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How the Internet has Changed Presidential Campaigns
and the Effect on Political Communication

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It's Election Eve 2008 and Barack Obama has more than 2.3 million friends on Facebook. John McCain has 623,359. Obama has nine times as many views for his YouTube videos than does McCain. McCain has just more than a quarter the number of MySpace friends that Obama has. On Twitter, Obama has 240 times as many followers as McCain, and many aren't even sure McCain was actually in control of his Twitter feed (web-strategist.com). Further, BarackObama.com is generating five times as much Internet traffic as JohnMcCain.com (Alexa.com).

Four years earlier, that paragraph would have made little sense. In 1996, it would have made no sense at all. Then, most Web sites were little more than pictures, words and e-mail addresses. Political advertising was on television. People sought information from traditional media – newspapers, television and radio (Howard, 2005).

As the Internet became more of a staple in the information sphere, political use of the tool increased. The Internet was seemingly indispensable in the 2008 presidential election, with candidate Web sites serving as the headquarters of a Web-based onslaught of tweets, status updates, friend requests and, ultimately, mobilization. This study will focus on how the Internet has evolved into such a crucial campaign tool. It will analyze how Barack Obama's campaign exploited it as such an effective weapon and how his administration has, or has not, continued to implement it.

The Internet as a Communication Tool

Political researchers have proven many times over that exposure to political information increases voter turnout and political involvement (McLeod et al 1996; Prior 2005; Chicksand & Carrigan 2006; Howard 2005; Shah et al 2007). Shah's (2007) study shows that interpersonal political communication is just as much an influence on participation as the gathering of information from traditional media.

As the number of people on the Internet grew, the number of people using the Web for political news grew with it, but at a slower pace. In 2000, more than half of the American public was online, but only 12 percent used the Internet to check the news. By 2002, it was 41 percent (Howard, 2005). The number of people who had visited a government Web site or sent an email to a government official also grew dramatically over that period (Chicksand & Carrigan, 2006).

The number of people using the Internet for political information was low and that may have been motivation for campaigns to avoid exploiting the Web as a campaign tool. Before Shah's 2007 study, there was no evidence that online communication was as effective at influencing involvement as traditional offline communication.

Shah's study further proved the effectiveness of interactive political communication. Rather than simply giving users the ability to interact with a comment moderator or, worse, just the site itself, truly interactive Web sites give users the ability to communicate with each other (Stromer-Galley, 2000). This is called horizontal communication. The interpersonal political communication shown to increase political participation could be brought to the Internet, although it wasn't until late in the game that tools exploiting this kind of communication model were employed.

The Campaign Site

By 1998, a majority of major-party Senate, House and gubernatorial candidates had Web sites (Herrnson, Stokes-Brown, Hindman 2007). Two years later, independent candidates got into the mix, with nearly one in three House candidate Web sites belonging to non-major-party candidates (Bimber & Davis 2003).

Motivations for the use of a Web site varied, as did the content. Many campaigns sought to wrestle control of their candidate's message from the media. The webmaster for a conservative political action committee said his site's goal was "to circumvent Peter Jennings," (Howard 2005). He felt the media were getting his candidate's message wrong, so he wanted to provide an avenue for constituents to get the message straight from the campaign. It's likely that independent candidates saw the Internet as a way to get their message out without the help of the media.

The growth of the politician's Web presence has gone through a lot of trial and error. Before the 2008 election, the candidate Web site was nearly the only way, aside from online news sites, for candidates to establish a Web presence (sites like meetup.com provided information about candidate events, but not about policy positions). For many, it might seem hard to remember the Web as less than the well-oiled machine it is today, but research shows a steep learning curve for campaigns on the Web.

Stromer-Galley (2000) classified early candidate Web sites as online infomercials. In analyzing campaign sites' form of communication, Stromer-Galley says that candidates used the Web space primarily to promote their policy positions, give information about speeches and rallies, and provide information on volunteering and

donating. Few candidates provided email addresses. Fewer still provided the chat functions which were becoming popular online. Candidates were mobilizing a message without mobilizing people. Stromer-Galley says the early campaign Web sites provided only media interaction, meaning users could only interact with the information provided on the site. Candidates took little advantage of the early interactive capabilities of the Internet.

