

**Violet is Hopeful for Change:  
Social Media and Barack Obama's 2008 U.S. Presidential Election Campaign**

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## ABSTRACT

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David Godsall

This thesis explores the use of social media technologies like Facebook by Barack Obama's Presidential campaign and its supporters in the 2008 U.S. General Election. By investigating the social and technological forces driving ongoing changes in the modes of communication used by campaigns and supporters, I argue that the 2008 Presidential campaign was the first major American electoral event in which social media, as I define them, were a significant factor. I also examine the specific structural and rhetorical properties of the campaign's communications strategy in order to determine what efforts to promote the flow of its messages into and throughout social mediascapes the campaign may have made. My primary research is composed of interviews with young Obama supporters volunteering with the campaign in New Hampshire in the final week of the election period. I conclude from this research that a potentially transformative pattern of communicating with the campaign and with peers characterizes the habits of political expression displayed and described by these young people. Using Facebook, my interview subjects integrated political signifiers appropriated from the campaign's messaging and branding into their own identities, creating potentially powerful and pervasive new flows of influence within their online communities.

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## Introduction

Throughout 2008, I saw Barack Obama everywhere I turned. Images, messages, sounds and every other species of signifier imaginable permeated my world with Hope and Change, amongst the many other Obama-branded political tropes. As a passionate supporter of the campaign, I often consciously immersed myself in mediascapes that were saturated with these signifiers, but I didn't have to seek them out. They seemed to follow me everywhere I went, both virtually and physically, borne by social mobility that I at first attributed (simplistically) to widespread excitement about an historic election and enthusiasm for an impressive candidate. What I didn't yet realize when I started to notice this saturation of my own communicative ecosystem was that many of my peers who weren't as engaged in the election narrative and drama as I was—many of them Canadians like me with very little directly at stake in the outcome—were feeling like they had unwittingly plunged into the Obama pool as well. It was almost inescapable.

All this would seem obvious if the mediascapes in question were those occupied by traditional media. 'Traditional', of course, is a problematic term, since it implies that some universal tradition governs certain media. For the sake of clarity, then, I'll define them by what they are not, new media. But they are not part of any tradition of mine, either. I am a consumer of messages and images mediated by the various online social mediascapes I habitually inhabit. These include Facebook and Twitter, but also social bookmarking sites and aggregators like Digg.com, all of which provide a social reference process for filtering the content I consume according

to the tastes of specific people whose opinions I trust or groups of people whose collective opinions seem to correspond, however loosely, with mine. Most of the traditional media I consume is filtered according to these processes. If I'd been watching broadcast television, for example, it would be easier to explain why I spent the year soaked in Obama branding. But I wasn't; most of what I was consuming had been mediated by peers, a group consisting primarily of university-educated people under the age of 30 whose tastes typically exclude mass media.

Dissecting, examining, and reverse-engineering the 2008 Obama campaign is a pursuit that has, in the past year, launched hundreds of books and articles—scholars and journalists have been working feverishly to understand the formula that produced his successes. (From Richard Wolffe's (2009) bestselling campaign narrative subtitled "*The Making of a President*" to Colin Delany's (2009) widely circulated *Learning from Obama* web book, the publishing industry appears to have received a *de facto* bailout to compensate for the lean times of the Bush era.) These texts largely focus on matching specific tactics deployed by the campaign with social, technological, political, or cultural trends thought to have made them more effective. I've yet to encounter an explanation of the overwhelming social momentum the campaign built that doesn't defer to the candidate's unique charisma or the country's perceived ripeness for Change to account for the sustained saturation of email inboxes, Facebook news feeds and blog comment rolls with re-produced, remixed, satirized, or otherwise socially mediated Obama messages and images. Obama *is* a charismatic politician and America *was* ripe for change, but these explanations

become less satisfying when they are confronted with the breadth and depth of the social phenomenon the campaign catalyzed.

The primary impetus for this thesis was this sense that the social and cultural dimensions of the campaign had yet to be adequately examined and this impetus, in turn, led me to an investigation of the technological and demographic dimensions of the campaign. Young Americans suddenly became more engaged in politics and civic issues than they had been in a generation, partially because they had just been introduced to a uniquely engaging politician, but there was also something new in the way they constructed their relationship with the candidate and the campaign. And, at the risk of ascribing excessive importance to a technological change, it is arguably significant that usage of social networking sites among American adults (now one in three) quadrupled between the 2004 and 2008 Presidential elections (Smith, 2009:17). In this thesis I argue that the maturation and widespread adoption of social media, particularly among young Americans, enabled more intimate and personal relationships (or at least the feeling of more intimate and personal relationships) with politicians and political campaigns than those that would have been possible to build using only traditional media.<sup>1</sup> The Obama campaign's communications strategy was designed in part to exploit the potential of social media's ascendance by fostering

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this thesis the term "social media" includes the user-generated content (UGC) sites like YouTube that are typically associated with Web 2.0 and social networking utilities/sites (SGS) like Facebook and Twitter, as well as various other media organized primarily according to relationships between users.



these new kinds of relationships with messaging tactics that promoted a sense of belonging in the imagined community of the campaign.<sup>2</sup>

It's not new that a political campaign would try to build a sense of community around its goals, but the sheer size of the community Obama created *was* new. Colin Delany, political consultant and editor of the internet politics website epolitics.com, notes that the campaign's email list, composed of supporters who deliberately "opted-in" to the campaign's online communications regime, had more than 13 million names on it. And on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008, Obama had 2,401,386 "friends" on the social networking site Facebook, almost four times the number his opponent garnered (techPresident, 2009). These successes are certainly a reflection of the candidate's general popularity, but they must also be evidence of a particular aptitude for building community online and engaging the people more likely to get their information about politics online than from traditional media and who are also most likely to communicate their opinions online: Americans between the ages of 18 and 30 (Smith, 2009;15). So if Obama's success in forming online community can be assumed to have contributed to his electoral success and young Americans (among whom Facebook was the most popular social networking site in 2008) is proportionately composed of the online participatory class, then the pursuit of a better understanding of how politics and political signifiers were communicated within the

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<sup>2</sup> The term "imagined communities" was coined by Benedict Anderson in his 1983 book examining the origins of nationalism and the forces behind the spread of nationalistic sentiment. He argues that nations are socially constructed by imagining shared threads of identity and I use his idea in this thesis to apply the same concept to groups of Obama supporters.

online communities these young people inhabited is a potentially important undertaking (Smith, 2009;13).

One of the primary assertions of this thesis is that there is something new about this pattern of political communication. Some people will always be motivated to actively project their political opinions in ways intended to influence their peers; for these people, social media are simply new channels requiring new rhetorical tactics. Utilities like Facebook certainly offer these political evangelists powerful tools and one of the purposes of this thesis is to examine how politically committed young people used social media. People who are willing and motivated to actively project their politics and persuade their peers, however, are perennially mobilized and energized; they can only explain a limited part of the Obama phenomenon. I argue that the more passive persuasion tactics marshaled by Facebook users who are not typically inclined to project political signifiers was more likely to have been responsible for the scale of the Obama movement. Social media provided new tools that enabled these people to influence their peers without investing the energy (or exposing themselves to the potential social complexities and pitfalls) associated with active persuasion. These people were able to influence their peers as a byproduct of their normal process of curating their online identities.

Facebook in particular is a venue for this kind of influence because many of its tools are designed to let users describe themselves in public ways. Chris Hughes, one of the four founders of Facebook, remarked that one of the site's advantages is that "you get to fashion yourself in a new way in a new space. It's not about changing who you are. It's about emphasizing different aspects of your personality" (Cassidy,

2006). And one of the aspects of their personalities that many American young people chose to emphasize in 2008 was their politics. Over the course of the election, 14% of Americans used social networking sites (again, Facebook being the most popular) and more than half of those used social media “for political information or to take part in the some aspect of the campaign” (Smith, 2009:35). In this thesis I consider whether the relative ubiquity of political expression in social mediascapes might, in the case of Facebook, be promoted by both the software itself and the social conventions governing its use. Do features like the “status” update tool condition the proliferation of political messages into and throughout Facebook’s mediascape? If so, then the most popular social networking utility among American young people is in some ways an intrinsically political place and the implications for youth civic engagement are significant.

In some ways, Facebook is self-evidently political. When users create a new account, “Political Views” are among the basic pieces of information about themselves they are asked to provide. It is one of the assumptions encoded in the site that our politics are part of how we will choose to construct the identities our peers will see. And that our peers *will* see them makes Facebook a venue for new flows of political influence. The “status” update feature is a particularly instructive example of this dynamic: supporters were able to broadcast messages like “Violet is hopeful for change!” throughout their communities, potentially reaching hundreds of their peers with the campaign’s stock tropes appropriated and remixed according to the conventions of the form, while performing the mundane everyday maintenance of their online identities. The Obama campaign benefitted from a unique understanding

of both the social and technological dimensions of Facebook politics, at least partially because one of its senior figures helped to establish them. (In 2007, Chris Hughes, left Facebook for Chicago to lead Obama's new media team.) Still, I do not intend to argue that the Obama's campaign's successes can be attributed solely to their ability to capitalize on the ascendance of Facebook. My goal instead is to understand how these successes exemplify larger shifts in the ways future political communities and political movements will be constructed and mobilized.

This thesis is organized according to three central research questions, each corresponding with one of three chapters. First, what are the underlying technological trends and relevant changes in the American media landscape that created the conditions for the Obama campaign to build its online imagined community? Chapter 1 is concerned primarily with the evolution in political communication that took place between the 2000 Presidential election and the 2008 Presidential election. This was the period in which political campaigns, like all content creators, were compelled to adapt to the shifting of American attention from traditional media to online media. I argue that this broader shift encompassed two salient changes that transformed the practice of political messaging in advance of Obama's Presidential bid: first, the fragmentation of audiences and early indications of the potential decline of conventional mass media forced campaigners to begin targeting smaller groups with strategically tailored messages and, second, the maturation of social media beginning in 2004 meant that campaigners would have to begin building communication strategies that could accommodate their surrender of control over their signifiers.

The second question pertains to the Obama campaign's responses to these trends. Every new medium challenges political communicators to tailor the form and content of their messages to its most effective use. So in what ways did the Obama campaign's communications strategy involve tactics that accommodated or promoted the social mediation of its messages? In Chapter 2, I examine the specific rhetorical and structural properties of the campaign's messaging regime in order to identify the tactics that may have contributed to their social media presence. I argue that the Obama campaign's communications strategy reflected early recognition of a potentially widespread future return to a two-step flow of communication, similar to the pattern described by Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld in their influential treatise *Personal Influence*. The two steps I identify, however, differ from the social referencing process they described in 1955 in that messages must now penetrate social mediascapes in order to achieve the first step. I argue that the two notable rhetorical features of this strategy were the reliance on Aristotelian ethos as a means of constructing a social media-friendly brand and the use of what I refer to as the syntax of solidarity to foster imagined community.

My third question concerns the patterns of political expression involved in the new second step. How did American young people communicate their political opinions using social media during the 2008 campaign and in what ways did their use of tools like those afforded by Facebook exemplify new and potentially important modes of influencing their peers? In order to answer this last, most central question, I conducted interviews with young Obama volunteers in New Hampshire during the last week of the campaign. In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology I employed to

conduct this research (while also volunteering with the campaign myself) and explore the three significant groups of ideas that emerged from my interviews. From this research, I conclude that supporters use social media to influence their peers because Facebook's tools make it easy to express political ideas in ways that are subject to little social friction. Almost all of the young people I interviewed told me that their Facebook profiles reflect their political beliefs, but more importantly, they viewed Facebook as a semi-public space that was socially and culturally hospitable to casual political expression. They felt that messages like "Violet is hopeful for change" were endemic to their social mediascape. I believe messages like this say more about the future of political communication than they do about the "status" of the person sending them.

## Chapter 1: Contexts

Abraham Lincoln's political career began in Illinois state politics. Both he and Barack Obama have this in common, in addition to their Harvard educations and shared interest in constitutional law. But there is another, more immediately relevant dimension of similarity between Lincoln and Obama: not only did they take the same route to the national political stage, they did so using variations of the same strategy. While serving in the state legislature as leader of the Whig Party in 1840, Lincoln penned the 19<sup>th</sup> century equivalent of a campaign brief detailing a communications plan. He was particularly emphatic on one point: "Keep a constant watch on the doubtful voters, and from time to time have them talked to by those in whom they have the most confidence" (Tarbell, 1998:164).

By insisting that the Whig campaign to elect William Henry Harrison make a "constant" effort to maintain direct communication with the swing voters they needed to persuade, Lincoln pioneered what would become a strategic pillar of many successful modern campaigns. One of the most effective practitioners of the frequent talking technique is former Republican strategist Karl Rove. In a 2007 interview with *The Washington Post*, Rove actually described the debt he owed Lincoln, no doubt in an effort to frame his work on behalf of President Bush in a grander context than that afforded by the various scandals that had attracted the media's attention by that time (Gerson, 2007). Rove's 2000 Primary and Presidential campaigns exhibited a rare mastery of the talking "from time to time" strategy; sympathetic, but potentially doubtful Republican voters were, in fact, talked to relentlessly.

Rove's first foray into national politics came in 1992, when he was a direct-mail consultant for George H. W. Bush's reelection effort in Texas. His firm Karl Rove & Co. was one of two spending the Bush campaign's million-dollar Texas direct-mail budget in that race and he applied what he believed to be the salient lesson from Bill Clinton's electoral victory, namely that too little talking (or mailing) had been done (Moore, 2004:275). He remained determined to avoid committing this error of taciturnity when he took on the role as George W. Bush's chief strategist. Bush outspent Gore by a wide margin in 2000 and Rove devoted a significant portion of the Republican war chest to direct mailing and other voter contact techniques (Green, 2004). Beginning even in advance of the hard-fought Primary, the Bush campaign, with Rove at the helm, compiled extensive contact lists and budgeted the most money for canvassing, calling, and mailing of any previous national campaign (Birnbaum, 1999).

The political commonalities shared by Obama and Lincoln should be easy for any student of Presidential history to identify—they are many and manifold, running from geography to rhetoric. Those shared by Obama and Rove, however, are tougher to spot, obscured as they are by an ocean of political and ideological disparity. (Of course, they also had very different job descriptions.) But by charting the space between them—and, more importantly, the broader social, cultural, and technological shifts that have taken place between 2000 and 2008—it is possible to better understand some of the contexts informing the Obama campaign's communications strategy. Rove knew how and when to contact specific voters. He knew how to leverage the organizational advantage he had over opponents by putting either a



mailer or a volunteer at voters' doors with unprecedented frequency and strategic precision. Rove's campaign, however, lacked the Obama campaign's message-shaping prowess; he lacked the rhetorical innovation and sophistication I will discuss further in my second chapter. His job was to manage his candidate's relationship with voters in structural terms—put simply, he was a medium man. As such, his work presents the opportunity to compare in structural terms the communications strategies deployed by the winning Presidential campaign in 2008 with those of the campaign that won eight years earlier.

In the context of his innovative efforts to target specific social groups with direct mail campaigns, Rove's tactics begin to seem remarkably similar to the ways in which the Obama campaign worked to promote the social mobility of their messages. Obama's was an even more formidable system. Like Rove and Lincoln, the Obama campaign made direct communicative connections with specific voters frequently and strategically. What was new about the Obama campaign, however, was the scale of its efforts to communicate using new media. They knocked on doors and sent direct mail, but they also used social media utilities like Facebook and Twitter, a 13-million-voter email distribution list, and SMS messaging (Delaney, 2009). These new media may have been attractive to the campaign because of their potential to help better execute the very old 'frequent talking' strategy, but they also made a whole new structure of relationships between candidates and voters possible.

On August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008, the Obama campaign sent the following text message to 2.9 million people: "Barack has chosen Senator Joe Biden to be our VP nominee. Watch the first Obama-Biden rally live at 3pm ET on [www.BarackObama.com](http://www.BarackObama.com).

Spread the word!” The people who received this message were supporters who had responded to an email in which they were invited to sign up to “be the first to know” who Obama’s Vice Presidential nominee would be (Puzzanghera, 2008). It is significant that the campaign delivered a message in which their candidate is referred to by his first name and the recipient is colloquially instructed to “spread the word”—this message provides clear examples of the rhetorical strategy I will discuss in the next chapter—but what is more significant is that the campaign was able to get this message into almost 3 million American pockets. This is just one example of the myriad ways the Obama campaign leveraged new communications technology to establish new modes of contact between its candidate and his supporters. The appeal of these media to a campaign is obvious: more talking happening in more intimate ways. This chapter analyzes what the campaign did in the context of previous comparable campaigns and ongoing technological trends. Starting with George Bush’s 2000 Presidential campaign and continuing through Howard Dean’s 2004 Democratic Primary bid, I will explore the parallel evolutions of political communications and online campaigning in the period between the internet’s emergence as an important medium for political messages and the 2008 Presidential campaign. I argue that these contexts reveal the Obama campaign’s historical moment to have been contemporaneous with the political ascendance of social media.

### **Casting Narrowly**

For every new communications medium there is a political campaign that discovers and ultimately defines its use as a tool of political persuasion. One might

even argue that the first campaign to fully exploit the potential of a new medium defines its political use to some extent because it is at this stage when the medium offers the greatest potential advantage over an opponent that has yet to fully leverage it. Roosevelt's mastery of the microphone and Kennedy's televisual charisma are easy (if not entirely conclusive) examples of this dynamic. Rove's direct mail campaigns in the 2000 and 2004 Presidential races can hardly be considered the first successful application of Gutenberg's press, but there is a case to be made that the technology on which Rove's success rested was not the printed word, but database software. In a 2003 *New Yorker* profile, Nicholas Lemann, the current dean of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, cites the importance of a then-new technology that has still received very little scholarly attention: Extensible Markup Language (XML). He writes that this data coding protocol "made it possible for political organizations to have much richer information about individual voters" (2003:79). XML is significant because of the specificity with which it enabled political campaigns to target the doubtful voters and deliver messages from people in whom they have confidence.

