

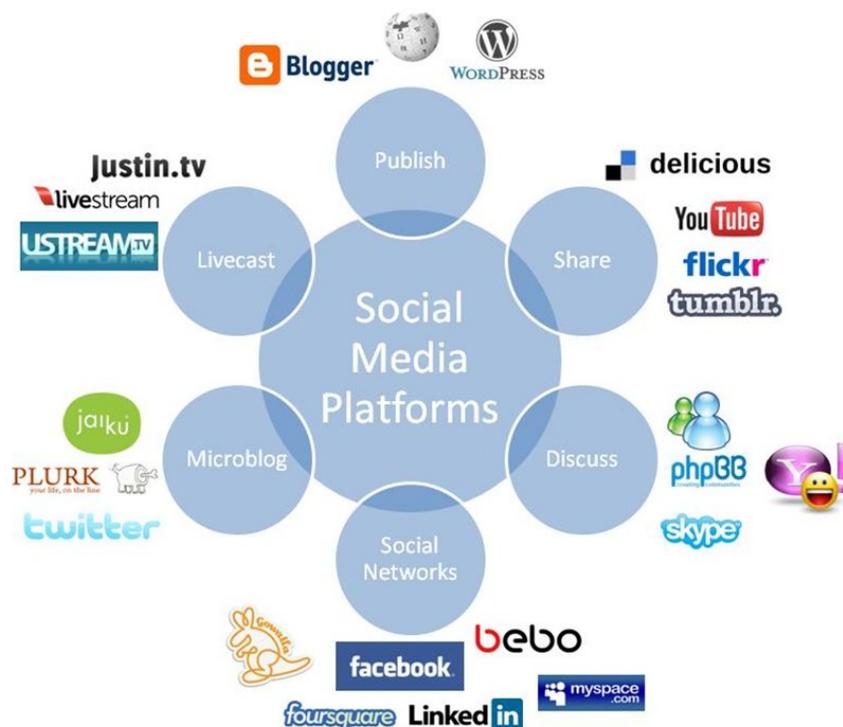
The Use of Social Media in the 2010 Niagara Municipal Election

Introduction

The traditional tool of the municipal election has been shoe leather. Candidates walked from door to door distributing flyers and engaging residents in discussion. In the last few years a new tool has come on the market—social media. As with any new tool, some people have warmed to it more quickly and easily than others. However, it seems clear that social media is changing the political landscape. The purpose of this brief is to consider the impact of the use of social media on the 2010 municipal elections in Niagara.

Social media are socially interactive platforms on the internet that allow for the production and dissemination of user-generated content. User generated content includes text, photos, videos, links, tweets, likes, nudges, and pokes. The most-used social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, LinkedIn, Classmates.com, and YouTube. Social media allow for a high level of user interaction that differs from the traditional mass media that disseminates ‘processed’ content.

The growth in the number of people of all ages using social media during the past several years coupled with the increased interaction time driven by the growth of smart phones world-wide has presented a new, low cost, and effective tool for the business, advertising, and political realms. The ability to reach a large number of individuals at minimal or no cost presents an immense opportunity for political candidates. It also presents an opportunity for voters and interest groups to set the agenda for the candidates’ campaigns. Social media can be a game-changing innovation for political campaigns that is



beginning to alter political communication similar to the introduction of radio, television and websites.

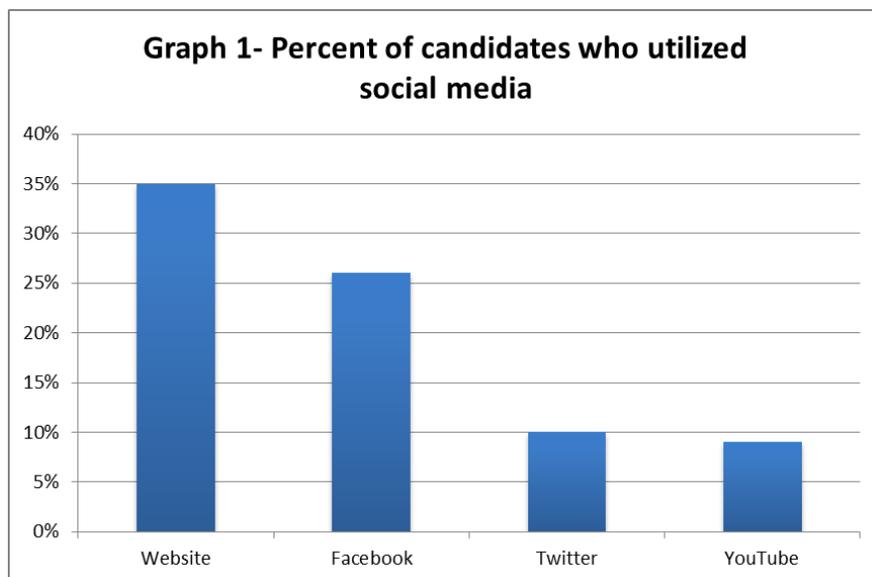
Social media offer the greatest opportunity at the municipal level where political communication is not commonly controlled by expert communications teams, and campaign communication is not shaped by political parties or party leaders. The municipal level has the greatest potential for two-way interaction between voters and candidates.

