



## Political Fiber

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# Obama uses social news site Reddit to reach different demographics

By Soli Salgado Oct. 16, 2012 1 Comment

Phillip Mays sat in front of his computer screen smoking a cigarette and waiting to see if his question — one of thousands that were asked — would receive a response from President Barack Obama. It wasn't long until he received a personalized answer to his question about small businesses. “Of course I feel pretty lucky to have asked him a question directly,” Mays said.

Obama, who hosted an “Ask Me Anything” forum on the popular social news site, Reddit, drew [200,000 concurrent viewers](#) at the time of the question-and-answer forum, which almost immediately crashed the site. Since then, the thread has received more than [5 million pageviews](#). After the visit from the president, Reddit can now join the likes of Facebook and Twitter as an important tool for candidates on the campaign trail.

Following the 2008 election season, in which technology and social media continuously made headlines, the 2012 campaign hasn't offered much in the way of new technological advancements. But with the president's appearance on Reddit, some observers see not only a movement forward in social media use, but also a return to a more personalized approach between candidates and their constituents.

“There’s been a trend where we’ve seen more and more politicians coming on to Reddit and doing these AMA interviews,” says [Reddit co-founder Alexis Ohanian](#). He predicts that as subreddits — specific categories of Reddit — begin to grow, local and state-level candidates will use Reddit in the same way Obama did. “We have a mayoral race coming up next year [in New York City], and I would love to see candidates come on r/nyc and do AMAs. This is where their constituents are and Reddit happens to be the best, if I may say so, platform on the Internet to curate those kinds of comments.”

Reddit allows registered users to create conversation threads with posts ranging from political debates to pictures of dressed up pets. Other users participate by commenting on or ranking the posts, much like a bulletin board system. The most popular posts and comments move their way up the charts and get more visibility.

David Guth, associate professor at the University of Kansas’ School of Journalism, said that social media can be helpful in reaching out to college-age voters — a notoriously difficult demographic to attract. Even though young people set record turnout numbers in the 2008 presidential election, only 51 percent of Americans aged 18 to 29 voted that year, a full 16 percentage points lower than Americans older than 29.

Obama met with professionals early in his 2008 campaign to tackle the social media giant, and he developed a vast understanding of the power of the Internet to target the younger generation. McCain simply could not keep up. Guth predicted Romney would not make the same mistake Republicans did four years ago, while noting that as long as social media attracts younger voters it will continue to be a standard campaign tool.

Throughout history many candidates have revolutionized traditional campaigning for the sake of getting youthful attention, from Bill Clinton answering questions on MTV and playing the sax on the Arsenio Hall Show to Richard Nixon’s cameo appearance on the TV show “Laugh-in.”

Today’s borderless Internet allows for candidates to make even more personal connections and allows viewers across the world to participate on that personal level.

Rosendo Plano, a construction trust funds administrator from Buenos Aires,

asked Obama about plans to increase funds for the space program. Obama answered, saying the recent passing of Neil Armstrong is a reminder of all that the space program has provided. “The key is to make sure that we invest in cutting edge research that can take us to the next level,” Obama wrote. Plano, saying he was looking for a more of a “yes” or “no” answer, said he was still pleased with the response, as it showed the president is both well-informed and interested in this topic. Lifetime bragging rights didn’t hurt either.

Karl Franks, a student from Malvern, U.K., asked Obama who his favorite basketball player was. “Jordan – I’m a Bulls guy,” was the shortest yet most direct answer on the forum. Franks said he didn’t really think his question through, because he knew if he wanted a response he would have to act quickly. “Anyone who knows Reddit knows the most up-voted comments are generally [posted] the earliest, so I realized I needed to get a question on there, and fast,” he says. “Hearing back from him on a site I spend many hours on made him seem more of a normal person.”

Phillip Mays asked Obama what he intends to do to help small businesses in the next two years. Obama answered that he plans on keeping taxes particularly low for the 98% of small businesses with \$250,000 or less in income.

“I just wish he would’ve said something I didn’t already know, in all honesty,” Mays said.

Although this digital contact between voters and a politician may be a campaigning tactic we see from more candidates in the future, Guth argues that hearing a candidate speak is an irreplaceable form of communication.

“There’s nothing more powerful than the human voice, and inflection is everything,” Guth said. “We all know how difficult it is to have emails interpreted different ways because you can’t tell the tone. The live chat or message board approach isn’t bad, but it’s not as good as you being either with the candidate or seeing the candidate say it and interact with people. ... You look for those verbal and physical cues that you can’t get from a keyboard.”

Even so, candidates are becoming increasingly savvy, finding ways to reach demographics that may not tune in to traditional outlets such as the

presidential debates or convention speeches. Still, Guth insists that technology is a means, not an end.

“Despite all the technology, it still comes down to the candidate and his or her message,” Guth said. “If you do not believe in the candidate or connect with his or her message, it doesn’t matter what medium you use: you are not going to be elected.”

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