Lemann (2003) argues that one of the lessons Rove took from the Bush campaign's narrow win in 2000 was that campaigns "should pay less attention to consultants, television advertising, polls, and 'message,' and more attention to the old-fashioned side of the business: registering voters, organizing volunteers, making face-to-face contact during the last days of a campaign, and getting people to the polls on Election Day" (2003:79). This lesson gave rise to the vaunted turnout strategy the Bush campaign deployed in 2004, a strategy which resulted in a 20% increase in the

number of voters contacted directly between 2000 and 2004 (Bergan et al., 2005:764). In the intervening years, Rove had launched a research campaign called the 72-Hour Task Force, which sought to improve turnout among supporters by refining the campaign's one-to-one communications strategy. The reason for this surge in emphasis on traditional canvassing and phone-banking techniques in what is now thought to have been the heyday of mass communication politics is that the most astute practitioners of 21<sup>st</sup>-century electioneering (a category to which Rove certainly belongs) understood at this time that a structural shift was underway that was already diminishing the persuasive power of messages delivered via broadcast media.

One of Lemann's (2003) most revealing quotes from Rove illustrates that, while most casual observers believed that the Bush campaign's use of television advertising (particularly ad-hominem attack ads, a genre near its apotheosis at the time), was effective, the strategist himself was losing faith in the medium. Describing what he believed to be the political saturation of the television, Rove said: "I can remember focus groups in 2000 where you thought you had a room full of directors. People were talking about the production values of the spot" (Lemann, 2003:78). Seemingly almost anticipating the political use of the social media utility, Facebook, that Mark Zuckerberg would invent the following year, Lemann interprets this quote as recognition of a broader trend: "In politics now, everybody is trying to figure out twenty-first-century means of achieving the 19<sup>th</sup> century goal of establishing face-to-face relationships between political parties and voters" (2003:79).

Rove saw a decline in the utility (or at least marginal utility) of broadcast media and set about discovering new ways to apply technology like XML databases

to cast more narrowly. In 2004, many of his efforts to target specific interest groups with custom-tailored messages were successful, as evidenced by Bush's gains among conservative Catholics in Ohio (Jenkins, 2005:91). But as successful as he was in discovering the advantages of casting narrowly, Rove was less successful at building a new structure of relationship between his campaign and American voters; what he achieved was a sophisticated information system. Lemann writes that at this time "in Rove's shop in the White House... the air [was] thick with buzzwords like 'niche marketing,' 'micro-modelling,' 'targeting,' and 'granular information'" (2003:80). The nineteenth-century goal, articulated by one of the most successful nineteenth-century presidents, would be achieved in new twenty-first-century ways best by Lincoln's fellow Illinoisan and perhaps first by Howard Dean.

Between Rove's first Presidential campaign for George W. Bush and Obama's victory in the 2008 Democratic Presidential Primary, significant social, cultural, and technological shifts took place in America that changed the ways campaigns communicate. In order to understand these shifts and their implications for the future of political communication, it is useful to reflect on the contexts that inform the rise of internet campaigning. Rove saw the potential of casting his message narrowly, strategically and in ways that could catalyze support within relatively unified social groups, like conservative Catholics in Ohio. 2004 Democratic Presidential Primary candidate Howard Dean was the first American politician to (almost) capitalize on the potential of the internet. Both offer insights into what is new and significant about the Obama campaign because both contributed to the fundamental changes in the communicative relationships between American voters and politicians we observed in

2008. These relationships became intimate and characterized by more one-to-one communication. Both, therefore, campaigned in ways that set new precedents and exposed new opportunities for the Obama campaign.

## **The First Internet Campaign**

With the advent of broadcasting, information could be transmitted everywhere instantly. Incremental changes followed, but the tectonic shift was that which reduced the marginal cost of each new recipient of a given message within a given space to zero. It was a shift so pervasive that every assumption about how people communicated needed to be re-examined. Then, after the internet arrived in the mid-1990s, it was as though media critics and communications theorists had been expecting a second coming. Hyperbolic language came to dominate the discourse—a technological revolution was heralded, one akin to that which took place in the 1920's with the arrival of broadcasting. *Wired* editor Chris Anderson (2006) wrote a more nuanced account of the changing media economy in his famous 2004 essay, “The Long Tail,” which later became a book by the same name. His idea was that big would simply be forced to compete with small; he argued that the share of the world's collective attention devoted to mass media would be diminished by the sheer volume of niche media produced for (and by) individuals with shared interests. This is a significant change, to be sure, but it is not a revolution. Revolutions change everything irreversibly and the arrival of the internet did not quite change everything—Nielsen Media reports that a quarter of a million American households watched Obama's Democratic National Convention speech accepting his party's

nomination on television in August, 2008. What the internet had by this time done was lead some people, including some campaign managers, to believe that everything was *about* to change.

The title of Joe Trippi's 2005 book about internet campaigning is *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Democracy, the Internet, and the Overthrow of Everything*. He is one such believer. Trippi was a high-ranking staffer with the Dean campaign; he is credited with developing the internet communications strategy that enabled much of Dean's early success in the 2004 Democratic Primary. Other prophets of the decline and fall of broadcasting, like David Weinberger (one of the authors of *The Cluetrain Manifesto* (2000), a book, website and wiki that claimed to describe how the changing media landscape would effect marketers), also populated the upper echelons of the campaign (Locke, et. al., 2001). To the great disappointment of these believers, the Dean team failed to overthrow everything and television ultimately claimed its retribution for the brief insurrection by relentlessly airing the now-famous "scream".<sup>3</sup> But many of the campaign's tactics were nothing short of revolutionary and its use of the internet reveals a great deal about how political communication changed between 2000 and 2008. A large-scale online fundraising apparatus and a young, passionate group of supporters reaching out with blogs, viral videos, and email chains were not Obama innovations. Although it's clear that the Dean internet campaign was not transformative on the same scale as the Obama campaign, it did pioneer new ways of contacting voters, many of which Obama used to far greater effect.

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<sup>3</sup> Dean was filmed on January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2004, after losing the Iowa Caucuses awkwardly yelling the word "yeah." The moment later became viewed as a turning point in the campaign.

Prior to the Dean campaign, the internet was a place to post campaign literature and sometimes raise money from tech-savvy coastal elites. During the 2000 Presidential campaign, surveys showed that only 10% of Americans used the internet as a way to get information about political campaigns and even fewer used it as a tool for supporting them (Chadwick, 2006:155). Andrew Chadwick describes the 2000 elections as a “transitional stage on the way to something more significant” (2006:154). And as a measure of significance, he notes that by the end of the 2000 Primaries, Al Gore had raised only \$10 million online (Chadwick, 2006:154). If the success of political campaigns were gauged by fundraising totals rather than by vote totals, perhaps Dean would qualify as a revolutionary after all—despite having been written off after successive losses in the first two primaries, he raised more than \$40 million, largely on the strength of an unprecedented number of online contributions (Chadwick, 2006:164). The Dean campaign’s fundraising success has been variously attributed to a groundswell of anti-war sentiment, advances in security for online transactions, and everything in-between. There were myriad variables, but the real reason he raised so much more money than his competitors (he beat John Kerry, the eventual nominee, in every reporting quarter of 2004) is that he was asking for it in new ways (Chadwick, 2006:165). And asking a lot.

Kelly Nuxoll (2007), the email manager for the Dean campaign, summarized her communications strategy by describing the rule for fundraising messages: “send at least three, if not five” (Nuxoll, 2007:195). Nuxoll wrote hundreds of Dean emails; she tells the story of her experience as though the campaign had its own voice and it was an important part of her job to ensure that all of her emails used it. The



campaign established conventions that governed the tone, style, and structure of all the campaign's email communications: "never say 'our' campaign; say 'your' campaign," write with "a real human voice" (Nuxoll, 2007:194). These rules are designed to make political rhetoric personal and they sound like they could have been drawn from the Obama campaign playbook. Messages encoded with this colloquial, informal style—a tone and voice that says "you, me, Howard (or Barack), and all our friends, we're on the same team"—are, for obvious reasons, most effective when they're delivered using a one-to-one medium, or at least a medium that approximates a one-to-one social structure. They work when they show up inside the social and cultural barriers we put up to corral political discourse. These barriers often follow the contours of various types of communities, which is one of the reasons Rove's data strategy was designed to survey the fence lines of target groups.

The Dean campaign's most formidable tool was its email lists. Convio—an Austin-based technology company that describes itself as an "Internet software and services company that provides online Constituent Relationship Management (eCRM) solutions for nonprofit organizations"—claims to have managed an email distribution list of more than 600,000 subscribers for the Dean campaign. But this number does not reflect the real number of people Kelly Nuxoll was talking to. The list was constantly in flux, with people being added and removed daily, and enthusiastic supporters forwarding or cc-ing messages onward to their peers. Facebook wasn't launched until a week after Dean lost the New Hampshire primary; email *was* the social medium of the moment in 2003. Even in 2008, email remained the gateway to the rest of the Obama campaign's digital communications and one of

the best ways of building social momentum. Delany (2009) describes it as persistently important even in the age of Facebook: “Email was the main tool used to build relationships with supporters and to raise money... the campaign’s (opt-in-only) list topped 13 million names, to whom were sent some 7000 separate campaign-written emails totaling roughly one billion actual messages” (2009:8). And those were just the emails sent by the campaign; email was also “one of the main ways individual activists spread the word among their own friends and family” (Delaney, 2009:9). By 2004, the best way for political messages to penetrate the complex systems of barriers and membranes we use to organize the media flows in our lives was for them to be channeled through our peers.

The Dean campaign did not deploy a cohesive Web 2.0 communications strategy, but it was innovative in creating new ways for energetic supporters to influence their peers. By organizing and communicating with supporters using a decentralized, ‘pass it on’ social structure and encouraging initiative with ‘Meetup’ gatherings organized online, they were able to engender a campaign culture that supporters felt was more personal and “authentic” (Teachout and Streeter, 2007:25). This decentralization was both a content strategy and a contact strategy; the ‘Deaniacs’ found new channels for talking to the electorate and used them to establish new modes of talking to the electorate. They created a new structure of relationship between supporters and the campaign by communicating with voters in ways that made them feel like they were engaged in a shared project with the campaign.

Variations on ‘Yes We Can’<sup>4</sup> have always been part of the rhetoric campaigns use to consolidate support, but this rhetoric is a lot more believable if supporters are constantly being “talked to” via email and these conversations take place in a tone and style that resembles a friendly exchange between peers, particularly if both parties share a goal. They may not have stormed the Bastille, but they certainly instigated the early skirmishes of the revolution by subverting earlier relationship structures.

Supporters enjoyed a much more intimate relationship with the Dean campaign than the supporters of any of the other Primary candidates did, but the campaign failed to scale beyond regional early-state insurgency status. Dean’s campaign was built for the Democratic Primaries, which are famously a game of retail politics, grassroots organizing, and mobilizing supporters. Because Dean didn’t win the nomination and the key figures behind his online communications strategy, like Joe Trippi, never migrated to the Kerry campaign, we are left to speculate as to how the tactics Dean and Trippi pioneered might have worked in the General Election. Like Rove’s data systems, Dean’s email lists were used to organize, motivate, and mobilize specific groups of likely supporters. What remained untested in 2004 was the ability of a participatory campaign, one in which supporters feel like stakeholders, to maintain the passionate engagement of supporters as it grows to the scale of a general election and the goal shifts toward persuading undecided voters. Social media makes it easier for passionate supporters, like those who built Dean’s early momentum, to co-create and reproduce a campaign’s messages and images in

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<sup>4</sup> An Obama-branded trope that first emerged in his concession speech following his loss to Hillary Clinton in the New Hampshire Primary.

ways that invite peers who might not be as passionate (or might not otherwise have cared at all) to become engaged in the campaign. One of the goals of this thesis is to explore how the Obama campaign—itsself at one time an early-state insurgency, albeit a more successful one—used Facebook to precisely this effect.

## **Casting Narrowly, Broadened**

When comparing the Dean campaign to the Obama campaign, technological determinism is, as always, a seductively baited snare. Facebook topped 1 million active users for the first time one month after the 2004 General Election and topped 100 million users for the first time 2 months before the 2008 General Election (Facebook). A spate of recent sociological studies have shown that use of social networking sites ranked among the most popular online activities in this period (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Pempek et al., 2009). And between 2004 and 2008, voter turnout among Americans aged 18 to 29 increased by about 10% (CIRCLE, 2009). Then there's the money. Obama raised \$750 million to finance his win in 2008, which dwarfs the \$370 million incumbent George W. Bush raised in 2004. What's more significant is that 88% of that total came from individual donors, compared with only 74% of Bush's total (OpenSecrets, 2009). Official Federal Election Commission data do not include the medium through which donations were made, but Members of Triple O, Obama's online fundraising operation, revealed to the *Washington Post* that 3 million donors made a total of 6.5 million contributions online adding up to more than \$500 million (Vargas, 2008). Turnout among young people, social media use, and online fundraising cannot be linked by the interpolation of any one technology,

but a broader trend does emerge from these and other diverse aspects of the 2008 campaign: a rise in engagement.

Facebook is an efficient facilitator of engagement. In the two chapters that follow I will explore how social media made it easy for young people to proliferate messages and images encouraging their peers to become involved with the campaign, but here I intend only to provide the technological, social and cultural contexts within which the Obama campaign's successes were achieved. And the 2008 election's measurable increase in political engagement took place, generally, in the context of Web 2.0 giving rise to social media and, specifically, in the context of Facebook emerging as the dominant social media utility (Small, 2008:85). The internet as a whole played a significant role in this change, with 55% of the American voting age population getting information about the campaign or participating in the campaign somehow online (Smith, 2009:3). This figure is unsurprising because, between 2000 and 2008, 20% more Americans got online (Pew Internet and Life Project). The number of people who used the internet to engage with a campaign or a political issue, however, is surprising. In 2008, approximately one in five American internet users actively participated in online political discourse by posting a comment or a question on a website or using social media to communicate a political message. Social media were the most frequent venue for online participation and Obama supporters were 10% more likely to engage online than McCain supporters (Smith, 2009:13).

Young people are the focus of this thesis not only because they voted in greater numbers than they had in previous elections—this statistic could have

prompted an investigation of any of the myriad ways the 2008 election garnered more attention than previous races—but also because they are the most frequent and committed political Facebook. Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 were more likely to use the internet to engage politically in general than any other age group, but they were more than twice as likely to use a social networking site to engage than the next most likely group, 30-49-year-olds (Smith, 2009:17). There is also considerable evidence that, throughout the period of the campaign, social mediascapes were politically charged environments, with more than half of online social network users expressing themselves politically. And the specific behaviors set out to investigate were particularly common among young people: 41% discovered which candidate their friends voted for, 33% posted political content for their friends to see, and 26% revealed on these sites which Presidential candidate they voted for (Smith, 2009:43). I will elaborate further on my methodology in Chapter 3, but these statistics illustrate in part why I chose to study young Obama supporters in my pursuit of a better understanding of the political use of social media.

It is instructive to situate the ascendance of social media within the context of Karl Rove's efforts to use data technologies to figure out who best to talk to and Howard Dean's use of the internet to talk more frequently and more intimately with his supporters because all three are driven by a shared impulse, one that was articulated in the restrained language of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Lincoln. It is impossible to be certain what he meant by "doubtful"—perhaps this is a concise way to describe what we now call 'swing voters' or 'late breakers'—but we know, in the very least, that the word "doubtful" is an adjective. His intent was not to talk to all voters or whichever voters chose to listen; he is describing a specific group of persuadable people who are neither firm supporters nor decided

opponents. Neither Rove nor Dean and Trippi sought out the ears of doubtful people; in fact, both targeted people who were relatively certain about specific things, from the war in Iraq to a woman's reproductive rights. But both saw the electorate as organized by social and cultural forces, not by the boundaries of media markets. Both, therefore, saw the benefit of casting their messages narrowly and both succeeded (on different scales, to be sure) in building communications strategies that used new media to shape and accelerate the proliferation of their messages in and through the communities they targeted. In this context, it is possible to imagine Facebook as being built following the collapse of the Dean campaign for the purpose of supporting the growth of the next early state insurgency.

Facebook, of course, wasn't built for this purpose. It was built for college and university students to curate markers of their identity, from expressions of political opinions to expressions of appreciation for bands and television shows, and display these markers in a way that would be visible to their peers. The Facebook group "1 Million Strong for Barack" may have met and exceeded its membership goal, but this is still for the most part what the site is used for. Both Rove and Dean talked to certain supporters frequently in order to build engagement and Dean in particular, with Joe Trippi's help, began to discover new ways to exploit a then-nascent Web 2.0 media ecology to talk *with* supporters for the same purpose. Neither had the benefit of a medium that would enable them to talk with voters who might then, depending on the success of the conversation, integrate the campaign's images and messages into their online identity. Such a medium, I hypothesize, not only makes engagement easy; it makes engagement social and communicable. And though it may not be possible to argue that the widespread use of this technology among American young people explains their greater collective

participation in the 2008 election, I will argue that it contributed to this shift and that the ways in which it contributed warrant scholarly attention.

In this chapter I have shown that the Obama campaign benefited from a moment in the history of social media's political ascendance that created the opportunity to build a communications strategy that could be propelled by unprecedented social momentum. Rove's direct mail tactics and techniques for defining and targeting small communities (geographic and imagined) preceded the Obama campaign's social media strategy by subverting the primacy of mass media and recognizing that a messaging strategy is potentially most persuasive when it can penetrate socially-defined community boundaries. The Dean campaign's innovations then went further, using the internet to turn the campaign into its own community or network of communities. His was the first campaign to exploit Web 2.0, thereby decentralizing control of parts of its communications strategy, and it even used elements of the rhetorical system I will describe in Chapter 2. Perhaps the country wasn't quite ripe for Dean's brand of change or perhaps the candidate was not personally charismatic enough to build the social momentum Obama enjoyed. I believe it's most likely that neither condition existed in 2004, but also that Obama's successes cannot be explained simply as a function of intersecting social, cultural and technological trends or his personal charisma. His communications strategy relied on particular tactics that leveraged both these trends and his charisma to harness the social momentum he enjoyed.



