Macaca Moments Reconsidered: Electoral Panopticon or Netroots Mobilization?
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Macaca Moments Reconsidered: Electoral Panopticon or Netroots Mobilization?

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Abstract:

This paper addresses popular misconceptions about so-called "Macaca moments" – high profile candidate gaffes that are captured on YouTube, receive a cascade of citizen views, and contribute to some substantial political impact. Since the 2006 Virginia Senate race, when Senator George Allen made the original "Macaca" gaffe and went on to be narrowly defeated by his challeger, the term has become synonymous with the transformative influence of YouTube. This paper constructs a case study of that Senate race through the archived blog posts on DailyKos, the largest progressive blogging community in America. It compares this case study with a second high-profile candidate gaffe occurring in the 2008 election season – Michele Bachmann's verbal misstep on *Hardball with Chris Matthews*. The central argument of the paper is that the impact of these high-profile moments, and of YouTube more generally, must be viewed in the context of the campaigns and organizations attempting to engage in partisan mobilization. YouTube provides additional tools for parties and political organizations, but its influence is often overstated when academics and commentators focus on the technology in the absence of the organizations that use it.

"This fellow here, over here with the yellow shirt, Macaca, or whatever his name is…

He's following us around everywhere. And it's just great. Hey, let's all welcome Macaca

to America, welcome to the real world of Virginia." – Senator George Allen (R-VA),

August 11, 2006

"What I would say is that the news media should do a penetrating expose and take a look.

I wish they would. I wish the American media would take a great look at the views of the

people in Congress and find out, are they pro-America or Anti-America? I think the

American people would love to see an expose like that." – Congresswoman Michele

Bachmann (R, MN-06), October 17, 2008

Introduction

      The so-called "Macaca Moment" is often treated as indicative of YouTube's

transformative effect on American politics. Named after Senator George Allen's

utterance of the obscure racial slur at a camera-wielding, Indian-American opposition

campaign operative during a rally, which was caught on tape, posted to YouTube, and led

to an ongoing controversy, it is frequently referenced by scholars and pundits alike, and is

almost as frequently misunderstood. Allen's subsequent loss in a close Senate race has

led the term "Macaca Moment" to enter the public lexicon as a synonym for political

gaffes that are heavily accessed through YouTube and lead to cascades of media and

public attention. As Ryan Lizza of the *New York Times* puts it, "When politicians say

inappropriate things, many voters will want to know. Now they can see it for themselves

on the Web." (Lizza, 2006) Likewise, political scientist Vassia Gueorguieva suggests that YouTube "ha[s] increased the potential for candidate exposure at a low cost or no cost at all and the ability of campaign to reach out to the public for campaign contributions and for recruiting volunteers. In addition, [it] ha[s] provided lesser known candidates with a viable outlet to divulge their message to voters." (Gueorguieva, 2008) Communications professor David Perlmutter writes that "Politicians learned, from the example of George Allen, that the 'citizen journalist' with a cause and camera should not be ignored." (Perlmutter 2008)

This paper argues that the political impact of YouTube as an isolated mediuam has often been overstated. A closer look at the Virginia Senate race suggests that the individual "Macaca moment" itself had a relatively small effect on the Jim Webb-George Allen race. The notion that user-generated video content has transformed political campaigns into a panopticon in which all politicians must beware the prying eyes and video recorders of citizen journalists fails to account for the heavily-skewed power law distribution of attention throughout the web (Hindman, 2008). Even in the few high-profile cases where online video of a candidate gaffe attracted substantive attention, detailed case analysis reveals that it is not YouTube itself, but the self-identifying "netroots" political community's involvement that drives this process. YouTube's impact on political campaigns occurs in the context of mobilization efforts, as political campaigns and internet-mediated organizations incorporate it into their repertoire.

This paper attempts, in essence, to *bring the organizations back in* to the study of information technology and politics. Rather than the technology-centric framework commonly used to discuss YouTube, social networking sites, blogs, and other internet

artifacts, I propose a community-centric framework that concentrates on the new communities-of-interest that have come together on the basis of the internet's lowered transaction costs. As such, it pays particular attention to the DailyKos blogging community. Previous research (Karpf, 2008b) argues that such community blogs function as quasi-interest groups. The DailyKos community endorses and fundraises for political candidates, engages in issue education and strategic mobilization around policy priorities, engages hundreds of thousands of volunteers (or "kossacks") at various levels of participation, and even holds an annual in-person convention.

In comparison to all of the public and scholarly discussion of "Macaca moments," attention to new "netroots" political associations such as this one has been surprisingly lacking. The paper attempts to demonstrate the important role played by the netroots organizations through the development of two cases studies of high-profile "Macaca moments:" the original George Allen-Jim Webb campaign and the 2008 Michele Bachmann-Elwyn Tinklenberg House race in Minnesota's 6th district. Relying upon a dataset of over 1,000 blog entries posted by the DailyKos community, it traces the time series of events preceding and following the high-traffic YouTube clip, and notes how the clips were used as tools in broader campaign efforts.[1]

I argue that the political impact of YouTube videos is deeply rooted in the usage of such videos by "netroots" organizations such as DailyKos – simply put, when YouTube videos are highlighted by the major netroots groups, they receive substantial viewership and, more importantly, are converted into campaign donations and pressure

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[1] This dataset of DailyKos archived blog posts will be placed into the *JITP* dataverse for future public reference and analysis.

campaign tactics. Without these donations and pressure tactics, it is unclear why large national viewer numbers would be determinative in the outcome of a local election.

Rather than the common techno-centric "YouTube effects" explanation, which treats collective action as though it happens spontaneously or in response to formal elites, this theory of "netroots effects" argues that the dramatic lowering of video content-production costs only bears political fruit when organized interests incorporate them into ongoing efforts. Thus the lasting impact of such web 2.0 technologies as YouTube lies not in the dissolution of elite control, but in the creation of more porous elite networks and the development of new, "peer-produced" tactical repertoires.

Blogosphere Research: Why Study DailyKos?

There has been surprisingly little written about the political "netroots" thus far – in the academic literature, virtually nothing in fact. Some research on political blogging has appeared in political science journals – most notably a special issue of *Public Choice* and various issues of *Journal of Information Technology and Politics* (*JITP*) – but this has largely considered bloggers as a single, discrete set of "citizen journalists" and sought to discuss their habits, practices, and effectiveness (see Pole, 2006; McKenna and Pole, 2004; Lenhart and Fox, 2006; McKenna and Pole, 2008). While the blogosphere circa 2004 was arguably small enough to allow for such a classification, the explosive growth of the technology has since rendered such population-level studies problematic. Blog software is a relatively simple type of code, and as blogging has grown in popularity, various institutions have adopted blogging into their suite of online communications

tools. While Duncan "Atrios" Black and Glenn "Instapundit" Reynolds – two early bloggers from the Left and the Right, respectively – shared much in common with each other and could be reasonably classified according to their role as "bloggers," it is unclear why we should expect NBC News Anchor Brian Williams or Sierra Club Executive Director Carl Pope to use their blogs in much the same way. Likewise, with the launch of the community-engaging Scoop software platform in 2003, blogs like DailyKos began to offer their readers the opportunity not only to comment on the posts by Markos Moulitsas (nicknamed "Kos" during his time in the Army), but also to author their own "diary" posts and have them hosted for free on the site itself. In a previous *JITP* piece, I argue that these "Community Blogs" function as gathering spaces for identity-based communities-of-interest. The DailyKos community, for instance, endorses, fundraises, and volunteers for a slate of "netroots" political candidates, even holding an annual in-person convention of self-identifying "kossacks." The group engages in political education efforts, chooses issue campaign priorities, and attempts to pressure political decision-makers. The difference between an elite community blog and a traditional interest group lies in the details of staffing, tax status, and tactical repertoires, while the similarities between such a hub community blog and the average pseudonymous individual blogger's site are few enough to make sweeping generalizations about "bloggers" highly problematic. (Karpf, 2008b)

