence fellow individuals about different candidates. These social groups have a real existence for their participants and therefore, they can affect their members' behaviour (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). In fact, this citizen advocacy may be one of the major factors influencing a positive image for both candidates and political parties since fellow individuals are seen as a more objective information source (Kozinets, 2002).
- Secondly, blogs may help to identify the needs and desires of particular citizens or groups of people. In addition, thanks to these virtual communities, citizens may be able to participate in the development of the electoral program, which entails an increase of the individuals' commitment, as well as a better adaptation of the political proposals to the society's reality.

- Lastly, active participation in these communities may favour higher levels of citizens' loyalty to the common interest (e.g. a candidate, a political party, etc.) around which the blog is developed. Thus, this result may be especially relevant for political parties due to the fact that the great efforts needed to win new voters make it increasingly necessary to reinforce the ties established with the previous ones.

In addition, blogs also allows obtaining other advantages which can be summarized in the following aspects:

- Increase of the candidate's popularity, as well as the diffusion of the program ideas.
- Fundraising to defray campaign costs.
- The online coordination of campaign meetings so that a larger number of people may be called.
- Improvement of the candidate's image, since he/she is perceived as a person concerned for the citizen's participation in politics.

Nevertheless, the use of blogs must be subject to following some recommendations. These aspects may be specified in the following questions:

- User-friendly systems must be designed, because technological barriers hamper the diffusion of virtual communities.
- If it is legally possible, online fundraising must be encouraged by the implementation of a payment platform.

- To motivate participation, blogs must facilitate the emission of complex messages, that is, the citizen must be given the possibility to express their opinion in a complete way, with images and sounds if necessary.
- Likewise, the citizen must be given the opportunity to contact the political leaders directly. This may be achieved by the design of moderated forums which control the messages for the politician according to a series of pre-established rules.
- Although the success of blogs lies in their capacity to intensify mouth-to-mouth communication, it is also true that a promotional campaign must be designed so that the citizen has a proof of the existence of these tools. Likewise, the individual must be informed about the benefits that their participation has on society, as well as being aware that their opinions will be taken into account when designing political proposals.
- In order to show a concern about citizens' needs and desires, blogs must be constantly up to date. In other words, blogs should not only be active during the election process, but every time. If they are active only in some important dates, citizens will perceive that blogs are only a tool to increase the number of voters and they may not be motivated to participate on them.
- Systems like MeetUp or similar ones must be used to coordinate the supporters' efforts and especially the calls to propaganda acts.
- Independent blogs should be firmly supported. Consequently, web location or tools to facilitate the creation of blogs may be offered. Likewise, a network of blogs which have the reference of the campaign's website or official blog should be created.
- Finally, if it is technically and legally possible, it is important to reward those individuals who recruit more people or funds.

However, it is important to note that the use of virtual communities also entails some risks (Baillie, 1997). First of all, since the Internet penetration rate is still quite low in many countries, only some groups may be well represented in virtual communities; that is, those who use the Internet very often. Hence, low classes are not able to express their interests in these forums. Secondly, it is possible that sometimes blogs, which are intended as an instrument to improve the relationships between the citizens and the administration, may become a source of arguments and confrontation where debates result in irrelevant questions. Lastly, in some cases, the management costs of these virtual communities may be quite high, since they may need hiring personnel to moderate online debates, as well as a large outlay for the design of the websites which support the community.

Lastly, it is necessary to decide if the events observed in the USA may be replicated in other countries. It is not easy to give an answer, since the experience out of the USA is very short. For instance, we may note the case of the autonomous elections in the Basque Country (a Spanish autonomous community) in 2005, where most of the candidates developed their own blog to interact with their online voters. However, due to the fact that the Internet penetration rate in Spain is still quite low - only 37.5% of Spaniards are frequent Internet users (INE [*National Statistics Institute*], 2005)-, it was not possible to assess the success of these actions. In fact, we may consider that the likelihood of a similar success for the phenomenon of blogs in other countries largely depends on the groups they are aimed at. In this respect, it is reasonable to think that the success of blogs will be higher in those groups which already form communities in traditional channels (e.g. left-wing groups, environmentalists, cultural groups), those who are

more accustomed to the use of the Internet (e.g. young people), supporters with a certain party or those located in a nearby place (e.g. a city).

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