Of course, in 1996, interactivity had a different meaning than today. A study of candidate sites in 1996 showed that as many as three of four candidates offered interactive features on their Web site (Davis 1999). These interactive features consisted primarily of e-mail addresses, many of which were provided with an explanation that the candidate would not be responding to individual e-mails (Stromer-Galley 2000).

All this signifies the desire for control in campaign strategy. Features like real-time chat could allow a candidate to get cornered by a question he wasn't prepared to answer. These features could also provide opportunities for non-supporters to intervene. Even if the Internet that existed over a dial-up connection offered little more interactivity than two-way communication by email and chat, these features threatened a campaign's ability to control its message (Stromer-Galley 2000, Howard 2005). Campaigns strive to mediate the message between the candidate and his/her constituents. This loss of control was something early campaigns did not take a chance with (Howard 2005).

Campaigns offering interactive features also faced an enormous burden if they planned to respond to individual messages. If users were given the impression that they could send an email directly to their candidate, many would take advantage to ask questions. The Jesse Ventura gubernatorial campaign site explicitly stated that e-mails

would not receive a response (Stromer-Galley 2000). The 1996 presidential candidates opted to not provide an email address at all.

Another campaign goal that the interactive capabilities of the Internet compromised is ambiguity (Stromer-Galley 2000). Although e-mail is a largely one-on-one communication forum, chat rooms and web boards are very public. Specific questions posed to candidates in these forums threatened a candidate's ability to be vague about policies and objectives. Posts would also be archival, meaning the slightest inconsistency posted in such a forum could lead to accusations of waffling on positions – and there would be proof (Stromer-Galley 2000). While it would be possible to remove unwanted messages from these boards, moderating comments would add to the burden.

This gives three reasons for candidates to avoid the human interactivity available on the Internet – loss of control, increased burden and loss of ambiguity. Bimber and Davis' study of campaign Web sites showed candidates and their Web strategists were largely going along with this in the 2000 presidential election.

Online Objectives

In previous campaign years, the main purpose of candidate sites was to “preach to the converted,” meaning the audience for these Web sites was composed of supportive voters and undecided voters. Candidates have four online goals: opinion reinforcement, encouraging activism, soliciting contributions, and registering and mobilizing voters (Bimber & Davis, 2003). In past campaigns, achieving these goals required little breakage of the three rules listed by Stromer-Galley.

For opinion reinforcement, both Bush and Gore allowed visitors to customize their Web sites so as to adjust the content based on what issues each returning visitor

thought most important. News feeds kept supporters in touch with what was going on in each campaign. Bush even employed a fact-checker to combat comments made by the Gore campaign or the media that the Bush team felt were inaccurate (Bimber & Davis, 2003).

Users were also encouraged to submit comments on each candidate's site and provide contact information. This was media interaction rather than human interaction, but it shows that the amount of interactivity increased. E-mail was put into use in 2000 through the use of the e-mail listserv, which many gubernatorial candidates utilized in 1996 (Bimber, Davis 2003, Stromer-Galley 2000). Rather than two-way communication, e-mails were used by campaigns to send out voter registration reminders, volunteer opportunities and updates from the campaign trail. This usage allowed a greater amount of communication between the candidates and their supporters with little increase in burden and no loss of control. It also satisfied the goals of opinion reinforcement, activism and mobilizing voters.

Gore's instant messaging system allowed for horizontal communication among his supporters and flew in the face of the desire for control, but there is doubt as to how effective the tool was (Bimber & Davis 2003). Largely, the 2000 election followed the rules and strategies set out by the 1996 campaigns, with little effective innovation in usage of the Web.

Dean Sets a New Standard

Then along came the Howard Dean campaign in 2004. Dean revolutionized the use of the Internet in political campaigns and many see his Internet presence as the catalyst to his campaign success in the Democratic primary (Best & Krueger 2005). He

could afford to go against some of the assumed science of Internet campaigning because, as a dark horse candidate, he had little to lose (Hindman 2005).

Not only did Dean provide an email address on his Web site, he blogged about his campaign activities (Hernson, Stokes-Brown, Hindman 2007). Visitors were allowed – and encouraged – to comment on his entries. By Bimber and Davis’ definition, keeping supporters updated on news from the trail was an opinion reinforcement tool. Using a blog was an efficient way to update supporters.

