

**Christian Nilsson, 2008.**

**Professor James Ingram**

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### **In the digital trail of Campaigning**

- how social media changed the rules of the game in 2008 elections

#### **Scope and references**

This paper is on the borderline of politics and technology. It does presuppose some knowledge of current trends on the Internet, though tries as much as possible to avoid being overly technical. More in-depth information about certain names and solutions is outside the scope of this paper, however further reading is encouraged for the interested.

Some references used in this paper are:

**Blog** – A text-entry on the web such as a online diary or a chronicle

**Twitter** – A blog-tool where the length of content is limited to approx.140 characters. It is instantly distributed to all subscribers choice of platform, be that computer, mail or cell-phone. It allows for trend-software and real-time analysis

**Tweet** – A message sent using the Twitter-service

**Online Communities** – Large websites with many members that collaborate in discussions, network and interact digitally using chat, sharing of photos, music and video

**Social Media** – The term coined to separate the new distribution-channels provided by the Internet, compared to “traditional media”. Signified by accessibility, reach and low cost of usage

**Traditional Media** – What is normally associated with the term “media” today. Any broadcasting media such as newspapers, radio and TV

**Website** – A collection of homepages containing information structured under one single domain-name on the Internet

**E-governance** – The use of information technology and Internet to improve interaction with the public, minimize cost between departments and increase lag-time between decisions

## Introduction

*"It's been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this date in this election at this defining moment change has come to America."* – President-elect Barack Obama, concession-speech 2008

The election of 2008 was interesting from many different perspectives. The first afro-American in the White House won the election with a land-slide victory and never before have so many turned up to cast their vote. As many as 125225901 voters registered their vote on 4<sup>th</sup> November<sup>1</sup>. Record-amounts of funding were collected through the Internet, mainly to the Obama-campaign. The politicians as well as the business-people of the world are looking at the Obama-campaign to understand how they might go about to build such a strong brand, activate the people and generate such a global interest in other topics. The change that Barack Obama mentioned in his concession-speech may not only relate to policies in the White House, but to the world of marketing and how campaigns, no matter the cause, will be run in the future.

The balance of media-coverage has been debated fiercely, however the general consensus is that the Obama-campaign frequented the most in media and more-so in a positive manner than negative. Not only was coverage, discussions and information frequent in the traditional media such as papers and TV, but in this election the Internet was used in a never-before seen manner.

This essay aims to take a closer look at how the Internet and social media was used by both campaigns and also what impact this has had on the outcome. It is safe to say that it has played a role in the outcome of the campaign. This has been a deliberate strategy in re-constructing the politicians as brands, activating the grassroots-movement and financing the operations.

The constant net-presence Obama had created a more active and loyal movement of followers. This helped in keeping the topics relevant to the Obama-campaign rather than to John McCain. The digital trail from the Obama-campaign suggests that they used many different publicly available tools on the Internet were used to communicate and build a personal relationship with both old as well as the important first-time voters. In a comparative perspective between the two candidates Obama had a wider following on the Internet and also used the tools available for communicating more frequently.

In particular this paper has reviewed a few tools all present on the web for collaboration and informing the public in a social media-context. These tools are but a select few, though gives a comparative perspective and are representative of most solutions available. What has been reviewed is

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/president/> (2008-11-26)

presence on YouTube<sup>2</sup> for streaming video, Facebook<sup>3</sup> as presence on online communities, Twitter<sup>4</sup> for use of presence-applications and how the two campaigns used their own websites for communication with voters.

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## **Background**

A notable difference in the 2008 elections compared to earlier election is the Internet-penetration. Today the critical mass of computers attached to the Internet has been achieved and a computer with Internet-access is available to most of the population in USA. This helped reach out to and attract a larger base of voters. Just as the Television was used before the Kennedy-era, it was with Kennedy that Television made a noticeable impact. This is largely because of the critical-mass factor, before Kennedy a TV was not something often found in the middle-class households, hence the recipient-group was not large enough.

The Internet as a medium has brought about a great change in how we communicate and organize ourselves. It has also brought forward many new ways for companies and organizations to interact with their customer-base, as well as to promote brands. The Internet has been used in earlier campaigns with websites containing information from each campaign and provided the ability to follow breaking news in digital format. Previously the Internet was considered a second-hand channel of communication, somewhere information ended up once it has been communicated in the primary channels. In the 2008 election, we saw some shift in this, with the Internet considered a primary channel of communicating ahead of traditional media. The biggest change however, was the use of social media-services on the Internet to interact with and stimulate voters to involve themselves in the campaigning.

