

Subject: Engage the Netroots
From: Jerome Armstrong



As we approach the 2008 election it's important to realize that the netroots, comprised of blogs and social networking websites, are not something to be scared of, to avoid, or demean. Instead, these community websites, and the millions that comprise their audience, can be a powerful asset for progressives working in issue advocacy organizations, labor unions or political campaigns. This memo makes the case that all parts of the progressive family must engage the netroots, through the blogs and social networking websites, both in the long-term by increasingly integrating them into our work, and in the short-term with six recommendations that can be implemented immediately.

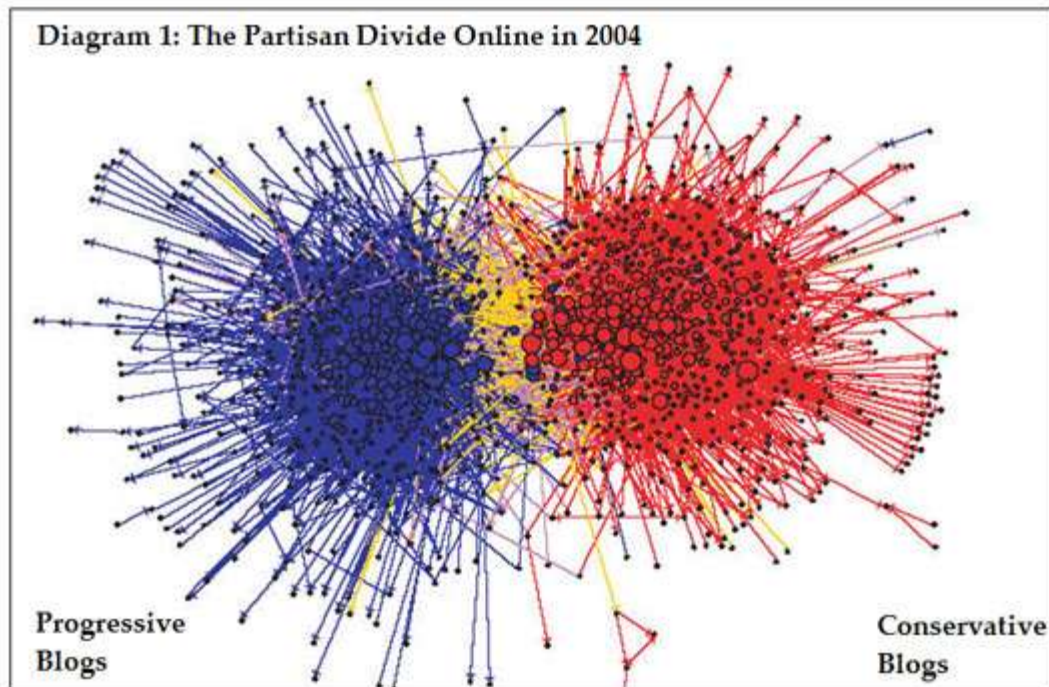
The netroots are the online activists who are working to revitalize a Democratic Party that will further a progressive agenda. Unlike the conservative ideologues who have held power for most of this decade, the people-powered netroots herald a much-needed return of non-dogmatic pragmatism to our politics. And that's good news for America, because if we don't provide leadership, the solutions to the world's problems will be decades in the making, or won't come at all. [1]

Last year, heading into the 2006 mid-terms, I wrote a NPI memo focusing on just the blogs. In this updated memo, I've added the development of political activism upon the social networking websites in discussing netroots outreach.

The world of social networking sites such as YouTube, Facebook, Myspace, Eventful, and others, has once again altered the political playing field. With even more community members than the blogosphere, these websites allow organizations to reach out to millions more people. In contrast to the highly partisan blogosphere, the social networking sites are not all about politics. However, as the 2008 elections heat up, the sites are engaging their communities in the presidential election, and activists are emerging that will prove valuable to progressive organizations in targeting youth, who comprise a disproportionate majority of the community members on these websites, for political action.

