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Among Facebook users, President Obama is far more popular than Mitt Romney.

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KIP CASSINO, *Borrell Associates*

Headstart for Democrats in the digital campaign

By Bobby Caina Calvan

GLOBE STAFF

WASHINGTON — With 27 million Facebook friends, President Obama is far more “liked” than Republican Mitt Romney, who gets a middling 2 million thumbs up on the popular social network. In the Twitter universe, more than 17.2 million flock around Obama and more than 620,000 follow Romney.

A barometer in the presidential race?

The Romney adviser who directs the campaign’s online efforts

scoffs at the idea such numbers matter. “If that were the case,” said Zac Moffatt, “Lady Gaga would be the leading contender.”

Yet the expanding digital frontier has emerged as another battle line in the campaign for the White House, with a host of powerful communication tools — including Facebook, Twitter, and text messages — that candidates now must master. The question is which candidate can best exploit the troves of personal data available online to

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Candidates increasing digital efforts

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raise the most money, get out a message, and bring supporters to the ballot box in November.

For now, the digital divide favors the Obama campaign, which has expanded on the network and strategy it forged with great success in 2008, when the candidate outspent rival Republican John McCain 4-to-1 on online activities. The president's team is at least twice the size of the Romney operation of about 70 personnel.

"I don't think the expertise has yet caught on with Republicans," said Kip Cassino, executive vice president of research at Borrell Associates, a Virginia-based media consulting firm. Old-school politicking, he added, may be a hard habit to shake.

That's changing. Last week, following the US Supreme Court's decision upholding much of President Obama's health care law, the Romney campaign mustered its online tools — dispatching e-mails, tweets, and text messages — to tap into conservative outrage over the ruling. For its efforts, the campaign says it hauled in \$4.6 million in contributions.

For Romney's team, it's a recognition of the new political world. "It's 2012, and we're running for president," Moffatt said.

Spending on online advertising could exceed \$160 million during the 2012 election cycle, up from the \$22 million spent four years ago, according to forecasts by Borrell Associates. Most of that — about \$100 mil-

lion — will be spent on presidential campaign, Borrell predicts. The Obama campaign has spent about \$24 million on online advertising, according to reports released in June by the Federal Election Commission. But that doesn't include money for consultants and salaries for digital campaign staffers. The Romney campaign has spent \$1.7 million for online ads and \$5.6 million for consulting on digital projects.

Such ads span digital platforms, from eye-catching banner ads on independent sites to news-oriented websites to direct-marketing e-mails and texts.

"The Obama campaign has a lot more invested in this area, and they have the benefit of knowing what worked and what didn't work in 2008," said Daniel Kreiss, a journalism professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who is publishing a book on the history of digital campaigns.

Much of the increase in online spending will go for ads with customized messages targeted to individual Web surfers. The campaigns are tapping into the digital information collected by data brokers who track consumers to learn about eating habits, tastes in music, hobbies, salary, profession, and political leanings. Retailers have long used this data to market products, from cars to soda.

This same data, combined with voter registration records and other personal information, some stored on browser cookies, is used to compile rich

profiles for microtargeted political messages.

The result is a blizzard of appeals on screens of all sizes and kinds. Search for “health care reform” and an array of ads may appear next to results on Google, including one linking to the Obama campaign.

Two people visiting the same website may well see different ads, based on their age, marital status, sex, and political leanings.

“There might be six reasons why a policy might be good, but one might be more pertinent to seniors, another to women, and another to men,” said Alan Rosenblatt, the associate director for online advocacy at the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning think tank.

What’s more, voters in Ohio or New Hampshire, two battleground states, probably will see far more online ads from the Obama and Romney camps than people living in Massachusetts or Texas, where most voters have made up their minds.

All those Twitter followers and Facebook friends — and the growing list of supporters who

subscribe to e-mail lists — represent regiments of potential foot soldiers and financial donors. Online ads, targeted to the right people and bearing the right message, help campaigns recruit more to the team.

In many ways, using social media for campaigns is just a modern-day twist on the ways office seekers have long connected with voters. Without flying into distant towns or kissing any babies, candidates can use Facebook and Twitter as virtual town squares to meet and greet potential voters, reaching out to them on a more personal basis than they can through TV or radio ads.

On the fund-raising side, Obama’s digital prowess was clearly evident in 2008, when his campaign took in more than \$500 million through the Internet.

The nonprofit journalism site ProPublica has been asking readers to send in campaign e-mails and found that the Obama campaign has reached sophisticated heights in tailoring the words in these appeals,

depending on the audience. Men and women often receive different messages in e-mailed appeals for money.

For a fund-raising dinner hosted by the “Sex in the City” actress Sarah Jessica Parker, the Obama campaign sent out at least seven permutations of the same message to woo donations. “The more you can personalize your message, the better shot you have at capturing their attention,” said Larry Shaw, the vice president of research for Borrell Associates. “That’s what targeted advertising is all about.”

Political analysts are examining how the battle plays out, particularly whether online pitches prove to be as effective as more expensive forms of advertising, such as television and radio.

For now, television will continue to play a huge role, with about \$6.5 billion expected to be spent on ads for all campaigns. That’s two-thirds of the \$9.8 billion in expected political spending, according to Borrell.

Despite all that spending on

TV spots, however, a large portion of voting-age Americans, perhaps one in three, rarely watch television or listen to the radio. But many of them spend hours online checking e-mail, scrolling through status updates, surfing websites, and Googling information. In battleground states, reaching that audience could be critical.

TV spots are expensive and aren’t always effective, said Nicco Mele, who ran Democratic candidate Howard Dean’s online campaign in 2004 and now teaches about the Internet and politics at Harvard’s Kennedy School. “If you can figure out how to win an election without TV ads, you will upend the entire political system,” Mele said.

For now, that’s fantasy. But it doesn’t mean campaigns aren’t trying. “The real innovations will come from figuring out how to use the Web to persuade undecided voters,” he said. “That’s the holy grail.”

Bobby Caina Calvin can be reached at bobby.calvan@globe.com. Follow him on twitter @GlobeCalvan.