This brief presents the results of a content analysis of candidates’ websites, Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, and YouTube videos. The analysis included all mayoral candidates in the 12 municipalities and a random sample of candidates for regional and the 12 city/town councils. In all, the campaigns of 105 candidates for office were tracked.

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Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were the only platforms included because they are the most commonly used among the general public and were the most relevant to the political campaign process.

Websites were also analyzed in order to see if they were responsive to viewers, whether they offered any potential areas of interaction, and to see what type of content was present on the websites.



How many candidates used social media?

The most common form of social or online media used by candidates in Niagara was campaign websites followed by Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

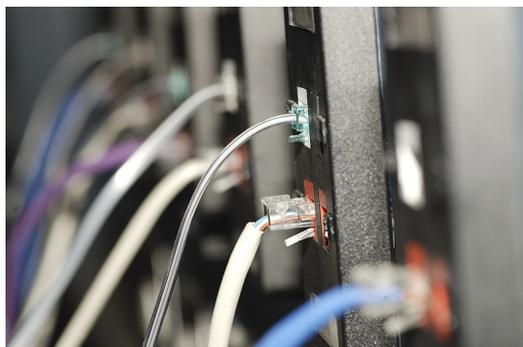
Common content on candidate websites included photos of the candidate, discussion of the candidate's political accomplishments, and an outline of the candidate's platform and major campaign issues. Of the sites reviewed, 69% discussed the main elements of the candidate's campaign on the home page and 43% offered more detailed descriptions of platforms or major issues. The majority discussed political accomplishments and civic experiences multiple times. Just over 94% included a biography, 56% had a lawn sign request, 88% encouraged donations, and 94% had a request for volunteers. Candidate websites were generally well designed and easy to navigate. Only 8.5% of candidate websites were difficult to navigate

Facebook and Twitter

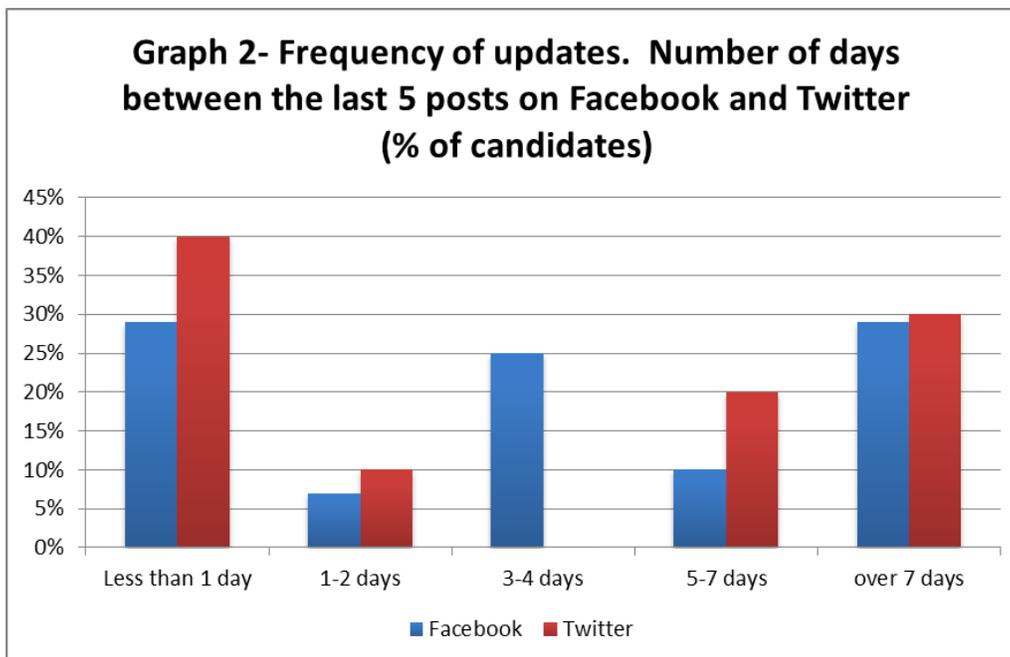
For the 26% of municipal candidates who used Facebook, the average number of 'Likes' that they received was 255. The number of likes that candidates received varied greatly from a few to over two thousand. Generating a large number of likes is important for campaigns that use Facebook because the candidates can send out updates on their campaign, issues, and request support through votes, donations, volunteering, or other means. The average

