

THE PHOENIX

The new armies of the 'net

Can pop technology ramp up public interest in politics?

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More than a million people have downloaded the "Hello Garci" ring tone — whose more than 11 versions variously incorporate samples from 50 Cent, Vanilla Ice, and the Beatles — making it one of the most popular clips to emerge from a cell phone. Yet the most provocative thing about "Hello Garci" is how it draws its inspiration not from a pop song, but a 2004 political scandal in which Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's voice was captured while she allegedly discussed vote-rigging with elections official Virgilio "Garci" Garcillano.

Before the audio tape was released, "people kind of knew what happened, but since they embargoed the wiretap, the story [about the election] wasn't getting out," says Jo Lee, a technology consultant in Providence. Once the tape was leaked and it became a ring tone, the recording was unstoppable. While impeachment attempts and mass protests failed to throw Macapagal-Arroyo out of office, her approval rating has been consistently negative since the recording was released.



"It's brilliant," says Lee. "The president's most humiliating moment is played over and over, every time a cell phone rings. It would be so effective here; it's this great bumper sticker approach to guerrilla politics."

The Philippine ring tone sensation suggests the potential power of netroots, the emerging movement of left-leaning activists, who are using technology and the Internet to find new ways of diffusing political power and getting more people engaged in politics.

In California, for example, MobileVoter, a group employing technology to promote civic engagement, used text messaging to register young voters, since texting is so popular with that age group, in 2006. Lee, who worked with MobileVoter, calls the idea "a no-brainer," because "it literally puts a voter registration booth in the back pocket of every person."

The unpopularity of President George W. Bush and his policies, particularly the war in Iraq, represented the biggest factor influencing Democratic gains in the 2006 elections. Still, the just-past election season will be remembered as the year when blogs came into their own, candidates got smacked around via YouTube, and *Time* declared "You" its Person of the Year, because of the ongoing "revolution" in personal technology and social networks.

So if 64.5 million Americans sent text messages to vote for their favorite contestants on *American Idol* — compared with 61.5 million who voted in 2006 US Senate races — should voting be as easy as sending a text message? Although technology won't single-handedly revive broader political participation, the "Hello Garci" episode stands as a prime example of how it can bring together people, politics, and popular culture. And with the early stages of the 2008 presidential campaign underway, the netroots plan to keep pushing this envelope.

The birth of a new movement

By using online organizing, Democracy for America (DFA), which grew out of Howard Dean's 2004 presidential campaign, has fostered an alliance of groups across the country. While DFA, like www.moveon.org, proved unsuccessful at mitigating Bush's march to war, it provided a ready fundraising network when Seth Yurdin, chair of the group's Rhode Island chapter, successfully ran last year for the Providence City Council.

Yurdin brought in about \$4000 — a significant sum in a council race — from people around the country who had never met him, in average \$35 donations, says Jeff Gale, vice chair of Democracy for America's Rhode Island chapter.

In Rhode Island, the growth of the netroots accelerated when political activist Matt Jerzyk (an occasional *Phoenix* contributor) started [Rhode Island's Future](http://RhodeIslandFuture.com), now the state's most popular political blog, in March 2005. RI Future has since had 10 million hits, averaging 25,000 page views per day.

While Jerzyk's site (to which I am a contributor) is a staunchly progressive blog, and others of a similar ilk — including www.pat-crowley.org, www.kamerka.com, and <http://ri.12.blogspot.com> — have emerged, [Anchor Rising](http://AnchorRising.com) spearheads a small but growing conservative blog movement in Rhode Island. Founder Justin Katz calls Anchor Rising "a long overdue

forum for ideas outside of the local consensus.”

If the growing blogging movement has aided political organizing and fundraising, it is also increasingly making news — as with Lane Hudson, the blogger who first posted Mark Foley’s e-mails to congressional pages, leading to the Florida Republican’s resignation.

And though there is still a gap in access to new online technologies across age, race, and income, Internet use for political information and engagement keeps growing. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, more than 60 million people (31 percent of Americans online) say they went to the Internet for information on the 2006 elections.

Pols still need a message

Politicos will remember YouTube’s fast rise in 2006 in connection with US Senator George Allen’s caught-on-tape moment, in which he called one of his opponent’s volunteers a “macaca,” leading to Allen’s unexpected defeat by new Democratic darling Jim Webb on Election Day in Virginia.