The Rise of Blogs and the Impact on Progressive Politics

Political blogs have been around since the 2000 election, but it was during 2004 that their impact began to be noticed, particularly in the Democratic Presidential primary campaigns. Just as there was a Blue-Red divide in America, so there was on the web also. The partisan extent of the blogosphere can be seen from the 2004 BlogPulse.com map (overleaf) of the blogs and their connections. [2].



A number of things have changed since 2004. According to the website Technorati.com, the blogosphere has grown over 100 times in size. Blogs have expanded in content beyond technology and politics, and now include every imaginable discussion topic: moms talking, sports chatter, entertainment gossip, and so forth.

Perhaps more importantly, the blogosphere has recently become more progressive. During the 2004 cycle, traffic visiting Conservative and Progressive blogs was about equal. Yet today the Progressive blogosphere is much larger. A 2006 poll [3] by the online advertising service Blogads.com found that nearly 50% of blog readers self-identified as Democrats. Only 20% saw themselves as Republicans, with 19% as Independents, 5% as Libertarians, 4% as Greens, and 2% as apolitical.

The raw numbers are equally impressive. Time Magazine [4] estimated that about 6 million Democrats read blogs on a daily basis. Nielson ratings reported that the biggest political blog, DailyKos.com, is visited by 4.8 million people a month. The Liberal Ad Network [5], which comprises nearly 100 of the biggest blogs that are aligned with the progressive cause, now pegs readership at over 90 million page-views a month. And the National Journal's Hotline conducted a poll [6] in April 2006, finding that 23% of Democrats read blogs at least a few times a month.

Those who do read political blogs tend to be among the most politically engaged Americans. A PEW post-election survey [7] of online activists that supported Howard Dean showed that an incredible 99% voted in the November 2004 election. Because these bloggers and online activists are extremely politically active, they can and do have a disproportionate impact on everything from primary elections to advocacy campaigns.

By 2006, the netroots played a key role in the Democratic victory during the mid-terms by helping to: launch innovative advocacy campaigns; counter the Republican propaganda machine, and through volunteer coordination and online fundraising. But one of the biggest contributions was to expand the playing field of candidates. While the DCCC did a fine job of recruiting competitive candidates for the top targeted districts, the netroots identified and propelled candidates in less-known districts, with funding, buzz and momentum. [8] Combined, the complimentary effort allowed Democrats to have a candidate in nearly all of the 435 congressional districts, fielding more candidates than either party in the last 40 years, with netroots funding through ActBlue.com [9] This decentralized, 50-state effort is where the netroots will continue to lead as a more localized progressive blogosphere develops.

From National to Local Impact of Blogs

Progressives need to recognize the importance of forming bonds with local blogs – those blogs that are within a state, region, congressional district or city. Reaching out to these local blogs can be akin to making connections with the special interest groups and constituency groups of the past that have traditionally dominated the progressive movement. The difference is that whereas interest groups traditionally care about only a small range of topics, such as the environment or women's choice, local bloggers are much more likely to be movement-based and focused on changing the status quo.

Until recently, the perception of bloggers has been that they are more concerned with national issues, and have a questionable impact on local elections. However as the blogosphere has grown, and grown more progressive, this has changed. A series of special elections in the 2005 and the 2006 primary cycle made clear that local blogs can have a real impact. Paul Hackett came remarkably close to winning a special election, in Ohio's second congressional district, in a very Republican district—largely off of funding from the blogosphere. Among the recent victories, the primary US Senate victories of Jim Webb in Virginia and Jon Tester in the Montana showed that the local blogosphere is now capable of connecting netroots activism and grassroots action. In the 2006 mid-term election, to the surprise of those inside the beltway, local heroes won upset victories throughout the nation with help from local online activism.