Below, I reproduce two figures from a recent study to demonstrate just how expansive the DailyKos community has become. The data comes from an ongoing data-gathering project called the Blogosphere Authority Index, openly accessible to the research community online. Figure 1 illustrates the growth of content production in the

DailyKos blogging community since it switched to the "Scoop" platform. This is the total number of blog posts, both in front page and diary format, per month, an important figure given Marlow's (2005) finding that content generation, rather than pure preferential attachment, is the main driver of increases in site traffic over time. We see that content production increases during the months surrounding an election, and we see a continual increase in the overall size of the community. Figure 2 provides some context for just how enormous DailyKos has become, comparing the average number of *comments* per week posted to DailyKos, the next 24 largest progressive political blogs, and the top 25 conservative political blogs during and after the high-traffic 2008 election season.[2] One year prior to the election season, in November 2007, DailyKos received nearly as many comments as the next 24-largest progressive blogs *combined*, and nearly 50% more comments than the entire elite conservative blogosphere (Karpf, 2008a). During the 2008 election season, the lion's share of increased public participation in the blogosphere went to DailyKos, with no analogous growth anywhere else in the political blogosphere (see Karpf, 2009 for a full discussion of shifts in various measures of blog authority during the 2008 election season). [3]

-- Figure 1 Here –

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[2] I often use comments as a proxy for community activity, since neither hyperlinks nor site traffic effectively distinguish between posts that are actually being read versus posts that are merely skimmed or skipped over. It stands to reason that, prior to posting a comment, a reader must be actually engaging with the material and considering it long enough to form an opinion worth posting. It further stands to reason that these motivated commenters are more likely to engage in other forms of community activity, such as donating money or taking political action.
[3] Data for both of these figures comes from the Blogosphere Authority Index dataset. See www.blogosphereauthorityindex.com or Karpf 2009 for further discussion.

--Figure 2 Here --

These changes are particularly important given that the literature has, to date, sidestepped the DailyKos community. In his otherwise-excellent *JITP* piece, "Poltiical Blogs: Transmission Belts, Soapboxes, Mobilizers, or Conversation Starters," Kevin Wallsten notes the methodological challenges in studying a "hive blog" like DailyKos and, noting that, circa 2004, the site was not much larger than its contemporaries, excludes it from his study of the political uses of blog posts. Wallsten concludes his study – which introduces the content analysis framework that I rely upon in this project – by suggesting the importance of the site as an area of future research: "If the political significance of political blogs is to be accurately determined, therefore, future work should explore how the Daily Kos is used and whether its readers are taking political action." (Wallsten, 2007. Pg 119) No member of the research community has followed up on this suggestion, though, and in the meantime works such as Matthew Hindman's *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Hindman, 2008) and Richard Davis's *Typing Politics* (Davis, 2009) have treated the site as if it were a solo-author blog, ignoring the internal site mobility that allows the most popular active community members to eventually become paid full-time "Kos Fellows" with front page-posting privileges and a national daily audience in the hundreds of thousands. David Perlmutter's 2008 book, *Blog Wars*, includes some discussion of community blogs and the "netroots" more generally, but his largely interview-based approach sheds limited light on the comparative size and strength of these sites. Perlmutter is primarily a journalism and communications scholar, and so

his work treats the DailyKos community as "citizen journalists" rather than political mobilizers or partisan activists. (Perlmutter, 2008)

For this reason, most of what has been written about the "netroots" consists of journalistic coverage in newspapers or magazines, or of books published by netroots leaders and the journalists who follow them (see Moulitsas and Armstrong, 2006; Bai, 2007; Feld and Wilcox, 2008; and Moulitsas, 2008a). These works unsurprisingly tend to display the sort of techno-optimism and broad, sweeping claims of effectiveness that make for popular writing. Deeply theorized accounts of how these "netroots" political interests are affecting politics, much less attempts at large-scale data gathering, have yet to emerge. Some excellent research has been conducted on the use of blogs and internet tools by formal political campaigns (see Bimber and Davis, 2003; Latimer, 2007; Foot and Schneider, 2006; Bloom and Kerbel, 2006; and Pole, 2008), but these studies have not been aimed at considering independent "netroots" blogging communities.

It is the aim of this paper then, through the construction of two case studies, to begin building some theory of the distinctive effectiveness we should expect from these internet-mediated political associations. What, in essence, does all of the "netroots" activity amount to? It is an especially important moment to engage in such theory-building, because the same sort of technology-focused pieces that we originally saw regarding the blogosphere a few years ago are now being produced regarding YouTube and Twitter. A few scholars – most notably Bruce Bimber (2003) and Andrew Chadwick (2007) – have discussed the internet's impact on interest groups and social movements, but their work has not made the direct connection with community blogs or other leading social technologies. In considering the political impacts of the web, a deeper

understanding of these novel quasi-interest groups can help to contextualize the use of new media applications such as YouTube.

Methodology

Following Bloom and Kerbel's 2003 study, which traced blog involvement in publicizing Senator Trent Lott's racially-charged statements at Senator Strom Thurmond's birthday celebration, this study relies upon archived blog posts to construct a time-series of events for qualitative content analysis. The value of online data such as blog posts to qualitative studies has been relatively underappreciated, overlooked in light of the more tantalizing implications that floods of internet data hold for quantitative studies. Rather than relying on the faulty memories and 20/20 hindsight of political actors in the aftermath of an event, however, archived blog posts allow us to investigate "who said what," "when," "to whom," and "with what issue frames," with remarkable accuracy. Furthermore, these findings are replicable in a manner that many qualitative studies are not. They are akin to ethnography or participant-observation in their rich detail, but the data is freely available for competing analysis.

I chose to develop case studies of the George Allen-2006 and Michelle Bachmann-2008 candidate gaffes because the term "Macaca moment" has expanded beyond the initial Virginia Senate election. The Bachmann episode exhibited several similarities to the Allen gaffe, and journalists frequently invoked the term in their coverage. Both were heavily-publicized verbal gaffes by Republican candidates who were aware that a camera was trained on them. Both received heavy and repeated play on

YouTube, with Allen receiving over 380,000 views and Bachmann receiving over 189,000 views.[4] Both resulted in election forecasters changing the status of the race from "Republican favored" to "leans Republican" or "tossup" – important since this signal of competitiveness can lead to increases in donor interest and strategic resource support from the Democratic and Republican Congressional and Senatorial Campaign Committees. Both were, in fact, referred to as "Macaca moments," though the latter reference was an indication of how the term has taken hold in the public lexicon. The similarities also extend to how the formal campaign operatives attempted to use the event. Each campaign tried to capitalize on the gaffe in local, national, and online media spaces, deploying campaign operatives to post diaries at DailyKos and even having the candidate himself (Jim Webb in the Allen case, Elwyn Tinklenberg in the Bachmann case) post long "thank you" diaries on the site to great response. The major difference between the cases, then, included differences in timing (Allen's gaffe occurred in August, before the start of the traditional campaign season. Bachmann's gaffe occurred with only two and a half weeks left in the campaign season), national profile (Allen's seat could determine which party held the Senate majority in a non-presidential election year, Bachmann's seat would have no such national implications, and occurred in the context of the Obama-McCain presidential contest), and netroots engagement. While we cannot rule out the importance of timing and national profile in the two-case comparison, investigation of the two cases provide a valuable context for evaluating standing assumptions about the power of YouTube in the absence of netroots mobilization.

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[4] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9G7gq7GQ71c and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJIQm_7YAUI. Both of these videos were posted multiple times on YouTube, and therefore it is unclear what the exact total of unique views would be.