There are dozens of similar examples of how this popular technology is being incorporated into politics.

When an anonymous user recently posted a 1994 video of former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney expounding pro-choice, pro-gay marriage rhetoric, for example, the video was viewed 12,000 times the next day, prompting Romney to respond with his own YouTube video, asserting he was now “greyer, heavier, and wiser” — and more anti-gay marriage and anti-choice.

Politicians are also readily embracing online social networks like MySpace and Facebook to target and communicate with supporters. US Senator Evan Bayh’s Facebook profile tells us his favorite car is a Jeep Wrangler, and his favorite food apple pie, cherry pie, and BBQ. Too much information, some say, or perhaps another entertaining distraction from the real issues.

But Matt Burgess, a media consultant with MacWilliams, Robinson & Partners in Washington, who was the spokesman for Matt Brown’s abortive US Senate bid, strongly believes that social networking has engaged many more people in the political process.

Burgess’s firm integrated MySpace profiles for campaigns with YouTube videos and got users to sign up for text message updates through the site, using today’s popular incentive — the chance to win an iPod — to encourage people to join their campaigns. “All these new technologies are great,” he adds, “but they need to be paired with a good message and a strong voter contact program to have the most impact in a campaign.”

Despite the buzz around progressive activists and the Internet in 2006, Chuck DeFeo, e-campaign manger for Bush-Cheney ’04, says the Republican Party maintained an edge technologically. He says the national GOP used technology to empower regular citizens to hold house parties, get maps and directions to the polls, and organize neighborhood get-out-the-vote efforts. “The only thing missing,” from the Republican strategy, DeFeo writes on [Personal Democracy Forum](#), “was a message for grassroots supporters to carry.”



WEB POWER: Lee touts the Internet’s potential to expose political

chicanery and to register young voters through text messaging.

Bringing it all back home

While national groups have used the Internet to organize local events and meet ups across the country, Jo Lee, the Providence high-tech public relations consultant, has tapped the Web for smaller local campaigns.

When she returned to the US in 2001, after two years in South Africa, she was shocked by the shift in the political landscape. "When I came back there was the war, there was the economy, and it was a very depressing situation," Lee says. "But I started getting these e-mails from MoveOn — 'Click here to tell your Senator to vote against the war,' and it was incredibly empowering. I was never the type of person who would go and write a letter. But I'll click."

In 2002, Lee became involved with the Summit Neighborhood Association in Providence, which was protesting Miriam Hospital's proposed expansion. Inspired by an Arianna Huffington column on civic engagement, and her own community involvement, Lee decided to take things to another level.

With the help of her brother-in-law, a computer programmer, she put together [CitizenSpeak](#), a Web site where people can design their own free MoveOn-like e-mail campaigns, targeted at a specific politician or decision-maker.

Lee sees great potential in the Internet as an effective advocacy tool in local campaigns, particularly since national politicians receive a lot more e-mail.

A case in point is the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence's (RICADV) effort to pass a protective order gun ban in 2003. After holding a State House rally and using CitizenSpeak to send more than 200 e-mails, legislators began soliciting meetings with the coalition.

"Legislators were amazed by the flood of e-mails they were receiving," Patricia Loomis, who RICADV's senior policy associate at the time, says in an interview on CitizenSpeak's Web site. "At the local level, legislators simply aren't used to hearing from such large numbers of constituents. It definitely played a role in winning the support of the Senate president, [Joseph Montalbano,] who cares what constituents think."

Wiki politics gets personal

One of the most tech-savvy individuals to try his hand at politics last year was Pete Ashdown, an Internet service provider founder-turned-US Senate candidate in Utah.

Ashdown, who ran as a Democratic challenger to Orrin Hatch, focused his campaign on citizen participation through new technology. When Ashdown began, he put up 12 policy positions on his Web site. Using wiki technology, the site allowed users to add to or edit his ideas — something that led him to embrace 50 policy positions, ranging from "Abortion" to "Wiki," with input from 100 people.

What he heard most in his travel, Ashdown says, was that Utahans felt disconnected from Washington, and that the wiki served as a way to take their views into account.

The candidate's Iraq stance, for example — that the US should ask Iraqis if they want us to stay or leave, and then do that — was suggested by an anonymous American on his wiki. Ashdown was surprised how the idea resonated with liberals and conservatives in Utah, but says, "That's what I think is key to good public policy; it's finding a compromise that people can move forward on."

