VOLKER DEPKAT
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Editors

Visual Cultures –
Transatlantic
Perspectives

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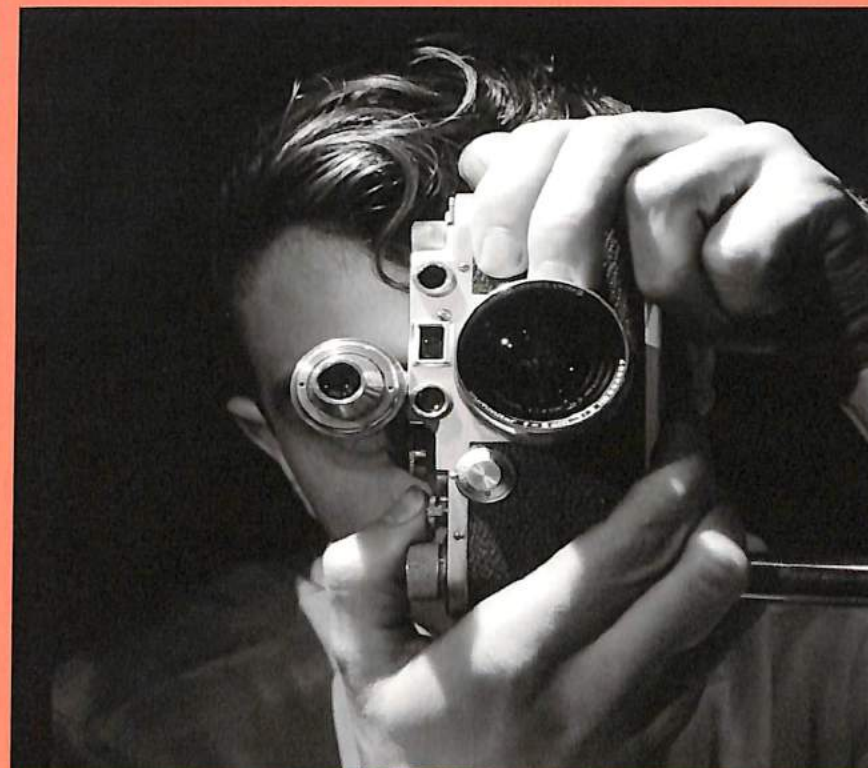
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Visual Cultures – Transatlantic Perspectives

On both sides of the Atlantic, visual culture studies currently is one of the fastest growing and most innovative fields in academia, attracting a great variety of questions, approaches and disciplines. Indebted to an understanding of visual culture as the means by which cultures visually construct the social field, the articles in this volume address how concepts of legitimacy and authority, race and ethnicity, history and space were visualized over the centuries in Europe and the United States.

Contributors cover the creation of political iconographies, contested visual narratives of racial and ethnic difference, images of gender and sexuality, the role of photographs in journalism, and, finally, the importance of visual representations in the construction of historical memory.

A broad selection of visual media, ranging from paintings, prints and photographs to experimental cinema and the internet, is analyzed to unearth the visual dimensions of the political and the social in Europe and the United States since the eighteenth century.

Visual Cultures –
Transatlantic Perspectives

DEPKAT ZWINGENBERGER (Eds.)

NOTE ON THE EDITORS

Volker Depkat is a Trained Historian and Professor of American Studies at the University of Regensburg and Member of the Board of Directors of the Bavarian American Academy.

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Visual Cultures – Transatlantic Perspectives

Edited by

VOLKER DEPKAT

MEIKE ZWINGENBERGER

Preface

The volume "Visual Cultures – Transatlantic Perspectives" collects the revised papers presented at the Bavarian American Academy's (BAA) 2009 annual meeting, plus some additionally invited contributions from international scholars in the field of visual culture studies. Like all previous volumes of the BAA monograph series the present collection would not have materialized without the generous support of several institutions and the personal commitment of many people. We want to thank, above all, the U.S. Consulate General (Munich) and the Bavarian American Center (Munich) who sponsored the 2009 annual meeting of the Academy, from which the essays assembled here originally sprang. Special thanks go to Prof. Christoph Decker (Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich), Prof. Volker Depkat (University of Regensburg), Prof. Petra Dorsch-Jungsberger (Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich), Prof. Karsten Fitz (University of Passau), Prof. Barbara Hahn (University of Würzburg), Prof. Antje Kley (Friedrich-Alexander-University, Erlangen-Nürnberg), and Dr. Meike Zwingenberger (Bavarian American Academy) for setting up the program of the conference. The present collection of essays has been assembled and edited under the auspices of the Bavarian American Academy by Volker Depkat, a member of the BAA Board of Directors and Professor of American Studies at the University of Regensburg. As always, meticulous editorial and technical support has been provided by Dr. Meike Zwingenberger, the BAA's executive director, and by Jasmin Falk, M.A., the BAA's office manager. Finally, we owe much to our Munich student interns Antoine Habersetzer, Pia Eckert, Hülya Tirpan, Yurdanur Cetiner, Nikolaus Wirth, Ann Midunsky, Felix Meier-Lenz, and to Miles Hookey, a research assistant at the University of Regensburg, for their scrupulous proofreading of the final draft of the manuscript.