To see how quickly this is developing at the local level [10], let's look at the Massachusetts' blogosphere. In November 2005, a convention called "BlogLeft" was organized by Massachusetts bloggers. The convention members began a Yahoo email list to allow for further communication, and in May of 2006, organized a forum for the Democratic primary candidates for Lieutenant Governor. Soon after, Deval Patrick, who ultimately won the Democratic nomination for Governor, had his campaign reach out to the blogger community for advice on how to identify "average citizens" in its video testimonials. This early outreach to the blogs is only one of the many factors that explain Patrick's victory. But it's certainly no accident that a progressive online infrastructure in Massachusetts developed alongside Patrick's incredible campaign.

Advocacy campaigns, labor unions, political campaigns and others are in a natural leadership position to help spread further the sort of growth seen so clearly in Massachusetts. In turn, the local progressive online political structure can provide support for a broad range of progressive

causes with its database of local online activists, listserves among bloggers, ability to aggregate through regional portals or advertising networks, and capacity for state-based fundraising.

Video and the Blogs

One of the areas where increased internet usage is making online politics more important than ever is in video, and specifically through the use of YouTube. Today, more than 80% of people in the US have internet access. Internet users spend the same amount of time online (14 hours a week) as they do watching TV. Over 21 million people have watched political videos online, and the daily usage of online video rose by 56 percent over last year. Politicians and organizations that engage the netroots through innovative video techniques will find encouraging results. [11, 12]

For example, on July 17th, 2007, Senator Harry Reid called for an all-night session of the US Senate to call attention to the Republican Party's filibuster of the Levin-Reed amendment that was supported by a simple majority of the Senate and would have brought a responsible end to the war in Iraq. Progressive bloggers from around the country stayed up all-night with the Senators to monitor and discuss the floor proceedings and cover rallies outside the Capitol Building, but few Senators were using this very important moment to talk with bloggers.

At approximately 11:00 p.m. Senator Harkin, left the capital grounds during a break in the proceedings to film a short 3-4 minute video blog, and his staff turned it around within a few hours, uploaded it to YouTube, and posted the video as an entry from Senator Harkin on major national progressive blogs such as DailyKos, MyDD, and in Iowa on Bleeding Heartland.

Between Midnight and 9:00 a.m. the video blog from Senator Harkin received over 200 positive and thankful comments. Within 24 hours, the video had been linked to by over 444 websites and blogs around the country, including FireDogLake which received over 330 comments on the video. On YouTube, the video received top honors and was ranked as being one of the most-viewed, top-rated, and most-linked political videos of the day. [13, 14, 15, 16, 17]

Tom Harkin's simple 3-4 minute video that only took 10 minutes of the Senator's time to shoot illustrates the effectiveness of being able to respond quickly to current news events with compelling video content and should be an outreach method that is repeated or improved upon in the future. In the middle of a campaign, that becomes even more important, in order to gain a competitive advantage.

Changing the Campaign Operation

How should we do this? The first thing to realize is that netroots activism can become involved in all areas of a progressive organization. Politically, website outreach can be very helpful in reaching leading "influentials" or opinion makers. In the field, they can help in the earliest stages, through word of mouth and event organizing. The online fundraising potential, especially through small donors, is well known.

Beyond those advantages, having an online rapid-response team, or an email list serve of local bloggers, means you are one step ahead of the opposition in shaping the beginnings of any news story that hits the wire. Opposition research can be distributed to bloggers and online supporters to break and spread the story through their networks. And website content that includes a public schedule will help bring volunteers and new supporters to your organization.

But it's not just the departments of campaigns that have changed. The entire way a campaign unfolds has to change by engaging bloggers, from how a campaign gets off the ground to how it uses media in the closing days.

Progressive campaigns must reverse the traditional volunteer model – and the earlier the better. Instead of leaving recruitment of volunteers until the last minute, campaigns should try to excite volunteers up front, long before a full field program is up and running. It is at this point that engaging the netroots can be most effective. Start by reaching out to local bloggers and online activists who actually have a pre-existing audience to build the initial groundwork. Claim an active presence on the social networking websites and let younger volunteers in the campaign perform outreach efforts.