number of Facebook posts during the 2010 Niagara municipal campaign was 64 posts.

Having a Facebook campaign page could just be a token measure and not be consistently used by candidates. Frequently-updated Facebook pages indicated that candidates engaged in the pages and used them as major elements in their campaign. As shown in graph 2, one group of candidates updated their Facebook pages and Twitter feeds at least once per day, while the other main group did not use their Facebook pages and Twitter feeds very consistently. The second group had a span of over 7 days between updates. One notable difference was that it was more common for candidates who had a Twitter account to update their tweets more frequently than Facebook users. This could be due to the fact that Twitter is not as heavily used as Facebook and therefore candidates who were aware of Twitter likely had a greater interest in social media and technology.



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YouTube

YouTube was the least used platform in the municipal campaigns. Most of the videos consisted of either the candidate discussing his or her main campaign priorities in one continuous medium shot or short offers of support from a number of voters. The voter videos were posted by the candidate and were shot by the candidate as well.

The videos allowed voters to gain insight into the candidates' communication abilities that would otherwise only be gained in-person or on televised debates. The videos were short and well-produced with no audio or technical problems. They were a bit dry and more editing would have been helpful to maintain viewer attention but would require an increase in production skills and an increased cost.

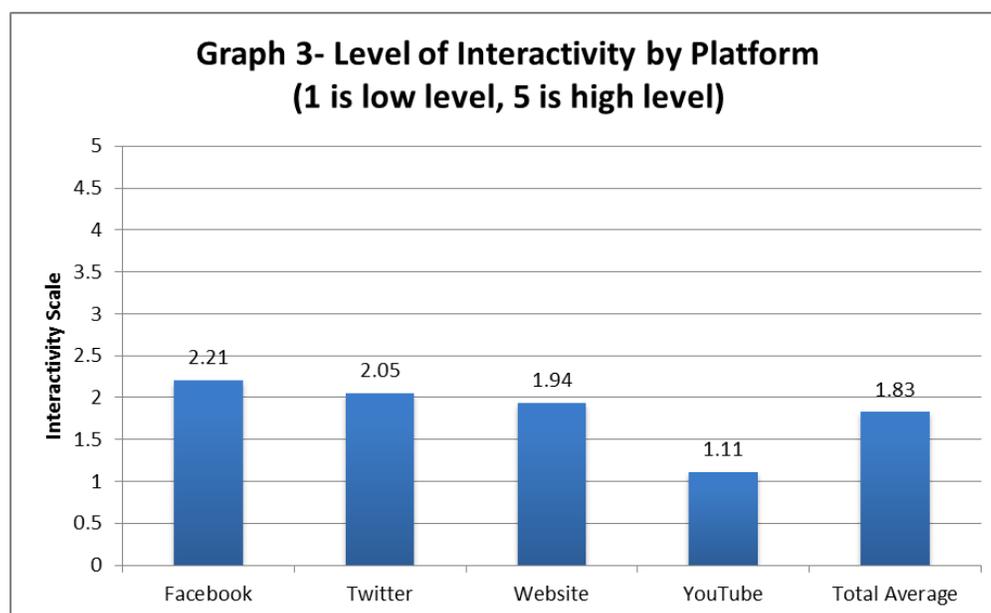
The YouTube videos typically were embedded directly on the candidates' websites. YouTube was mainly an intermediary that hosted the candidates' videos rather than a main campaign tool. Very few candidates had extensive YouTube pages. Most pages simply listed the videos that were embedded on websites and did not contain any other text.

Interactivity

An interactivity scale was developed to measure the level of interaction for the various multimedia platforms. The scale included such factors as the frequency of posts, responses to posts, and voters' questions.