A few caveats should be offered regarding the limits of case study research. I do

not present this research as evidence of causality – such a research design is inappropriate

for making firm causal claims. Rather, case studies are of greatest value in areas of

research that are theory-poor. Detailed case analyses can be used to clarify hypotheses

and develop theories for testing in later research, and the inclusion of multiple cases can

be particularly useful for distinguishing variance that calls for future explanation. This

research design tells us little about broader trends in YouTube usage by bloggers, or

about the interplay between political blogs and the mainstream media. (See Wallsten's

piece in this volume for an excellent discussion of this topic) More generally, the choice

of focusing on only two cases comes at the price of ignoring the huge quantities of data

available on web-based and YouTube-specific activity. At this juncture, I would suggest

that case-based research is of value specifically because of the frequency with which the

"Macaca moment" term is invoked. If the research community is going to make reference

to the Allen incident and subsequent, similar events as a proxy for YouTube's influence,

it is worthwhile to produce a detailed analysis of just what impact the individual clips

likely had.

Given the large volume of content on DailyKos, and its aforementioned status as a

central hub among the elite progressive blogs, I chose to build upon Wallsten's 2007

content-coding scheme for this study. Using DailyKos's tagged searching feature, I coded

all blog entries tagged with either "MN-06," "Michelle Bachmann," or "Elwyn

Tinklenberg" that were posted in 2008 up through November 3rd 2008, the day before

election day. I did the same for all entries tagged with "VA-Sen," "Jim Webb," and

"George Allen" from December, 2005 through November 6, 2006, the day prior to

election day. This yielded 211 Bachmann-related entries and 825 Allen-related entries.[5]

For each of these data points, I recorded the date posted, author, title, number of

comments, and whether the post appeared on either the Front page of the site or the high-

traffic "recommended list." I then duplicated Wallsten's content-coding scheme (relying

on the appendix from his 2007 piece), with a series of bivariate entries for (1) Link or

Quote Only, (2) Commentary, (3)Request for Feedback, and (4) Mobilize Political

Action. Following Wallsten, I broke down (4) into a number of sub-categories, including

(4-1) voting, (4-2) protest, march, or rally, (4-3) contribute money, (4-4) send an e-mail,

(4-5) online poll, (4-6) online petition, (4-7) volunteer, and (4-8) phone call. I found that

the DailyKos community often added internal polls to their own blog posts as a

mechanism for requesting feedback, and given that I found zero cases of DailyKos

bloggers asking their readers to take action by voting on non-DailyKos online polls, I

reclassified (4-5) as (3-5) to indicate that, on this site, online polls are used to solicit

feedback. I then added a fifth category to the content analysis, (5)YouTube link. This was

divided into four subcategories, (5-1) user-generated content, (5-2) media clip, (5-3)

campaign commercial, and (5-4) video mashup. This category was added so that I could

specifically examine netroots usage of different types of YouTube content.

I use the data to investigate three questions regarding the DailyKos community's

involvement in the two cases. First, over what time period and in what quantity did

"kossacks" post about the cases. This question doubled as a qualitative time-series

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[5] For those interested in either duplicating the data collection or conducting similar
content analysis projects, I discovered one important bug in the DailyKos search system.
The tagged search feature itself underreports blog and diary entries, yielding only 71
Bachmann-related posts, for instance. Clicking directly on the tag of interest reveals the
much larger universe of tagged entries, in reverse-chronological order.

investigation, mimicking Bloom and Kerbel's 2003 study. Reading blog entries in chronological order allowed me to identify the sequence of major events as they occurred, which led to some surprising findings about the Allen case in particular (detailed below). Second, what post-types did kossacks commonly use, and how did this change between 2006 and 2008? Third, what was the breadth and depth of community involvement in the issues? For this third question, I isolated the subset of the population that appeared either as front page content or was voted onto the recommended list, and also counted the total number of unique diarists in each case and their frequency of posting. The findings from each case are presented individually below, with between-case comparison and analysis provided in the discussion section.

Netroots Campaign Moments: "Macaca" and the Campaign for Jim Webb

The original "Macaca moment" has become the stuff of legend in American political campaigning. University of Virginia senior S.R. Sidarth was tasked by the Webb campaign as a "tracker," attending George Allen's events and recording them with a handheld camera. On August 11th, 2006, after five days on Allen's campaign trail, the aspiring Presidential candidate and elected Senator of Virginia acknowledged Sidarth's presence to the crowd, referring to him as "Macaca" and "welcoming him to America and the real world of Virginia." The clip was later posted to YouTube, where it received hundreds of thousands of visits. The cascade of negative attention essentially ended Allen's Presidential aspirations (he had spent most of the summer visiting the early primary campaign states of Iowa and New Hampshire) and led to a running campaign

issue that eventually let his opponent, Jim Webb, win a narrow victory in the race, 49.6%

to 49.2%, or a difference of about 9,000 votes. David Perlmutter summarizes the lessons

from this event as such: "Politicians learned, from the example of George Allen, that the

'citizen journalist' with a cause and camera should not be ignored. Allen's 'macaca

moment' would have been a local story or even no story, but via YouTube it received

upwards of 400,000 viewings in weeks." (Perlmutter, pg 105.) Online news magazine

Salon.com would later name S.R. Sidarth their "Person of the Year," for "changing

history with a camcorder." (Scherer, 2006) The details of the original "moment,"

however, paint a far less clear picture of YouTube's supposed importance to the episode.

The central question we need to ask is whether Perlmutter and others are correct

in asserting that the obscure racial slur would have been "a local story or even no story"

without the presence of YouTube. Here one detail of the episode is often left forgotten:

Siddarth was not a "citizen journalist with a camera." He was a campaign operative on

assignment as a "tracker." The video was property of the Webb campaign, and was not

posted to YouTube until August 14th – three days after the event occurred, and also after

the *Washington Post* had been successfully pitched to run a front-page story about the

episode. (Craig and Shear, 2006) Technically, one could argue that the *Washington Post*

is a local paper with national circulation, but its front page is generally reserved for

national news. Salon.com records that the campaign had initially been unsure how to use

the video, and indeed their initial reaction was to focus on the "real Virginia" dimension

of the comment, in an appeal to affluent Northern Virginia Democrats, rather than

focusing on the potentially more explosive racial connotations. (Moulitsas, 2008a. Pg

85.) Webb had offered a similarly tame response to an April 26, 2006 feature story in *The*

New Republic by Ryan Lizza which discussed Allen's long history of racially-tinged

associations, including keeping a noose in his old law office, voting against the Martin

Luther King, Jr. Memorial holiday, and long collecting Confederate Flags and

memorabilia. (Lizza, 2006) The political netroots, including the DailyKos community, a

number of active Kossacks cross-posting from the Virginia State community blog,

RaisingKaine.com, and other top progressive blogs such as Atrios's "Eschaton" and

Joshua Micah Marshall's TalkingPointsMemo, seized on the racial dimension of the

comment and, over the next two and a half months, consistently returned to that theme.

 Why did the comment receive front-page treatment from the *Washington Post*

prior to the large number of YouTube visits? The reason, quite likely, is the same as the

reason why the journalist Lizza had devoted column inches to a George Allen profile in

April, 2006: Allen was viewed as an early presidential front-runner, and in the months

prior to the congressional election season, news and speculation on early presidential

front-runners had national appeal. Further, the impact of Lizza's article, generally ignored

in popular retellings of the Macaca episode, meant that there was an ongoing narrative

that the incident connected to. Though the term is not a commonly-used racial pejorative

in America, the original *Washington Post* piece noted, "it's not the first time Allen has

confronted charges of insensitivity to race or ethnicity from minority leaders and

longtime political opponents." Kossacks had been blogging about making Allen's racial

views a campaign issue in April and May 2006, priming the pump for the YouTube

moment. (Feld, 2006; Username "The Apathetic Militant," 2006)

 Though the zero-cost publishing and direct access of YouTube led hundreds of

thousands to view the video, arguably boosting the appeal of the story, extending the

media cycle, and creating an identifiable turning point in the campaign, we have to keep in mind that the lion's share of these viewers were likely not Virginians. Unless these viewers forwarded the video to a Virginian friend, donated money, or took some other political action, it is unclear how we would expect them to affect the Senate race. The YouTube video may have helped raise the comment from campaign-trail-gaffe to lasting campaign moment, but without Allen's national standing, one has to wonder whether many people, Virginia voters in particular, would have cared. The initial reading from the national punditry was that the gaffe had likely ended Allen's presidential ambitions, but his $7 million campaign warchest and incumbency advantage in traditionally-Republican Virginia left him well-positioned to hold his seat against the underfunded and little-known Webb campaign.