Munich, September 2012

Klaus Benesch
Director, Bavarian American Academy

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Introduction

Volker Depkat

We have been swimming in a sea of technically reproduced images for a couple of centuries now. The earliest printing technology, the woodcut, appeared in Europe in the early fifteenth century, coinciding with the revolution in printing that thrusted humanity into the *Gutenberg Galaxy* (Faulstich; McLuhan; Giesecke). The full effects of this deep transformation of public communication first became visible during the Reformation which was as much a media event as it was a theological dispute and a factor pushing the early modern state building process (Burkhardt; Faulstich). It was, however, only in the nineteenth century that visuals began to move to the core of public and private life. The advent of lithography not only made images readily available to an unprecedented degree on a rapidly growing mass market for popular prints, it also led to an explosion of color in visual material, circulating widely in nineteenth-century books and magazines, and eventually into homes, taverns, schools, banks, shops and other public places (Marzio; Last).

As the market for mass-reproduced prints was rapidly expanding around 1850, the new visual technology of photography was already evolving: unique daguerreotypes soon gave way to glass-plate negatives produced by way of the wet collodion process that – although still cumbersome – allowed for multiple reproductions of one picture. In the 1880s photo pioneer George Eastman first perfected the newly developed method of making photographic dry plates, going on to introduce roll film, and finally – in 1888 – Eastman introduced the *Kodak* camera, an easy-to-handle, portable device that opened up the realm of photography to uncounted amateurs, laying the foundations for the snapshot-culture that has since become a central aspect of the modern way of life. In 1935, the newly developed *Kodachrome* ushered in the era of color photography, and seven years later the Kodak Company hit the market with the *Kodacolor* negative-positive film, which after the Second World War became the most popular color film used by photo amateurs all over the world.[1]

While photography was on its way of becoming one of the paradigmatic visual technologies of the industrial world in the last quarter of the nineteenth century,

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[1] The literature on the history of photography is vast. Good places to start are Orvell; Johnson et.al.; Newhall; Gernsheim.

The Visuals of Online Politics: Barack Obama's Web Campaign

Caja Thimm

New Visual Cultures Online

The Internet has altered communication as we know it, allowing new forms of interaction previously thought impossible. Social networking sites, desktop video-conferencing, streaming video, and multi-dimensional graphical interfaces in computer games provide sophisticated communication tools in the twenty-first century. Inevitably, such tools will face replacement by ever more sophisticated technologies. Indeed, contemporary computer-mediated communication differs vastly from less than a decade ago. One of the main shifts connected to technological development is an increase of visual information, with the "iconic turn" towards moving images being the most striking change.

Internet technologies may come and go, yet their common ground remains their means to communicate. Whether it is one-way, two-way or wholly interactive, communication remains constant in all technological advances on the Internet. As a feedback platform, the Internet allows users to interact and share information from all corners of the globe, spanning uncountable subjects.

New computer-based technologies continually transform communicative patterns and spaces, enabling new ways of communicating that integrate text, static and moving images, diversifying sound and virtual presences within electronic environments. As of present, strong indications point towards the status of images continually improving. Together, we live in a mediated blitz of imagery, filling our newspapers, magazines, books, clothing, billboards, computer monitors and television screens as never before in the history of mass communications. Through steadily becoming a visually mediated society, our understanding of the world is increasingly accomplished not through reading words, but by reading images. This holds true for all kinds of contexts, including politics, where the visuals of political communication have dramatically changed due to the influence of YouTube, Flickr and other mobile communication websites. News events now reach us close to real time, with on the spot photos and videos adding to the feeling of immediacy and closeness.

The following article aims to illustrate how visual cultures are used in a very specific online environment, more specifically for the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. "It takes Technology to make a President" headlined the September 2008 issue of the online magazine *Wire*, commenting on the role technology played in

U.S. presidential campaigns, and its role in the then-ongoing Obama campaign for the presidency in particular. The *New York Times* also discussed the subject prior to Election Day. Not since the 1960 election of John F. Kennedy with the help of television, an increasingly popular medium at the time, have new media cultures exerted such a huge influence on the outcome of a presidential race as they did in 2008. Investigating such media cultures, therefore, is essential for a study of the media's role in the electioneering process.

