

Stockton panel discusses old, new media's effect on election

By **DEREK HARPER** Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, November 13, 2012 11:52 pm

Upstart social media along with more established media both played roles in how Americans viewed and voted for candidates in the presidential election, according to a panel discussion Tuesday at Richard Stockton College.

The race highlighted the growing importance of social media in the 24-hour news cycle, said Steve DiMicco, the chairman of Message and Media, a campaign firm that works predominately with progressive candidates.

"I'd have to say that (Republican candidate Mitt) Romney created the perception he was a buffoon," DiMicco said, adding that Romney was constantly at a disadvantage against President Barack Obama because of gaffes and awkward moments. "YouTube doesn't lie."

Comments about the so-called "47 percent" who were dependent on the government only reinforced this, DiMicco said.

Charles Stile, an unaligned political columnist for The Record of Bergen County, said these quick bites made Romney seem "desperate and ridiculous," trying to find ways to adapt to last-minute polls.

Comments about the "47 percent" and "binders full of women" circulated faster online.

Did this make traditional media less relevant, asked Sharon Schulman, a Stockton executive and panel moderator?

Stile said it was all part of a single media entree that people can take part in. Social media supplements traditional media, but doesn't replace it. People turn to traditional media for a calmer, more nuanced view, he said. But Mac Avery, a Stockton political science professor and self-described liberal, said it seemed that now that people have choices, fewer are seeking the more neutral traditional media.

DiMicco said he still turned to print media because "it's the only place you can go for news, and you can sit there and read something without someone shouting at you."

Schulman asked the audience in the board of trustees room in the college's Campus Center how they predominately learned about the presidential campaign. Of about 90 people, six lonely hands appeared for traditional media.

When asked how many learned through electronic media, a forest of hands appeared.

Reporting on Missouri U.S. Senate candidate Todd Aiken and other prominent Republicans who torpedoed their own races over comments on abortion had an effect on the Romney campaign, they said.

Stile said the episodes fostered the fear that Romney would be captive to the radical right, or "a pawn

of extremism.” The reality, Stile said, was that Romney had shown political agility in getting Democratic politicians to go along with his Massachusetts health care plan as governor.

The panel split on the effects of Hurricane Sandy and the candidates’ ability to communicate.

DiMicco said the hurricane had no effect on most of the nation. Avery said the hurricane came after polls showed Obama was beginning to pull away from Romney.

But Stile said that it seemed like the hurricane helped close the deal for Obama. It gave Obama “this additional veneer of bipartisanship, showing him in action and showing him working across the aisle with his new best friend (Republican New Jersey Gov.) Chris Christie.”

They also split about the role of Fox News and MSNBC, broadly seen as catering to conservative and liberal constituencies. DiMicco said he thought these dueling bubbles were to account for the exaggerated importance of the first debate.

Avery said the networks, by offering a specific perspective, were a disservice to the viewers. But Stile questioned their influence on the independent voters who determine most elections, particularly late in the election.

By late October, Stile said, “Either you’re really under a rock or you’ve been out on a scallop boat in the ocean for the last month.”

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