The amount of horizontal communication allowed by Dean’s Web site was key in mobilizing his supporters in 2004. Dean’s team knew that his Web site would primarily only garner the attention of his supporters. Instead of using this as a reason to use the Internet casually, he decided to use his site to galvanize these supporters into a dedicated unit of organizers, volunteers and fundraisers (Hindman 2005, Howard 2005). He provided avenues through which Dean supporters could not only communicate with him, but also with each other.

Through the site, his campaign managed to recruit more than 640,000 supporters. 188,941 of them opted to receive notices from the campaign about pro-Dean meetings in their area. Nearly 75,000 of those supporters attended such a meeting (Hindman 2005). More than 70 percent of the people who attended pro-Dean meetings found out about them from the Internet rather than an acquaintance. (Hindman 2005). Although Gore beat him to the punch, this was certainly the more successful attempt to provide the kind of horizontal communication the Internet is now known for.

Dean had a massive influx of money from small donors – 61 percent of his finances came from people donating \$200 or less (Hindman 2005). Much of that came

from the Internet. After winning the Democratic presidential nomination, and the support of most of Dean's followers, John Kerry raised 40 million dollars in the next two months. Sixty-five percent of it came from online donors (Hernson, Stokes-Brown, Hindman 2007). Dean didn't win the primary, but he rose to prominence from a dark horse candidate and his success on the Internet translated to continued online achievement for the Democratic party. His ability to raise money online set the standard for future campaigns in achieving that goal.

Obama.com

Barack Obama's campaign was too recent for research to have been conducted on it and analyzed, but based on the current Web statistics, he certainly trounced John McCain in Internet presence (Alexa.com). His Internet team included one of the founders of Facebook and an executive from Google. Both candidates' taking of the campaign to the Internet in 2008 contributed to the largest turnout of voters in presidential election history, with more than 122 million people casting votes for the two major candidates (CNN.com). Research hasn't shown it, but many will consider Obama's online assault to be instrumental to his victory.

Method

So how did Barack Obama's campaign site? What were the main facets of Obama's online strategy – not just through his Web site, but through Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites? Further, how did Obama adapt these strategies to provide consistent communication now that he has an administration instead of a campaign?

Mimicking the process of Stromer-Galley's evaluation of online campaign presence, this paper will qualitatively analyze the campaign version of the BarackObama.com site and compare it to the administration's WhiteHouse.gov. BarackObama.com still exists and the current version will be used for comparison purposes also, but WhiteHouse.gov is the administration's main informational tool on the Internet. BarackObama.com is now a tool which seeks to advance the agenda of the administration, but is paid for by the Democratic National Committee. The Wayback Machine (www.archive.org) will be used to reproduce most recent archive version of the campaign's version of BarackObama.com, which is Feb. 22, 2008.

Bimber and Davis' four main uses of the political Web site – opinion reinforcement, activism, contribution solicitation, and registration and mobilization of voters – will provide a rubric for the research. In conducting the analysis, opinion reinforcement tools will be operationalized as blogs, news feeds, email list serves and any other tools directing users to Obama's policy stances. Features promoting activism will include volunteer pages, calls to action or any features that request a user to fill out a form containing personal information. Solicitation of funds would include any call to make contributions. Mobilization and registration of voters will include any registration information, links to registration sites, calls to action in primaries or reminders of election dates.

Much of the research points out the importance of what Stromer-Galley calls horizontal communication among site users. In light of the importance of such a feature, the paper will also seek tools which allow users to communicate with each other and how they help achieve Bimber and Davis' objectives. These tools would include anything that

allows direct communication between users or gives volunteers information on finding other supporters around them.

Lastly, it will also evaluate just how closely these features follow Stromer-Galley's listed campaign goals of message control, burden management and ambiguity. Each will be evaluated separately and qualitatively. For Ambiguity, the pages focusing on education and the economy will be singled out.

Since the campaign's site is just part of the online presence, content Obama's Facebook page and updates from his Twitter account will also be evaluated by these criteria.

Objectives

You Agree with Me? So Do I!

Looking at the campaign site yields several of the features Bimber and Davis would consider opinion reinforcement tools. The main image on the center of the page is a banner sorting through the latest news about the campaign, including recent endorsements and the latest primary victories. Above that is the "Learn" tab, which leads users to transcripts of old speeches, press releases from the campaign, information about Obama's positions on issues and a fact checker used to refute claims made by other campaigns about Obama.