Turning to the Webb campaign, the importance of netroots mobilization in the case becomes far more clear. Beginning in late December, 2005, Lowell Feld of the Raising Kaine state blog, posting under the username "lowkell" on DailyKos, began advocating for a "Draft Jim Webb" effort online. The frontrunning Democratic candidate at that time was Harris Miller, a close associate of Virginia Governor Mark Warner. Miller was unpopular with labor leaders due to his years working as a lobbyist in favor of outsourcing information technology jobs. The "lobbyist" label was likely to be a particularly big problem in an election year featuring national outrage over lobbyist Jack Abramoff's conviction for purchasing political influence on Capitol Hill. Feld felt that Webb, a former Republican who had served as Secretary of the Navy under Reagan but had switched to the Democratic Party and become an outspoken early critic of the Iraq War, would be a far stronger candidate. Webb, however, was reluctant to enter the race.

The Draft Jim Webb effort raised the somewhat paltry sum of $40,000, but also identified 240 Virginia-based volunteers who were enthusiastic to work on Webb's campaign and made it clear that there was grassroots support awaiting the first-time candidate. Webb agreed to enter the race in mid-February and eventually would defeat Miller, despite a 3-to-1 fundraising disadvantage, in the June Democratic primary without purchasing a single campaign commercial. Instead, the Webb campaign relied on earned media, with an outpouring of campaign volunteers, organized largely through Raising Kaine, and a series of high-value endorsements from interest groups and national elected officials. (Moulitsas, 2008a, pgs 52-60)

The DailyKos community would go on to name Webb as one of their top-tier "netroots candidates," regularly blogging about the campaign and urging their national community-of-interest to donate and volunteer for the Webb campaign. All told, the DailyKos community would donate $193,248 to Webb through their ActBlue.com fundraising page, while Raising Kaine, the Webb campaign, and other online activist groups would raise an additional $700,000 for the candidate through the ActBlue fundraising system.[6] DailyKos coverage of the campaign also continually focused attention on Allen's racially-charged statements, including both the "Macaca moment" and later Allen campaign gaffes, including the revelation that Allen had once stuffed the head of a deer carcass into the mailbox of his black neighbors, that Allen had repeatedly used the "n-word" in his youth, despite public declarations that he never had, and Allen's testy response during a campaign debate that a question about his mother being raised as a jew qualified as "casting aspersions." (Moulitsas, 2006b) The political netroots actively

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[6] www.actblue.com/page/netrootscandidates

recruited Webb to run for the Senate, they consistently wrote about the race, they pursued

the racial elements of the "Macaca" story during the early days when the Webb campaign

was resisting "playing dirty" in this way, and they were engaged in the campaign itself on

multiple levels. Lowell Feld was hired by the Webb campaign as their "netroots

coordinator," various top campaign staff posted heavily-read entries on DailyKos, and

Webb himself (or a campaign staffer empowered with writing in his voice) posted three

diaries to the DailyKos site, including a June 16, 2006 thank-you post, "My Netroots

Victory." (Webb, 2006)

        Coverage of the Webb campaign on DailyKos was both broad and consistent

throughout the 2006 campaign season. Figures three and four provide two measures of

this coverage. Figure 3 depicts the total number of blog posts (including user diaries)

posted about the campaign from December 2005 through November 6, 2006. What we

see is that, after the August 14th YouTube posting, there was a sharp increase in site

discussion over the race, from 14 early August diaries to 164 late August diaries. This

fluctuated through the rest of the campaign, but remained at a very fast pace. New polls

and new Allen missteps produced a flurry of blog posts, while weeks without a new poll

or major misstep still saw a few dozen posts on the subject. The individual "moment"

represented by the YouTube video was just the first of many events that prompted the

outpouring of activity in the blogging community, and given that it occurred in mid-

August, before the start of the traditional campaign season, one could speculate that the

netroots mobilization would have picked up a few weeks later regardless. Kossacks had

already decided to highlight Allen's racially-charged past in the aftermath of the April

24th Ryan Lizza article, so the counterfactual argument that, in the absence of that

specific campaign gaffe, they would have found another to focus on bears serious

consideration.

-- Figure 3 Here –

Since anyone can post to the site, and the opportunity costs of content production

are so low, total blog posts may not be the best metric of popularity. The high-traffic

"recommended list," however, provides another measure, since space is limited to the

five most-popular diaries on the site, as determined by registered user "recommend"

voting. Table 4 provides the incidence of recommended diaries on the subject during the

campaign season. Starting a few weeks before the Democratic primary, there was an

average of 1 to 2 recommended diaries per week on the subject. In reaction to the

"Macaca" clip, this soared upward, with 16 recommended diaries in the two week period,

but this total was exceeded in late September and late October. As the campaign drew

closer to a close, the DailyKos community became increasingly invested in it, voting it a

higher and higher priority.

-- Figure 4 Here –

Table 1 provides the frequency distribution of the 825 blog posts by author. 33%

of the Virginia Senate campaign-related posts came from a poster who only discussed the

issue once. The top 3 most-frequent posters, meanwhile, produced 21.3% of the content

on this topic. These top 3 posters were netroots coordinator Lowell Feld (84 posts),

Markos Moulitsas (68 posts) and DailyKos regular "teacherKen" (24 posts), who lives in

Northern Virginia and volunteered regularly for the campaign. Feld and TeacherKen

were also regulars on the recommended list, with 24 and 9 recommended posts,

respectively. Recommended and front page posts garnered an average of 206.7 comments

per entry, with a large standard deviation of 124 indicating substantial variance in these

numbers. The full 825-post dataset had a mean of 62.3 comments per entry, however,

with a standard deviation of 97.9. Incidence of the five major content categories, along

with the particularly important "donate" subcategory, are detailed for full dataset and

recommended/front page subset in Table 2:

-- Insert Table 1 Here –

-- Insert Table 2 Here –

Similar to Wallsten's findings on the wider blogosphere, we find that commentary

is the most frequent use of blog posts. Recommended and front page diaries are 15.1%

more likely to mobilize political participation than the population as a whole, and 19.1%

more likely to include a donation link. This appears to indicate a strong preference in the

DailyKos community for "action diaries," though I would caution that such a conclusion

needs to be tested against the full population of DailyKos diaries, rather than the case-

specific time series I am investigating here. YouTube usage rose from 6.9% to 14.3%

between the full population and the subset, but both of these indicate the generally low

incidence of embedded YouTube videos or YouTube hyperlinks in this, supposedly video-led, case.

The picture that emerges from the aggregated time-series of "Allen,", "Webb," and "VA-Sen"-tagged diaries on DailyKos is of a topic that attracted early interest and involvement, spiked in interest during the "Macaca" scandal, then continued to receive high and continuous engagement as election day approached. The netroots publicly claim Webb's victory as an example of their growing influence and efficacy within the Democratic party coalition, and an examination of their archives supports this claim: kossacks helped to "draft" the candidate, they volunteered for and were hired to work on his campaign, and they routinely highlighted the campaign within their online community-of-interest long before it was clear that Webb would emerge as the winner. The other element that emerges from this time-series is the limited scope of the "Macaca moment" itself. Prior to that moment, Webb was polling roughly 10 points behind Allen in the Senate race. Afterward, the gap closed to roughly 5 points, and it wasn't until late October that Allen took a lead in the majority of polls. The 2006 Virginia Senate race was a close affair throughout, and though S.R. Siddarth's camera work proved an early turning point, there were several other candidate gaffes along the way which reinforced the narrative, and without those gaffes, a strong Democratic challenger, and sizable field and fundraising campaign components, it is likely that Webb's tiny margin of victory would have instead been yet another example of "internet hype" that produces no change in Congressional leadership.