## Chapter 2: The Rhetoric of the First Socially Mediated Campaign

All politics is personal. If Tip O’Neil, the late Congressman whose insights remain the stuff of Democratic Party orthodoxy, had survived to witness the arrival of the first national internet campaign, that’s what his famous maxim would have been. It’s not that politics is any less local than it was in the 1930s when he first learned this lesson—quite the opposite, actually: the American political landscape is now in some ways more like it was then than at any other time since. It was in the 1930s that the last paradigm-shifting communications technology transformed the dominant social structure of political communications. Television, while certainly a transformational technology, distributes messages according to the same structural model (broadcasting) that radio introduced. (Or at least it did until recently.) When Roosevelt addressed the nation with his first Fireside Chat, he ushered in an era in which the dominant mode of talking to Americans involved creating a single message and transmitting it through the air so as to reach as many people simultaneously as possible. This created a social structure of communication according to which politics remained qualitatively less “local” local than they were prior to rise of mass media. But the basic concept of “local” politics has recently been making a dramatic comeback. O’Neil was talking about the persistent value of traditional “shoe leather” retail politics, but he could have been talking about how politicians turn mass campaigns with minimal effects into grassroots campaigns with significant effects. He could have been talking about the Obama campaign.

What local politics meant in 1932 was campaigning on a social and cultural scale that let political communicators circulate messages within a single interpretive community. This has always been an effective way of campaigning, but it's costly and time-consuming. Broadcasting was simply much more cost-effective and efficient. But the opposite is now true. Social media utilities like Facebook create channels and venues for a social referencing process that make virtual local campaigning cheap and efficient. Messages from campaigns that penetrate online interpretive communities like Facebook can travel within them broadly, instantly and with almost no cost. The advantage of local campaigning—shoe leather politics, marathon grip-and-grin sessions, assembly line baby-kissing—is authenticity. It's about the projection of empathy and the claiming of 'one of us' status. And it worked because politicians who (physically) got inside voters' communities had a far better shot at penetrating their defensive cynicism and mistrust than those who did not. What is different now is that these communities are online.

The traditional concept of local campaigning's value and merit still informs the strategies of successful politicians. Door-to-door canvassing, for instance, remains the most effective method (on a per-contact basis) for promoting turnout among sympathetic voters, according to a comprehensive series of field experiments by Yale political scientists Alan Gerber and Donald Green (2001:26) testing different techniques during real elections. But authenticity, the prize for which politicians campaign locally, can now increasingly be won by campaigning personally, virtually. This is the value of the efficient, transparent and public social-referencing process that Facebook provides. In this chapter I will argue that when a campaign's messages

are inserted into a mediascape where they can be rapidly proliferated via their endorsement (and, by extension, co-production) by supporters, authenticity and credibility may be rapidly accumulated. Of course, by campaigning ‘personally’ I don’t mean campaigning for and by oneself. I mean two things: first, that the Obama campaign successfully employed the syntax and rhetoric of interpersonal communication and, second, that the campaign’s communications strategy exemplified the successful penetration of newly personalized mediascapes.

In my first chapter I described the cultural and technological contexts that informed and gave rise to the Obama campaign’s communications successes. In this chapter I intend to focus more specifically on the attributes of the campaign’s messaging strategy that I argue enabled these successes. My third chapter is concerned primarily with the results of the field research I conducted while campaigning in New Hampshire, but it is useful here to mention one compelling discovery that emerged from my interviews: Obama supporters usually described a significant degree of exposure to campaign messaging that was mediated and re-produced by—or co-produced with—their peers. When I asked them what kinds of things they were seeing or hearing about the campaign, they frequently described materials to which they had become exposed via online social-referencing processes. They were receiving the campaign’s messages from the campaign, but frequently also from the campaign via their friends. These messages included everything from a forwarded YouTube clip to an image on a Facebook profile “wall,” but it all circulated within online personal communicative ecosystems. It’s all part of the new personal-virtual local.

Volunteers also described surprisingly frequent contact with the campaign and a relationship with the campaign (extending to the candidate himself) that was intensely personal in character. The combination of this personal relationship with the campaign and the rapid, fluid social referencing processes made possible by utilities like Facebook created feedback dynamics whereby the co-production of some messages by supporters lent the messages produced and disseminated entirely by the campaign a personal character they would not otherwise have had. A Facebook message from the campaign feels more personal, I argue, to someone who is also receiving similar messages from the campaign *via* their peers. But the only practical way to understand how these messaging strategies function is to first examine the specific direct messaging tactics the campaign employed, then consider how the messages circulate socially. These are the two steps that constitute the model I propose for explaining the persuasive force (or flow) of the Obama's campaign's messaging strategy: Step 1, the deployment of a rhetoric that facilitates an imagined personal relationship with the candidate, thereby promoting engagement and, Step 2, the co-production, socially mediated reception, and social proliferation of the campaign's messages.

The first step seems obvious, given the campaign's success, but is nonetheless worth examining with the aid of a more robust analytical toolkit than that which has (so far) been applied. Writing in *The New York Times Magazine* in the weeks before Obama's inauguration, Matt Bai (2009) noted a study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project showing that "more than half of Obama's online supporters expect to hear directly from the president or his administration in the months ahead,

and 62 percent of Obama voters expect that they will urge other people to support his policies” (48). He went on to argue that these data are indicative of an “intimacy between president and voter that surpasses anything born of the broadcast age” (48). Bai is one of many commentators to notice that the relationship between Obama and those supporters with whom he communicates online is a new phenomenon, but there remains a conspicuous dearth of understanding when it comes to how these relationships actually work or how they were formed in the first place.

I think the answers to the questions that persist into the first term of the Obama administration can be found at the intersection of classical rhetorical theory and ongoing discourses in communication theory. The first question is how did they so pervasively traverse our ever-more-effectively mediated, moderated, edited and curated personal mediascapes that the supporters I interviewed were finding campaign messaging on their peers’ Facebook news feeds and tweet-streams everywhere they turned? This, I believe, was achieved through the campaign’s use of the oldest trick in the political rhetoric book—the book, naturally, being Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. The campaign’s messages traveled across social mediascapes and between potential supporters with unprecedented velocity and fluidity because, I argue, they were constructed with an ethos-driven rhetorical style.

The second area of inquiry I intend to explore (Step 2) is how these campaign messages circulated and proliferated within and between supporters’ personal mediascapes. I will argue that the rhetoric with which the individual messages were constructed not only promoted their penetration, but enabled the further infusion of authenticity provided by a synthetic co-creation process mirroring that which Elihu

Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld observed in their seminal 1955 work, *Personal Influence*. Katz and Lazarsfeld's two-step flow of communication—the notion that media messages are filtered through social reference processes, colloquially (if reductively) called the water cooler effect—lost credibility when the minimal effects hypothesis that accompanied it gave way to the mass effects of mass communication theory (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008:4). The fragmentation of mass media, however, has more recently resulted in a fragmentation of mass communication theory, leaving elements of Katz and Lazarsfeld's 1955 work more relevant than they have been in a generation.

Drawing on the masterfully disruptive recent work of W. Lance Bennett and Shanto Iyengar (2008), I argue that the notion of messages gaining mobility, credibility, authenticity, and (notably) “influence” through a social reference process deserve resurrection. In fact, I believe the complex and sophisticated social reference processes engendered by social media like Facebook may now be a greater force for organizing influence (albeit in a typically internet-age chaotic and asymmetrical fashion) than their 1940s equivalents were among Katz and Lazarsfeld's Decatur, Illinois, test group. Arguments such as those advanced by Todd Gitlin in his 1978 critique of *Personal Influence* focus on the disintegration of the institutions of social organization that served as the apparatus of social reference in pre-mass media America and assert that mass effects have supplanted minimal effects as a result of this disintegration. But political communication, in the era of mass media fragmentation and selective consumption, is increasingly subject to what even Gitlin

(1978) would now have to recognize as diminishing effects (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008:10).

So the prevailing argument critiquing the prevailing critique of Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow of communication relies on the assertion that mass effects have declined with the decline of mass media. The result must therefore be a return to messages achieving little effect on their own, or at least little effect after only one step. Now, however, this assertion appears to be met with at least one obvious contradiction: the Obama campaign's messaging strategy was not met with minimal effects. There's little evidence that he persuaded large numbers of Republicans to vote Democratic, but he did persuade large numbers of typically apathetic young people to vote. Under-25 turnout to the traditionally retiree-saturated Iowa caucuses soared 135% in 2008, and that's after Dean's youth-focused, campus-driven 2004 campaign (Von Drehle, 2008). And in the 2008 general, turnout among Americans aged 18 to 29 increased by about 10% over 2004 (CIRCLE, 2009).

Obama's ethos-driven rhetoric is part of a political messaging strategy that operates according to a two-step model. As with the model Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) envisioned, the success of the second step depends on the success of the first. I will therefore begin by examining how his messages achieved the first step—penetrating a potential supporter's membrane of selective exposure, persuading him or her to opt-in to the campaign's communication regime—and then explore how their effects were multiplied and amplified by processes of social reference and social creation. Messages that inhabit a supporter's personalized communicative ecosystem proliferate, providing both social references for the broader campaign while also

gaining credibility and authenticity. In this chapter I will explore how messages and messaging strategies that function (and flow) in this way can be systemically constructed and deployed, but also consider ways in which the success of the Obama campaign's tactics might reflect the emergence of broader issues for the future of political communication.

### **The First Step**

Aristotle wrote of ethos, the first of his three modes of persuasion, that “we believe good men more fully and more readily than others” (2004:7). This, while certainly true, is limited in its instructive value—it amounts to ‘be good and you’ll be persuasive.’ He does, however, offer another more helpful description of ethos as rhetorical mode: “persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible” (2004:7). This might seem so intuitive as to lack any applicable insight. Until the implications of the link between credibility and character are considered, that is. Aristotle is saying, first, that it is possible to deliver “speech... so spoken as to make us think [a skilled rhetorician] credible” and, second, that so speaking informs the impression of the rhetorician's character held by his or her audience. (2004:7). This is not a trivial claim. Aristotle reinforces it, adding: “this is true generally, whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided”<sup>5</sup> (2004:7). His point is not simply that a rhetorical strategy focused on describing positive attributes of the speaker's character might be effective, but that speech can be performed in

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<sup>5</sup> Book I, Chapter II; retrieved March 20, 2009, from public.iastate.edu.



such a way as to emphasize the speaker's character and that speech so encoded can be intrinsically persuasive.

### ***Ethos and Modern Political Rhetoric***

Due to the fragmentation of mass-media, new technologies enabling ever-more sophisticated selective consumption, and the mass personalization of online mediascapes, American opinions have scattered and diverged since the height of broadcasting. Opinions are certainly divided. And few could argue that Obama's March 18, 2008, race speech (titled "A More Perfect Union") was not 'spoken as to make us think him credible' (Bobo and Dawson, 2009:9). Obama's rhetoric in this speech as in others was engineered in exactly the way Aristotle describes ethos: persuasion achieved by character achieved by credibility. The sequence, in Obama's case, functions as follows: first enough credibility had to be established so that his campaign could rest significantly on his personal traits, then a messaging strategy had to be constructed that would engender and reinforce an imagined personal communicative relationship between the candidate and his supporters. David Gliem and James Janack (2008) examined BarackObama.com in 2008 and found significant continuity between the text and images on the site and the rhetoric of his speeches, concluding that the two were coordinated in order to reinforce the perception that Obama was a "transformational leader" like Martin Luther King, Jr. and John F. Kennedy. This was among the most transparently ethos-driven tactics the campaign deployed, since the goal is to simply draw credibility from other credible figures. Because there exists both an exhaustive body of literature discussing strategies for shaping affect generally in political communication—consider Marcus Cicero's

famous maxim, “the effect is in the affect”—and considerable scholarly discourse (Frank and McPhail; Gliem and Janack, 2008) concerning Obama’s particular affect, I will focus primarily on the specific rhetorical attributes of the campaign’s messages that reflect an ethos-driven strategy. Briefly, however, it is worth mentioning that his affect (generally) was effective.

Obama rallies were emotion-saturated events. This fact is best evidenced by searching YouTube for coverage of events like his Iowa victory speech (or even his subsequent New Hampshire concession speech). ‘Man on the street’ interviews showed some supporters giddy with excitement and others with tears streaming down their faces. Every politician aspires to be able to reach these oratorical heights of passion because energized supporters are influential supporters, but it’s also important to note that emotions, generally, play a significant role in the way Americans make voting decisions. Drew Westen (2007) posits in *The Political Brain* that, “although both have an impact, gut level feelings (‘I like this guy’ / ‘I don’t like this guy’) are about three times as powerful as more ‘rationally’ derived preferences in predicting electoral choices” (2007:120). On July 24, 2008, Obama gave a well-received speech at Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate. Given that the primary alternative to ethos according to Aristotle’s formulation is logos, the ‘what I can do for you’ strategy, the German speech demonstrates something interesting about Obama’s rhetoric. There was very little he could have done for his German audience, but my own YouTube viewing of the scene in Berlin suggests to me that they were energized. And logos does not easily energize non-constituents. Of course, many Americans were even more energized—one of the questions I asked Obama supporters in New

Hampshire was “why come out this time?” and most respondents couched their answers in the personal attributes of the candidate.

Arguing that political theorists should devote more attention to understanding ethos in a contemporary context, Simone Chambers (2009) notes that “[ethos] leaves much to the serendipitous appearance of certain individuals” (339). Expressing concern about the persuasive power of ethos-driven communications strategies, she goes on to argue that “interest in character can turn into an obsession with image and images can be packaged like commodities” (340). In the specific context of Obama, she shares this concern with many of his critics, but obsession with his image is not at issue here—the efficacy of ethos is. Because ethos is potentially three times more powerful than its logic-based sibling, politicians like Obama who can serendipitously appear and evoke ‘I like this guy’ sentiments without muddying themselves with policy prescriptions, are well advised to leave their political identities loosely defined. Ellen McGirt (2008), writing in the Silicon Valley business magazine *Fast Company* during the primary season, may have been the first to articulate the way in which Obama's style made his communications strategy better able to live and proliferate online than that of his rivals. She pointed out that Obama’s campaign (or branding strategy, as she saw it) was uniquely well suited to the diffusion of control and flattening of hierarchy that accompanies social media communications. “Traditional top-down messages don't often work in a system where the masses are in charge. Marketers must cede a certain degree of control over their brands. Yet giving up control online, in the right way, unleashes its own power... Obama has tapped into that power” (McGirt, 2008:87).

Obama ceded control of his brand to his supporters by encouraging them to participate in his messaging strategy. The nature of this participation ranges from semi-professional user-generated content, like the “Obama Girl” and “Yes We Can” videos, and the use of tools like My.BarackObama.com that enabled supporters to make canvassing calls for the campaign to entirely independent grassroots movements.<sup>6</sup> This kind of relationship between the campaign and its grassroots is made possible by the candidate’s rhetorical success in building a brand that supporters want to own. Obama’s Super Tuesday victory speech, for instance, a classically eloquent example of traditional political stagecraft, became one of the most viewed videos on the internet the week it was delivered (Kellner, 2009:718). Douglas Kellner (2009) points out that, following the officially sanctioned videos and the freelance efforts “Obama Girl” and “Yes We Can,” “there emerged grassroots-based videos made by ordinary people who produced their own videos and narratives to support Obama” (719). The supporters that made these videos used them as a “platform for grassroots political mobilization with which to inspire and consolidate potential Obama supporters online and off-line” (Kellner, 2009: 719). Ben Boer (2009), a former Vice President of Technology for educational software company AHA! Interactive and an Obama consultant, described this structure according to which content was inspired by the campaign but produced by supporters that appears alongside content produced by the campaigns itself as an “open source” movement

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<sup>6</sup> Both the “Obama Girl” and “Yes We Can” videos were semi-professionally produced viral videos not explicitly sanctioned by the campaign, but nonetheless widely circulated with tacit approval. Obama Girl’s videos (obamagirl.com) showed an attractive woman singing “I’ve got a crush on Obama,” while “Yes We Can” (my.barackobama.com/page/invite/yeswecanvideo) also a music video, was a mashup featuring celebrities like musician will.i.am singing lines from Obama’s speeches over music.

(Boer, 2009:38). But for the purpose of understanding how Obama's rhetorical strategy worked, the significance of this flattened communications structure is that a broad range of messages must fit within the overall messaging campaign. Obama's rhetoric accommodates a wide array of different messages from different sources because the unifying force is Obama himself. With a surplus of positive affect to spread around, the campaign did exactly that.

An ethos-driven rhetorical strategy is one that supports messaging promiscuity. This was desirable partially because the people to whom the campaign ceded control of Obama's brand were his supporters and doing so gave them a sense of equity in the campaign—co-producers are stakeholders. But it's also useful because it's easier to build a movement around supporters' faith in the "personal character" of the candidate than around any one idea or collection of ideas. Drawing on data from their 1996 study polling voters on their emotional response to then-candidates Bill Clinton and Bob Dole, Just et al. (2007) argue that "hope is a powerful coping mechanism that can mould perceptions about candidates and bias information search" (2007:231). A candidate who can inspire hope and persuade people to invest that hope in his or her personal character can build broad coalitions, crossing otherwise treacherous boundaries like party (and policy).

### ***The Syntax of Solidarity***

Once Obama supporters had invested their hopes in the candidate and his credibility, gaining a sense of equity in the campaign, they could be further galvanized, energized, and mobilized by rhetorical tactics that emphasized shared

participation in a common mission. These tactics employ the syntax of "We," a simple conjugative maneuver that transforms a sermon into a rally and a fundraising email into a call for collective action. This syntax was deployed persistently and pervasively across every medium and every message. It was maintained assiduously by campaign representatives ranging from campaign manager David Plouffe to local precinct captains. Not only does this continuity spread Obama's golden affect around to areas of the campaign he never touched, it spreads the suggestion of a personal relationship with the candidate to areas of the messaging strategy that would otherwise feel like traditionally top-down, one-way communication. It lends ethos and a sense of shared participation in the movement to even the most mundane communications.

In his definitive work on the nexus of language, commerce, and politics, Norman Fairclough (1989) termed this tactic "synthetic personalization." And he was mostly cynical about its use. "Synthetic personalization stimulates solidarity: it seems that the more 'mass' the media become, and therefore the less in touch with individuals or particular groupings in their audiences, the more media workers and 'personalities' (including politicians) purport to relate to members of their audience as individuals who share large areas of common ground" (Fairclough, 1989:195). Writing in the context of Thatcher's England, a political climate he abhorred, Fairclough saw this as an insidiously powerful and persuasive feature of what he assumed to be an increasingly mass communication. The effects (mass effects) he presupposed were the further reduction of public discourse to a unidirectional flow with citizens acting only as passive consumers.

