

Elizabeth Minton

Digital Media Coordinator, Richard Burr for Senate

Would you first walk me through how you were hired onto the Burr campaign?

It was a little bit of me knowing some of the people involved – my father knew Mr. Paul Schumaker and Mr. Schumaker had mentioned that they were looking for a digital media person. I had just graduated from college at the time, so I sent my resume over, they liked it, and so they called me in for an in-person interview and then a week later I was hired. Not too complicated.

Would you describe to me the team that you worked with on a day-to-day basis?

There were two different offices for the campaign – one in Winston-Salem and one in Raleigh. I was in the Raleigh office, and there were five of us there: myself, Alex Johnson who you spoke with and who is kind of in charge of everything – he was our strategic person; Luke Blanchett who was in charge of fundraisers and the go-to person; Jesse Hunt, who was our media director – he talked to the media, wrote press releases; and then Thomas Schumaker, who was Paul Schumaker's son, who handled graphic design and a little bit of everything around the office. That was who was in the Raleigh office on a day-to-day basis.

We also had some help from the Republican Senate Committee up in Washington D.C. who sent down a couple people who came down fairly regularly throughout the campaign, more so as it came closer to election day.

Was there anybody on the team that weren't "political people," but had backgrounds in other things? I'm thinking tech, in particular, but did you have anyone else come in from other industries?

Thomas Schumaker had an agricultural background. And then, myself, this was actually my first job out of college – my background was more in marketing than anything else, that's what I did all of my internships in. Everybody else had done several campaigns before that point. So, honestly I'd probably be the closest thing to not-necessarily a political background, but my father has worked as a lobbyist for most of my life, and whenever I had time off of school I tagged along with him to meet people. So, unfortunately I don't think anyone quite fits that description.

Would you describe to me – I feel that you would be the perfect person to do this – what technologies your team used. Anything digital. I know you worked with firms like i360, and people like that, but were there any that you helped them develop or any systems that you developed for Burr's campaign?

My job was more on the social side, so I used Facebook, Twitter, that kind of stuff. I helped build up those platforms, but in general, Alex was the main go-to person for any tech platforms – social and photography and everything was kind of a job in and of itself. Kept me busy enough that I didn't have all that much time to work on other aspects of the campaign.

Not only did I write all the social for the campaigns, I was also Senator Burr's photographer for campaign events, and I was his videographer – so I did a lot of editing. Our YouTube channel, any of the blank-for-Burr videos, I filmed and edited those, so I was very busy with all of that, because that stuff takes time.

Wow, that is a full time job. I imagine you could spend all of your time just editing video. You must have not slept for a year.

Well I only started the job in August. I graduated from college that May, and then I was unemployed, working temp positions up until the first of August when I got hired. So, Alex, Luke and Jesse were on since about that January, I came on in August and Thomas came on in September.

When it came to these videos and creating your Facebook posts, your Twitter posts, what were your big goals?

Exposure, honestly. To make sure that as many people knew who the senator was, what he stood for, and why he'd be the right person to vote for. Twitter, especially is very good for people our age - younger people who might not necessarily know that much about local politics or who aren't as skilled at researching both sides of things at that point in their life - so Twitter is very good for that. Facebook is better for older people, or older people use Facebook - and things tend to get viewed more if there is a photo or a video attached to it, you'll get far more views on Facebook and Twitter, so that's where all of that came in.

So when you were editing video, or compiling videos, were there certain things that you would look for when scrubbing through footage?

After you go through the basic things - is it clear? Can you hear everything?, bluh bluh bluh - the basics of it, then, in general I would look for things that would make the senator stand out in a good way. Like, if he was speaking at an event and he gave really good voice clips, like "truth, justice and the American way" or whatever, and it really would be a good thing to make him stand out, then I'd want to pull that clip. Even if the video itself wasn't that good, you still use the audio. And then the same thing, if the audio wasn't that good but the video looks amazing, don't be afraid to split things in order to get a really cool effect.

Did your social media strategy, or digital strategy, change from the beginning of your time there towards November?