MN-06: Michelle Bachmann Gives a Gift To Her Opponent

If the Allen case was initially newsworthy because of his large national profile,

Michelle Bachmann's gaffe was the exact opposite. Bachmann, the Republican House

member from Minnesota's Sixth District, was facing an easy reelection campaign against

the poorly-funded and mostly-unknown Elwyn Tinklenberg. In mid-October 2008, with

less than three weeks left before election day, Tinklenberg had raised roughly $1 million

in the previous nine months and had yet to take out a single television commercial.

Though he was listed among the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee's

(DCCC's) second-tier target list, and though increased DCCC fundraising had led them

on October 16th to add this and several other races to their list of funding priorities, the

campaign had a virtually nonexistent national profile and was viewed as a "likely

Republican" seat retention. Given that the Democratic Party held a large majority in the

House, was pursuing a 60-seat, filibuster-proof majority in the Senate, and was primarily

focused on electing Barack Obama to the Presidency, the Bachmann race received little

attention from either the national media or the political netroots. Bachmann spent much

of the fall appearing as a Republican surrogate on the 24-hour news channels, her

reelection seemingly assured.

That all changed on the evening of Friday, October 17th. Appearing as a McCain

presidential campaign surrogate on *Hardball with Chris Matthews*, Bachmann was asked

to defend the latest Republican talking points, which were focused on Obama's

associations with controversial left-wing individuals like Reverend Jeremiah Wright and

former Weathermen extremist William Ayers. With Obama leading in the polls,

Republican campaign rhetoric had taken a highly negative tone, and it was Bachmann's

job to defend campaign-trail comments and try to keep the conversation focused on

Barack Obama's associations. After seven minutes of grilling from the veteran political

reporter, Bachmann found herself backed into a verbal corner and, in response to

question about "who else in the Congress holds 'anti-American views'," suggested that

"the news media should do a penetrating expose and take a look … into whether people

in Congress are pro-America or anti-America."[7] The specter of Eugene McCarthy and the

House Un-American Activities Commission was too obvious to miss, and Bachmann's

comments dominated the weekend news cycle as an example of a vicious campaign

going too far. Two days later, when former Secretary of State Colin Powell announced

his endorsement of Barack Obama, he made specific mention of the "Congresswoman

from Minnesota" when indicating that the Republican campaign had gotten far too

negative.

Bachmann initially attempted to brush the comments off as being taken out of

context, and later settled on the claim that she had "walked into a trap" on Hardball.

Indeed, if one watches the entire 7-minute interview, it seems highly plausible that

Bachmann's comment was more an example of clumsy media skills than an explicit,

intentional call for a return to McCarthyism. But Bachmann's initial denial that she

hadn't made any such statement on *Hardball* was exactly the wrong tactic in the

YouTube-infused campaign environment. As Markos Moulitsas put it, "in the old world,

blatant lies … could be easily covered up. A reporter catches you saying something

stupid? Who cares! Just lie and deny it. At that point it becomes a 'he said, she said;

question and people will shrug their shoulders unable to independently determine who is

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[7] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJIQm_7YAUI

right. Enter YouTube …Bachmann can blatantly lie and it doesn't matter because *we have the video and can see for ourselves what was actually said.* What's more, the more Bachmann explicityly denies her comments, the more insulting it becomes for those who can see for themselves the truth of the matter. People may assume politicians lie, but they don't appreciate having it rubbed in their face." (Moulitsas, 2008b) Time and again, DailyKos members posted the clip, and with close to 200,000 views on YouTube, newspapers and bloggers alike were quick to dub this the "Macaca moment" of the 2008 election.

Once again we must wonder, however, what a high-traffic YouTube video is worth. Bachmann's appearance on Hardball made her a target of left-wing ire and a ready example for pundits on the Sunday talk shows, but if that does not translate to money, volunteers or votes, what difference does it make? This was not the first controversial appearance Bachmann had made on national television, nor would it be the last. The constituents in her district had apparently displayed a tolerance with her antics.

What made this different, in essence, was the way YouTube was *used* by the political netroots. After months with barely a passing mention on DailyKos, Bachmann suddenly became the symbol of all that the community-of-interest disliked about the Republican Party. Popular longtime community member "thereisnospoon" quickly pulled together a diary that featured the YouTube clip, outlined the state of the race, including the latest polling that showed it was winnable, the DCCC's recent decision to upgrade the campaign's status, and background on the centrist Tinklenberg who, though not a classic fit for the interests of the progressive arm of the party, suddenly seemed an outstanding upgrade for the U.S. House of Representatives. He also included a fundraising link to

Tinklenberg's website and, after that website immediately crashed from the torrent of traffic, a new link to an ActBlue fundraising page devoted to electing Tinklenberg. (Username "thereisnospoon," 2008) Over the course of the next 48 hours, Tinklenberg would receive over $810,000 in online donations – nearly doubling the money raised in an entire *year* of fundraising. $130,000 of that came in from the Kossack-created ActBlue page alone. Recognizing the importance of the netroots community, Tinklenberg himself (who, at the time of Bachmann's Hardball appearance, had been shaking hands at a local hockey game) authored a diary for the DailyKos site titled "Kossacks, Thank You and Michele Bachmann, $488,127.30 raised!" (Tinklenberg, 2008)

The DailyKos community would continue to discuss the Bachmann incident for the following week, in particular noting new poll data that showed a too-close-to-call race, and posting YouTube embeds of Tinklenberg's first campaign commercials that debuted the following Monday. But within a few days of the event, Kossacks lost interest in the race and turned their attention to the *next* latest scandal from the Republican presidential campaign. Commenters even began to caution each other that they had given "enough" to Tinklenberg, and should instead be donating to other worthwhile races through the sites "Hell to Pay" program, which highlighted a different race every few nights and encouraged the community to engage in a 24-hour donation binge. A week after Bachmann's Hardball appearance, the only bloggers still posting about the race on DailyKos were MN-06 locals and Tinklenberg campaign operatives, and their posts were no longer making it to the high-traffic recommended list. The Bachmann case was a classic example of what has been termed a "moneybomb" – a short-duration online fundraising explosion that infuses a large amount of cash into the otherwise-offline race.

With only two and a half weeks left before Election Day, Tinklenberg put the influx of funds to the best use he could, but he had only achieved financial parity with the incumbent Bachmann, and with so little time, he eventually went on to lose the race 46% to 43%, with 11% going to a third-party candidate.

Figures 5 and 6 demonstrate the incidence of Bachmann, Tinklenberg, and the MN-06-tagged diaries on DailyKos, again in the form of total diaries and recommended or front page posts. What we see is that, though both "Macaca moments" were indeed self-inflicted campaign gaffes, captured on YouTube and covered by the blogosphere, the heavy and ongoing coverage we saw in the VA-Sen campaign was not present in this case. Perhaps more interesting than that lack of coverage pre-gaffe is the *decline of coverage post-gaffe*. It appears that the DailyKos community acted as an amplifier of sorts, reacting to the same latest intrigues that were covered by the mainstream media, but adding an infusion of vital campaign cash that otherwise would not have been present.

-- figure 5 here –

--figure 6 here --

Table 3 provides the frequency distribution of the 221 Bachmann-related blog posts by author. The short time horizon of the Bachmann episode is evident in the broader, flatter distribution, with 139 authors posting a single diary on the subject (65.9%) while three high-volume local authors, Bill Prendergast (21 posts), Ken Avidor (7 posts), and "Nada Lemming" (6 posts) provided 16.1% of the posts, including nearly

all of the posts occurring pre-*Hardball* and more than one week post-*Hardball*. Table 4

offers a snapshot of how these posts were used. Not surprisingly, given the

"moneybomb" nature of the event, there is a 42% gap between the full population and the

Recommended or Front Page posts. "Action Diaries" were particularly appreciated.