It's impossible to determine the relative weight of the two obvious reasons Fairclough could not have anticipated Obama—he was writing at the apex of the broadcast era and under the rule of the Iron Lady—but the communicative relationship he envisions, whether insidious or not, would seem unfamiliar to Obama supporters. “Thatcher... builds a relationship with the ‘public’ based in part upon synthetic personalization... and constructs ‘the public’ as a community of political consumption, which real people are induced to join” (Fairclough, 1989:197). Right or wrong, if Fairclough’s concept of synthetic personalization were applied to them, they’d object to the characterization of their community as one in which only consumption is shared. More importantly, though, they’d object to the way it characterizes their relationship with the candidate. He wrote that “party politics, in becoming increasingly conducted through one-way public discourse in the media, with advertising as its model, is increasingly retreating from two-way, face-to face discourse” (Fairclough, 1989:211). But Obama supporters don’t feel that their relationship with the campaign is like that which exists between an advertiser and consumer.

Future marketers would do well to take note of why not, because most supporters did not necessarily interact with the campaign in a way that would not be possible for Coke, Nike or Apple if a savvy enough social media strategy were to be applied. George Christodoulides writes that “post-internet branding is about facilitating conversations around the brand. Consumers are now wired and capitalize on social networks to derive power from one another” (Christodoulides, 2009:142). He was referring to recent evolutions in marketing theory, but he could easily have

been talking about the model for building political brands pioneered by Obama. The important thing isn't how the relationship was constructed, it's whether or not supporters feel the sense that they're part of the way the brand's image is shaped. Fairclough (1989) argues that "people's involvement in politics is less and less as citizens, and more and more as consumers; their bases of participation are less and less the real communities they belong to, and more and more the political equivalents of consumption communities, which political leaders construct for them" (1989:211). But Christodoulides (2009) also describes socially-mediated evolutions in the communitarian ways we consume: "the internet enables consumers to... satisfy their social needs through sharing of consumption-related experiences" (2009:142). And if the bases of participation from which supporters engage with the campaign are real communities, they participate more as citizens. Facebook communities could, from a certain perspective, be perceived as consumption communities, but the politicians didn't construct them; they happened organically and the politicians had to learn how to infiltrate them.

Obama's successful use of synthetic personalization as a tactic was made possible by his ethos-driven rhetorical style, but it also contributed to the shaping of that style. The emotional engagement his supporters felt with the campaign and the candidate himself (by virtue of his "personal character") when they attended or watched a speech was extended to the campaign's digital messages because the consistent use of the syntax of solidarity created continuity. Ethos is much more easily projected in speech, but it's transferable to text when encoded in this syntax. The use of the first person plural pronoun in a speech promotes inclusion—"speaker



plus third party plus addressee”—that pretty much every politician knows (Coville, 2008:5). But in an email (figure 1), an SMS message (figure 2), or a tweet (figure 3), it’s ‘Barack and me’ who are included. Noting that Obama supporters expected to maintain this communicative relationship even after his inauguration, Matt Bai (2009) writes that, “to a striking degree, voters seem to feel a personal connection with Obama. This is why they refer to him in interviews, routinely, using only his first name” (2009:48).

Tomorrow Close | X

Barack Obama to me

Nov 3, 2008 11:03 AM Reply ▼

David --

We're just one day away from change.

Election Day is tomorrow -- Tuesday, November 4th.

We've asked you to do a lot over the course of this campaign, and you've always come through.

Right now, I'm asking you to do one last thing -- vote tomorrow, and make sure everyone you know votes, too.

Watch a short video about how far we've come, and how close we are. Then find or confirm your polling location and make sure your friends and family do the same.



When this campaign began, we weren't given much of a chance by the politicos or the pundits.

But tomorrow, we can make history.

We've made it this far because supporters like you never stopped believing in your power to bring about real change.

Take the final step now.


Watch the video, find your polling location, and get everyone you know involved on Election Day.

<http://my.barackobama.com/nov4>

With your vote, and the votes of your friends, family, and neighbors, we won't just win this election -- together, we will change this country and change the world.

Thank you,

Barack



**LAST CHANCES FOR CHANGE**

Sign up to volunteer: <http://my.barackobama.com/nov4>

Here are some tips to help you make sure Election Day is your last: <http://my.barackobama.com/nov4>

**LAST CHANCE TO DONATE**

<http://my.barackobama.com/nov4>

Figure 1: This email was sent on November 3, 2008, from "info@barackobama.com" the address the campaign attributed to the candidate.

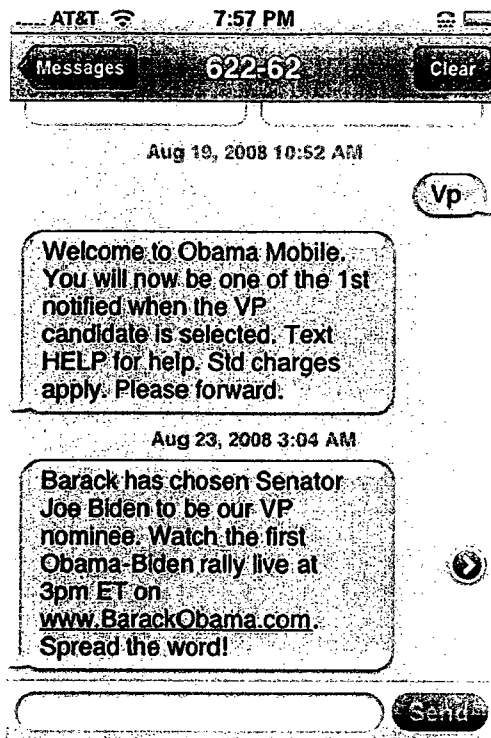


Figure 2: This SMS message was sent on August 23, 2008, to supporters who had previously submitted their cell phone numbers to the campaign by sending the letters “vp” to the campaign’s code number.

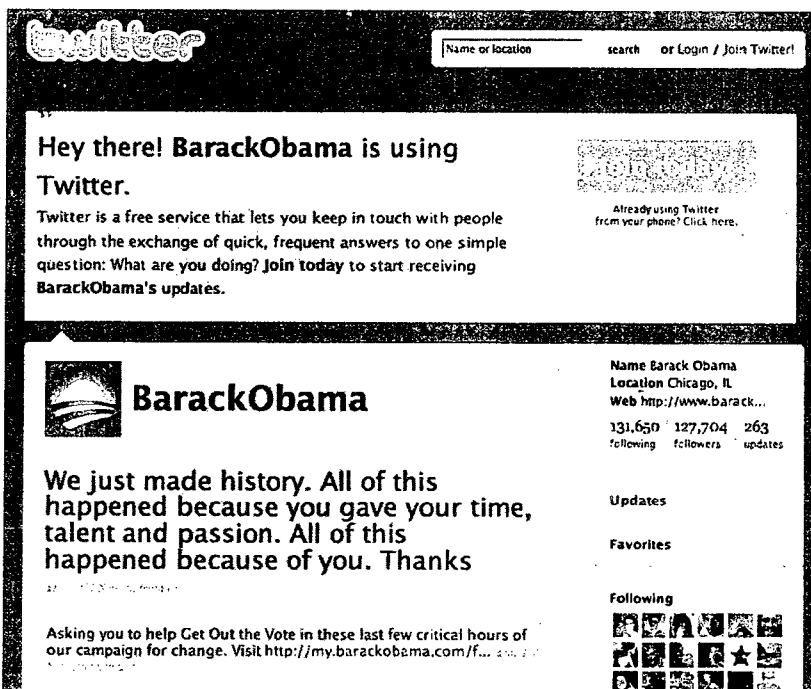


Figure 3: This screenshot of @BarackObama's Twitter feed was taken on November 5, 2008.

It's an emotional dynamic—the emotions in rallies and speeches permeate the digital messaging strategy and the sense of intimacy with which the syntax of solidarity infuses individual messages is reflected back upon the campaign in other dimensions of its relationship with supporters. Ethos is reinforced by this feedback loop—supporters' emotional engagement with the campaign motivates them to let the messages into their personal mediascapes, either by giving the campaign an email address, following the candidate on twitter, or friending him on Facebook. And, facilitating the second step through which the campaign's influence flows, their emotional engagement is also a force adding credibility to the campaign's messages as they are received by others. "Emotions are contagious," Drew Westen (2007), a psychologist famous for his studies using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to demonstrate the role of emotions in political bias, points out. "When we watch other people do or feel something, neurons become active in the same regions of our brains as if we were doing or feeling those things for ourselves." This "mirror neuron" effect is our neurobiology compelling us to feel something like what the people around us feel (2007:288). And social media lets us have more people around us than ever before.

### **The Second Step**

His mastery of rhetorical ethos was a big part of why potential supporters let Obama's political messaging in, but because this tactic extended to the messages themselves, it was possible for supporters not only to be persuaded *by him*, but also to persuade *for him*. These were messages that supporters forwarded to peers, posted to

their Facebook walls or made reference to in status updates. They were not just designed to be convincing, they were built to travel through and across networked mediascapes. This is a strategy that achieves mass effects by extending beyond the shrinking sphere of mass media and one that responds to young Americans' retreat from the mass into the personal communicative ecosystem of social media. As Bennett and Iyengar argue (2008), "growing distrust of official communication, declining confidence in the political leaders who rely on managed public performances, and the widening disconnect between citizens and government," motivates this retreat (2008:10). But it also motivates politicians to follow us into our personal mediascapes.

### ***The Rise and Fall of Mass Effects***

Katz's and Lazarsfeld's idea was based in mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century western assumptions about community. Given the impact of *Personal Influence* (for decades it bestrode the worlds of marketing, political communications, and communication theory like a colossus) it's significant to note how narrowly defined the research itself actually was. Their studies, all conducted in Decatur, Illinois, all proceeded from "the introduction into an isolated social system of a single artifact—a product, an 'attitude,' an image" (Gitlin, 1978:208). They even offer a footnote acknowledging that they ignored the advent of television—potentially a more "credible" medium, as Todd Gitlin (1978) observes—clarifying that "the study was completed before the general introduction of television" (1978:220-221). For all its influence, *Personal Influence* was in decline within little more than a decade of its publishing. Katz and Lazarsfeld conceptualized the audience as "a tissue of interrelated individuals rather

than as isolated point-targets in a mass society," so when the mass society became increasingly mass and the tissue began to disintegrate, the social processing dynamics they observed were thought to play a diminishing role in communication (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 2005:72).

In his 2000 book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam argued that the institutions of social cohesion, like service clubs or the bowling leagues from which he derives his title, were dissolving. But with respect to communication theory, his ideas were more than two decades out of vogue. Gitlin's 1978 critique of *Personal Influence* revolved to a significant degree around the idea that the similar social structures Katz and Lazarsfeld assumed to be stable interpretive communities providing predictable (or at least measureable) social reference processes were dissolving. In their place, he found evidence that the first step in the two-step flow was commanding significant and growing "influence" over the decisions that Americans made with their money and their votes. He asked (implying both that the question had gone unasked by earlier theorists and that the answer was changing) "how does the routine reach of certain hierarchies into millions of living rooms on any given day affect the common language and concepts and symbols?" (Gitlin, 1978:206).

His answer, paraphrased, was 'with mass and direct effects.' And it's this answer that invited further discourse and responses, leading ultimately to the ascendance of new arguments and evidence showing a return to minimal effects (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008). The scholarly conversation has now circled back around to 1955, before the full realization of the broadcast era, with new concepts of the limited persuasive power of mass-mediated messages. These rely heavily on

structural and technological changes that have fragmented audiences: “In the 1960s, an advertiser could reach 80 percent of U.S. women with a prime-time spot on the three networks. Today, it has been estimated that the same spot would have to run on one hundred TV channels to reach the same number of viewers” (Jenkins, 2006:66). But such technocentrism neglects to acknowledge the potentially more important social and cultural shifts inherent to the current trend toward minimal effects. After all, it wouldn’t matter how many channels there were if all American women chose to watch the same show.

Positing a new phase in the evolution of media effects theory, Bennett and Iyengar (2008) write that “with the continued detachment of individuals from the group-based society, and the increased capacity of consumers to choose from a multitude of media channels (many of which enable user-produced content), the effects picture may be changing again” (2008:25). They argue that weakening effects are part of an ongoing cultural shift toward selective exposure. Ours is now a cultural landscape in which the messages we receive are often the messages to which we expose ourselves by choice. “As receivers exercise greater choice over both the content of messages and media sources, effects become increasingly difficult to produce or measure in the aggregate” (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008:4). Audiences for political messages are increasingly elusive, not only because Republicans can watch Fox News and Democrats can watch MSNBC, but also because independents (especially young independents) can watch neither. If campaigns focus entirely on traditional media, they are confronted with declining per-message marginal gains in support and rising per-message costs.

These trends are accelerating because the internet, with its millions of microscopic social enclaves enabling rigorous selective exposure, is structurally predisposed toward minimal effects. "The internet was designed to be decentralized, meaning that control is distributed to all users who have relatively equal opportunity to contribute content... Audiences are reconceptualized as smaller and discrete 'taste cultures,' rather than as an amorphous mass" (Chaffee and Metzger, 2001:369-370). Nicholas Negroponte's concept of the 'Daily Me', a hypothetical custom newspaper that symbolizes the theory that such extremes of personalization are now possible that isolation will become an increasingly likely side-effect, anticipated presciently in 1995 the way Americans, and politically engaged Americans more than apathetic ones, organize and curate their exposure to political messages in 2009. Theorists like Steven Chaffee and Miriam Metzger, who in 2001 predicted the end of mass communication, got a lot right about the minimal-effects future they described, but Obama's campaign disrupts one important corollary of their claim: "New media will allow people to isolate themselves from the larger public discourse and... the result may be that the kind of widespread collective action seen in the past may not be possible in the future" (2001:375). The Obama campaign was nothing if not widespread collective action.

### ***Mass Minimal Effects***

This chapter is about how the Obama campaign's communications strategy, and the unified rhetorical strategy within it, achieved mass effects within a fractured mediascape. The campaign's messages were subject to the social reference process that characterized the two-step flow and its minimal effects, but the social mediation



of these messages appear (as I will show in chapter 3) to have promoted their flow rather than inhibited it. Because this strategy was executed on the largest possible scale, it might plausibly represent a new model for the flow of political messages, one formed through the synthesis of two very old strategies: the first inspired by Aristotle, the second by Katz and Lazarsfeld. The first step in this new two-step flow was achieved by producing ethos-encoded messages that engendered an imagined personal relationship with a stranger: Barack. Paradoxically, the second step is achieved through an “impersonal” relationship with friends, or at least with Facebook friends. “Impersonal influence,” according to Diana Mutz (1998), is “not about the direct persuasive influence of media messages that attempt to promote one viewpoint over another; it is strictly concerned with the capacity for presentations of collective opinion or experience to trigger social influence processes” (1998:4). And it explains part of how the campaign’s messages were co-produced and proliferated by Obama’s supporters. Bennett and Iyengar (2008), in turn, explain why: “The kind of communication that reaches... personalized audiences tends to travel through multiple channels and may require interactive shaping in order to be credible and authentic” (2008:18).

This “interactive shaping” is the Facebook-era equivalent of Katz and Lazarsfeld’s water cooler, and it could potentially command much more influence than its mid-century predecessor. Interpersonal communication alters opinions, judgments, and even perceptions by introducing the credibility, authenticity, proximity of peer-to-peer contact. Mutz (1998) offers the example of crime to illustrate how this works. People may read about rising crime statistics in a newspaper

or watch a news report about worsening crime without experiencing significant effects, but when a peer is victimized by crime and tells them about it, the effects are likely to be much greater, despite the probability that they will be victimized themselves remaining the same (Mutz, 1998:67). Communication organized and mediated by online social networking utilities, though not nearly as intimate as a face-to-face conversation, makes similar effects possible. If a friend posts “just got robbed” as a Facebook “status update,” their peers will likely feel these greater effects. The difference is that there are potentially several hundred peers feeling these effects and, perhaps even more importantly, several hundred people within a single person’s network announcing that they have just been robbed.

This collective influence, the aggregation and social mediation of personal influence, cannot be directly controlled by a political campaign, but political campaigns can build messaging strategies that make it easy. In some ways this new model of the flow of influence resolves the debate over the relative importance of mass media and personal influence by providing an explanation for how the two are processed together in a culture where messages must penetrate our cocoons of selective exposure. As Mutz (1998) puts it, “the question is not whether perceptions are formed by mass media or by personal experiences or interpersonal exchanges, but rather how people integrate information that they receive from mass media, from other people, and from experiences of their own lives” (1998:78). Social media like Facebook let political messages, co-produced by our peers, into a communicative sphere where this integration process is actively and perpetually underway. These are the spaces where the interplay of influence flows from mass media and personal

relationships are mediated. When political messages inhabit these spaces, having infiltrated them with the help of ethos-driven rhetoric, they gain the credibility and authenticity to circulate and proliferate further.

The exploration of the new ways in which these messages, and presumably also the influence they are meant to help project, proliferate within social mediascapes is the central goal of this thesis and there are limits to the insights that can be gleaned from examining the messages themselves. In this chapter I have argued that the campaign was able to encode its messages with a rhetoric that helped achieve the first of two new steps and that social media provided new channels and venues for the second. Since the most important rhetorical tactics the campaign used were variations on well-established strategies—reliance on ethos and persistent use of the syntax of solidarity—I believe the first step is less fertile ground for scholarly inquiry than the second. The new second step, however, is a function of new social and technological realities to which the Obama campaign was among the first to comprehensively and strategically react. The messaging strategy, while certainly sophisticated on its own, also reflected a sophisticated recognition of the importance of this new second step by introducing ‘Barack’ into the personalized social mediascapes of supporters. In order to understand once he was inside, however, I had to go to New Hampshire.