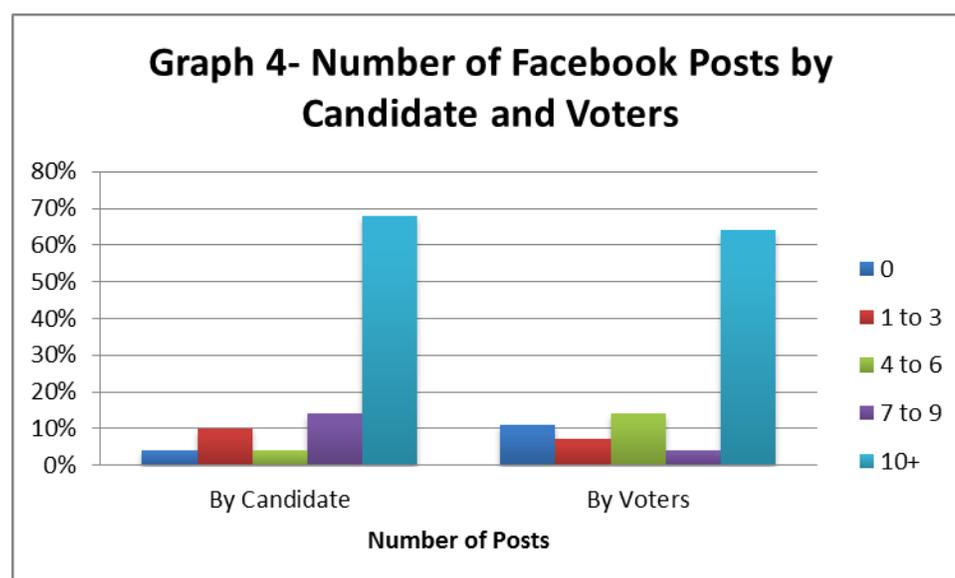
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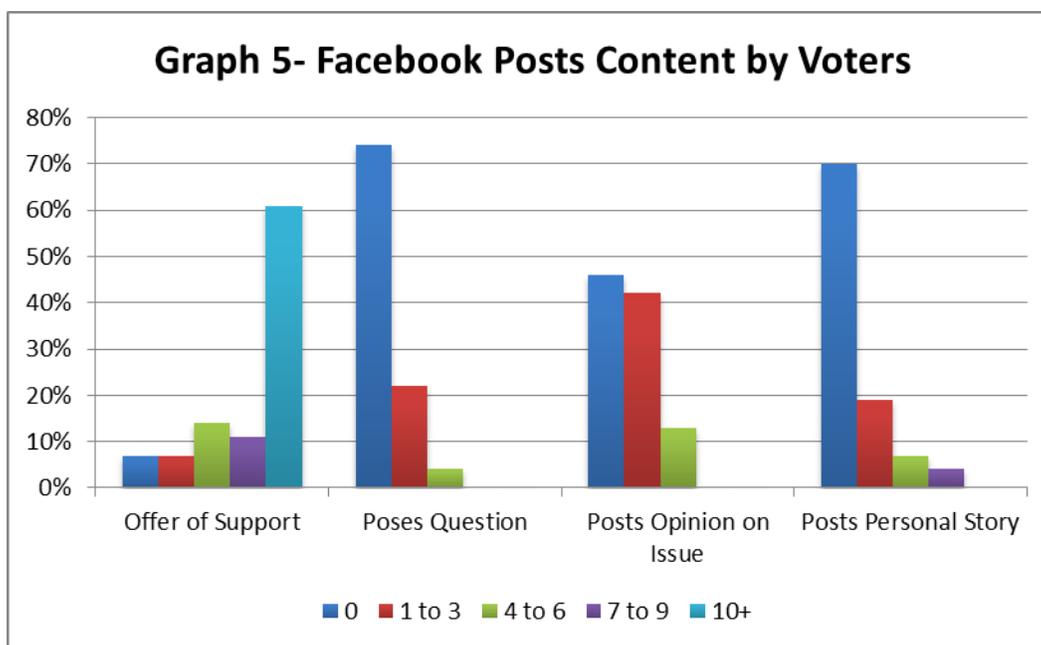
Graph 3 makes clear that overall, the candidates' social media platforms and websites were not very interactive during the 2010 Niagara municipal elections. The average level of interactivity for all platforms was 1.83 out of 5. Facebook was the most interactive social media platform with a score of 2.21 out of 5 followed by Twitter with a score of 2.05, Websites with a score of 1.94 and YouTube with a score of 1.11.