Integrate bloggers, who are your pre-field program, into your organization as it starts to grow. Put up search-term ads, advertise on the blogs themselves through blogads, build email lists for communications and fundraising, and hire an internet person to create a website and blog. Get website tools for community building, website video for persuasion, and rapid-response for bloggers. Do social networking outreach and fundraising - both through existing sites and nationally – using existing free or cheap tools.

In the final stages, use local and national geo-targeted websites to persuade voters with online ads such as interactive ads and video (this should be 10-15% of your media budget as it is in the corporate world for consumer products). Using these methods, the netroots can help push your efforts over the top.

Six Things You Can Do Now

Bloggers will be your frontline of defense against attacks. Having them as allies is an important focus for any organization. Here are six things that any progressive organization can do today:

1. Take the first step with outreach to local bloggers:

This is something that should already have been done, but it's never too late start. If the relationship doesn't exist, reach out today. Rather than focusing on national bloggers, focus on those within your state first, as many of the national bloggers look to the state-based blogs for identifying which races to target as highly competitive. Have the leaders of your organization or campaign touch base with local bloggers,. Set up a conference call with local bloggers asking for feedback, encouraging coordination, and providing updates.

2. Have a daily-updated website to engage and empower the bloggers:

If you are not putting out timely everyday information, then people who want to get involved are coming to the website and leaving empty-handed. The format is not as important as the information. Email your entire list, tell them to visit the website everyday for the latest news and ways that they can help. Event information, the latest news, resources to counter the opposition, all of this is important information to your supporters and bloggers. It keeps them stay engaged and fired up, willing to go the extra step in their volunteer activities. Your website should be an open door for volunteers and the blogs to engage with you.

3. Be on the blogs and advertise on the blogs:

Organizations and campaigns often have news, such as a poll or new campaign material, that will be of interest to your supporters. But it's not enough to just put it on your website. You should also get it on the blogs. You can buy advertising on smaller local blogs for \$100 or less per month, so there is no reason not to take advantage of this valuable resource. Having an ad on the blogs is also a good way to make your cause or campaign known to the blogger community. You can change any ads on blogads with your latest push too. Go to blogads.com and you will be able to search by state to find the blogs near you.

4. Get your opposition research onto the blogs:

Still got that dirt on your opponent that nobody knows? It's useless if you don't get it out to the people who make news. You probably have something a local blogger could use, but you'll never know if you don't get that info out of its manila folder and onto the web. By now, you ought to have local online allies that you can trust enough to give the scoop. Got a story that has a good hook? Feed it to the bloggers. Short stories that are personalized have the best chance at being posted. If the blogs cover it, then go to the more traditional news outlets, and press them to cover the story as well.

5. Use YouTube:

It is best if you are creating video for the web instead of re-produced television ads, but your TV commercials can also be put to good use on the web too. YouTube.com allows you to easily upload your commercials for free and then put them on your website, email them to bloggers, and send them out to voters. Chances are, your local bloggers will link to your ad or put it on their website, giving you broader coverage.

5. Create a web presence on Facebook, MySpace and other social networking sites:

The most recent addition to netroots outreach is on the websites that have been used as social networking websites that have extended into activist networking around candidates and organizations. Having a presence on these websites is something that an organization should do, but maintaining one through the usage of the platform is what will engage the users of these platforms. Facebook and MySpace are two of the early

movers in this space, and for those looking to do outreach into youth organizations and colleges, these sites are very important.

Conclusion

The netroots are both a critical component of building a long-term progressive infrastructure and an important vehicle right now. There is little downside, and lots of upside, for candidates, causes and campaigns to engage them now.

Bio:

Jerome Armstrong has been at the forefront of tech-politics, starting one of the first political blogs MyDD.com (which spawned DailyKos.com, among others). An architect of the netroots strategy that used blogs and meetups for Howard Dean's campaign, Armstrong has consulted and advised with many other campaigns and organizations. Armstrong is the co-author of "Crashing the Gate: Netroots, Grassroots, and the rise of People-Powered Politics", written with Markos Moulitsas, with the foreword by Simon Rosenberg. He is co-owner of WebStrong, an internet-focused political consulting firm, and based in Alexandria, Virginia.

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