Email was a big part of the Web presence. Users could not get to the Obama



main page without first visiting a site asking for an email address and zip code for each visitor. A link was provided to skip the signup, but the intent was

obviously to develop a sizable email list serve. There was also a perpetual email address entry bar at the top of every page on the campaign site.

This site also had a blog which, like the Dean blog, chronicled where Obama was and what he was doing. Obama used Twitter, which made its campaign debut in 2008, in a similar fashion. His February “tweets” (posts on a Twitter account) include “in Virginia, speaking at VA Democratic Party Jefferson-Jackson Dinner. Watch his speech live on CNN,” (Feb. 19); and “heading to Cleveland State University for tonight's debate. Watch it live at 9pm ET on MSNBC or streamed at <http://cleveland.com>,” (Feb. 26).

Obama’s Facebook page served up more opinion reinforcement. Most of the campaign’s status updates were links which redirected visitors to blog posts or YouTube videos.

WhiteHouse.gov has similar opinion reinforcement features. The president’s weekly video address is featured front and center, with the “Briefing Room” tab serving much the same purpose as the campaign’s “Learn” tab. There is a regularly updated blog (three updates on April 28) and another persistent reminder for you to submit your email address.



The Obama administration still uses Twitter and Facebook to link visitors back to videos and blog posts, just not quite as often.

From Web Surfer to Campaign Organizer

Encouraging activism was one of the main goals of the Obama campaign, as with campaigns in the past. The “Action” tab gave site visitors access to the volunteer center and the action center, which provided information about upcoming speeches, rallies and volunteer opportunities. There was even a link to receive phone lists for voters in your area so volunteers could make cold calls on behalf of the campaign.

WhiteHouse.gov has created the Office of the Public Liaison (OPL) to stimulate conversation between visitors and the administration. Users can submit questions and comments, but must first enter their zip code and email address, an important tool for gathering contact information for future mobilization.

The site also introduced an “Open for Questions” feature, which not only allowed users to submit video questions to the president, but also for users to vote as to which questions he should answer. According to the site, more than 92,000 people submitted nearly 104,000 questions and cast more than 1.7 million votes.

The current BarackObama.com is more overt than the White House site in its encouragement of activism. The site’s name is now “Organize for America.” During Congress’ debate over the stimulus package, the site helped visitors organize and attend informational meetings about the program. Users can register for my.BarackObama.com for online local organization tools. The link says it can help with forming and joining local groups, allowing volunteers to talk to voters and raise funds for the campaign. Users can also start their own blogs on the site.

Now Enter Your 12-Digit Credit Card Number

There is only one item on the BarackObama.com campaign site that is red- deep, bold red; it says “Donate Now.” It was a simple one-click process to donate to the campaign. There was also the Obama store, where supporters could buy Obama gear, the profits from which counted as donations.

Campaign solicitation is not generally the goal of an administration. There is a new Web site introduced by the administration, Recovery.gov, which lets Americans see how the money used for the Toxic Asset Recovery Program (TARP) is used. The money in the program is not a donation, but the administration does treat it as such because the money belongs to the taxpayers and Obama’s performance on the economy is a major moniker of his success.

The Organize for America site does solicit contributions, since the campaign no longer funds the site. The link looks just about the same as the donate icon on the campaign site.



Get Out the Vote



There were few places a user couldn’t find voter registration information on the campaign site. Each state had a sub-page on the Obama site with information on how to register and when the primary votes were scheduled. The action center had a voter registration tab, and there was a primary link on the right of the main page.

Scrolling lower on the page shows the primary vote scorecard which kept tabs on the race against Hillary Clinton and gave the dates of upcoming primary votes.

Obama's Twitter page helped with getting out the vote also. His November tweets include "Asking you to vote Nov. 4th. Visit <http://VoteForChange.com>, call 877-874-6226 or text VOTE to 62262 to find your polling locations," "Asking for your vote today. For polling location info visit <http://VoteForChange.com> or call 877-874-6226. Make sure everyone votes," and "Asking you to help Get Out the Vote in these last few critical hours of our campaign for change," (Nov. 3-4).

Voter registration is not really an administration goal – at least, not until mid-term elections – so there is not much present on BarackObama.com or WhiteHouse.gov. The definition of the objective was stretched to include mobilizing visitors to encourage their representatives to vote a certain way, but there is not much of that either. There are no pages helping citizens get in contact with their representatives, which would have been an excellent way to accomplish this goal.