Facebook

In terms of frequency of posts, Facebook was well used by candidates and voters. Most candidates with a Facebook page had at least 10 posts by the candidate and voters during the course of the campaign.



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The majority of Facebook posts were voter offers of support including “good luck on election day” “I’m voting for you!” and “I hope you win!” as the most common posts. The least common post content included questions posed by voters to candidates on issues or their platform. Also there were very few posts by voters displaying their opinions on any governmental or campaign issues.

Overall, the type of discussion on Facebook exhibited a low level of interaction. Candidates did not pose questions to voters asking for their input on any platform elements or issues. Voters mainly posted their support and offered their vote and did not engage in much dialogue.

Twitter

The level of interaction on Twitter was also low. Most of the candidates who used Twitter in their campaigns used it as a venue to announce new Facebook posts or direct users to news stories that were posted on their websites. Some candidates offered daily updates on the campaign happenings and informed Twitter followers on debates that they are attending or experiences that they had while door-to-door campaigning in the community. About 60% of candidates posted their views on campaign issues or elements of their platform in their tweets.

Tweet content was heavily candidate driven and consisted of links to news articles, websites and daily campaign updates. There was minimal discussion or interaction between candidates and voters on Twitter. All candidates who used Twitter had campaign progress updates with 60% of candidates having over 10 daily campaign updates throughout their campaign. Daily updates include statements such as “out knocking on doors today” or about events or rallies that they have attended or plan on attending. About 40% of candidates shared supporters’ stories more than four times through Twitter, while 90% of Twitter-using candidates shared links to news media on important issues or articles on themselves and all shared links to websites. Very few Twitter followers posted comments or opinions resulting in a low level of interactivity.



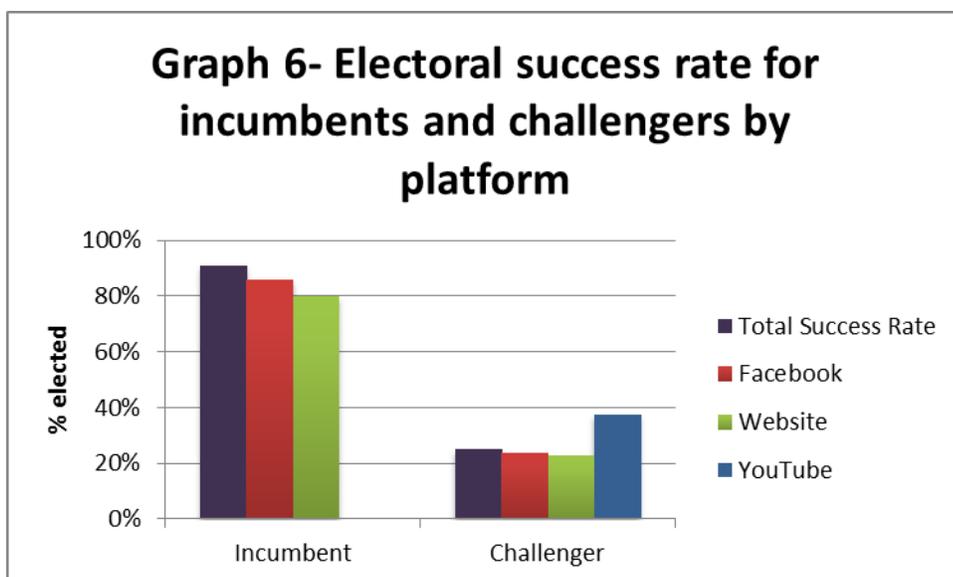
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Websites

Websites also exhibited a low level of interactivity. Almost all websites encouraged voters to send questions or comments but there were only a couple cases of websites allowing voters to have comments or questions posed to candidates that would be visible directly on the websites. A few candidates did post some questions that they had received by email from voters and their responses to the questions. It was apparent that these questions were primarily selected based on consistency with the candidate's campaign. With moderated comments, the user control is in the hands of the candidate and therefore it does not exhibit much interactivity.