Ashdown also posted his schedule online, along with campaign ideas. When he put up a campaign commercial on his Web site — a cute spot featuring his toddler daughter waving American flags to a campaign jingle — one campaign volunteer thought he could do better. In the volunteer's ad, an "Ashdown Action Figure" shoots his "transparency rocket" to expose the bad guys' backroom deals, a commercial that the candidate then used in his campaign.

Though Ashdown lost his race, attracting 30 percent of the vote, he plans to run again, and hopes that his ideas inspire other politicians. Among those already following his lead is Steve Urquhart, Republican Rules Committee chair in the Utah House of Representatives.

On January 22, Urquhart launched the wiki site [Politicopia](#) to discuss the state's legislative issues. Urquhart wants the site to "improve people's access to information in my state . . . provid[ing] a quick and solid handle on the process — without the intermediaries filter," he writes on [Personal Democracy Forum](#).

While it remains to be seen if such efforts attract participation beyond just a relatively small group of people, Personal Democracy's editors call Urquhart's site — said to be the first time that an elected official has created a political wiki — "a sea change in the relationship between representatives and voters."



HARD-WIRED: Thanks to the 'net, blogger-activist Crowley was able to link up with other supporters of Barack Obama.

Looking back and ahead

On a weekend in December, about 400 progressive political organizers, activists, techies, and bloggers squeezed into a conference room in Washington, DC.

Despite the tech-savvy nature of the participants (including Lane Hudson; Chris Casey, credited with having created the first congressional Web site in 1994; and Eli Pariser, who started the precursor to www.moveon.org in 2001), the event included some markedly low-tech elements.

This two-day RootsCamp election debriefing took its cue from online open-source technology that promotes user participation. Instead of sessions planned in advance, any participant could hold a workshop by putting a sign up on the wall. It was a chance for the techies, activists, organizers, and online fundraisers who worked on the 2006 election to talk about what worked — and what didn't — as they prepared for the 2008 campaign season.

Back in Rhode Island, blogger-activists like Pat Crowley, 33, assistant executive director of the National Education Association-Rhode Island, hope to bring a more 'active' element to online organizing: It's no longer just "putting up the information online," he says. It's "Here's the information, now do something with it. It's active in the sense that it's not afraid to tell people, 'Here's what I want you to do. You read about the minimum wage — now send a message to this company that's paying their workers under the minimum wage.'"

Most recently, Crowley jumped on the Barack Obama bandwagon. While just seven people showed up for December 7 pre-meeting, six were strangers who "I probably never would have met" without e-mail and the Draft Obama Web site he established. "That organic element is fun," Crowley says. "How to take it from there to a real organized campaign — that's going to be the test, to see if this Internet-based way of doing things works."

The most technically innovative Rhode Island candidate in 2006 was probably Frank Caprio, now the state's general treasurer, who used Cox Communications' On Demand feature for an extended campaign commercial and even created his own Internet TV station.

"We realized we needed to make it more interesting if people were going to pay attention to the treasurer's race," says Xaykham Khamsyvora-vong, Caprio's campaign manager. Caprio used his Internet TV channel, for example, to discuss his plans for the state pension fund and for divesting the state from Sudan.

While he faced negligible opposition and is a potential gubernatorial candidate in 2010, Caprio used technology to show how he would make government more effective, says Khamsyvora-vong, and made "early and bold moves" with technology that may have discouraged others from entering the race.

What's next for the roots?

With the 2006 election barely passed, the 2008 frenzy is already beginning, and hopes for technology's role are high.

"The 2008 election will produce the ultimate democratization of information technology," says Brown University political science professor Darrell West. "You're going to see everyone have the potential to become a journalist, and to record information that might have consequences for the election."

It will likely take years before we can fully understand what's happening at this moment.

"I think it's too early to try and quantify this technology's impact," says Joshua Levy, associate editor of Personal Democracy Forum. "But think of it like the 1960 first televised presidential debate — we saw Nixon sweating, we saw how handsome JFK was, and that decided the election. We [will] look back and see this as a turning point in the way political campaigns are run."

And changes happen fast: YouTube, for example, is less than a year-and-a-half old. "We can't be certain this [wave of new technology] will change everything," Levy says. "But we can be certain that [in] 2008 there will be something new and big that we don't even know about yet."

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