Media and Election Campaigning – an Alliance with a History

Media forms have always played decisive roles for victories at the polls. Especially in the United States, a successful election is often viewed as the direct result of a clear media strategy, with the talent of the candidate putting *that* strategy effectively to use. Franklin Roosevelt used radio to reach out to voters for elections in the Depression and World War II eras. John F. Kennedy understood the power of television noticeably better than his rival, Richard Nixon, during the 1960 campaign. Beginning in the 1970s, Republicans launched the direct mailing campaign strategy, an approach the party relied on for almost twenty years.

Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign team advertised via the growing medium of cable television. Clinton's advisors recognized that voters could be better reached more directly using cable than through expensive advertisement spots on regular terrestrial networks. Consequently, his team implemented a "micro targeting strategy," assisting organizers to reach out to members of the population who did not venture to the polls before, relying on the assumption that apathetic voters could potentially influence the outcome of the election the most. The Bush campaign collected millions of voters' data in the so-called "swing states," bombarding voters from those states with campaign messages thought most likely with voter groups better identified according to postal zip codes. The Clinton team developed a complex system allowing the campaign to run ads at times believed to carry the largest impact upon a target audience. Today, every candidate goes by the "Clinton Cable TV Playbook" as a matter of course.

George W. Bush's 2004 campaign also relied on technology for its own advantage. The Bush campaign advisors especially appealed to registered Democrats. The strategy's success became most apparent in Ohio. While eight percent of African American voters voted for Bush on average, 16 percent of Ohio African Americans gave the Republican incumbent their vote. Similarly, the Bush campaign team applied a micro targeting strategy to Hispanics in New Mexico, a state Bush narrowly lost in 2000. The result: the white Democratic vote sank by two percent, yet rose by 12 percent among Hispanics, enough to color the state red on Election Day.

New media played an important role in the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. With Internet participation undergoing transformation under the auspices of what Tim O'Reilly deemed "Web 2.0" since 2005, these new forms of user participation and social networking sites had already begun to dramatically alter global communication. Virtual worlds such as *Second Life*, as an example, created radical new forms of voter communication, adding a new visual environment inhabited by colorful avatars (Thimm and Klement 197-220).

The Internet's population demographics changed over the 2000s. Now not only the exclusive domain of young people, growing numbers of older individuals came online throughout the decade. Over the 2000s, users progressively exchanged new and different kinds of private data, including photos, movies and texts, joining worldwide social networks such as Facebook, YouTube or Twitter.

These dramatic changes during the decade gave rise to a form of political communication no longer based upon traditional strategies, but rather upon personalized participation. The distinction between producers and recipients consequently blurred, with bloggers, an increasingly relevant demographic, going on to describe themselves as both producers and as a discerning audience.

Changes in the implementation and application of political communication manifested greatly towards the end of the decade. This observable transformation arose not only in the institutionalized web presence of political parties, politicians, national or international organizations; rather, the very interactivity and participatory nature of the Internet was also influencing media political communication. The Web 2.0 phenomena and the question of who is responsible for its many additions played an ever more important role in political debates in the presentation of (or control over) political information. The methods these phenomena were utilized for similarly reflect the Internet's development into a mass medium, forcing organizations and parties to change their traditional tactics. Today, it is impossible to imagine contemporary politics without blogs, podcasts, newsletters, or chat. In addition, the Internet and Web 2.0, both in the past and current, continue to be perceived as innovative and young, where maintaining an online presence is considered an essential ingredient for showcasing a personal profile or organization as young and dynamic. Many political ads, TV shows and music videos, for example, have gone on to copy the World Wide Web aesthetic whenever a progressive, modern, or "cool" image is desired upon (Thimm and Hartmann 71-92).

Still, not every web strategy guarantees success, with many individuals either reluctant to change old habits or accept new conditions for communication, viewing them either impractical or unreliable. Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, however, set new standards for political communication for the Web 2.0 era.

Cyberculture and Online Visuals in Politics

If media cultures are defined as cultural products, their representations in discourse are crafted as different cybercultural modes of reception, identified by the actions of the "produser" (Bruns). The double role of the 'user' and 'producer' points to a new type of interaction between medial products: recipients not only make those products 'their own,' but also use them for constructing their identities and medial environments. This type of self-determination and autonomy produces a culture of active participation, taking shape whenever medial products are created. The intertwining of production and use is an important element of cyberculture, which itself links to claims of individual self-positioning in the medial environment. Only when one acknowledges the forms of 'produsage,' respecting the demands of the active user community for freedom from regulation, can the Internet be recognized as a space of social communication useful for election campaigns.