There are links to features like the vice-president's Middle Class Task Force which ask visitors to submit ideas toward furthering administration goals. Not the same, but it does mobilize users to assert opinions.

Having My People Call My People

Establishing communication was an obvious goal of the campaign site. One major



horizontal communication feature was the "People" tab. This tool allowed Obama supporters to congregate based on their heritage, religion, veteran status or age. There were groups like Latinos for Obama and Kids for Obama. Each had their own page, their

own membership, a unique version of the Obama logo and a news feed on their own page of the site.

The emphasis on mobilizing and organizing volunteers also incorporated horizontal communication. Like the Dean campaign's use of Meetup.com, Obama's volunteer page brought people together. Potential volunteers had to submit their contact information, occupation and special skill sets when signing up. Volunteer offices contacted users in their area. Users could search for other local volunteers and organize together.

The Organize for America site brings activists together in a similar way. Again, the site assisted Obama supporters in organizing meetings touting the benefits of the stimulus package when it was under Congressional review. The site also allows registered users to host blogs about Obama and submit comments on the blog posts of other users. The Organizing Blog, the page's main blog, receives as many as 400 comments on some posts, and it has become an honor for users to be first to comment on a post. On three of the four blog posts from April 28th, the second comment is a user congratulating another user for posting the first comment.

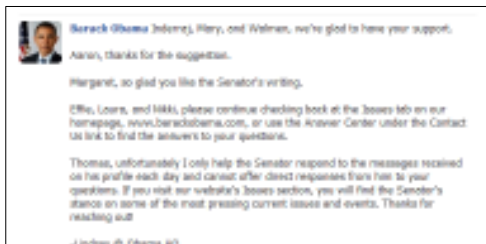
Obama's use of the social networks is another example of his horizontal communication strategy. Again, Obama had more than 2.3 million Facebook friends on November 3. More than a millions more were following him on Twitter. Facebook users started Obama groups and fan pages where they could interact and share stories about the candidate. Most of his status updates and tweets gave information about his appearances and positions, giving his friends and followers information on events and opportunities to rally to support their candidate.

Obama still uses Facebook and his friend list has grown to more than 6.2 million Facebook users. His use of Twitter has tapered significantly, however. There were more tweets in the four days before the election than there have been since.

That's What She Said...

The tapering of Obama's social networking presence is a good point to transition to Obama's recognition of the three reasons Stromer-Galley gave for avoiding fervent use of online interaction.

Can't a Staffer Do This?



One of those reasons was an increase in burden, which could explain Obama's decreased use of social networking sites. In May (his Facebook post archive goes back to May 25), the campaign

team assigned a staffer named Lindsey to respond to comments Obama's Facebook friends made on his wall. This only lasted four days.

On the other hand, Obama never hosted any chat rooms, where his team might have to monitor for negative comments or where he might have to engage in impromptu conversation. His campaign sent out emails through a list serve, so as to reach as many people as possible with a single message. Contacting the campaign involved filling out a form on his site, so his team got your email address and location. There was no email address given for the candidate. There was also no promise of a response.



His blog was and is similar to his emails, in that one message would receive broad exposure to supporters. The WhiteHouse.gov blog was a

popular place for people to go to see pictures of the president's new dog (Alexa.com).

Control, Control, Control

Message control, again, is a crucial goal of any politician. Obama largely avoided the pitfalls Stromer-Galley listed. His blogs, both as President and as a candidate, do not allow comments (The Organize for America blog allows comments, but it is not run by the administration, so it would not present a burden to it). The "Open for Questions" feature on WhiteHouse.gov allows users to submit pointed questions, which Stromer-Galley mentions as a potential problem, but those questions go through a pretty long vetting process and the administration has ample time to formulate responses.

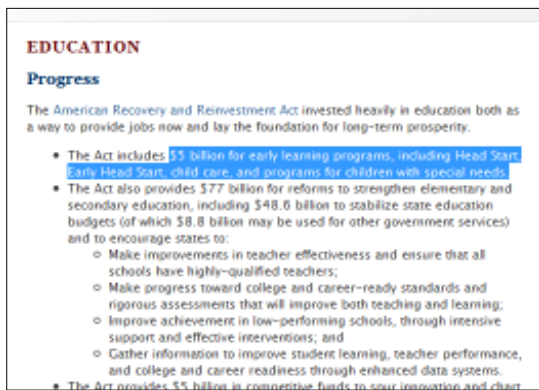
Ambiguity... Or Maybe Not

Stromer-Galley lists ambiguity as a major goal of every campaign – a goal that could be jeopardized by a strong Web presence. Obama did not employ chat rooms or engage in any other real-time communication with supporters through the Web. Submitting questions to the campaign consisted of either posting a question on Obama's Facebook wall, which would only receive a response if it were posted May 25-29, or through a private message sent through his Web site. No responses were promised, so Obama did not have to worry about losing ambiguity in responding to specific questions from supporters posed on the Web.