Likewise, the high incidence of YouTube usage on the recommended and front page list

should not be overinterpreted, as this is associated with a single, very visible campaign

moment.

      The increase in fundraising requests between this case and the VA-Sen case is

quite substantial, however, from 31% to 84.2% on the Recommended List and front page.

This either indicates that kossacks were more interested in giving to Tinklenberg than

Webb (highly unlikely), kossacks were more motivated to give in 2008 than 2006

(somewhat unlikely – people generally give more in Presidential years than congressional

years, but it is unclear why that would translate to Senate and House races in an already-

motivated community of givers), or kossacks have developed additional institutions to

support political giving. This third explanation seems the most plausible, as the "ActBlue

thermometer" widget provided an easy giving tool in 2008 that had not been developed in

2006. Likewise, the usage of YouTube embeds may have risen because of advances in

the software platform that made it easier for users to post such videos – there were a

number of diary comments in 2006 that explicitly included a link to YouTube and a

question to readers about how one embeds clips into a blog post.

-- Table 3 here --

The picture that emerges from the Bachmann episode shares several technological commonalities with the Allen episode – both featured elite-captured candidate gaffes that received heavy play on YouTube, which in turn led to additional media coverage of the gaffe – but otherwise indicates that the "Macaca moment" alone does not fundamentally reconfigure the course of an election. In essence, Bachmann *volunteered* herself as the target of netroots ire for a weekend by offering to appear on *Hardball* and then making her noteworthy verbal misstep. This led to tangible benefits to her opponent, in the form of both free media and an avalanche of financial support from the online community-of-interest, and those material resources helped him to become more competitive in the race. But this is a more reserved impact than the picture usually drawn when discussing "Macaca moments." Netroots dollars may flow quicker and in much larger bundles than small-dollar contributions did in the pre-internet campaign world, but an infusion of campaign cash has the same limited effects that it did previously. The ongoing involvement of the DailyKos community, which was evident prior to Allen's gaffe, and continued to develop long after it, did not materialize simply because of a *Hardball* appearance. Bachmann was not a campaign priority for the netroots, and so they briefly paid attention to her, and then reverted to their main priorities. The online environment augments the traditional news media cycle with opportunities for web-based partisan engagement, but it does not uproot or necessarily democratize the news cycle.

Discussion

What, then, can we say about "Macaca moments" and YouTube's broader impact on electoral campaigns in isolation from netroots-based campaign efforts? The common assertion that Allen's verbal misstep on the campaign trail doomed his presidential aspirations and eventually cost him his Senate seat demand reevaluation. The National Republican Senatorial Committee included a reference to the "Macaca moment" in its 2008 guidebook, urging candidates "that they should assume there is a camera on them at all times and act accordingly. It is also recommended that campaigns film their opponents' public events as well... The paradigmatic example of failure to do so is the 'Macaca moment.'" (Budoff, 2007) In the 24-hour cable news environment, however, it is unclear why this is so often treated as an example of YouTube's impact on politics. Both George Allen and Michele Bachmann were well-aware that they were being recorded, and the recordings came from campaign operatives and camera crews, rather than the intrepid "citizen journalist."

The similarities between the Allen and Bachmann YouTube clips themselves were strong. Both were candidate gaffes placed on YouTube, picked up by bloggers, receiving viral attention cycles reaching into the hundreds of thousands in viewership. Both elicited an additional news cycle of coverage on the supposed "YouTube effects" of the coverage. Both were branded with the misused and overused term, "Macaca moment." Both were, arguably, less damaging in context. Senator Allen was attempting use his opposition campaign tracker to highlight that his opponent was out-of-state at a fundraiser instead of interacting with "real Virginians." He slipped in the obscure racial epithet, prompting cable television pundits to debate what the term meant and where it

even came from. Representative Bachmann was trying to argue that the media should do a better job of looking at Barack Obama's personal connections. She deviated from her talking points and made a much more inflammatory statement. The clips received heavy viewership – likely blog-driven – through YouTube, but the viewership itself was unremarkable. As political videos go, recording artist Will.i.am's "Yes we can" video received over 6 million views, 15 times more than either of these clips. If we consider that many of the views come from citizens living outside of Virginia or Minnesota's 6th Congressional District, it is unclear in isolation why we should consider YouTube to have any meaningful impact on electoral campaigns. Recall that the Webb campaign embargoed the release of the damaging clip for three days, and its release coincided with coverage in the Washington Post.

The term is so often referenced, however, because of the substantial mobilization and citizen campaign activity it is connected to. And here we see some important divergences between the two cases, both evidenced through how the DailyKos political community used YouTube as part of its novel tactical repertoire. The DailyKos community paid sustained attention to the Webb campaign, having made it a top organizational priority in early 2006. Over the course of the year, they used YouTube clips, online fundraising portals, and various other tools to attract campaign volunteers, small donors, and media attention. The initial George Allen clip was followed by several others, but these YouTube clips were just one element of an organizational effort that also highlighted news clips, polls, and any other opportunity to focus the attention of a national community on a priority statewide race.

In contrast, the Bachmann case was not an organizational priority for the DailyKos community. As such, it received "moneybomb" attention for the duration of the media cycle, then faded from view. That attention is itself noteworthy for the major impact it has on campaign events. The Bachmann YouTube clip in isolation received a few hundred thousand views and was discussed for a few days on cable news programs as the latest outrage along the Presidential campaign trail. This reflects poorly on Minnesota's 6th district, and so any citizens paying attention to the national news programs or actively searching for Bachmann clips on YouTube might be influenced in their decision-making. Given Bimber and Davis's finding that online campaign communications primarily reach elements of the public who have already made up their minds (Bimber and Davis, 2003), it is hard to see why YouTube is granted such transformational status. Yet the DailyKos community, in the course of this brief attention cycle, fundraised nearly as much for Bachmann's opponent as he had been able to raise in the previous year.

It is worth noting that despite Allen's status as a higher- and longer-term priority, roughly 2.5 times as much money was raised for Tinklenberg online than for Allen, and in a much shorter timeframe. This is likely indicative of the growing size and influence of netroots political associations as a whole. With more Americans turning to blogs for their news and political involvement (Rainie and Smith 2008), and with DailyKos registering over 2 million visits per day during the 2008 election season (versus roughly 600,000 two years previously), the kossacks were able to generate far more total funding in 2008 than in 2006 because they are an expanding portion of the interest group spectrum. This is also visible in the growth of total comments on the blog posts in these two cases, with the

average recommended or front page diary receiving 206 comments in the Allen case and 497 comments in the Bachmann case. Assuming those users who take the time to participate through comments are likewise more likely to make a small donation, it stands to reason that the growth of the DailyKos hub yields a continuing increase in its potential donor base for supported candidates. Likewise, the blog has continued to add new participatory institutions, both under the guise of programs like "Hell to Pay" and in the guise of permissive software code that makes ActBlue fundraising, YouTube embeds, and other engagement opportunities simpler, lowering the transaction costs of online involvement even further.

Conclusion

The term "Macaca moment" is unlikely to disappear from the public lexicon any time soon. Any close election loss will lead to a dozen narrative threads about "why the candidate lost," and the high-profile campaign gaffe leads to an easy reference points for pundits, academics, and the public at large when seeking to describe the effect of YouTube on political campaigning. It is thus incumbent upon us to be clear about what, exactly, the term actually describes. This article has argued that the most important effects of the candidate gaffes came not from their easy accessibility via YouTube, but from the various ways that a new type of political association used them to influence politics. We do not care about George Allen's racially-tinged statements because they were viewed online, we care because they became a recurring campaign theme and a rallying cry for his opposition. We do not care about Michele Bachmann's misstatement

because hundreds of thousands of viewers – most of them unable to vote in her district – saw it, we care because of the torrential online donations that followed.