Social Media's Impact on Electoral Success

The use of websites, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were not statistically significant in determining electoral success of candidates. In municipal elections incumbency has traditionally been viewed as a huge advantage in continuing to get elected. In the sample 90.9% of incumbents were re-elected. Challengers who used social media extensively were not able to overcome that incumbency advantage and were successful in their campaigns only 25% of the



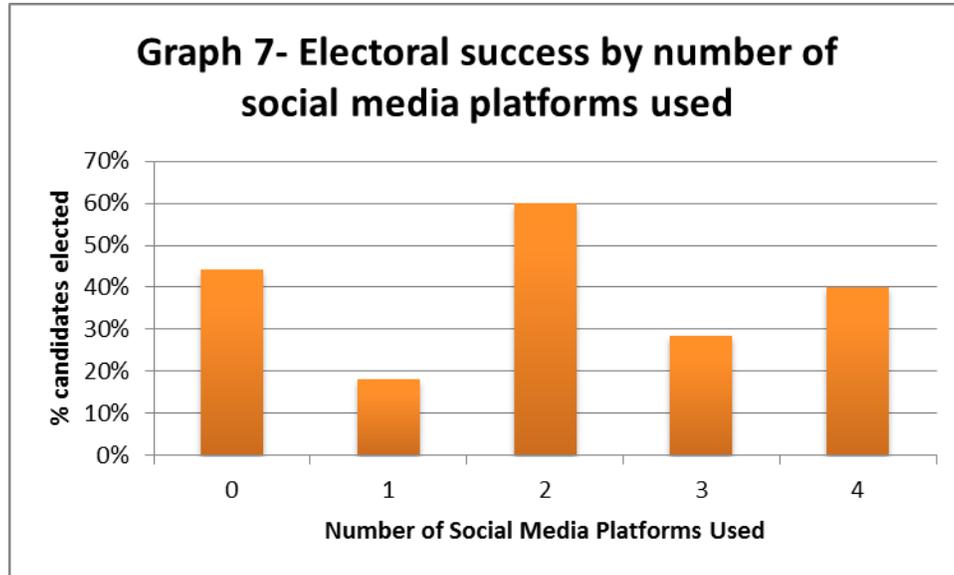
time. Incumbents who used Facebook and websites were elected at

* Twitter incumbent results low and not statistically significant and therefore not included

significantly higher proportions than challengers. YouTube videos (the social media platform used the least) was the only category where challengers were more successful than incumbents. In fact, none of the few incumbents who used YouTube were successful.

Graph 7 identifies that a large number of candidates, 44%, who did not use any form of social media were elected. Using one social media platform did not result in an increase in electoral success. Candidates who used two social media platforms were more likely to be elected with a success rate of 60%. Candidates who used three or four social media platforms did not have increased electoral success; instead, they had lower rates of electoral success than candidates who did not use any social media platform. The increased success of candidates with two forms of social media may be the result of effective and efficient use of time and resources. Monitoring multiple platforms requires more time and effort and therefore may result in the inability to engage in extensive voter interaction in any single platform. In sum, social media had a minimal impact on electoral success in the 2010 Niagara municipal elections.

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The minimal impact could be due to a large number of voters relying upon traditional campaign elements including door-to-door campaigning, flyers, and newspaper ads to help them make a decision on how to vote. Also, the result may be due to the fact that seniors, who are more likely to vote than younger people, are less technologically savvy and therefore are less likely to use social media platforms when deciding on their vote. Despite this, seniors are the fastest growing segment of Facebook users and therefore, this tool may become a significant tool for them in the next municipal election.

Lack of interactivity on the platforms could also explain the minimal impact of social media. Interactivity could be increased by candidates increasing the number of questions that they pose to voters online and encouraging discussion. Voters also share the burden since most of their posts were offers of support. Posing questions to candidates and sharing their opinions on major issues would help increase interactivity on the social media platforms. Increased interactivity would also encourage more users to follow the candidate on Twitter and would lead to more likes on Facebook. There are many other ways that social media can be utilized better in municipal campaigns.



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Conclusion

Social media did not have a significant impact on the electoral success of candidates in the 2010 Niagara municipal elections, but social media could offer significant opportunity for candidates in future elections as its usage expands among the general populace. Social media is in its infancy and therefore it may take another election cycle or two for its potential to be realized. Candidates who use social media must realize that the interactive nature of social media requires that its usage within their campaigns must differ from the news-release, one-directional type of communication used in mass media, flyers and most websites. Social media require consistent updates, posing questions to voters, answering questions, and frequently posting relevant commentary on campaign issues.

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