## Chapter 3: Social Media Conversations

### Methods

The transformation of political communications brought about by the advent and widespread adoption of social media utilities like Facebook is a phenomenon characterized by a scope and a pace that renders scholarly inquiry uniquely challenging. It is frenetic, complex and now nearly ubiquitous in North America and western Europe. Quantitative analyses measure only the scale of this transformation and identify broader trends among users of social media—political figures increasingly using social media disseminate messages, for example, is a readily quantifiable dimension of this phenomenon (Smith, 2009). But such an analysis provides very little insight into the effect of this trend on the relationships between politicians and their constituents. In this thesis, I have relied on research of this nature, such as The Pew Internet & American Life Project's 2008 investigation of Internet use during the campaign described in my first chapter. Smith's (2009) research establishes my first premise: that the ways in which political ideas are communicated to and between American young people have changed and are continuing to change in dramatic ways. I liken this type of analysis to indicators such as gross domestic product that aggregate patterns of economic activity: *that* more or less money is changing hands between economic actors is important information, but very little can be gleaned from these indicators about *how?*, or *why?* So in my first chapter, I established that a certain type of communicative transaction is taking place

with increasing frequency. I did not, however, answer the underlying questions about how these transactions work and to what effect.

In my second chapter, I analyzed the Obama campaign's communications strategy from a perspective that emphasized the specifically encoded rhetorical properties of its messages. The goal of that chapter was to understand as much as possible about how these increasingly common communicative transactions work by examining their content. This too has its limitations as a method of inquiry because messages are mediated not just by technology, but also by the social contexts of their transmission. The goal of this thesis is to understand how the Obama campaign's communications strategy might have promoted flows of influence between and among supporters in addition to influencing the supporters themselves. My first two chapters thus established important foundations for the primary qualitative inquiry from which I derive my central conclusion that the campaign deployed tactics that leveraged a potential for proliferating influence into and throughout social mediascapes that is both intrinsic to Facebook itself and a function of the social conventions governing its use. I conducted this research by applying techniques adapted from various modes of ethnographic inquiry that accommodated the unique challenges of my context: the final week of a Presidential campaign.

Between October 30<sup>th</sup> and November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008, I interviewed 28 Obama campaign volunteers in southwestern New Hampshire. My interviews, between 15 and 40 minutes in length, were semi-structured and organized loosely around three or four standard questions. Half were conducted with groups of two or more people and half were conducted one-on-one. My three criteria were that the individual be

between the ages of 18 and 30, that he or she have volunteered with the campaign or be in the process of volunteering with the campaign, and that he or she have used Facebook at least once in the previous month. These were easy criteria to satisfy, since a large proportion of Obama volunteers were young Facebook users. My method, therefore, was determined largely by convenience. I volunteered to work on the campaign myself and interviewed the people I worked with. The interviews took place in a variety of physical settings, all related to campaign work, ranging from the campaign office in the midst of the chaos and excitement of Election Day to placid New England country roads while walking between voters' houses. My case was neither strictly instrumental nor purely intrinsic; I take it to be instructive, but not broadly representative. I chose southwestern New Hampshire because of my own familiarity with the region and its politics, because there were numerous universities in a relatively small area making it likely that there would be many young people working on the campaign, and because it was the state with the most competitive race to which I would be able to easily travel to from Montreal. As Robert Stake (1995) succinctly notes, "if we can, we need to pick cases which are easy to get to and hospitable to our inquiry" (1995:4).

My modes of interviewing and my position in relation to both the campaign and my interview subjects were determined partially by necessity (campaigns, after all, present specific challenges in terms of time and place) and partially by strategy. My goal was to interview the people most likely to be engaged in the communicative transactions I aimed to study at the time when they were most likely to be taking place. Achieving this introduced challenges related to the nature of my role as a

researcher. I was interviewing peers as both an Obama supporter and an academic and, although I believe the two roles were compatible, I frequently subordinated the latter to the former in order to foster the social dynamics that would yield the most fruitful conversations. I was constantly shaping and calibrating my questions and interview style in order to make the conversations less obtrusive to the campaign work. With these challenges in mind, I drew on ethnographic work and methodological theory by Jeff Todd Titon (1985), Janice Radway (1989), Joke Hermes (1995), and Lisa Tillmann-Healy (2003), among others, to interrogate myself as a researcher and formulate a concept of my role and its unique social properties. I ultimately arrived at a methodology that combined a theory of power (or the destabilization of power) between myself and my informants derived partially from Radway's (1989) article, "Ethnography Among Elites" and concepts of my role and identity that draw on both Titon's (1985) work with American religious communities and Tillmann-Healey's (2003) concept of "friendship as method" adapted to the context of a campaign environment.

My relationship with my informants was characterized more by what we had in common than by what distinguished us. In fact, my most significant differentiating feature (one I will discuss in relation to my role and identity) was that I was carrying a digital recorder. Radway observes that "the practice of ethnography has always been at least covertly comparative and therefore implicitly preoccupied with the world of the ethnographer" (1989:3). Acknowledging that this relationship between researcher and informant necessitates a comparative, reflexive ethnography, I positioned myself within my research as someone who meets all my own criteria.

Beyond this basic level of proximity to my interviewees, I shared my ethnicity and language with all of the 28 people I interviewed. (This fact seemed like a significant aberration until I consulted the most recent census and discovered that New Hampshire is 97% white.)<sup>7</sup> Radway (1989) argues that power dynamics between ethnographers and their informants are the product of the academic's monopoly on the power of representation and writes that, among elites, this power is mitigated. Elites command more power of self-representation; they also understand "what academics 'do' and they can quite adequately imagine how they might be represented in an academic discourse that would take them as its subject" (Radway, 1989:9). Expecting that this would be true of my relationships as well, I was able to prepare questions and interview strategies that were predicated on shared recognition of relevant situations, for example, "looking up" acquaintances from one's hometown after having left to go to university. This made my comparison transparent and unthreatening, since I was comparing similar perspectives.

By applying a strategy similar to the comparative, reflexive ethnography Radway (1989) advocates and offering my interviewees information about myself that hinted at a proximity of experience, I was able to mitigate the degree to which the answers I was given were designed with my power of representation in mind. I invited this perceived proximity in order to broaden what Hermes (1996), citing Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell, terms the "interpretive repertoire" of mutually recognized signifiers available in our conversation. This strategy was successful, but it would have failed utterly had I not also established the single most important feature of my identity: my support for Obama. All of the above dimensions

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<sup>7</sup> Demographic data tables viewed online at census.gov on October 23, 2009.



of commonality that I shared with my informants proved less important than political affiliation, a marker of identity, which, for many supporters in the last week of the 2008 campaign, was the only meaningful signifier of difference or commonality.

In his paper about the methodological complexities of conducting ethnomusicological research with folk Baptists and Pentecostals, Jeff Titon (1985) describes a scene in which he is sitting among a congregation of fundamentalist Baptists in northern Appalachia. At the end of the sermon, the pastor asks for a show of hands from the saved, prompting the following realization: "There is no avoiding it: my hand fails to rise with the rest. By resolutely projecting my role and maintaining my identity as a professional ethnomusicologist, I take my place among the unsaved" (Titon, 1989:18). I would have been confronted with a similar problem had I been unable to raise my hand without compromising my role as a researcher.

My role as a researcher and my identity as an Obama supporter (and a Canadian, among other things) were compatible because both were authentic.<sup>8</sup> At the time, I had been a committed supporter since before the Primary campaign. Having worked in southwestern New Hampshire throughout the hard-fought Primary campaign the previous winter, I proudly displayed my bona fides in the form of an "Obama '08" vinyl sticker in the rear window of my car. (The stickers for the general election said "Obama-Biden '08.") Being sincere in my support for the candidate had benefits beyond inclusion in social situations where I might have been out of place if I had been unable to take my place among the saved; the myriad subtle signifiers of belonging, some as trivial as my fluency in the language of Sarah Palin jokes, leant

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<sup>8</sup> Most of the supporters I met were unsurprised to learn that I was Canadian, possibly because they already assumed the campaign to have international cultural and social significance. I never asked my interviewees how they felt about my nationality.

my conversations a mutual familiarity that made talking about Facebook and politics seem perfectly natural. My research questions touched on topics, trends, and ideas that could have been (and almost certainly were) fodder for normal friendly conversation between young people performing campaign work together. I rarely asked questions that would have been out of place in such a situation and the pace, tone, and content of my conversations were frequently unchanged after I turned my recorder off.

The relative fluidity with which I transitioned in and out of my interviewing mode presented benefits and challenges similar to those Lisa Tilmann-Healy (2003) encountered with her “friendship as method.” She writes that “through authentic engagement the lines between researcher and researched blur, permitting each to explore the complex humanity of both self and other” (Tilmann-Healy, 2003:733). My research was more narrowly defined than hers, focused as it was on complex habits of political communication over a period of five days rather than “complex humanity” over a period of many years, but we shared the centrality of “authentic engagement.” More specifically, her method, like mine, “involves the practices, the pace and the ethics of genuine mutual engagement in a shared project about which all participants are passionate” (Tilmann-Healy, 2003:734). And this is significant because researching according to the practices, pace, and ethics of campaigning at a time when passion (and Hope) infused every action and interaction limited the extent to which my interviews intruded upon the normal social tempo and tenor of the campaign. As Titon (1985) notes, “sometimes the fieldworker will find that he

disturbs a situation less by participating in the events instead of merely observing impassively and thereby putting a damper on the actors" (1985:21).

The specific social complexities of the ephemeral community fostered by Obama supporters in southwestern New Hampshire demanded my authentic engagement because their practices, pace, ethics and (perhaps most importantly) passions would otherwise have been impediments to the casual, candid conversations I hoped to have with them. Because of this necessity, my method entailed indulging a bias that was not relevant to my research (that I supported Obama and shared the passions expressed by my interviewees) in order to make the kinds of authentic conversations that *were* relevant to my research (those that pertained to flows of influence within social mediascapes) possible. When I travelled to New Hampshire, my first goal was to establish my own authentic engagement. And one of the first things I learned about the culture of the campaign community was that this goal would not be hard to achieve.

## **Keene**

I arrived in Keene, New Hampshire, at 1am on the morning of October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008. Keene is a town of about 20,000 people in the southwest corner of the state. It is the political seat of Cheshire county and home to both Keene State College and Antioch University, the former a public university, the latter private. In many ways, Keene reflects the demographic, cultural, political, and socio-economic makeup of the state. New Hampshire's "live free or die" libertarian streak is well represented, as are environmental values usually associated with Vermont. With a median household

income of 49,649, slightly below the national figure, it is not as economically prosperous as the commuter towns close to Boston in the southeast corner of the state, but richer than most of the northern counties. Levels of educational capital, however, are 7% higher than the national average, with 34.6% having achieved at least a Bachelor's degree. The number of degree granting institutions in Cheshire County (4) might partially explain this relatively high figure, as might a general cultural inclination toward higher education fostered by the town's location in the middle of the northeaster "college belt." The town's most unique social characteristic is that more than 95% of residents are white and born in the U.S., an unusually high number that could limit the extent to which my findings can be taken as representative of the country as a whole (Census).<sup>9</sup> For my purposes, its value was its low median age and electoral unpredictability.

Keene is one of those New England towns where the main street is still Main Street, so I immediately drove down Main Street. I was looking for the county headquarters of the Obama campaign and I was driving because the campaign representative I'd spoken to prior to leaving had asked me two questions before asking anything else: 1) "do you have a car?" and 2) "do you have somewhere to stay." It felt like the kind of conversation you have with an army recruiter in wartime: "Can you read the bottom line on that chart on the wall? Good; sign here, line up over there." What was missing from the conversation was the critical piece of information that would answer the question with which I'd been confronted when I arrived that morning, namely, "where do I go now"?

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<sup>9</sup> All demographic and socioeconomic data are drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2006-2008 American Community Survey.

The 2008 Obama Presidential campaign is now famous for its tech savvy. And as I have shown in Chapter 1, deservedly so; my arrival in Keene was orchestrated by the formidable networking software of the campaign. My.barackobama.com was a tool for spatial organization as much as it was a tool for social organization. One of the things it did very well was the gentle systematization of hyper-local politics; it facilitated things like organizing debate-watching parties that became the social nuclei of volunteer networking when it came time to pound the pavement. I listed my location as Montreal, where I lived, and the software asked me where I wanted to pitch in. I chose Keene because I'd volunteered there in the Primaries the previous winter and because the concentration of students in what I expected to be a hard-fought district made it fertile ground for this research. The software asked me what I wanted to do and when, then put me in touch with organizers in Keene. But neither Mybo nor the organizers I spoke with told me where the office was.

Not wanting to impose myself on the sophisticated billeting network the campaign had built, I'd booked a room in a motel. I was ready to check in, but having some experience with political campaigns, I knew there's always something interesting to learn about the character of a race by what it looks and feels like in these wee hours of the final week. So I drove slowly down Main Street looking for a storefront plastered with Obama-Biden '08 signs. The action at this stage rarely takes place at the address listed on the website. As a campaign grows, it takes over space in the homes and businesses of supporters; anywhere there are tables to cut turf, lines for

phone banks, and outlets for laptops.<sup>10</sup> In the weeks before I arrived, the campaign's Keene office annexed a warehouse a few blocks off the main drag, and that's where most of the real work was being done. When I noticed a young couple wearing Obama "sunrise" t-shirts over their jackets carrying packages of door-knockers, I asked them where the vollie (volunteer) office was, they sent me to a warehouse.<sup>11</sup>

From outside, the warehouse felt like a prohibition-era speakeasy. No sign gave it away, but you could hear music and the murmur of a crowd. As I walked in, I was half expecting everything to stop and everyone to look at me as though I'd stumbled upon some secret nocturnal meeting. Instead, I was barely noticed. Most people seemed to be just hanging out, but those who were working were working feverishly. The majority of the 30 or 40 people in the room seemed to be in their twenties, but the youngest could have been in middle school and the oldest almost certainly qualified for Medicare. The first thing anyone said to me was a single syllable: "done?" The speaker, in flannel pajama pants, seemed ready to spend the night doing whatever she was doing, and her next question—"ready for another one?"—implied that she expected me to spend the night doing whatever it was she thought I'd been doing.

As I've discussed earlier in my methods section, immersion was central to my strategy. My reasons for planning my research around my own participation in the campaign were validated immediately by the young organizer I spoke with when I

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<sup>10</sup> "Cutting turf" is the nightly process by which the campaign's full-time staff review the areas that were canvassed during the day, decide what areas will be canvassed the next day, and prepare the correct packages of campaign materials for volunteers.

<sup>11</sup> Door-knockers are cardboard flyers that are designed to hang on doorknobs. These are usually distributed very late at night and usually by young volunteers. Hanging door-knockers is one of the tasks that paradoxically seems to fuel energy, engagement, and enthusiasm for the campaign because of (rather than in spite of) its grueling, caffeine-fuelled nature.

first arrived in Keene that night. Political campaigns are spontaneous social networks organized around a specific agenda. The closer Election Day gets, the more engaged the network's constituents become, so the underlying trends and dynamics—really, the social, cultural, and technological infrastructure of the network—become more salient, but simultaneously more difficult to discern from the outside. In that final week before Election Day, the nodes of this network—volunteer organizers, campaign staff, and committed supporters—methodically divide the people they meet between three categories: supporters, voters, and distractions. This is the time when there's the most to learn from political campaigns and the movements they represent, but it's also a difficult time to hang around soliciting interviews from people who would rather be working for their candidate.

I therefore responded that I was, indeed, ready for another one. I spent the next two hours re-organizing the VoteBuilder spreadsheets from the day's canvassing and phone-banking.<sup>12</sup> As I tallied undecideds, I started to explain myself to the organizer who had put me to work. Kim was a 19-year-old who had just finished high school and had taken her first semester of university off to volunteer with the campaign.<sup>13</sup> I started with my credentials: "I worked here on the primary campaign, so it made sense to come back to a place I knew for the general." I made sure to add that the area where I'd worked in January 2008 had gone for Hillary Clinton, giving myself a more specific motivation for returning to Keene. Then I revealed that I was researching the campaign for this thesis and that I intended to conduct interviews as I

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<sup>12</sup> VoteBuilder is the Democratic Party's database. It enables organizers to keep track of which voters they've contacted and who those with whom they've spoken say they will be supporting in order to identify undecided voters and, on Election Day, get likely voters to the polls.

<sup>13</sup> All of my interview subjects have been given pseudonyms.

worked. As I started to explain some of my ideas to her, she became my first subject.<sup>14</sup> From that interview, a few of the small social nuances that would later become consistent trends in my conversations, and even significant features of my methodology, emerged for the first time.

This first interview began organically, as an outgrowth of the kind of conversation volunteers were having in campaign offices across the country at the same time. I asked her why she was working for Barack Obama and she asked me the same thing. These conversations were all predicated on a self-evident truth, one almost everyone I met advertised and one that, for my research, produced the beneficial result of subverting any potential impact of the traditionally problematic researcher-subject dynamic: that we were both part of the same movement and, therefore, both ultimately there for variations of the same reason. When I explained that I intended to collect interviews as I worked, she almost immediately began asking me questions about my research. She wasn't the least bit surprised that I would be studying the campaign; in fact it seemed perfectly obvious to her that someone interested in social media and their application to politics would study their intersection in the campaign.

As I started explaining some of the research questions I wanted to explore, Kim's response to my ideas dictated the pace and structure of the conversation. This pattern enabled me to skirt some of the potential problems identified in scholarly theory concerned with open interviewing methods. Lewis (1991) argues that "normal

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<sup>14</sup> I asked Kim to sign an HREC consent form at this stage, creating the first real interruption to the flow of the conversation. In this case, as in many of my interviews, it seemed like my producing this form was the only thing distinguishing the interview from a conversation we might otherwise have had regardless.



conversations do not usually involve the use of non-directive questions designed to encourage someone to set the agenda for discussion” and goes on to note that “this can be particularly awkward at the early stages of an interview” (1991:85). I rarely encountered this kind of awkwardness; often, I would only have to explain my research questions and describe the themes I intended to discuss before the conversation would become engulfed in personal narrative. The process of introducing the interview was a frequent catalyst for the substance of the interview.

This pattern continued through many of my interviews. When both parties started with the assumption that the interview is secondary to the activity of organizing spreadsheets or hanging door-knockers, discussing my research was easy small talk. My subjects would first ask what I was studying, then ask what I thought. This structure, of course, has its flaws—by first revealing at least that I believed there was a significant (if difficult to describe) force of influence permeating Facebook in the form of campaign messages co-authored by supporters, I inserted my own assumption into the conversation, potentially inviting my interviewees to calibrate their answers accordingly. But I found this wasn’t the case. At this early, more casual stage of the interview many of the people I spoke with tried to think of anecdotes contradicting my premises. And regardless of the content of these early exchanges, they never seemed to influence the tone or direction of the questions that followed. I consider them to have been part of a priming process. My methodology was designed to take into consideration a problem that most researchers would love to have; namely, that everyone I met wanted to talk about Facebook and Obama.