According to a report presented by SocialMediaToday.com products appearing in the space of a

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.youtube.com>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.facebook.com>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.twitter.com>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.barackobama.com> & <http://www.johnmccain.com>

social media solution earn more trust and good-will from potential customers<sup>6</sup>. An article in Times India that discussed the importance of E-governance identified a few significant characteristics which must be met for application of information technology to support government function. These are compiled as “S.M.A.R.T” meaning “Simple, Moral, Accountable, Responsive and Transparent”<sup>7</sup>. This translates well to the core of social media-information online and is more and more adhered to by companies in their web based marketing efforts. Information provided in a social media-context is interpreted as more personal, reliable and direct, which leverages the brand as something personal to the recipient. Additional to this it encourages people to get involved and interact with the sender.

Both campaigns used the web and social media as communicative platforms. Each campaign had a corresponding web-site that communicated information about the candidate and their politics. But more so it has been used as a platform to shape and communicate the idea of the candidate as much as to communicate his actual politics, leveraging the candidate from a politician to a brand. On my.BarackObama.com there is a note from the team describing the importance of the tools of the site for the outcome of the campaign. A quote from the note reads “[...] millions of individuals have used My.BarackObama to organize their local communities on behalf of Barack Obama. The scale and size of this community and its work is unprecedented. Individuals in all 50 states have created more than 35,000 local organizing groups, hosted over 200,000 events, and made millions upon millions of calls to neighbors about this campaign. There can be no question that these local, grassroots organizations played a critical role in Tuesday's victory”<sup>8</sup>. The website is still very much active and everyday new posts are published daily. On the site you can learn more about Biden, Obama, Michelle and their campaign, donate, read their daily work-blog, find out about events, organize your own events and buy merchandise. JohnMcCain’s website has today only his concession-speech in full and the people that have been using the site to stay informed are left hanging.

The ability to keep vast numbers of followers close and maintain a personal relationship with them, as well as being able to quickly group and activate them has played an important role. Twitter provides that ability by publishing short bursts of information to subscribers, which means that each recipient is already a dedicated target-group. This years campaigns saw the use of these services by both

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.socialmediatoday.com/smc/54189> (2008-11-26)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.socialmediatoday.com/smc/56815> (2008-11-26)

<sup>8</sup> <http://my.barackobama.com> (2008-11-26)

campaign though different in grade of activity. Barack Obama on Twitter<sup>9</sup> has 137129 followers and generated 263 updates between 5:th nov. and 29:th April 2007. It was used frequently to communicate everything from personal notes to reports on the current status of the campaign. Examples of Tweets are: “Wondering why, four years after President Bush landed on an aircraft carrier and declared ‘Mission Accomplished,’ we are still at war? 8:12 PM May 1st, 2007 from web”, “Enjoying an ice cream social with residents of Sunapee, New Hampshire. 11:00 PM Jul 19th, 2007 from web” and “Had a great three days in Florida. Watch videos from Florida as well as our amazing stops in OR & IA at <http://www.youtube.com/barackobama> 11:38 PM May 23rd from web”. The John McCain-campaign also used Twitter<sup>10</sup>, has 4848 followers and did 25 updates between 19:th sep and 24:th Oct. One example is “Obama, First he bumps the World Series for a political ad, now he's bumped the national anthem [...] <http://tinyurl.com/5o8sjy> 4:00 PM Oct 17th from twitterfeed”.

On Facebook.com, both Obama and McCain have a profile and support-groups. On each profile you can read about their interest, favorite music and watch photo-albums. Obama has gained 3203607 fans since 2006 for his support group, posting 1670 notes to the group. For Christmas 2006 he sent out “Wishing you and your family all the joy of the holiday season [...], Barack, Michelle, Malia, and Sasha“. At the same time McCain’s campaign general posted a note to the McCain support-group with the subject “How we will win”. Some notes are posted by Obamas campaign manager David Plouffe, others are directly from Obama and sometimes include questions with links to forum-boards where people can answer. They also ran competitions where you could win dinner with Obama. From the profile John McCain has on Facebook we can learn about him that his favorite movies include “Viva Zapata” and “Some Like It Hot”, he has 602028 fans. He has 122 posted notes to his support-group. On YouTube the Obama-campaign has posted 1824 videos with a total of 20022276 views, McCain has 2222396 total views on 330 videos. Both accounts are active to this day.