From its inception, a deep understanding of cyberculture characterized the Barack Obama presidential campaign. Obama belongs to a line of presidential candidates whose innovative and creative use of technology influenced the election outcome heavily. Arguably, the Obama campaign did not solely utilize modern media technologies simply for political propaganda. Rather, the sophisticated implementation of Web 2.0 era strategies gave the medium itself new significance. Due to the Obama campaign, the Internet is now something that concerns even those who potentially had nothing to do with the medium before. That change in importance comes from the fact that participation in the highly emotional race required a high level of 'digital media literacy.' Unlike the radio or television eras, all users initially required development for their own media competencies – sometimes discovering them in the first place – in order to truly take part in an event.

Participation also required visualization. The slogan, "Broadcast yourself," by the video platform YouTube, asks for participation in the presentation of videos. The target group is the world itself: every minute, users download twenty hours of new content, equivalent to 16,500 feature length films. YouTube has therefore been rightfully labeled as 'open TV of the people.' For political campaigning, it is claimed that "if you're not on YouTube, you're not part of the discussion … It's the world's largest town hall" (Breslau).

"Broadcasting yourself" did not strictly limit itself to video forms. The concept also encompassed blog entries, uploading photos, or adding comments for online newspapers. Everybody could potentially go public, making his or her perspective on the world visible. In this respect, visual cultures online tie to publicity and public discourse. To speak of a "President 2.0" not only acted as a play on words, but rather referenced a political agenda, types of media used, and the emergence a new media culture, all to partake in the pivotal role of making an individual the most

powerful person in the world. In the wake of the Obama campaign, it is necessary to reinterpret the relationship between cyberculture and participatory democracy.

The next chapter discusses what potential so-called 'new' media have for political communication, providing examples of the communicative and technologically innovative campaign strategies utilized by the Obama campaign.

Obama's Web Campaign – President 2.0?

The 2008 presidential race was the first in the U.S. where the Internet did not solely act as a communication channel *supplementary* to more traditional means of transmission. For German journalist Tobias Moorstedt, Barack Obama's own campaign website not only acted as a "two-dimensional website, but rather as a virtual structure, an electronic space, that is composed of HTML pages, features, text, photos, and links, and that makes it easy for users to identify with the candidate and his interests" (46).

The roots of Web 2.0 campaigning trace back to 2004, when for the first time, social networking software acted as platforms for professional political communication. Although not able to achieve a final victory in the primaries, Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean's Web 2.0 strategy set precedence for future campaigns (Crumlish; Beckedahl; Hübel; Davis et al. 17). By placing links to social networking sites such as Moveon.org and Meetup on the campaign website, as well as including campaign supporters' blogs, Dean's campaign scored several decisive victories. Not only did a large sum of Dean contributions originate from online donations, but a new form of voter mobilization arose out of this novel way of connection. Citizens and political activists alike witnessed the new media format for the first time, who responded by beginning blogs, meeting friends and acquaintances in online communities, and learned how to use social software – the elementary information technology for connecting users – competently.

Several different social software formats, or spheres of influence, are readily identified. The blogging community is thought to exert an especially large influence upon public opinion (Bahnisch 139; Farrell and Drezner 16). Based mostly on text entries, bloggers increasingly worked with photographic images by 2008. Compared to previous political campaigns where blogs achieved success as modes of interaction between politicians and voters, the political discourse in the 2008 blogosphere decisively stood out; its discourse initiated, maintained and widely expanded by concerned citizens. The politically-minded used Web 2.0 applications such as blogs and other social networks to organize groups, building influential networks of supporters for their favorite candidates. These Internet users created video clips, organized voting parties, and uploaded their experiences in the form of photos or videos onto personal blogs or other interactive online platforms for oth-

ers to see. In the end, the "grassroot army's" efforts led to more supporters joining forces with official campaign bodies (Crumlish 29).

Never before did so many people in the United States use the Internet for political participation than during the 2008 presidential campaign. A study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project demonstrated that supporters of Democratic candidate Barack Obama were among the most politically active online (Smith and Rainie 14). In comparison to Obama's biggest competitors, fellow Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican nominee John McCain, Obama's supporters more likely forwarded messages and comments about the campaign to friends and family digitally, signed online petitions, or donated money online to the campaign than other supporters.

Why was it that Obama's fans more willingly used the Internet for political purposes to organize fundraising parties with friends and acquaintances, setting off a veritable 'Obama hype?' In the past, politicians had not fully capitalized on the Internet's interactive potential for campaigning until the Obama candidacy. Even young voters, who comprised the majority of the Internet's user group, felt connected to the candidate due to its new paths to communicate and participate in the election process (Schmidt 26). Obama's campaign team used the Internet to woo the youth vote, a supposedly politically indifferent target group (Hübel 69). The end results of the election showed Obama capturing a majority of this age bracket; 66 percent of 18 to 29-year-olds voted for Obama, contrasting to the 31 percent who voted for his Republican opponent, John McCain (Keeter et al.).

