PARTICIPATORY AND SOCIAL MEDIA TO ENGAGE YOUTH: FROM THE OBAMA CAMPAIGN TO PUBLIC HEALTH PRACTICE

Barack Obama’s successful campaign for the presidency has been widely attributed to the use of social networking sites, mobile devices, and interactive websites to engage previously hard-to-reach populations in political activity. Campaign communication strategies may be applicable for youth health promotion efforts, particularly for the highly stigmatized issue of mental health. In this article, we examine elements of the 2008 Obama presidential campaign’s use of social media technologies and content designed to foster effective political participation among youth. We outline how the same social media technologies may be applied to public health efforts focused on reaching and providing services to the 20% of young people who have a diagnosable mental disorder. We discuss the strengths and limitations of the application of these media to date, and raise questions about the future use of these media for engaging hard-to-reach populations in addressing stigmatized public health issues. (Ethn Dis. 2011;21[suppl 1]:S1-94–S1-99)

Key Words: Social Media, Mental Health, Youth, Health Communication, Community Outreach

Social media, defined as communication forms that are digital, networked, and interactive,1 facilitate rapid dissemination of public health information. Health departments and universities are among the early adopters of social media for health communication purposes, with many using Twitter (a service which allows users to send their followers 140-character updates via mobile device) and short messaging service (SMS), also known as text messaging, to convey emergency preparedness and disaster response information.2–4 SMS-based efforts have successfully curbed outbreaks of infectious disease.5 The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) operates a short message service (SMS), also know as text messaging, to convey emergency preparedness and disaster response information. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) operates a comprehensive media campaign, which employs Facebook and other social networking sites, online videos, and Twitter to transmit health messages on myriad topics including pandemic flu, other infectious illnesses, and chronic disease.6

The public health sector’s adoption of tech-based communication campaigns warrants exploration of the question: What can we learn from previous successful social media communication strategies? Political campaigns provide a relevant parallel in that they must also engage large segments of the populace that may be considered hard-to-reach and then motivate them to action. Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential victory and the highest voter turnout in 40 years7 have been attributed to the campaign’s effective use of social media8–9 to engage historically less politically active groups including young voters. Targeted messaging and interactive communication contributed to the 135% increase in youth votes in the first caucuses10 and the participation of an additional 3.4 million under-30 voters than in the 2004 presidential election.11

Abroms and Lefebvre argue that lessons from the campaign’s successful use of new media are applicable to public health communication broadly,12 but they may be particularly relevant for engaging youth and other hard-to-reach populations around issues such as mental health that are both highly prevalent and stigmatized. In this article, we examine elements of the 2008 Obama presidential campaign’s use of social media technologies and content designed to foster effective political participation among youth. We outline how the same social media technologies may be applied to public health efforts focused on reaching and providing services to the 20% of young people who have a diagnosable mental disorder.13 We discuss the strengths and limitations of the application of these media to date, and raise questions about the future use of these media for engaging hard-to-reach populations in addressing stigmatized public health issues.

THE RATIONALE FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICAL AND PUBLIC HEALTH CAMPAIGNS

Social media may represent a breakthrough for political and public health campaigns because unlike traditional unidirectional media such as billboards and television advertisements, they engage readily available technology to encourage active communication and participation among the target audiences. They offer the potential first to foster discourse, and subsequently to promote a sense of belonging to a like-minded or similarly-affected group. The ubiquity and familiarity of the media at this time make it an appealing medium for engaging the electorate.

Address correspondence to Benjamin Springgate, MD, MPH; 1430 Tulane Ave SL-16; New Orleans, LA 70112; 504.491.3459; 504.988.8252 (fax); benspringgate@gmail.com