Each campaign, as well as a number of political journalists, also made their online-reading subscriptions available as shared items through Googles “Powerreader”<sup>11</sup>, making it possible for the

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<sup>9</sup> <http://twitter.com/barackobama> (2008-11-27)

<sup>10</sup> <http://twitter.com/JohnMcCain> (2008-11-27)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.google.com/googlereader/powerreaders/index.html>

community to follow some of the reporting which the actual campaigns were utilizing. This also gave an interesting insight as to how each office were leaning in terms of media<sup>12</sup>.

## **Discussion**

A key part of Obama's success was the campaign's early adoption of social media strategies. This adoption required the re-shaping of the whole organization to live through the social media, to not simply consider social media a second-hand channel to others and to maintain a constant high level of activity. The Obama-campaign managed to do this, while also maintaining a consistent brand image and message.

Social media has changed the way people gather and process information and then make decisions. The user-generated content and social networking sites supports an active grassroots-movement if only when provided with a common signifier or a central value to gather around. According to chiefmarketer.com 70% of people rely on social media platforms for product and brand information<sup>13</sup>. By communicating the candidate in a campaign not as a person, but as a brand they are much more likely to succeed in gaining popularity. A lot of today's celebrities and actors are brands rather than people, and it's just natural that the brand is the sender of information. It builds confidence and trust in between the brand and the individual, encouraging interaction. According to Popkin voters take information shortcuts, consuming aggregated information to build their gut-feeling, which in turn affects their opinion. This can be put in relation to the immediate nature of information on the web, quick, direct and aggregated. A tool which takes this to the extreme is Twitter, which is perceived as an individual to individual-transmission, though the sender can be an organization.

In "Going Public", the author tells the story of how Kennedy decided to use live television to broadcast the public. This was met with an outcry from the printed media. However the idea that the administration had about this relatively new media was that it "provided a direct communication with the voters which no newspaper could alter by interpretation or omission". The author goes on to conclude that "direct communication" would become the new buzz in during the coming years the White House (Going Public, 1986, p.70). The revolution of interaction that social media brings is a natural evolvement from this. A working democracy has always been about engaging the public in politics. The phenomenon of going public is about tapping into this engagement and build momentum from it. Social media provides excellent channels to accomplish just this. The reason is in reach. Though there is a computer-

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<sup>12</sup> <http://googlereader.blogspot.com/2008/08/read-what-they-read.html> (2008-11-25)

<sup>13</sup> <http://chiefmarketer.com/disciplines/online/1125-obama-social-media-success> (2008-11-26)

screen in between sender and recipient as a wall, the online social networks radiates an intimate climate consisting of friends, acquaintances and family. Matters become personal and as such people get involved. Kernell argues that the modern president must have a good idea of what the public wants and not rely solely on a “hunch”. By going public they can reduce this uncertainty and has a great deal of professionals in staff to help understand the public opinion (Going Public, 1986, p.185). The social media adds a more direct dialogue to said public and enables the administration to add transparency to their work, bringing back feedback from the public.

The Obama-campaign has stated that they intend to continue using social media as an part of their communicative efforts while in the White House. They have already started a new website called [change.gov](http://change.gov) where vast amounts of information about their policies are posted. They have truly realized the importance of transparency in the administration and aim to keep the motivation and engagement among their followers high by involving them in the transition process and onwards.

One could argue though, that the difference in outcome has nothing to with the use of social media on the Internet, but rather that the two candidates appealed to different crowds, which in turn has different habits. McCain might have been a more attractive choice for a public not as net-aware, which would explain their choice to not put much emphasis on communicating using the web. Whereas Obama’s fanbase were younger and more net-savvy, hence more receptacle to online-campaigning.

## **Conclusion**

Obama has elevated the role of politics more than before into being a race of business-models. It is about building a brand and then build momentum from this. An effect of this is that future literature of campaigning might involve works by authors such as Naomi Klein and her book “No Logo”, but also that the term “Going Public”, might have to change into “Being Public”. The Obama-campaign will most likely be viewed by today’s marketers as a comprehensive case study in how to build a brand in a Web 2.0 world. In their strategy they found a way to grow their reach exponentially as supporters used the same social media tools to pass-along links and broadcast their opinions to their networks of family and friends, but also going one step beyond by involving strangers. The Obama-platform are using the momentum of the people they have rallied whilst the Republican seems to have not only underestimated the power of social media to engage people, but also lost the steam to keep the supporters tight to them in building momentum for the next battle. In the social media-world of tomorrow, the war of the public’s attention is still raging!

## Sources

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