Little doubt is left that Barack Obama changed the face of political communication (Walker 1095). "Striking in its simplicity, and its complexity" (Norquay 59), the Obama campaign used social software to mobilize a self-organizing network of supporters. With statements such as "Join me" or "It is your choice" on the campaign homepage, Obama gave voters the feeling of personally inviting them to join the campaign. The messages' success is demonstrated not only through the millions of 'followers' on Obama's Facebook profile, but also in the thousands of supporters who registered their email addresses and mobile phone numbers on the campaign website to receive personalized emails from Obama, or those who willingly donated to his campaign.

Besides the 'classic' form of email contact, visual media such as YouTube also played a major role in the presidential campaign. Hillary Clinton announced her presidential candidacy at the end of January 2007 via YouTube, arriving at a period where the importance of Web 2.0 increasingly became apparent to political advisors. Clinton's announcement stating, "I am not just starting a campaign ... I am beginning a conversation. With You. ... We all need to be part of the discussion" (Bosch 70), was a general declaration of the 2008 election's interactivity.

A defining moment in the Obama campaign arose in March 2008 during the primaries, when Obama's former confidant and religious advisor, Pastor Jeremiah

Wright, publicly condemned white dominance over blacks, blasting the whole country, stating, "God damn America." A YouTube video of the speech spread quickly in a matter of hours, with criticism quickly following (Birnbaum 346f). Obama responded to the news using the same medium, turning YouTube into a form of personal television. His nearly one-hour speech about "racial issues" is considered a rhetorical and political masterpiece, gaining the candidate worldwide recognition. With his rebuttal, Obama put water on the fire of Wright's outburst, giving the African American population a clear, non-accusing voice.

YouTube continued to play an important role following the speech. While Senator John McCain set his bets mostly on TV spots, Obama did not strictly limit ads for TV viewers. By September 9, 2008, some 1,239 Obama videos were viewable on YouTube, compared to only 260 McCain videos. The difference in the number of Internet users that viewed those YouTube channels stands especially significant: Obama videos received 15,939,665 views, compared to McCain's 1,329,674 views.[1] Harfoush called the visual presence an enormous asset: "Video was one of the Obama campaign's most effective tools because it capitalized on one of their greatest assets: the eloquence and charisma of Barack Obama" (148).

The *New York Times* perceived another function in this visual campaigning. "Raw footage of political speeches – which no network except C-Span considers as hot content – racked up huge numbers" (Carr and Stelter, <www.nytimes.com>, December 17, 2009). YouTube included the audience, capitalizing on the social aspect of video sharing. Contributors forwarded videos to friends and family, giving them a viral quality that otherwise may not have been present in an officially made campaign clip.

The traditional mass media also took responsibility in boosting the value placed upon online campaigning. A study put out by the American Pew Research Center in December 2008 showed that over the course of the year, the Internet won out over almost all other traditional media as the main source of political information, with television being the medium used most frequently (<www.people-press.org> 2008). For the first time ever, the Internet had become one of the primary go-to sources for information; 40 percent of the people surveyed gathered news online, while only 35 percent used print media to do so. However, the Internet did not just inform the majority of the American population during the 2008 campaign year; almost half (46 percent) of respondents used the World Wide Web, email, or text messaging (SMS) *actively* for political purposes (Smith and Rainie). Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace became the preferred means of political communication, especially amongst younger people; 66 percent of Internet

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[1]   <http://www.journalism.org> 2008.

users under 30 claimed a profile in one of those communities, and half of all young social networkers used those sites to inform themselves about the elections and its candidates (Smith and Rainie 10). 35 percent of all American adults reportedly watched at least one online political video on websites like YouTube during the campaign season.

Campaign Strategies

The above-mentioned tactics played not the only part of Obama's comprehensive Web 2.0 campaign. The Obama team successfully identified cyberculture as an important sphere, taking the country's 'netizens' seriously. Such a perspective is considered the key to a successful web campaign, since without a deeper understanding of what communicative codes demonstrate relevancy to the online world, any serious attempt to reach such a discerning audience runs the risk of failure.