This first interview established what would become a pattern of talking about my research and the ideas that motivated my research as a preface or introduction to the actual interview. It meant that by the time the interview got underway and I began asking my planned questions, many of my subjects were already thinking of their own experiences, preparing to respond to questions they assumed they would be asked, such as the question “do you think there are more people on Facebook supporting Obama or more supporting McCain?” Sometimes the people I spoke with would launch into anecdotes unprompted. Because everyone I interviewed was a Facebook user and an active Obama supporter, almost everyone I spoke with felt that they knew a lot about my subject. An interesting trend that persisted throughout a majority of my interviews, was that my subjects seemed surprisingly confident in their answers. Lewis (1991) writes that “interviews, particularly those that use a relatively 'open' interviewing style, resemble narratives” (1991:93). The source of my informants' confidence might be found at the intersection of this assertion and Radway's (1989) theory of power residing in representation: by couching their answers in anecdotes, they were able to claim significant control of the narrative.

Kim was perhaps the interview subject who best exemplified this reliance on anecdotes to explain how she and her peers influenced each other's political opinions using social media. One of the questions I asked in each interview was based on a scenario in which the interviewee is hypothetically trying to persuade a peer to support Obama. The point of the question is to encourage the interviewee to reflect on his or her own instinctive use of Facebook as a tool of persuasion. Part of what I wanted to learn is whether Obama supporters saw it as a medium that makes this kind

of active influence easier than it would be if they were face to face or using another medium. When I asked Kim whether she would use Facebook to persuade this hypothetical peer, I was surprised to find her reaching for her white, Hope-clad Macbook. There were two browser windows already open—one was the VoteBuilder web interface and the other was her Facebook “wall.” Her only verbal answer to my question, after gesturing toward a wall post, was the following:

“Let me show you an example of that that I did the other day. This is my friend who I know. He’s not registered to vote, and probably won’t. I wrote to him the other day. I sent him a video. So that’s what I would do!” (interview October 30, 2008).

Kim was a full-time volunteer. Not only was her computer adorned with Obama livery, her body was literally covered in campaign stickers while we were conducting our interview. Her responses were instructive, but I don’t take them to be representative of major trends in my findings because she’s not representative of most young Obama supporters; she took common patterns of engagement to the extreme. She was using every medium she could think of, including her sticker-plastered arms, to support the campaign. What’s more telling about this interview is relevant to my methodology. For everyone I met, questions about Facebook are treated as personal questions. And interestingly, they were personal questions to which my interview subjects often felt comfortable offering very personal answers.

The rest of my process began the next morning. Because I could offer a car, my job during daylight hours was usually to ferry groups of volunteers to and from the turfs they had been assigned to canvass. Many of my interviews were conducted

in the car or while walking between houses and six were with two or three people at one time. I always explained my research and distributed consent forms before leaving the staging area, but the pretense was still the same: we were campaigning; there just happened to be a digital recorder running. The group interviews in these situations were among the most fruitful. The groups almost always found something to disagree about and the ensuing debates drew out important insights. The rest of my interviews were conducted either at the campaign headquarters while organizing pamphlets and knockers or on the street with volunteers doing “viz”.<sup>15</sup> Each of my interviews was conducted in a different situation with a different series of challenges, both social and logistical.

Because of the diversity of social situations in which my conversations took place, the structure and pace of each was different. My challenge in synthesizing my findings from these interviews has been to discern broadly congruent themes from 28 unique conversations. Three salient clusters of thoughts emerged from this entropic corpus: ideas relating to the ways in which the campaign was making it easy for young people to use social media as venues for contact that might not otherwise be made, ideas relating to the perceived public nature of political identity within social media spaces, and ideas relating to the specific modes of projecting political messages engendered by Facebook. These three themes—contact, perception, and projection—are distinct pillars of a communicative system that is as subtle as it is pervasive. Indeed, despite the widespread recognition of social media’s presence as a factor in the 2008 campaign, it remains inadequately understood, even as it heralds a

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<sup>15</sup> “Viz,” short for “visibility,” is a campaign tactic where groups of volunteers are organized to hold up signs and attract attention to themselves at strategic places and times.

generational shift in the way political identity is constructed and projected. That the Obama campaign, as a political community and an associated brand, benefited from this shift was not coincidental, so this instance of symbiosis between a medium and a movement is revelatory of both.

## **The Power of Easy**

For political campaigns, there's a big difference between communicating with a crowd and communicating with an individual. Communicating with crowds is important—it's what they spend millions of dollars doing with advertising and thousands of hours doing with speeches and rallies. But direct contact, be it by phone, direct mail, email, or now social media, is how campaigns identify and mobilize supporters. A person who sees an ad or hears a speech may or may not become a supporter, but when the campaign calls someone and actually speaks with an individual directly or sends out an email with a "donate" link, there's a feedback process. The campaign can target supporters and turn them into message multipliers. This is one of the reasons social media represent a significant change for politics; a campaign can establish this dialogue with a supporter, say through a "group," in a semi-public way, combining the breadth of a broadcast medium with the granular targeting of a direct medium.

The importance of contact—both establishing it and leveraging it—is why one of the first questions I asked in every interview was "how did you get involved with the campaign." Answers ranged from "I walked into this building five minutes ago" to an explanation given by one committed Democrat that amounted to a long list of

activist groups (to which, presumably, this supporter belonged) that had endorsed Barack Obama. One significant pattern I noticed, however, was a relatively uniform emphasis on ‘joining’. In about half my interviews someone answered that they had joined some sort of political group or organization and in seven cases it was a Facebook group that the supporter first joined. Most supporters I interviewed stressed the effortless way in which they were able to establish a dialogue with the campaign and begin to engage actively, but they talked about it like it was a club that was just very easy to get into. This 18-year-old male supporter’s answer is typical of that attitude:

“I signed up for Students for Obama, and they emailed me that way.

Also, Facebook groups in my local county—all the high schools were starting to support him, so they all started to work for the campaign. I started one in my high school” (interview November 3, 2008).

A sense of belonging, community and shared purpose are among the very few things political campaigns offer volunteers in exchange for their hours of service, so it’s strategically savvy to let potential supporters feel that these are easy things to get once they click the “join” button. Making the campaign feel accessible used to be something that could only be achieved through the style and tone of official messaging, but social media enables the proliferation of nodes within an expanding community network. Supporters can now display their own Facebook welcome mats and open the door to the campaign for their peers. Of course, this wouldn’t have been nearly as successful as it was if the campaign’s more centralized or official web outreach efforts weren’t sophisticated enough to bridge the (potentially substantial)

cognitive gaps between noticing that a peer has started a Facebook group, joining the group personally, and contacting the campaign. One thing savvy political campaigns appeared to have learned from online marketers by the fall of 2008 was a kind of vertical integration of communications—once they had a potential voter’s attention, they offered lots of easy, casual, and intuitive ways to take the next step in a sequence that leads to volunteering, putting up a lawn sign or starting an online group. It’s the same technique that a car manufacturer uses: an online campaign turns a single click into a test drive through a series of coordinated steps leading ultimately to a sign-up form without ever making the potential buyer feel like they’re being asked to engage too much or go too far beyond his or her normal habit of browsing for a new car.

Everyone I spoke with said becoming involved with the campaign was easy. That I didn’t encounter a single person who told me a story about struggling to find a way to contribute was surprising for me. Because the people I interviewed were young, I wasn’t able to ask a lot of them to compare this experience to previous campaigns—indeed, for the majority, it was their first—so I’m left with my own casual empiricism in this area. I’ve worked on numerous Canadian federal and provincial campaigns in the past and I’ve had many conversations with volunteers who have felt the campaign made it difficult for them to find ways to contribute. But regardless if this pattern was new or unique to the campaign, it was uniform enough to warrant consideration, particularly to the extent that it helps explain how or why

the young people whose participation had been dismissed by pundits and observers voted and volunteered in record numbers.<sup>16</sup>

The Obama campaign inserted portals to engagement in the mediascapes where these people were learning about politics and expressing their own political opinions. This is significant even on the most basic level: that the campaign was *there*, that it was *present* in ways that made sense to these young people, was a significant part of its successful contact strategy. An 18-year-old student, henceforth referred to as Brad, expressed something like approval as he described having first discovered the campaign's Facebook presence: "I think something that's new, that I didn't experience before, was the interaction with the campaign; how you can share that with the other people on Facebook." Another respondent, a 21-year-old Keene State student I'll call May, explained the significance of the campaign's Facebook presence in more longitudinal terms in response to my questions about how she became involved in the campaign. She said Facebook was instrumental, then went on to describe the following sequence:

"I got invited by somebody through one of those group things... Somebody who was in it—I don't even know the person, they just added me because we had a class together or something—they sent me an invitation to their club, and I volunteered—and here I am" (interview November 2, 2008).

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<sup>16</sup> The Tufts University Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement reports a 5% increase in turnout nationwide among 18-to-29 year-olds comparing the 2008 election to the 2004 election and a 15% increase over 1996. (civicyouth.org, accessed October 27, 2009).



It's impossible to know whether a variation of this sequence would have taken place had the initial Facebook exchange not provided the catalyst, but the significance of this narrative is that she saw it as a perfectly normal pattern, but one in which she invested no action or agency until she decided to contact a volunteer office. This is partially a story of a peer actively persuading May to become involved, but it's just as important to note the casual fluidity implied by the phrase "and here I am." She's describing a portal that—with a little help from an Obama supporter—was remarkably easy to walk through. With respect to the active supporter's role, it will suffice for my purposes to note that political campaigns have always relied on/upon surrogates to carry their messages into social situations that demand a particular kind of access, but Facebook makes it possible for more supporters to act as surrogates in more situations.

Surrogates, of course, aren't always needed to introduce potential supporters to the campaign. When social media is the neighborhood in question, often all it takes is a communications strategy that invites the feeling that the campaign lives nearby. I spoke with two siblings on Election Day, an 18-year-old woman and her 28-year-old brother, both of whom had travelled to New Hampshire from Vermont to participate in the get-out-the-vote (GOTV) effort of the more competitive state. Dawn was volunteering in her first political campaign. Even though I knew the answer would be more a function of her age than of any other variable, I asked her my stock question: "why this time around." She was waiting with the following response almost before I asked the question: "I think that it ties into a lot of how younger people are accessing their information about politics—we're able to get it through the Internet, and not just in the morning paper." She then went on to

describe her ability to “access” Obama online as contributing to her motivation, observing that “it’s really easy for our generation to have access to the candidate [by] going to his website.” The most interesting thing about this response is the leap she made by responding to a question about her motivation for supporting a candidate with an observation about how the campaign communicated well within the mediascape she chose to inhabit. She seemed to be saying the equivalent of ‘we just travel in the same circles.’

## **The Power of Perceiving**

A well-executed contact strategy can explain a lot about how the young people I spoke with became involved in the Obama campaign. It can even begin to explain parts of why they chose to engage—I heard at least two answers that might be paraphrased as “they opened a door, so I walked through it.” But it explains very little about the role of mediated online systems of peer relationships in *motivating* engagement. Contact is relevant to my research because it establishes that the threshold was easy enough to cross that the forces of influence supplying the impetus for engagement might have been subtle. Indeed, I believe they were aggregates of nudges and cues mediated by online spaces like Facebook that required only perception to provide persuasion. That is why one of my most important sequences of questions focused on perception. Asking young people whether they believe they are influenced by their peers is like asking them whether they think they are capable of thinking for themselves—the answer, of course, is predictable. The question I asked instead was “do you know what your friends think?” The answer to this question also proved predictable, but tellingly so.

Most of the Obama volunteers I spoke with knew a lot about their peers' politics. This isn't surprising on its face because most people have a pretty good intuitive sense of their peers' politics. What was surprising is the level of detail they were able to express about the political values held by people they didn't know well and the political brands with which these relatively distant acquaintances had affiliated themselves. Because anecdote was a favored strategy for responding to these questions, I heard a lot of stories in these interviews about learning funny or unexpected things about the politics of former friends and friends-of-friends. I spoke with two 22-year-old women that had made the trip from Wellesley College in Massachusetts who seemed particularly amused to recount their Facebook discoveries about people they'd known in their respective hometowns. Here's how Lynne, from a small town in Florida, described the experience:

"I just had three kids who I was in elementary school with friend me on Facebook. Before I went on their profiles, I was kind of guessing, 'So where are you right now?' I was absolutely correct—two of them are enrolled in the military and are very conservative, and one of them is a hemp-wearing liberal" (interview October 31, 2008).

She had her suspicions about these people and Facebook not only let her confirm them, it gave her a tool for canvassing her social network and categorizing everyone in it. The most significant thing about this response, something that became one of the most salient trends among answers to these questions, was the certainty and clarity with which the people I interviewed seemed to be able to read the Facebook-mediated signifiers of political brand affiliation.

Kim, the organizer I spoke with on my first day in Keene, might have been the person to describe the effect of this system of political signification most concisely. She noted that “[in her] group of friends, if there is a Republican, they will stick out.” Maybe this says more about her group of friends than it does about the medium, but the words “they will stick out” stuck out for me. She is not just saying that most of her friends are co-branding their online identities with the Democratic Party, she is saying that she notices the co-branding practices of *all* her friends. As I was researching this question, I felt that the most stubborn challenge I would have to contend with would be demonstrating that this dynamic is something new. After all, people have been co-branding themselves with political parties, using every medium from their car bumpers to their hairstyles, for as long as there have been political parties; the practice is now central to the nature of modern politics.

Perhaps the most famous shift in the way politics are practiced (and perceived) that has been directly attributed to a particular medium is that which attended the arrival of television. Discussing the results of his survey suggesting a correlation between the popularization of television and increasing emphasis among voters on the personal qualities of Presidential candidates, Scott Keeter (1987) argues that “the efficacy with which television reaches potential voters has changed the campaign behavior of candidates and the personal traits they stress” (1987:355). But television didn’t change the nature of politics; it changed the way political brands are constructed, as the famous Nixon-Kennedy debate demonstrated. The lesson of this resonant moment in media history, when radio listeners favored Nixon while television viewers preferred Kennedy, isn’t that a new medium can change the way a

candidate is perceived; it's that a new medium can change the relative importance of individual traits within a constellation of mediated attributes (Schudson, 1996:117).

Social media could be heralding a similar shift, but the difference is that the network itself, and by extension the individuals who compose it, is the fabric of the medium. So where television might have shifted voters' focus or emphasis toward Kennedy's apparent confidence and physical charisma, Facebook would shift them toward traits that are easily mediated favorably in the form of a wall post. My second chapter posited a hypothetical theory of how the campaign might have foregrounded rhetoric to which social mediascapes might be particularly hospitable, but proving such a theory would exhaust the potential of my methodology. For my purposes, it is sufficient to establish the possibility of such a system by demonstrating that my interviewees perceived their peers' opinions and images as political texts that they did and would have little trouble reading.

Learning that most of my interviewees understood the politics of their peers through the use of social media in ways that were more stable and precise than the understanding that would have been possible without their use of these media established an important premise: that our politics are, indeed, now more public, though no less personal. That is to say, our political opinions are still an important part of our identities—and perhaps an increasingly important part of the way young people construct them, as I will discuss later—but it's also something that two thirds of my interviewees said they would describe as public information. And the questions I asked about the degree to which my interviewees thought they knew the political opinions held by their peers also served an important priming purpose for the

corollary questions that followed: If they knew so much about their peers, then did they think their own politics were public? And if they did, how accurately did they think the political identity their peers perceived reflected *their own* perception of *their own* politics? A strong majority of the people I spoke with thought that their politics were something personal, but something anyone could know, like their hair colour. This result indicates a broad trend toward openness about politics in spaces like Facebook among young people.

What I am able to infer from the answers to these questions is, however, limited somewhat by my methodology. I spoke with campaign volunteers, people who are much more likely to be outwardly expressive of their political opinions than non-volunteers. Given these limitations, I found it fruitful to focus more on my questions about the relationship between my interviewees' Facebook identities and their 'real world' identities. One question in particular produced a scattered but compelling collection of answers. This question was based on the following hypothetical scenario: "Imagine we'd never met face-to-face, but we were communicating online through Facebook, would I think you're more or less political than you really are?" Interviewees answered "more," "less," and variations on "about the same" in almost equal numbers. Brad, for example, said I would not think him more political than he really is and added that I might get a de-politicized identity if I'd met him in person, offering this explanation:

"A lot of students might join groups, put things on their pages that they wouldn't say in person because they wouldn't feel comfortable saying it. They feel more comfortable in that zone saying it, and expressing it that

way and letting people know how they feel” (interview November 4, 2008).

That he assumes his peers (and, presumably, he himself) would feel more comfortable broadcasting a political opinion in ways that make it potentially visible to hundreds of people at once rather than expressing it in a private conversation is instructive. Since the advent of MySpace, a great deal of scholarly attention has been devoted to questions of social media privacy, but only recently have these acknowledged that privacy is not a not a fixed concept; different mediascapes are subject to different norms (Lenhart and Madden, 2007:20). And according to the social conventions that govern the sharing of political messages in Facebook, politics are welcome (Pempek et al., 2009:232).

The question I asked about the fidelity of their online identities to their personal image of their own politics divided my interviewees in ways that I haven't been able to fully explain. Because a sizeable majority told me that they did express their politics online, I can only infer from the tone of the scattered responses to the more nuanced questions asking how they *felt* about their Facebook presence that my question provoked feelings about the medium itself as well as feelings about how it's used. This question could have been better calibrated to dodge what I now see as the quicksand of asking these young people a convoluted version of “which is the real you?” Still, the response I received from Brad might inform the others. He assumed that Facebook was a “comfortable” place for politics and that there were many people, like him, who felt it was a natural venue for political opinions they were too intimidated to express in other situations. There were complex issues left

unresolved by these responses, but the simpler and larger questions were answered with resounding clarity: Facebook is both a public space and a political space. As both, it bends the latter to the rules of the former (and those of the medium), subjecting politics to perception.