Absolutely. When I first started there, I was very new. They had an intern before me writing out the social posts. She was doing four Twitter posts a day and three Facebook posts a day. I amped it up to five Twitter posts a day and three Facebook posts. By the end of the campaign, we were doing about 12 or 13 Twitter posts a day. We had also gone from about 1,500 Twitter followers to over 10,000 Twitter followers at that point. So, you have to make adjustments for the number of people.

Also, they were very strict on what kinds of things we could post. Obviously everything went through a very serious approval process, where everyone - Alex and the rest of the staff on the campaign would look at it, his official staff would look at it, so many people would look at it. So there were things that I was allowed to write about and things that I was not allowed to write about, and I had to keep those in mind, as well.

What kind of things would you try to steer clear of that they said "we don't want to write about this." Do any of those topics come to mind?

Frivolous things. The senator and the senator's wife, especially said they did not want things that would be considered "silly." So, anything "cute." Senator Tillis, as an opposite, sometimes would post

pictures of him with his dog. That was not an option for Senator Burr. Nothing silly like that. The most light-hearted thing I was allowed to do was, I started a segment on Tuesdays called "Trivia Tuesdays," where I'd write down a fact about North Carolina. That was pretty cool. But that was the most light-hearted thing I did.

So was the senator, and Alex and those people – were they pretty direct about a certain brand they were trying to create for the senator?

The best word I got would have been "senatorial." In our case, our opponent was very, very, very liberal. So, it was very easy to paint a contrast with her. We wanted to show the senator as a Republican, but he's also willing to listen and work across the aisle on things like that, whereas our opponent was very, very, very, very liberal, and often would not work across the aisle during her time in the state legislature. So we painted that contrast to show him as someone who worked with and for others.

You've talked a lot about Facebook and Twitter, but did you tap into other things – Instagram or Snapchat or other things like that?

No. Before I got on the campaign, they did make a couple of geo-tags, but the only other social channel we really used was YouTube. Because the senator was a sitting senator, we only got to follow him around at campaign events, and often my photos had to go through an approval process, as well. And given the volume of posts that we were putting out per week, it was better to just have the two main ones at that point in time, so that way we make sure those are very good quality and we're not causing a backlog because of approvals.

How much did you look at data or analytics to steer your social strategy? Did you see the tweets about XYZ get the most re-tweets, let's focus on that – or did you kind of already have a strategy in place?

Again, I was very young, so I got quite a bit of help and advice from other people. This was my first time doing something like that. And unfortunately, given how crazy the political season got, things were rather stressful for me at the time. I did look at some analytics, but probably not as much as I should have. We mostly paid attention to followers, so if there was a week that we dropped a lot of followers for whatever reason, then I would try and look to see what we were posting about that week. But in general, we tried to focus to the basic political things – Obamacare, the things that we were trying to push. Why you should vote for me and not vote for our opponent, those kinds of things.

How much did you have to, between you and Alex and whomever else, prove the worth of social media? The senator is a little older than us. Maybe he's not as much of a social media consumer as we are. How much did you have to prove the worth of that to the big dogs?

Not as much as you'd think, mainly because, as I told you earlier, we worked with the Republican Senate Committee, and they were very big on social media. So, when it came down to the campaign, honestly a lot of it was – even if the senator didn't necessarily think it was the best way to do it, we still kind of did it anyway, in some cases. The social thing – because he's an older gentleman, he might not necessarily understand social all that well, but we did. There was a reason they hired me to do social, because they knew that social was important, especially when you're trying to get the younger demographic involved. People our age are on social constantly.

How much did the Republican Senate Committee provide strategy? How much did they help in the execution of these initiatives?

Oh, all the time. The tighter the race got, and the more national eyes were on our race, the more Committee people were coming down to Raleigh constantly. Unfortunately, at first, they didn't think this race was going to be very tight – you had a sitting, incumbent senator who was relatively well-liked versus an incredibly liberal virtually unknown. The most politics that she had done had been a couple of terms in the state legislature, so people didn't think it'd be that difficult.