According to the Obama campaign slogan, change is only possible with the help of the people: "Change in America doesn't start from the top down. It starts from the bottom up." The idea of 'grassroots campaigning' became Obama's trademark, and his Internet presence a sign of his modernity and sincerity. Obama stuck to this concept through a series of actions, three of which described in more detail in the following. These strategies exemplify the Democratic nominee's understanding of cyberculture and Internet technologies:

- Blogging
- Online grassroots campaigning via direct mailing and text messaging
- Presence in niche scenes online

Blogger Activism

Within the electronic world, bloggers not only voice their opinions, but increasingly assume the role of a discerning audience (Thimm and Berlinecke; Einspänner). Bloggers collect facts and data, bringing details to light that otherwise may not be published, inviting comments from users and for others to do the same. Among unimportant and superfluous items, relevant news bits can be re-edited within the network. Cross-linking, current relevance, and access to specialty topics count in the blogosphere, with well-known bloggers' sense of mission comparable to that of renowned journalists.

For a transatlantic comparison, the blogosphere plays a greater role in American public discourse than it does in Germany. For example, *MyDD.com* is read by 100,000 people daily, as opposed to the approximately 700,000 that visit *DailyKos.com*. Several blogs have developed into hybrids between newspapers and

blogs. *The Huffington Post*, for example, is a veritable opinion leader of the genre. Besides presenting a new vehicle for public opinion, blogs and blog-like e-newspapers, such as *The Huffington Post* or Mark Halperin's *The Page*, take part in altering the speed of 'news cycles.' The traditional two-day news timeframe has shrunk to twelve hours. Highlighting the speed of news delivery today, *The Page* is aptly sub-headed as, "Politics up to the minute."

Whether supportive or of critical nature, blogging in either form was considered one of the most innovative online strategies for the 2008 U.S. presidential race. An example of how large an influence blogging carried upon the election's outcome is verified by Mayhill Fowler, a 61-year-old homemaker and hobby writer turned blogger from Tennessee. Fowler made it her mission to follow Barack Obama on his presidential campaign throughout the United States. Armed with a laptop and an MP3 player, Fowler attended various campaigning events, commenting on her experiences on "OffTheBus," a blog within *The Huffington Post*. When Barack Obama travelled to a private fundraising dinner with supporters in San Francisco in April 2008, the candidate discreetly assumed the media and press would not be watching. Speaking openly about small-town Pennsylvanians, Obama remarked that, "It's not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations" (Fiedler; Moorstedt 127; Smith and Rainie; <www.huffingtonpost.com> 2008). Fowler, a known and committed Obama supporter, had originally been invited to the dinner that evening, recording at the time when the future Democratic candidate voiced his opinions. After contemplating it for four days, Fowler decided to publish an account of the incident, including a sound byte on her blog (figure 1).[2]

After going online, Obama's words spread throughout the mainstream media, lighting a "political firestorm" that dominated the campaign for some time (Fiedler). Under pressure from coverage of the incident, Obama later publicly apologized for his remarks (<www.politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com> 2008; <www.guardian.co.uk> 2008).

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[2]   <www.huffingtonpost.com> 2008.

Figure 1: Fowler in *The Huffington Post*

Figure 2: Student blog for Obama

The case of Mayhill Fowler exemplifies the extent of the blogs' influence upon the political goings-on in 2008 and their value to public communication in general. Blogs not only played a medium for self-presentation, but also "without a doubt, represent[ed] a new way to form an opinion" (Möller 157). Moreover, the case underlines the blogosphere's basic understanding of ethics: although Fowler considered herself an Obama supporter, she felt compelled to report her findings to the American public.

The number of youth and student blogs who worked to mobilize people and organize support for Obama at universities also demonstrated how much of a grasp Obama's campaign organization understood "netizen" culture. Youthful designs often dominated the style of these websites, especially for students working with humorous visualization strategies, often causing viral marketing chains. Videos often enabled comments and recommendations to be sent to other Internet users, shared within social media websites like Facebook, thereby gaining even more visibility. As the following example shows, the blogs' messages often pointed towards Obama Internet culture:

The call to young people to keep their parents from voting for McCain was not entirely ironic, as these initiatives attained campaign-like status.

The Visuals of Online Textuality

Campaigners capitalized upon online information outlets, especially through mobile Internet penetration, by using these outlets to directly communicate with voters, aiming to draw potential supporters closer to the campaign. The Obama team did precisely that. In reaching out directly to voters via email and text messaging, including a successful online 'small-scale donation' plan, the Obama Internet strategy laid the foundations for future campaigns in its direct campaign-to-voter strategy. In drawing a comparison to Germany, however, it is important to note that considerably more Americans use mobile-phone-based Internet than Germans, giving text messaging a more personal meaning.

Successful direct emailing and texting contributed crucially to Obama's election. Sending out personalized communiqués to millions of individuals, including details about the campaign that were not (or later) available to the general public, the Obama campaign team gave its supporters 'rewards' with exclusive information. The announcement of Senator Joe Biden's selection as Obama's running mate coming by way of a text message serves as a supreme example. Such efforts gave Obama supporters a sense of belonging, reinforcing the campaign's war cry of "Yes we can."