These two case examples have focused on the DailyKos community because, as the largest political community blog, it acts as a quasi-interest group that is both distinct from other types of blog and also distinct from other types of campaign organization. Future research should seek to compare the activities of netroots organizations to other PACs and advocacy groups. The main purpose of this paper has been to debunk some of the myths that have risen up around the so-called "Macaca moment" in American politics. The notion that the medium has empowered every American with recording equipment and an internet connection to challenge elite institutions bears little resemblance to what has actually occurred in either of these cases. Rather, the internet is allowing a new type of political organization to develop novel tactical repertoires. It is only through this sort of organizational lens that YouTube's most important effects come into view.

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Author Note

Figures and Tables

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Allen-related posts by author

# of posts	# of authors	frequency
1	275	.333
2	54	.131
3	14	.051
4	12	.058
5	4	.024
6	5	.036
7	3	.025
8	1	.010
9	2	.022
10	1	.012
11	1	.013
12	1	.015
13	1	.016
15	1	.018
17	1	.020
24	1	.029
68	1	.082
84	1	.102

Table 2: Allen-related posts by activity-type

	Full Allen Dataset	Recommended and FrontPage
Comments (Standard Dev.)	62.3 (97.9)	206.7 (124)
Link and Quote Only	4.4%	5.4%
Commentary	94.7%	94%
Request for Feedback	15.2%	4.2%
Mobilize Political Action	25.4%	40.5%
Fundraising Request	11.9%	31%
YouTube Usage	6.9%	14.3%

Table 3: Frequency Distribution of Bachmann-related posts by author

# of posts	# of authors	frequency
1	139	65.9%
2	15	14.2%
3	3	4.3%
6	1	2.8%
7	1	3.3%
21	1	10%

Table 4: Bachmann-related posts by activity-type

	Full Bachmann Dataset	Recommended and FrontPage
Comments (Standard Dev.)	75.9 (174.4)	497.4 (370.1)
Link and Quote Only	0.5%	0
Commentary	98.1%	94.7%
Request for Feedback	13.3%	0
Mobilize Political Action	42.2%	84.2%
Fundraising Request	37.4%	84.2%
YouTube Usage	26.5%	57.9%

Figure 1: DailyKos Blog Posts Over Time

Figure 2: Comments/Week during the 2008 election season (including baseline data from Karpf 2008a)

Figure 3: Allen-related diaries, pooled into two-week periods

Figure 4: Allen-related Recommended Diaries, pooled into two-week periods
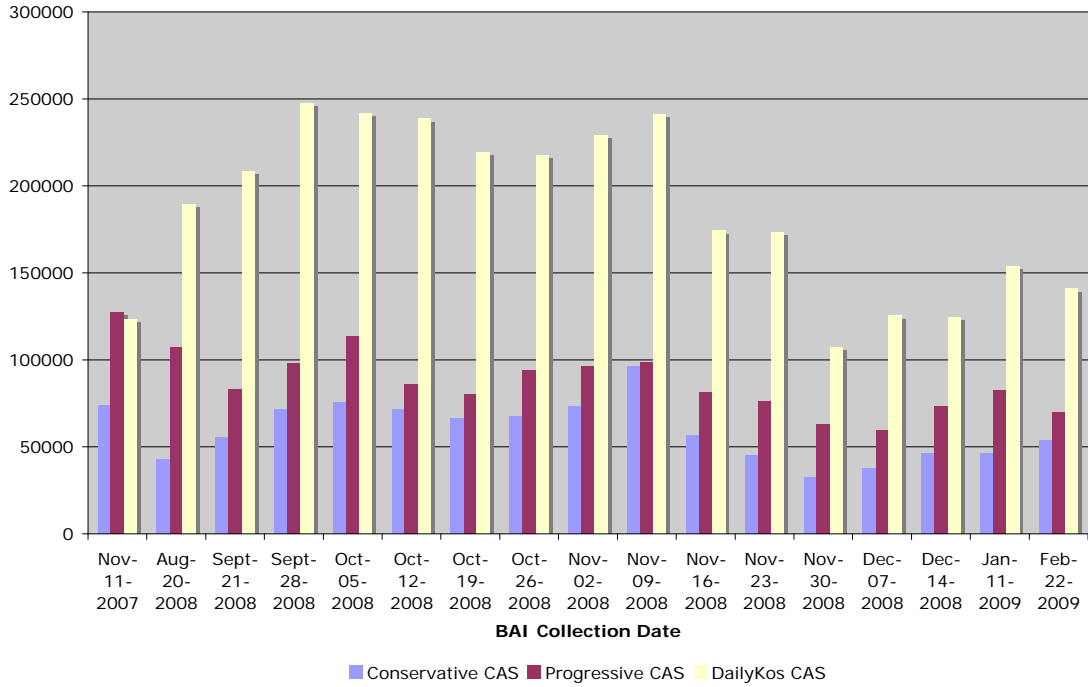
Figure 5: Bachmann-related posts by day (dates with no datapoint had zero posts)