But then, all of a sudden, with all of the craziness happening on the national stage, trickling down into the lower stage – and former State Representative Ross did run a very good campaign, I thought. She did a couple of flubs, unfortunately – well, fortunately, because I wanted to win – but she did very well with fundraising and whatnot. So then the race became incredibly tight, and all of a sudden we had national attention. They actually sent me up to Washington for a day to learn from their people.

What are some of the big things that you learned when you worked with the Senate Committee folks?

They were the ones who suggested tweeting more throughout the day. So we put that into practice, and it really paid off. Just different things, in general. I had never been on a political campaign – things that I didn't necessarily know that were senate rules. Rules for sitting senators when it comes to campaigns are much stricter than rules for non-incumbents – like what you could post on social media what whatnot. So I got to learn about that. Just, in general, overall strategy and stuff. It was all new to me, so it was all a learning experience.

That's interesting, because I always assumed that there would be an incumbent's advantage, but it sounds like maybe your wings may have been clipped a tiny bit with him being a sitting senator. What effect do you think his incumbency had on your digital strategy? Positive? Negative? Restrictive?

In some ways it was restrictive, because there are some things that you are and are not allowed to talk about on social when you're dealing with a sitting senator – that's one of the reasons why his staff had to look over everything that went out, as well. But in other ways, the simple fact was Senator Burr has been serving in the state of North Carolina for over 20 years; former State Representative Ross has not. So we got quite a bit of name recognition that she simply didn't have – and couldn't get in that timeframe.

You mentioned that, with social media, your big goals were exposure and kind of reminding people, especially the younger people – but in what ways did social media play a role in fundraising?

I don't have those numbers – Luke was the one who handled fundraising. I did post about donations and stuff fairly regularly, but I didn't know if there was any ROI on that. Luke was the one who handled finances and fundraising and that kind of stuff, so unfortunately I cannot answer that question very well.

No problem. But did you ever tweet or post links to the donation page or encourage people to support?

Yes, fairly regularly. I just don't know if there was any ROI on those efforts. The tough thing about digital media, unfortunately, is it can be difficult to pin-point one exact tweet as the reason that people did this, that, or the other thing in their behavior.

You talked earlier about how you tried to contrast Senator Burr's platform, personality, experience, against your opponent. So how much did you look to Deborah Ross' digital strategy and respond? How much did you keep an eye on what she was doing?

It wasn't necessarily responsive. But we used Tweet Deck for Twitter on the campaign, and I had streams set up for her Twitter page, for any time anybody mentioned her, anything like that. As we got later on in the campaign – like she made one pretty big mistake during the debate where she said something about being a good lobbyist, so we got to kind of take that and run. But in general, we never really played defense that much. I kept an eye on what she was saying and doing, but we weren't reactionary to the things that she said and did – partially because some of the things she said were actually flat-out lies, which got to be really fun at one point.

Whenever she would lie, or when someone would mention her in a way that was untrue, or that deserved a response – did you ever, especially on Twitter, as it can be quite conversational, did you ever respond or reply to media articles, or normal people?

No, not on Twitter. On Facebook, I had two responses that I was allowed to do. I was allowed to either say “thank you” for a nice response on Facebook – or, if somebody was using hate speech or threatening or something like that, I was allowed to remove them from the Facebook page and hide the comment. Basically, if they were from out of state, and they were making threats against the senator, or using hate speech or something like that, I was allowed to block them from the page completely. If they were from in-state, I just hid their comment, because they were constituents, and for all you know they might actually come back and say something nice or they might actually need support through Facebook. But if they were from out-of-state, I was allowed to block them. And then if someone said something nice, I was allowed to respond, in general. But I was not really allowed to go off-script, basically. You don't want your social media spread all over the news.

You mentioned that approval process, especially with him being a sitting senator, and there being lots of rules and restrictions. Do you think this approval process slowed down your media initiatives? Do you think it stifled the creativity at all?

I appreciated it, because it meant that, if for whatever reason, the social ended up on the news, it wouldn't be my fault. Seriously, that's the last thing you want, is to be at the center of a media controversy and be the reason your boss lost his race. So I did appreciate it, because if it came down to it, I wouldn't be the one to get dinged for it, as long as I went through the approval process properly. I felt more stifled, creative-wise, by the fact that the senator and his wife didn't want anything light-hearted – I felt much more stifled by that, because I, by nature, like light-hearted posts.