The 'community involvement strategy' precisely targeted supporters in their everyday lives. Obama's chief campaign strategists recognized that for millions of people who willingly and passionately participated, there simply remained not enough time in the day to do so. Obama's strategy, however, required supporters to devote a few minutes of their time forwarding an email, locating someone to contribute to the campaign, or calling a friend. In the end, this stratagem paid off, with its dovetailing of both the online and offline worlds to make the web campaign a success.

An analysis of the large body of emails generated by the Obama team yields the following types:

(1) *'You can make a difference' emails.* Sent at the beginning of the campaign, e-mails of this type strove to activate voters. As demonstrated in the following email, each voter was meant to feel part of something grander:

Friend –

I know these are difficult times, but the stakes have never been higher.

If every one of us reaches out to friends, starts organizing, and takes a piece of this campaign into our own hands, we will win this election.

With eight states already voting early – and a dozen more starting in the next two weeks – voters are already making up their minds. This movement needs supporters like you to step up and volunteer right now.

The simplest tasks are also the most important and the most effective. Here are some easy ways you can get involved today. This campaign has always been about change – and real change comes from the bottom up, not from the top down. Supporters like you organizing and fundraising at the grassroots level will make the difference, and we have all the tools to help you do that.

Even if you've never been involved in politics before, it's easy and doesn't require any experience.

This election is too important to sit on the sidelines. And together, there's nothing we can't do.

Barack

Paid for by Obama for America

Another variation of the 'you can make a difference' email prompted recipients to take action in a specific way, while maintaining the same tone as in the example above.

(2) *'Get out the vote' emails.* Most of these emotionally charged emails intended to compel recipients to concrete action. Political observers speculated that the near-idealizing adoration for Obama did not lay entirely due to the candidate's charisma, but rather to the campaign's careful regulation of Obama's distance from voters. Although Obama appeared calm and collected in the media without losing

composure during the presidential debates, unlike his Republican opponent, campaign strategists crafted an emotionally charged environment. Strategically reaching out to voters via email at key stages of the race enabled greater connection between supporter and candidate. These emails originated from either Obama himself, his wife, Michelle, his vice-presidential running mate, Joe Biden, or his chief campaign manager, David Plouffe, depending on the desired intention. The following is an example of a message intended to mobilize and organize voters in California:

Dear Friend,

With Election Day 30 days away, supporters like you in California have a special opportunity this weekend to make a big impact on this race.

Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico are all crucial battleground states that literally could decide the outcome of this election. As a Californian, you are in a position to make a huge impact in each of these states.

That's why this weekend, Saturday, October 4th through Sunday, October 5th, we're holding phonebanks at campaign offices across California so that Obama supporters can reach out to voters in these states.

Find your local Obama California office and reach out to voters in crucial battlegrounds this weekend.

To put Barack over the top in these states, we need to make sure that every voter hears his message of change and is ready to vote. California has led the way in passion and enthusiasm for Barack and this movement for change. Now it's time for us to step up when it really counts in this final stretch.

No experience is needed to participate – staff will give you all the resources you need to succeed. Nothing is more powerful than having undecided voters hear from ordinary folks about Barack and this campaign for change.

Sign up now to phonebank this weekend and make a difference in these final weeks:

http://ca.barackobama.com/CaliforniaVoices

Thanks,

Mary Jane Stevenson

California Field Director Obama for America

While various local or regional campaign directors assumed responsibility for organizing or mobilizing emails as exampled from above, emails containing a more politically slanted message originated from Joe Biden. Messages requesting financial donations usually arrived via David Plouffe. Messages from the candidate himself, or from his wife, Michelle, differed from their contemporaries both in style and content, being both more personal and emotional in nature, to convince their recipients of the importance of their vote.

Obama sent emails in his name only when the subject dealt with a major political issue relevant to the whole nation, calling for collective efforts. Following is an excerpt from an email that was sent just prior to a televised debate on March 10, 2008:

> And after tonight's debate, voters will be motivated to cast their ballots for the change this country needs. Joe Biden and I share a vision for the future of this country, and it's very different from the vision of our opponents. I'm sure you'll see that contrast in tonight's debate.
> But there's another contrast that you can see in every aspect of this campaign. Joe and I know that real change comes from the bottom up, not the top down. That's why we've always put our faith in supporters like you.
> Make a donation of $5 or more right now to help reach Ohio voters and Get Out The Vote in other early vote states.
> https://donate.barackobama.com/thevpdebate
> You've built an unprecedented grassroots movement, and that's what will make all the difference in the next 32 days.
> Thanks for everything you're doing, and make sure you tell everyone you know to watch tonight's debate.
> Barack

By signing the message using his first name and addressing the recipient in a similar manner, Obama exemplified the effectiveness of direct personalized emailing. Because supporters first undertook registration on the campaign's website, agreeing to receive campaign e-mail, the requirements for a participatory democracy were met. That too is proof of the campaign's deep understanding of a demanding cyberculture.