The crafted messages on the campaigns issues pages are specific in setting goals, but are vague in describing the means for achieving those goals. The education page

mentions a “Zero to Five” plan, which “places key emphasis at early care and education for infants, which is essential for children to be ready to enter kindergarten.” The page further promises that Obama “will improve the assessments used to track student progress to measure readiness for college and the workplace and improve student learning in a timely, individualized manner.” It does not mention what is wrong with the current assessments or how he will repair them.

The White House’s education page offers specific information as to legislation



that has already passed. It includes specific monetary implications of the American Recovery and Investment Act, including “\$5 billion for early learning programs, including Head Start, Early Head Start, child care, and programs for children with special needs.”

On the economy, the campaign again focused on goals. It is a little more specific in the details. “Obama will create a new ‘Making Work Pay’ tax credit of up to \$500 per person, or \$1,000 per working family.” The page is over 2,500 words covering issues like trade policy, job creation and home ownership.

WhiteHouse.gov’s economy site also links to pages covering the American Recovery and Investment Act, as well as the home refinancing plan and a plan to increase small business loans. The administration mentions the economic crisis repeatedly and speaks about taking steps to recovery. It offers specific information as to monetary outlays in the TARP and gives links to pages that explain where the money is going.

The February campaign site could not address the crisis since it did not begin until September.

The Chat Room (aka Discussion)

There is a trend in the U.S. that will continue to affect political campaigning – more and more people are using the Internet. Since 1996, candidates have been trying to learn and harness the power of this relatively new campaigning venue. The research here shows that the Obama campaign team sought to achieve all four of the goals listed by Bimber and Davis. It used news feeds and blogs for opinion reinforcement, gave supporters tools to become activists in the campaign, provided simple methods of contributing money and offered tools and information on registration and voting.

Obama's presence on social networking sites augmented efforts to achieve these goals. His Facebook status updates provided links to his blog posts and videos of his speeches. Twitter gave his followers constant updates on where Obama was going, who he was talking to and what he was talking about. These were crucial tools in getting supporters out to events and reinforcing his policy positions.

He further set new standards for providing horizontal communication in his online presence. His Facebook friends could communicate with each other on his wall; volunteers could find activists in their area through his site; and veterans, kids and Pacific islanders each had their own Obama groups and Web sites.

Obama managed to achieve these objectives while largely remaining true to the goals Stromer-Galley set forth, of maintaining control over the campaign's messages, preventing an increase in burden and keeping a certain level of message ambiguity.

The administration has managed to maintain these same objectives, even though some administration goals don't necessarily match up with campaign goals. Again, Obama has tapered his use of social network sites, which could be a sign that the burden was increasing, but it is important to remember that Obama likely wasn't logging in to Twitter himself to tell his followers he was excited to learn about winning the Dems Abroad primary on February 26. But, as one can tell from Lindsay's four-day stint responding to messages on Obama's Facebook page, it is burdensome to remain social on a social networking site when you have more than two million friends.

The Obama campaign's ability to remain ambiguous on messages has carried over somewhat into the administration. Whereas the campaign's main focus was listing goals on issues, the administration has the advantage of putting out the specifics of passed legislation.

Now What?

The obvious next question is, where do we go from here? The Obama campaign obviously had more online presence – at least in the form of friends, followers and Web traffic – than McCain, but was that because of the prowess of his Web team, the Web expertise of his target demographic, or just because he was a likeable guy? And now that his campaign is an administration, will the objectives set up by Bimber and Davis continue to apply? How will his administration fare in the online world? What good will come of his continued presence on the Internet?

Future studies need to test users of WhiteHouse.gov and BarackObama.com to gauge whether these users are more informed or feel more connected to the

administration than users of traditional media. This kind of research will provide the kind of platform for future administrations to decide on their commitment to the Web.

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