The first question in this series required only that my respondents reflect on the political identities projected by their peers and it produced almost uniform results. As the questions started to approach issues of the respondents' own identities (and maybe invite an expression of their ambivalence about Facebook), they became less consistent. But this pattern is potentially significant even if it resists a cohesive theory of the degree to which young people construct their online political identities to accurately reflect their 'real world' identities because so many respondents chose answers that revealed opinions about the medium. It is important, first, that they feel they can construct political identities and, second, that they feel that can do so in a public way. These responses reinforced that Facebook is both a public space and a political space while introducing other interesting questions about the ways in which politics are becoming part of a public process of identity formation for some young people.

On Election Day I asked Alexa, a 26-year-old Keene State student from Germany, whether she was noticing a lot of her peers expressing their politics online and her response was "almost everybody. Like McCain buttons or Obama buttons, and pages, and 'supports', and this thing of donating your status." Then when I asked her my hypothetical question about how I might perceive her politics if we'd only ever interacted online, she gave this response: "it's possible that you'd think I



am more political than I actually am. You can really manipulate facts with Facebook. You can create an image which is not really matching with reality.” For my purposes, there’s little value in determining whether or not Alexa considers it important to accurately represent her politics online; what’s important is that she feels she has control over the way she’s perceived when she expresses a political opinion. And this was consistent among most of my respondents. Whether they thought their Facebook politics and their ‘real world’ politics were the same or not, they thought they possessed a power of self-representation and that their peers possessed the same power. Given the fact that most thought they knew a lot about their peers’ politics, I am able to infer from these reflections on the nature of the medium that, in the very least, social media are generating primary texts of new public processes of identity formation.

### **The Power of Projection**

There are two ways young people use social media to influence their peers; the first is by actively reaching out with a message and the second is by attaching a message to their own online identity in a visible way and passively letting it permeate the online spaces they inhabit. The first is deployed for projecting political opinions in much the same way many other media are, but the tactics warrant consideration. I asked every interview subject I spoke with whether they would use Facebook if they wanted to convince a peer they didn’t know very well to support Barack Obama and a majority responded that they would, but perhaps not actively. To understand why, I return to Brad’s observations. Persuading a peer to vote a certain way is, of course, a

socially delicate endeavor and one that isn't easy in many social situations. Many of the people I spoke with indicated that they weren't likely to actively try to persuade their peers to support Barack Obama, but that when forced to imagine themselves in the hypothetical scenario I had constructed, they would use Facebook. This response, given by Allan, a 28-year-old University of Massachusetts Artificial Intelligence and Robotics student, is an illustrative example:

“I think a lot of people are afraid to speak up. One thing that's interesting about the Facebook thing is that it's easier to speak up, maybe, and say you have contrary viewpoints. If you're only saying it online... you're not actually near the people who might see your status”

(interview November 1, 2008).

Other media, like email and text messaging, are more intimidating channels for political rhetoric because it might seem to the recipient of these messages that the sender was trying too hard. Again, politics are now connoted with Facebook because political messages travel so easily within its mediascape.

The shape and content of political messages transmitted via Facebook between peers varied, from simple messages with links to articles to videos posted on a peer's “wall” to interesting devices like the “pin” shown here (Figure 4). The simplest messaging strategy was actually the least common. Only one person said he would send a peer a private message. Every other strategy made the message public. Allan described the following popular strategy:

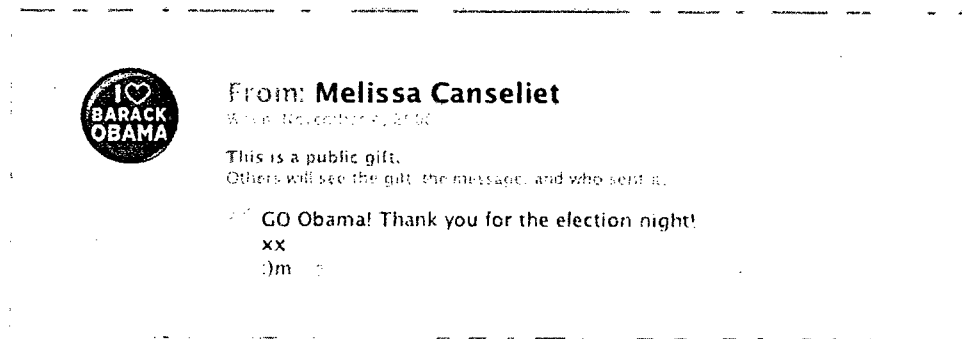
“Once you put your status, then other people can comment on it. I can imagine typing up a comment on someone else's status in response to

one of their friends who said something that I disagreed with. I've done that once or twice" (interview November 1, 2008).

What is significant about this particular strategy is that it has no offline or traditional media equivalent. It's hard to imagine this supporter noticing a McCain-Palin lawn sign in his neighborhood and knocking on the door to start a conversation in response. He explicitly described having done this with someone he had never met, but he didn't consider it a particularly outgoing act. He described attaching a political message to the public status update posted by his peers in a way that suggests he considers it to have been a casual act, something that was likely to be received passively even by someone who didn't share his opinions. The person whose status he commented on had created a public text. The ethics of collective creation associated with web 2.0 are now seemingly so internalized by young people that the pairing of two contradictory messages authored by two different people within a text that explicitly describes the status of only one of the authors is now treated as mundane. The pins shown above, similarly, enable Obama supporters to project their politics in ways that attach messages to their peers' online identities without transgressing against the social norms of the space. Political pins, of course are not new. What's new is the prospect of attaching one to someone else.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> These pins must be "accepted" before they appear on the profile of the receiver. Though it may not be possible to attach a pin to a peer's identity without their consent, these devices seem to be subject to an 'opt-out' convention. Likely because I only spoke with Obama supporters, everyone who brought up the Obama pins said they accepted them. None of my interviewees said they had offered pins to their peers.



**Figure 4: An Obama “button” sent as a “public gift” on Election Day.**

It was illuminating to discover that even in one-to-one communication, when the people I interviewed had communicated a specific message directly and actively to a specific message recipient, he or she chose to do it in public ways. He or she used forms that broadcasted the message throughout their network, presumably because a less intimate message is a less intimidating message. This brings me to the second mode of projecting politics using social media. The most common form of political expression using social media that I encountered was the Facebook “status” update. The rapid ascent of Twitter (a platform dedicated entirely to a variant of the status update) since the 2008 Presidential election suggests that this trend has broader implications. For my purposes, it serves as the most important example of passive projection. One person I spoke with told me proudly that she had changed her status to “palling around with terrorists,” an ironic reference to Sarah Palin’s then-notorious campaign trail rhetoric. Other passive projection strategies, like using the campaign’s “sunrise” logo as a profile picture were mentioned—Allan even told me that all his friends were changing their middle names on Facebook to “Hussein”—but the use of the status update was by far the most pervasive.

A status update is almost the ideal passive projection tactic. As a form, it's constrained by a series of conventions the most important of which is the imperative, prescribed by the hard-coded "John Doe is..." mechanism that Facebook used at the time, to describe oneself. It is almost impossible to be perceived as going too far or trying too hard by one's peers when this convention is maintained. Of course, the convention is easily subverted or appropriated in ways similar to the "palling around with terrorists" meme, but because of its passive nature the Facebook status became the most casual, comfortable and unthreatening rhetorical maneuver available to the young people I spoke with. It benefited from greater reach than a wall post because it appeared in their peers' "news feeds," but it was never impeded by the social complexities of singling out individuals to receive a message. Status updates also have the unique property of carrying social momentum, sometimes even achieving rapid, almost viral wave effects. One such wave was the status "John Doe is voting" on Election Day, a phenomenon that should be considered in the context of the record-breaking turnout among young people in 2008 (CIRCLE, 2009).

On Election Day, more than half of the people I interviewed said they had changed their status to a political message. Of course it is to be expected that people who care about politics will express political opinions on Election Day, but that is not what is most significant about the status trend. The notion that a status is the online equivalent of a lawn sign, something displayed on an individual's property that expresses that individual's opinions, is half right. These people used status updates to describe their own politics, not to evangelize on behalf of a particular candidate to their peers. It was an act of self-branding, something personal, yet it was entirely


visible throughout their networks. If status updates were like lawn signs, then they're lawn signs supporters can install in front of their peers' houses without permission. (Or more aptly, given that news feeds are "private," in their peers' living rooms.) And they would have done it without violating the social conventions of the medium. The power of social media as a venue for the projection of politics is in its simultaneously public and personal nature.

Embedded in the very concept of Facebook is the premise that everything one posts is a description of oneself—it's personal in that most direct and concrete of ways. When you sign up for Facebook you see the form shown here (Figure 5). On the most basic level, everyone who has a Facebook page has undergone a process of defining their online identity by filling out these fields. For most people this process is a bricolage combining the music, television, film, and literature that reflect the user's tastes with the brands and institutions (academic institutions are central here) that serve to locate him or her geographically and sometimes socio-economically. Politics are one of the markers of identity that the software invites new users to apply to themselves. Confirming the significance of this architecture, Pempek et al. (2009) found that among the 51% of the American college students they studied who expressed their politics in their profile, a third said they added the information because "Facebook had a place to insert it" (2009:232). Further research is needed to fully understand the specific effects of this invitation, particularly on younger people for whom it's possible that signing up for a Facebook profile may have been part of a very early process of defining political identity. It is likely that, for many teenagers,

choosing an option from Facebook's dropdown menu would have been one of the first instances in which they had specifically described themselves in political terms.

# David Ian Godsall

Wall Info +

 Click on a profile section below to edit it.

Done Editing

## ▼ Basic Information

Sex: Male ▾

Show my sex in my profile

Birthday: May ▾ 19 ▾ 1983 ▾

Show my full birthday in my profile. ▾

Hometown:

Home Neighborhood:

Family Members: Select Relation ▾

Add another family member

Relationship Status: ▾

Looking for:

- Friendship
- Dating
- A Relationship
- Networking

Political Views:

Religious Views:

Save Changes

Cancel

▶ Personal Information

▶ Contact Information

▶ Education and Work

Figure 5: This is one of the forms Facebook provides to help new users build their profiles.



Of course, Obama volunteers between the ages of 18 and 30 in the fall of 2008 were a group that used Facebook's built-in tools for defining political identity in more sophisticated ways. Violet, a volunteer who at 30 was participating in her first campaign, described her use of these tools as follows:

“Where you can write your political views mine says ‘go Obama’. In my ‘what I am doing’, it’s been ‘is voting for Obama’ or ‘is hopeful for change’—something along those lines. And I’ve got my Obama flair on my Facebook page!” (interview November 3, 2008).

Natalie, an 18-year-old student also participating in her first campaign who I interviewed at Election Day while she was holding a sign outside the polling place, described similar tactics:

“Under my interests, it says Obama; under the little box—the new box they’ve created under the profile picture, it says ‘get out and vote today’. My status is ‘standing at the polls—get out and vote Obama, and go all the way down the ballot’” (interview November 4, 2008)

It’s easy to understand intuitively why it requires less energy, less commitment, and less fervour to describe a personal opinion than to evangelize: “I am” is a statement that’s subject to much lower social barriers than “you should be”. The social conventions of Facebook recognize this explicitly. All but two of the people I interviewed said they had political messages on their Facebook profiles, but far fewer said they would use Facebook to reach out to a specific peer with a specific message. These young people overwhelmingly chose to project their politics and persuade their

peers to support Obama by embedding political messages in their most visible and public expressions of *their own* identity.

My findings show that the young people I interviewed expressed their support for Obama by associating themselves with the campaign's messages and the candidate's brand using a process by which they simultaneously define their own political identities and influence those of their peers. Each of the three patterns of responses I observe engenders these parallel processes in a different way. First, contact functions as a system of forces, some driven by the campaign's tactics, others by the agency of individual supporters, that draws the campaign's messages and the candidate's brand into the social mediascape. This serves the dual purpose of enabling these messages and images to proliferate throughout the social mediascape as supporters adopt them and creating a bridge out of the social mediascape into the MyBo, traditional media, or a campaign office. In the case of Facebook, this system is predicated on the medium's intrinsic hospitality toward politics, but it is also a reflection of the attitude expressed by most of my interviewees that politics are public in these spaces.

To the extent that it is a product of the social conventions governing the expression of politics using Facebook, this notion that politics are public within the social mediascape makes it possible for young people to feel like they know a lot about their peers' politics. Because its fidelity to 'real world' opinions or political affiliations is subject to considerable play, I use the phrase "perceiving politics" to describe a system of political signification according to which young people create public texts describing their own political identity and perceive those of their peers.

This system creates a social platform for the pattern of projection that I observed when I asked my interviewees how they presented their politics when they wanted to influence their peers. I discovered that passive projection was preferred to active projection, but that given the system of perception I observed, it might be more effective. I conclude that contact, perception and projection combined constitute a new platform from which simple messages like “Violet is hopeful for change” are proliferated widely and rapidly, potentially catalyzing broader shifts in political communications.

## Conclusion

When a new technology is first used in a way that demonstrates pervasive changes in our patterns of communication, an impossible question is inevitably asked: was it the innovation of a pioneering user that determined the way it was used or did the technology itself determine the way it was used? This question is to communication theory as the “Great Man” question is to history. Thomas Carlyle famously wrote that “the history of the world is but the biography of great men,” provoking energetic (and sometimes vitriolic) rebuttals from scholars claiming that he had it all wrong, that history is shaped by broad structural forces and social currents (1966: 2). Of course, like most useful dialectics, this debate never yields a stable answer and neither does its equivalent in the study of media. Tectonic shifts in our modes of communicating are neither the product of the innovative use of a new technology, nor are they a function of its intrinsic properties; both are conditions for transformational change.

I have argued in this thesis that social media are transforming the way political campaigns communicate, but Barack Obama’s new media team did not bring about this change and the media themselves did not determine the way the Obama campaign used them. These media made a new structure of communicative relationship possible and the Obama campaign was the first organized messaging effort to demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the new structure. Carolyn Marvin (1990) introduces her seminal social history of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century electronic communication with a bold claim: “in a historical sense,

the computer is no more than an instantaneous telegraph with a prodigious memory” (3). She compares the arrival of the telegraph with that of Gutenberg's printing press, arguing that these two transformational moments in media history both brought about structural changes in our patterns of communication. If, however, structural change is the standard according to which a new technology is categorized, then the rise of social media deserves to share Marvin's top tier of transformation with the printing press and the telegraph.

There are elements of the ways in which I observed the Obama supporters in New Hampshire expressing political ideas that are like the telegraph: they used Facebook's direct messaging tool in much the same way that most people send email. These media are characterized by a one-to-one structure of communication, with messages travelling (initially, at least) only between a sender and a receiver. For the most part, this how the campaign itself communicated with its supporters: they sent emails and Facebook messages designed to solicit money, to encourage volunteering or to generally build and reinforce imagined community, but these messages were only the first of two steps in the new structure. The second step is the social mediation of messages is their proliferation throughout spaces like Facebook within which they are reproduced, co-produced, or remixed by or with its original recipient. And it is through this second step that the new structure channels transformational forces. For the message to appear within the social mediascape in a visible place, like a Facebook “wall” or “status” update, it must first be channeled through a social referencing process that weaves the message into the identity of the person sending or posting it. An organization that can build communities in these spaces, therefore, is an

organization that can create venues for the proliferation of messages that are infused with the authenticity and credibility of their co-production with a supporter as they pass through the second step.

Clay Shirky (2008) recently gave a lecture at the U.S. State Department in which he described how the Obama campaign recognized the importance of the second step in this new structure: "In a world where media is global, social, ubiquitous, and cheap; in a world of media where the audience are increasingly full participants; in that world, media is less and less often about crafting a single message to be consumed by individuals. More and more often it's a way of creating an environment for convening and supporting groups." He was referring primarily to MyBo, but more broadly, to a communications strategy based on the assumption that the campaign would not maintain control over its messages. They were able to encode their messages with rhetorical tactics designed to facilitate the first step, but once the campaign's signifiers entered the social mediascape, their meanings were renegotiated according to the ways in which supporters chose to mediate them. This renegotiation is the part of the process that makes social media structurally different, not just another way to move text and images around with electricity.

There have been four technological revolutions in the history of our collective ability to communicate, according to Shirky (2008): print, the telegraph, "recorded media other than print," then finally "the harnessing of electromagnetic spectrum to send text and image through the air." He points out "a curious asymmetry" in this list: "the media that's good at creating conversations is no good at creating groups and the media that's good at creating groups is no good at creating conversations." His point

is that the internet is good at both because everyone is both producer and consumer of content. Where these four media limit their users to either creating one message and disseminating it throughout a large group or creating a message designed to travel through a one-to-one medium and foster a conversation, social media let conversations happen in large groups. The internet is generally good at creating conversations within groups, but social media like Facebook are particularly good at promoting conversations because they make it easy to contribute. It was possible for engaged, enthusiastic supporters of the Dean campaign to create conversations within their group—in blogs or email chains, for instance—but it wasn't easy; it demanded engagement and enthusiasm. The one idea that seemed to emerge from all my interviews was that becoming part of the conversation convened by the Obama campaign in 2008 was *easy*.

Of course, commenting on the Dean campaign's blog in 2004 wasn't technically, intellectually, or physically hard; it was, however, socially harder than most of the ways the Obama supporters I interviewed chose to engage with the campaign's conversation. The modes of expression that I found most common, like adopting and reconfiguring Obama tropes to use them in status updates and profile pictures, demanded only that the supporter feel part of an imagined community. If they felt like the campaign was something in which they were personally, authentically invested, then integrating pieces of the campaign's brand into their normal process of curating their online identity is a mundane, almost trivial behavior. Or at least it is on the signifier side of this new semiotic pattern—the signified is now interpreted as both the campaign's message and part of the supporter's identity.

Influence, therefore, now flows through a social reference process that can be propelled by passive habits and choices. This is the importance of the maturation of social media between 2004 and 2008: Dean supporters were able to wrap themselves in political signifiers and influence the people around them, but only when they went to the online equivalent of a Dean Rally. Obama supporters, however, were able to wrap themselves in political signifiers as they went about their normal daily lives.

This change is not without precedents, so in my first chapter I endeavored to explore some of the historical contexts that inform the evolution of this new structure of communication. These may include every political use of electronic communication since the telegraph, but for my purposes the most intuitive place to start was the destabilization of the media model that preceded the one I aimed to describe, namely broadcasting. I argued that Karl Rove's use of then-new database technology in his campaigns for George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004 reflected an early recognition of the growing inadequacy of the model that had dominated the theory and practice of political communication since Roosevelt's Fireside Chats. Rove knew that the mediascape built on technologies designed to take a single message and send it to as many people simultaneously as possible was becoming increasingly fragmented and he saw the advantage of targeting specific communities with specific messages. Dean saw the same advantage, I argue, but with the help of forward-looking strategists like Joe Trippi who were prematurely committed to the death of the broadcasting model, his campaign figured out how to use the internet to convene the communities they wanted to talk to.