Millions of Americans answered the call of greater involvement, setting up campaign parties at the grassroots level. Many of these events (fundraising dinners, telephone campaigns, picnics for Obama, etc.) did not take place online, but instead through direct personal contact with other potential or committed supporters. Nevertheless, the Obama web campaign made supporters' medial self-presentation possible. Active supporters creatively turned diverse social events into political ones. In one example, organizers for fundraising dinners designed a socially-themed website,[3] uploaded photos from their dinner events, thereby gaining themselves a modicum of celebrity status with the candidate, and providing a forum for follow-up communication after the elections.

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[3] <http://wwff.wordpress.com/2007/06/07/dinner-with-obama>.

Visualisation in Online Communities

Another of the Obama campaign team's strategies involved maintaining a presence within various online communities. Obama displayed a respect for the much-underestimated gamer community. Whereas gamers in Germany tend to be excluded rather than taken seriously, Obama struck chords among U.S.-based gamers – though not always successfully – with campaign ads placed in the *Burnout Paradise* and *NASCAR '09* X-Box games (Thimm). In the former game, players speed past virtual Barack Obama billboards, as pictured on the next page. The in-game advertising elicited mixed reactions, with some gamers complaining to the manufacturer that politics encroached upon their entertainment. The move also likely enticed a negative response among voters.

Figure 3: Obama calls out to voters in *Burnout Paradise*.
Publisher: Electronic Arts, 2008

Obama also maintained an elaborate presence in *Second Life*, a virtual world inhabited by often colorful avatars, personally designed by users of the program. Not only did Obama's virtual representative give interviews in *Second Life*, but an entire campaign platform complete with an office filled with avatar campaigners devoted itself to his candidacy. As with the in-game advertising example, it remains difficult to examine what affect the candidate's virtual reality presence carried for voters. The visual depiction of Obama's avatar, for example, drew mixed responses.
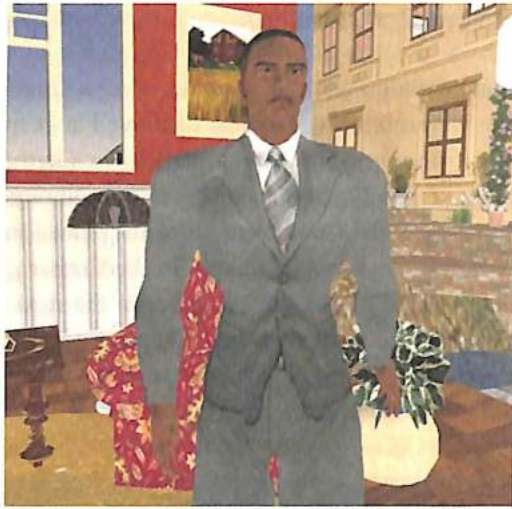
Figure 4: Obama's avatar in *Second Life*. Publisher: Linden Lab, 2003

These examples of Obama's presence within online communities point to two different effects. Primarily, communicating with members of a particular cybercommunity, or cyber-subculture, using their own communicative 'language' led to mixed, if not negative responses. Secondly and perhaps more importantly, the traditional media's coverage of Obama's web activities played a major role in informing traditional milieus of the candidate's online presence, solidifying Obama's image as a young and modern candidate.

A Recipe for Future Success?

Shortly after his election as the 44th President of the United States of America, President Obama sent a message to all his voters, donators, supporters, and individuals whose email addresses or mobile phone numbers he (or rather, his team) had collected throughout the race. It is representative of the emotionality and enthusiasm that marked the Obama campaign as a whole: "We just made history. ... I want to thank all of you who gave your time, talent and passion to this campaign. ... All of this happened because of you. Thank you, Barack."[4]

Yet the message did not entail itself as the last email from the new president. Obama and his team continue to regularly provide members of 'his' community

with information, appeals, and personal declarations. Often, President Obama's emails are announcements for a new video, underpinning the continuation of medial marketing between the text and the visual message as one of the president's ongoing strategies. Obama's more recent battle for healthcare reform involved requesting national support, participation, and donations. While it may seem easy to dismiss such efforts as simplistic political propaganda, finding a message directly from the President of the United States in one's email or mobile phone inbox – even in the Web 2.0 age – nevertheless continues to be remarkable. It remains to be seen how President Obama's campaign strategy for re-election will unfold in 2012.

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