

FEBRUARY 19

The collapse of Dean's cyber-bubble

The saga of Howard Dean is a cautionary tale about politics and the Internet. His campaign rode a big wave of cyberspace hype – and then sank.

There are valid complaints to be made about Dean's rough handling by major news outlets this winter. Sometimes the coverage was unfair. But what gained him media prominence in the first place was journalistic infatuation with his campaign's successful use of the Internet for outreach and fund-raising.

Actually, Dean burst onto the nation's front pages because of money. As far as political journalists were concerned, Dean came into his own as a presidential contender midway through 2003. In the second quarter of the year, he raised \$7.5 million – including \$800,000 on a single dramatic day.

In sync with the aphorism that money is the mother's milk of politics, the former Vermont governor seemed to have found a cash cow on the Internet. The ability to raise large sums from many online devotees caused the political press corps to sit up and take notice.

Countless news stories during the summer and fall chronicled the brilliance of Dean's cyber-savvy tacticians. In retrospect, there were parallels with the pre-bust media celebrations of the booming dot-com bubble during the late 1990s. As long as the money was flowing and customers were buying, adulation was in the air.

Inflated with generous quantities of hot-air punditry, the Dean bubble expanded to gargantuan size. For a few months, it held center stage in the national Democratic drama. Later, when opposing candidates got the knives out in Iowa and media hammers came down – with some help from Dean – the bubble burst.

The fact that Dean financed his campaign with a profusion of small donations rather than a few large ones was laudable. So was the groundswell of volunteer energy behind him. But the campaign – too inward-facing and circumscribed – may have gotten a false sense of security by playing to its Internet gallery. For a time, media fascination with Dean's online prowess loomed so large that few people noticed the insularity of his core support.

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The Internet is apt to be much better for raising money – and galvanizing a loyal set of adherents – than for finding ways to resonate throughout the society. While cyberspace may appear to be an ever-growing universe, it's likely to become a misleadingly impressive cul-de-sac.

In a country this size, it's not enough for a presidential candidate to draw in a few hundred thousand people – or even a couple of million – who are willing to click onto a website and perhaps make a contribution. Nor is it sufficient to find tens of thousands willing to attend a "meet up." Campaigns need to reach out to people who'll never lift a finger on a mouse to support a candidate.

The best thing about the Dean campaign was its activists. Many brought idealism, vitality and innovation to the process. The worst thing about the Dean campaign was the candidate.

While he deserves credit for aggressively going after the president, Dean resembled a singer who sort of knew the words but couldn't carry the tune. In part, he seemed a bit erratic – and not quite centered – because he had almost no progressive credentials stretching back farther than 2002.

Sometimes it seemed that Dean was being touted as a visionary more for the quality of his cyber-tacticians and their cutting-edge software than for the quality of his policy positions or political history. But no matter how praiseworthy it may be, raising a lot of money in small amounts on the Internet – or even involving young people to be active in the electoral process – is not the same as articulating a set of coherent political positions.

Rest assured that the kind of online techniques pioneered by the Dean campaign during the last year will be imitated for the 2008 campaign by other candidates, including some right-wing presidential hopeful. Adept use of the Internet is hardly a compelling qualification for high office.

When he withdrew from the race Wednesday afternoon, Dean declared in his speech: "We have demonstrated to other Democrats it is a far better strategy to stand up to the right-wing agenda of George W. Bush than it is to cooperate with it." Point well taken. But the success of that strategy will depend on the quality of leadership and the extent of grassroots organizing. At best, the Internet can be a useful tool.

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