In my second chapter I focus on the specific rhetorical tactics the Obama campaign used to build its imagined communities. The goal of their communications strategy was to make prospective supporters feel like they were engaged in a project they shared with a large, energetic community. Again, this strategy works by recognizing the two steps involved in the new structure of communication enabled by social media. In order to achieve the first step, the candidate persistently used a rhetoric that emphasized what Aristotle called *ethos*, persuasion based on the credibility of the speaker. This created a degree of comfort and familiarity with the candidate that helped encourage voters to let the campaign's messages into their personal social mediascapes. Because social media demand that a campaign cede control of its messages in order to achieve the second step in this model, *ethos-driven* rhetoric also offers the advantage of focusing supporters' attention on the personal qualities of the candidate rather than on the content of the message.<sup>18</sup> And further promoting their proliferation into and throughout social mediascapes, the messages the campaign sent to supporters who let them in were encoded with the syntax of solidarity, a series of rhetorical techniques that engender feelings of belonging and equity in the imagined Obama community.

My third chapter is concerned with the second step in this new structure of political communication. From my interviews with young Obama supporters in New Hampshire in the final week of the campaign, I discovered three salient groups of ideas: *the power of Easy*, *the power of perception*, and *the power of projection*. The

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<sup>18</sup> Recent resistance among former supporters aligned with the American political left to policies like President Obama's continued prosecution of the war in Afghanistan that are consistent with the campaign's platform demonstrates the campaign's successes in shifting focus from the campaign's message to its brand.

Obama campaign made it easy for prospective supporters to be invited into the conversation it was convening, with the powerful result that many young people who might not otherwise have become engaged used social media tools (both the campaign's and Facebook's) to join the imagined Obama community and start re-producing or co-creating the campaign's messages. Perception is powerful because we are now able to perceive more about our peers more easily with utilities like Facebook than we have been in the past, with the result being that young people like those I interviewed notice the political signifiers woven into their friends' online identities. Finally, projection has always been powerful, but social media make it more powerful in two new ways: actively projecting political expression for the purpose of influencing other people is more efficient than it has been in the past, but perhaps more importantly, the passive process of integrating branded signifiers into our online identities now makes it possible to project political expression while skirting the social complexities of active persuasion.

The limitations of my research are a function of those that constrained the scope (geographic, temporal, and methodological) of my fieldwork. There remains much fertile ground for further study; indeed, the implications of the structural shifts I have identified demand scholarly attention. First, the widespread increase in civic engagement among American young people throughout 2008 was a decisive force in the campaign. Von Drehle (2008) writes that young supporters delivered the margin by which Obama won the Iowa Caucus, an event that has attracted relatively few voters under the age of thirty in the past. Research is needed to determine if the former members of the Obama imagined community are still politically engaged and

still expressing political ideas using social media. A decline in intensity is to be assumed, but determining if the Obama phenomenon was ephemeral or more permanent will impact future elections globally. There is also a great deal yet to be learned about how, when and why Facebook users read their peers' profile pages. Habits of so-called "Facebook stalking" should be better understood, I believe, because the most important feature of the flows of influence into and throughout social mediascapes is the passive projection of influence. Lynne told me she had viewed the profiles of people from her hometown in Florida with whom she felt she had little in common because she was curious about their politics. It would be instructive to determine what habits and impulses shape the way young people are observing their peers' politics on Facebook because a better understanding of these dynamics could lead to broader questions about their systemic effect. For instance, could social media lead to increased homogeneity of political opinion within imagined communities?

These questions deserve to be asked because we are experiencing a moment in which the fundamental structures governing the ways in which we communicate our ideas and opinions are being rapidly, pervasively, and permanently transformed. I believe messages like "Violet is hopeful for change" now command influence that is potentially greater than the lofty oratory that inspire them. The opinion leaders in the two step flow model that I have described are not the same people as those who would have influenced the political opinions of their peers in the past because deliberate persuasion is no longer part of the equation. Social media enable flows of influence that demand so little action that the next generation of political activists

might learn how to be more effective than their predecessors without being active. And since so little action is required, the principal barrier that presumably deters many would-be activists has been removed—anyone with an opinion can now be an influential passive activist. I believe this new structure of political communication will continue to promote political engagement as social media continue to become more popular. If it does not, however, the disappointing conclusion we will likely be left with is that the history of the world might indeed be but the biography of great men.

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# Appendix

## Consent Form To Participate In Research

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN:

Social Networks, Mediated Identities, and the Politics of Friending:  
Barack Obama Supporters' Facebook Use in the 2008 New Hampshire Presidential  
Primary

This is to state that I agree to participate in a program of research being conducted by  
David Godsall of the Media Studies department of Concordia University.

Department of Communication Studies  
7141 Sherbrooke Street West  
CJ 3.230, 3rd Floor  
Montreal, Quebec  
Canada H4B 1R6

M: 514-941-7584  
E: ddogsall@gmail.com

### A. PURPOSE

I have been informed that the purpose of the research is as follows: to explore the use  
of social media, particularly the online social networking utility Facebook.com, as  
sites of political discourse, information and influence flows, and emergent practices  
of community- and identity-formation among American young people.

### B. PROCEDURES

Interviews will be conducted in public places agreed upon by both the interviewer  
and the subject. The time required for interviews will not exceed two hours per  
session and efforts will be made to accommodate the schedules of participants.  
Digital recordings will be made and kept, but accessible only to the researcher and  
research supervisor.

### C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

The potential benefits derive from the opportunity to discuss new modes of civic  
participation. Because interviews will focus on social networking utilities as sites of  
new forms of political engagement, participation in this research process could serve  
to empower interviewees in their own process of engaging with political issues.

The potential risks associated with the interview process, since participants' names will not be used in any written work, are a function of individual subjects' degrees of comfort with discussing issues of identity. These risks are assumed to be minimal.

#### D. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time without negative consequences.
- I understand that my participation in this study will be kept CONFIDENTIAL if I so choose.
- I understand that the data from this study may be published.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print)

---

SIGNATURE

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If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Adela Reid, Research Ethics and Compliance Officer, Concordia University, at (514) 848-2424 x7481 or by email at [areid@alcor.concordia.ca](mailto:areid@alcor.concordia.ca).

# Summary Protocol Form



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t 514.848.2424x4888 • f 514.848.4290

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## SUMMARY PROTOCOL FORM UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

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### IMPORTANT:

Approval of a *Summary Protocol Form* (SPF) must be issued by the applicable Human Research Ethics Committee prior to beginning any research project using human participants.

Research funds cannot be released until appropriate certification has been obtained.

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### FOR FACULTY AND STAFF RESEARCH:

Please submit a signed original plus THREE copies of this form to the UHREC c/o the Office of Research, GM-1000. Allow one month for the UHREC to complete the review.

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### FOR GRADUATE or UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH:

- if your project is included in your supervising faculty member's SPF, no new SPF is required
- if your project is supported by external (e.g. CIHR, FQRSC) or internal (e.g. CASA, FRDP) funds, the supervising faculty member must submit a new SPF on behalf of the student as per faculty research above. The supervising faculty member **MUST** be listed as the PI.
- if your project is **NOT** supported by external (e.g. CIHR, FQRSC) or internal (e.g. CASA, FRDP) funds, the student must submit a new SPF to the relevant departmental committee. Contact your department for specific details.

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### INSTRUCTIONS:

This document is a form-fillable word document. Please open in Microsoft Word, and tab through the sections, clicking on checkboxes and typing your responses. The form will expand to fit your text. Handwritten forms will not be accepted. If you have technical difficulties with this document, you may type your responses and submit them on another sheet. Incomplete or omitted responses may cause delays in the processing of your protocol.

---

### 1. SUBMISSION INFORMATION

Please provide the requested contact information in the table below:

Please check ONE of the boxes below :

- This application is for a new protocol.
  - This application is a modification or an update of an existing protocol:  
Previous protocol number (s): \_\_\_\_\_
- 

### 2. CONTACT INFORMATION

Please provide the requested contact information in the table below:

*UHREC Summary Protocol Form*

1

Principal Investigator/ Instructor (must be Concordia faculty or staff member)	Department	Internal Address	Phone Number	E-mail
David Godsall	Communications	N/A	514-941-7584	dgod्सall@gmail.com
Co-Investigators / Collaborators		University / Department		E-mail
Research Assistants		Department / Program		E-mail

**3. PROJECT AND FUNDING SOURCES**

Project Title:	Social Networks, Mediated Identities, and the Politics of Friending: Barack Obama Supporters' Facebook Use in the 2008 New Hampshire Presidential Primary
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In the table below, please list all existing internal and external sources of research funding, and associated information, which will be used to support this project. Please include anticipated start and finish dates for the project(s). Note that for awarded grants, the grant number is REQUIRED. If a grant is an application only, list APPLIED instead.

Funding Source	Project Title	Grant Number	Award Period	
			Start	End

**4. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH OR ACTIVITY**

Please provide a brief overall description of the project or research activity. Include a description of the benefits which are likely to be derived from the project. Alternatively, you may attach an existing project description (e.g. from a grant proposal).

This thesis research will explore the use of social media – particularly the online social networking utility Facebook.com – as sites of political discourse, information and influence flows, and emergent practices of community- and identity-formation among American young people. By examining the Facebook use of young Americans who were actively engaged in Barack Obama’s 2008 New Hampshire Presidential Primary campaign, I will investigate the increasing importance of this new medium as a distinct sphere of American civil society and ask what role it has played in the promotion of civic engagement and democratic participation.

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## 5. SCHOLARLY REVIEW / MERIT

Has this research been funded by a peer-reviewed granting agency (e.g. CIHR, FQRSC, Hexagram)?

Yes Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

No If your research is beyond minimal risk, please complete and attach the Scholarly Review Form, available here:  
<http://oor.concordia.ca/REC/forms.shtml>

---

## 6. RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

a) Please describe the group of people who will participate in this project.

The subjects I intend to interview for this project are individuals under the age of 30 who registered as volunteers with the New Hampshire Obama campaign offices before the January 2008 primary election and who are eligible to vote in the November 4<sup>th</sup> general election. These individuals must also be active Facebook.com users.

b) Please describe in detail how participants will be recruited to participate. Please attach to this protocol draft versions of any recruitment advertising, letters, etcetera which will be used.

I will recruit subjects by contacting university Obama supporter groups and Obama campaign officials in New Hampshire. I expect campaign organizers to be able to suggest individuals who meet my criteria and would be interested in helping with my research. I will also recruit subjects using my own contacts from my experience as a volunteer organizer with the campaign.

c) Please describe in detail how participants will be treated throughout the course of the research project. Include a summary of research procedures, and information regarding the training of researchers and assistants. Include sample interview questions, draft questionnaires, etcetera, as appropriate.

My interviews will be short, informal, and relatively unstructured. Since my subjects are young people volunteering their time, I will organize my process around the goal of making them as comfortable and casual as possible. To this end, my interviews will be conducted in neutral environments, like cafés and other public places. I expect these interviews to require at least 30 minutes, but they will last only as long as my subjects feel they want to continue.

I envision three groups of questions, all of which will be phrased in such a way as to invite long, reflective responses. The first group of questions will all pertain to how the subject uses Facebook and the second group of questions will focus on how the subject became involved with the Barack Obama campaign. The third group of questions will be designed to invite the subject to consider the ways they've been influenced by their peers through Facebook, the ways they've influenced others using Facebook, and how these dynamics are different from their interactions outside of the Facebook space.



These interviews will be recorded using a digital recording device, but if a subject asks that I not record any part of their responses this device will be turned off. Although biographical and demographic information may be important for my research, the specific identities of my interviewees are not relevant. I will, therefore, inform my subjects that they are free to remain anonymous. I will ask that individuals who participate provide me with an email address, in case I have follow-up questions, but explain that I will try to avoid imposing on their time after the initial interview.

The following examples indicate the general tone, style, and content of my questions:

- 1) Is the political identity you've constructed online the same as that which you use in conversation, in the "real world"? If not, in what ways?
- 2) Is the identity you use online more politically active than the identity you use in school, the workplace, or in "real world" social situations?
- 3) Are you more or less likely to accept or welcome advances of a political nature using a social networking utility as medium?
- 4) Are you more likely to try to persuade a less politically active friend to support a political candidate you favor using a social networking utility – by forwarding links and suggesting groups – than you would be in person?

I will not be using research assistants.

---

#### **7. INFORMED CONSENT**

- a) Please describe how you will obtain informed consent from your participants. A copy of your written consent form or your oral consent script must be attached to this protocol. *Please note: written consent forms must follow the format of the template included at the end of this document.*

I will obtain consent by asking that individuals interested in participating complete and sign the attached consent form.

- b) In some cultural traditions, individualized consent as implied above may not be appropriate, or additional consent (e.g. group consent; consent from community leaders) may be required. If this is the case with your sample population, please describe the appropriate format of consent and how you will obtain it.

N/A

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#### **8. DECEPTION AND FREEDOM TO DISCONTINUE**

- a) Please describe the nature of any deception, and provide a rationale regarding why it must be used in your protocol. Is deception absolutely necessary for your research design? Please note that deception includes, but is not limited to, the following: deliberate presentation of false information; suppression of material information; selection of information designed to mislead; selective disclosure of information.

Deception is in no way part of my research methodology.

- b) How will participants be informed that they are free to discontinue at any time? Will the nature of the project place any limitations on this freedom (e.g. documentary film)?

The nature of my project will not place any limitations on participants' ability to discontinue at any time. I will inform them verbally that they may end the interview at any time by saying they do not want to continue. Additionally, they may continue without the interview being recorded by asking that the recording device be turned off at any time.

---

### 9. RISKS AND BENEFITS

- a) Please identify any foreseeable risks or potential harms to participants. This includes low-level risk or any form of discomfort resulting from the research procedure. When appropriate, indicate arrangements that have been made to ascertain that subjects are in "healthy" enough condition to undergo the intended research procedures. Include any "withdrawal" criteria.

I intend to conduct my interviews in a way that will be less physically, emotionally, and intellectually taxing than the tasks my subjects will have performed while volunteering with the campaign. I cannot foresee any discomfort resulting from these interviews for my subjects.

- b) Please indicate how the risks identified above will be minimized. Also, if a potential risk or harm should be realized, what action will be taken? Please attach any available list of referral resources, if applicable.

I do not expect any harm to result from my interviews. If harm is realized by some unforeseeable means, I will take whatever reasonable action the interviewee requests.

- c) Is there a likelihood of a particular sort of "heinous discovery" with your project (e.g. disclosure of child abuse, discovery of an unknown illness or condition, etcetera)? If so, how will such a discovery be handled?

Because the individuals I will be interviewing are adults who volunteer their time, I don't expect to make any such discoveries. My interviewees will be selected from a group among whom I perceive no particular vulnerabilities.

---

### 10. DATA ACCESS AND STORAGE

- a) Please describe what access research participants will have to study results, and any debriefing information that will be provided to participants post-participation.

I will make my final product available to research participants and encourage them to read it. I will not provide any debriefing information.

- b) Please describe the path of your data from collection to storage to its eventual archiving or disposal. Include specific details on short and long-term storage (format and location), who will have access, and final destination (including archiving, or any other disposal or destruction methods).

The data will be collected by me using a digital recording device and stored as an Mp3 file on a hard drive in my home to which only I will have access.

#### 11. CONFIDENTIALITY OF RESULTS

Please identify what access you, as a researcher, will have to your participant(s) identity(ies):

<input type="checkbox"/>	Fully Anonymous	Researcher will not be able to identify who participated at all. Demographic information collected will be insufficient to identify individuals.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Anonymous results, but identify who participated	The participation of individuals will be tracked (e.g. to provide course credit, chance for prize, etc) but it would be impossible for collected data to be linked to individuals.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Pseudonym	Data collected will be linked to an individual who will only be identified by a fictitious name / code. The researcher will not know the "real" identity of the participant.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Confidential	Researcher will know "real" identity of participant, but this identity will not be disclosed.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Disclosed	Researcher will know and will reveal "real" identity of participants in results / published material.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Participant Choice	Participant will have the option of choosing which level of disclosure they wish for their "real" identity.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please describe)	

- a) If your sample group is a particularly vulnerable population, in which the revelation of their identity could be particularly sensitive, please describe any special measures that you will take to respect the wishes of your participants regarding the disclosure of their identity.

My sample group is not a particularly vulnerable population and the revelation of their identities is not likely to be sensitive or become sensitive for any reason.

- b) In some research traditions (e.g. action research, research of a socio-political nature) there can be concerns about giving participant groups a "voice". This is especially the case with groups that have been oppressed or whose views have been suppressed in their cultural location. If these concerns are relevant for your participant group, please describe how you will address them in your project.

These concerns are not relevant for my participant group.

#### 12. ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

*UHREC Summary Protocol Form*

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- a) Bearing in mind the ethical guidelines of your academic and/or professional association, please comment on any other ethical concerns which may arise in the conduct of this protocol (e.g. responsibility to subjects beyond the purposes of this study).

There are no other ethical concerns that could arise in the conduct of this protocol.

- b) If you have feedback about this form, please provide it here.

I have none.

---

### 13. SIGNATURE AND DECLARATION

Following approval from the UHREC, a protocol number will be assigned. This number must be used when giving any follow-up information or when requesting modifications to this protocol.

The UHREC will request annual status reports for all protocols, one year after the last approval date. Modification requests can be submitted as required, by submitting to the UHREC a memo describing any changes, and an updated copy of this document.

**I hereby declare that this Summary Protocol Form accurately describes the research project or scholarly activity that I plan to conduct. Should I wish to add elements to my research program or make changes, I will edit this document accordingly and submit it to the University Human Research Ethics Committee for Approval.**

**ALL activity conducted in relation to this project will be in compliance with :**

- ***The Tri Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Human Subjects*, available here:**

<http://www.pre.ethics.qc.ca/english/policystatement/policystatement.cfm>

- **The Concordia University Code of Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Actions**

**Signature of Principal Investigator:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** October 22, 2008