The way I thought of it at least, was yeah, let's talk about policy, but let's also try to connect with the younger people who don't care about policy. But at the end of the day, I appreciated the approval process, because it meant that everything went smoothly and that, again, we didn't end up in the media because of a stupid tweet.

It's funny you talk about Thom Tillis and the dog, because I was just scrolling through Instagram and saw a picture of Thom Tillis with one of his staffer's little dogs on the subway. I like dogs, so it made me feel more connected to him.

Exactly. So that's what I was thinking – let's do dogs, or just a photo of him with his granddaughter or something. Senator Burr has the most adorable granddaughter – she's really the most precious little baby I've ever seen.

So clearly he really wanted to stay on-message and didn't want to put out frivolous messages or fluff, but do you think that at all hurt your ability to humanize him?

There were times, yeah, I felt that way. But in general, the political season was just overall rough with horrid person attacks from people on all levels of the race – from national all the way down to mayors of towns. So I think, in general, even if we were able to do that kind of thing, it wouldn't have mattered, because the political season was so awful.

You have mentioned the political climate at the time. How much did the national race going on, other races, how much did that influence your messaging?

Very much so, because we tried to stay away from President Trump, but the senator was very supportive of President Trump, so it made things interesting in some scenarios. But in general, yeah it did, because on one hand, this was a Republican race, but on the other hand you had a presidential candidate who is saying foolish things. So it made things interesting at times, but in general, we tended to stay away from the national side of things as much as possible.

Especially as it was your first campaign, looking back, are there any big missed opportunities that stand out in your mind in terms of social media?

I do feel that we could have made him more human, especially when we got to the middle of the campaign when things started going crazy. But given what was going on in the political climate at the time, I think it went quite well, all things considered. Of course, we were on the winning side, so of course I'm going to say that. But overall I think it went really well – I was proud to be a part of it. As stressful as it is, working on a political campaign is not like a lot of jobs. In this case, it's like you have a goal that you're working towards – and that's great. That's an amazing feeling. So many jobs, you just get up and you go to work every day and it's like "why am I here?"

So that night that you realized that you won, can you describe to me how that felt - that feeling of winning?

Oh, it was amazing. The senator had his watch party up in Winston-Salem, so I was at the Winston-Salem Country Club for most of the day, and I was dressed up nicely and everything, and I was on my laptop doing Facebook and stuff. Then they started announcing the results – we're going through, we're going through, and I'm watching the results live on WRAL or something to track the results, and the whole time, we were ahead, we were ahead, we were ahead. It's just this growing feeling of "hey, what I did mattered." What I did, all of my work, it mattered. It meant something.

Then, when we won, I had my real camera in one hand and my cell phone in the other, Snapchatting from my personal thing. It's hard to describe, but that feeling of accomplishment, of knowing that the work that *I did*, individually, meant something. That was huge. I went to bed at 1 in the morning that night. It was amazing.

I don't know if you plan to be involved in more campaigns or not, but going forward, what do you think is going to change the most when it comes to both digital technology and social media in political campaigns?

Obviously, as social media platforms change, people will have to change. But I think the biggest thing that was made incredibly clear in this election that I think has not been all that clear in prior ones, is how everything you say and do is everywhere. You can't hide. Everyone is talking about you on social and news stories hit instantly instead of in a matter of days.

So I think that's going to be the big thing - is now, more than ever, they'll have to be aware of their surroundings. All it takes is one secret, undercover person from the other campaigns at one of your meetings, and you say something, and all it takes is them tweeting it out. And that's a huge issue right there. So, yeah, I think that will be the big thing - is, after this election, now more than ever, people are aware that anything they say can end up on Twitter in 30 seconds.

That will be the big thing - it really didn't take until this election when you have someone like President Trump who's not very calculating about what he posts online - that's the nicest way to put that, and anything you say can be online instantly, so you have to be even more prepared for that kind of thing. You can't necessarily go off-message as much.