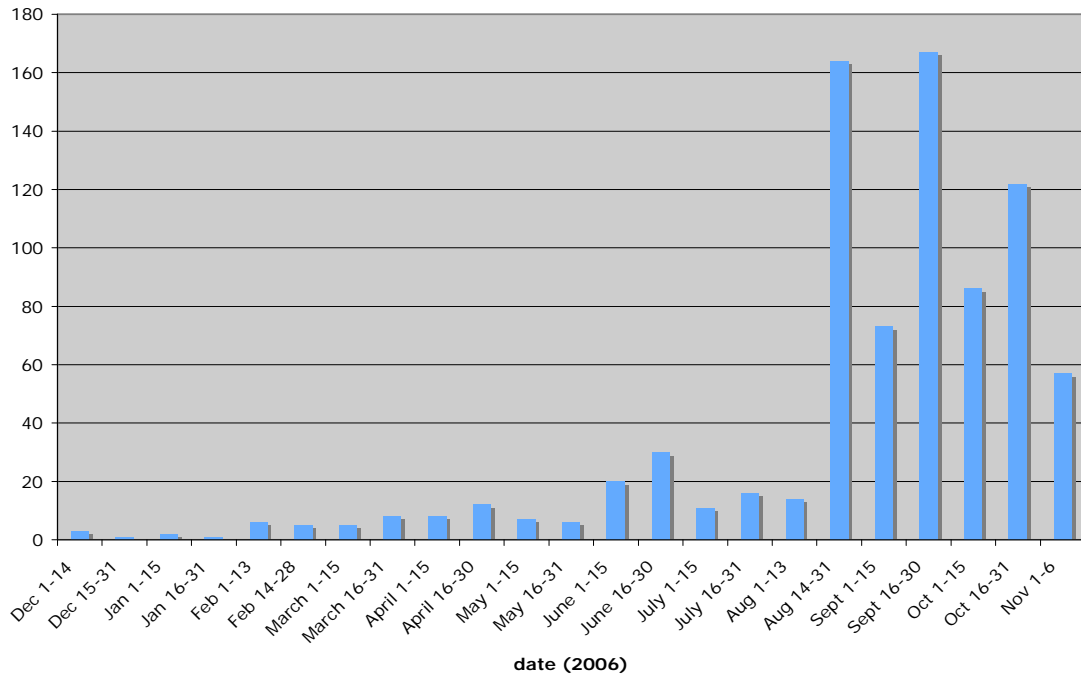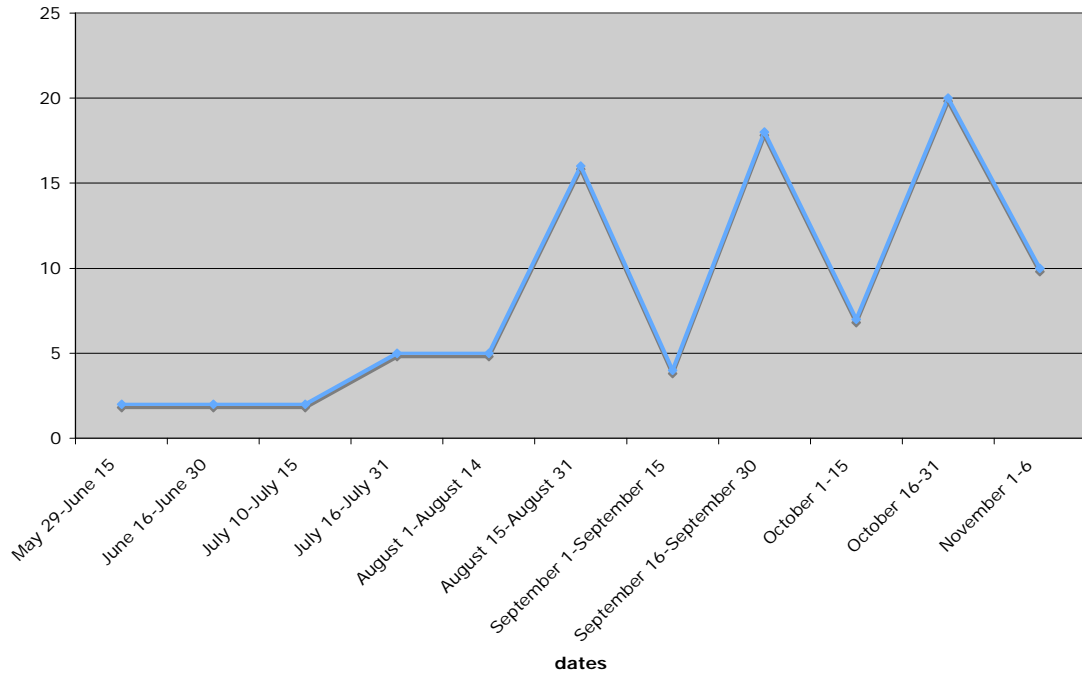Figure 6: Bachmann-related Recommended Diaries by day (zero rec'd diaries prior to October 17, 2008).
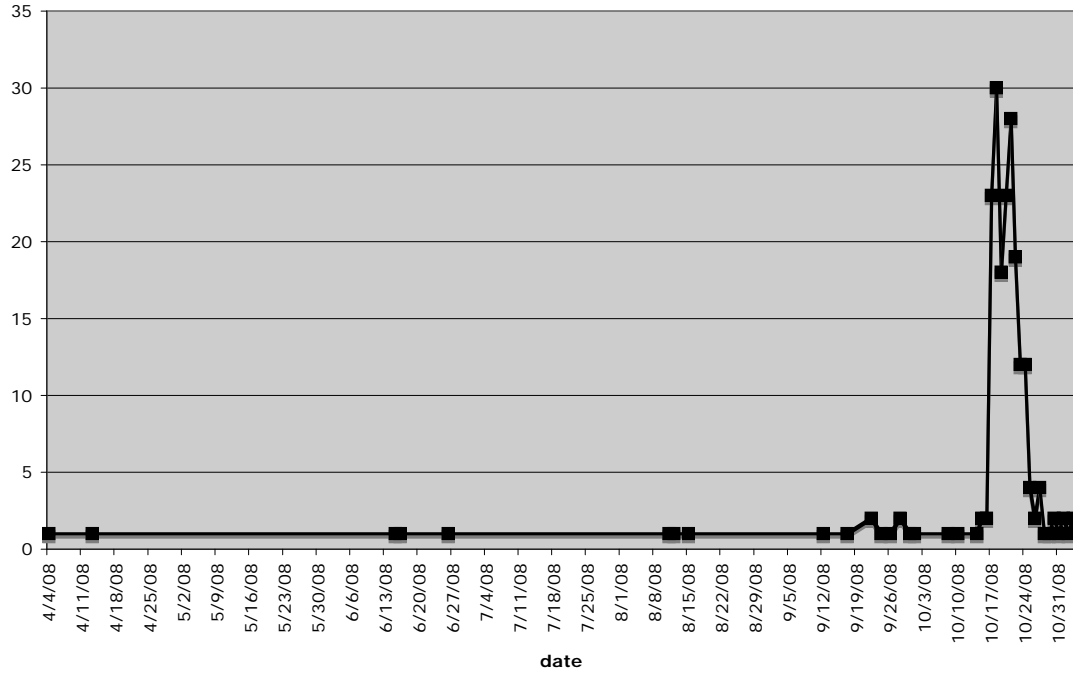
Dailyos: Combined Blog and Diary Postings

Total Comments/week

Conservative CAS   Progressive CAS   DailyKos CAS

Allen Diaries

date (2006)
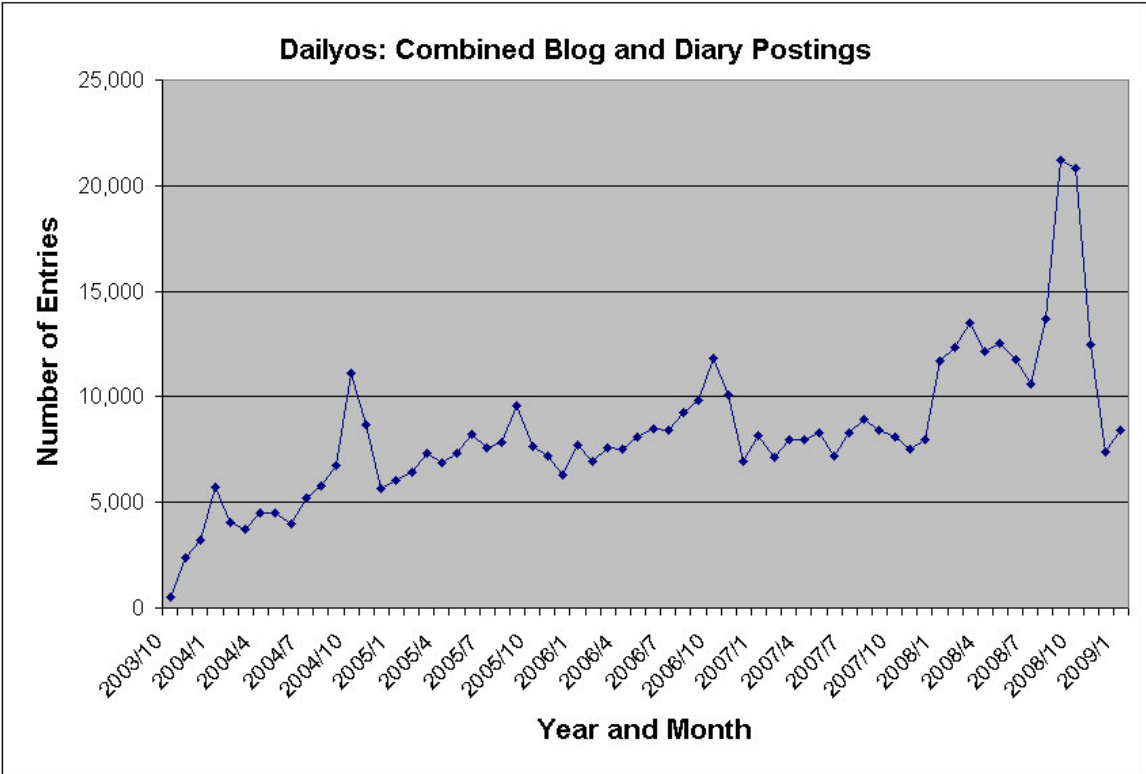
Allen Recommended Diaries

dates

DailyKos Bachmann-related Posts

Bachmann rec'd diaries